



SAM MESSER
MATRIX 178
DENIS THE PIRATE

OCTOBER 5, 2017 - FEBRUARY 11, 2018
WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART

SOME FAMILY HISTORY OR THE FINE ART OF FISHING

...even if you don't fancy yourself a fisherman, ...you should cast all the lines that you can, because only by casting will you catch, and very often you will catch things that you didn't intend to catch, things that are much better than those that you did: sometimes you'll catch a shoe, and sometimes that shoe will fit perfectly, and sometimes it will be a glass slipper.¹

—Jonathan Safran Foer on Sam Messer in *Modern Painters*, 2001

Sam Messer is a natural fisherman. Decades of casting lines has yielded Messer many glass slippers, now considered extended family, from serendipitous encounters with creative souls in the worlds of visual arts, literature, music, and film. Deep bonds of friendship developed over time, and, quite organically, have borne artistic collaborations. The “how we met” stories are sometimes simple and sometimes complicated, but always fascinating. Messer has a process that is social.

Messer's remarkable roster of collaborators includes celebrated writer-friends Paul Auster, Jonathan Safran Foer, and Denis Johnson (1949–2017), who each worked with Messer on publications or exhibitions that combine his paintings and the writers' words. Through the production designer Mark Friedberg, the artist has also created props and paintings for Hollywood films such as *The Tempest* (Julie Taymor, 2010), *The Miraculous Year* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2011), and *Noah* (Darren Aronofsky, 2014), for which Messer designed the “Watcher” creatures. Messer has also collaborated with renowned artist-friends like Kiki Smith and outsider artist, Jon Serl (1894–1993), on several portrait series. Messer's writer-director wife, Eleanor Gaver, introduced the artist to Serl.

A three-year collaboration with the reclusive Serl resulted in approximately 50 paintings and a publication titled *One Man by Himself: Portraits of Jon Serl by Sam Messer* (1995). Messer's final painting from the series, *Next*, created in 1994 after Serl's death, depicts a double portrait of Serl and Messer. Balanced in Serl's hands, a doll-size nude of Messer holds a painter's palette. Messer's head covers Serl's mouth, the older artist silenced by death in this posthumous portrait. The composition was inspired by Serl's reflection on mortality, “One Artist dies. Another is born.,” and encapsulates the importance of artistic relationships and lineages to Messer.²

UNTITLED SELECTION FROM THE SERIES "DENIS THE PIRATE," 2011-17
ETCHINGS WITH COLOR
11 X 14 IN. EACH





Messer's first and most recent collaborations involved the writer Denis Johnson. Messer and Johnson met as fellows at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts during the winter of 1981-82. Messer found that he had an intellectual interest in the work of the writers in the program more than the visual artists. Johnson and Messer became good friends, isolated during the winter months on the outermost point of Cape Cod. Johnson was strictly a poet at that time; his first novel *Angels*, which grew out of a poem, was published soon after his residency in 1983. In 1982, Messer's exhibition of enamel paintings at the Work Center's Hudson D. Walker Gallery, titled *Red Darkness*, was accompanied by Johnson's poems, which were also printed in a complementary broadside.

In 1995, Messer and Johnson reunited at the Moonhole Artist Residency in Bequia, a Caribbean island in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Artists and writers were invited to bring family members and lived communally in a wild, rustic setting at the end of the historic whaling island. At Moonhole, Johnson wrote the seafaring bedtime story for Sam's daughter Josephine with the title, *Denis the Pirate: Some Family History for Goddaughter Jo-jo*. The epic adventure of the eponymous pirate Denis—Johnson's alleged great-great-great-great grandfather—recounts his twenty-year campaign of terror, pillage, and murder across the islands of Caribbean Sea in the early eighteenth century. Pirate Denis's excessive evil is attributed to his perennial sidekick Babe Ruth—a one-eyed, one-armed, and one-legged pet monkey who sat on Denis's left shoulder, smoked magic mushrooms continually, and whispered bad ideas into Denis's ear. The story recounts the British Navy's 20-year mission to capture the elusive pirate, which resulted in a 60-day confrontation in which Denis sank all 200 battleships but one. The pirate was captured by the last of the British ships and “keel-hauled”—tied with rope, dragged under the ship, and drowned—but not before tearing a hole in the hull and taking the entire navy with him to the bottom of the sea. The fortune of gold amassed by the pirate had long ago been melted and covered with his victims' corpses, which rotted and formed a fertile island called Bequia.

About six years ago, Messer began to animate the story in etchings, depicting only Denis the Pirate and Babe Ruth as collaborators. Over these years, the project grew in scale and scope with the addition of other figures from the narrative. Conceived as a stop-motion video almost entirely composed of etchings, with a few drawings, the approximately eleven-minute animation would grow to include more than 1,700 etchings made by Messer's distinctive, distorted, and deceptively messy hand. The artist is actually a master of the controlled, chaotic line. Deviating from the specific narrative of Johnson's story, Messer's raucous adventure features a drug-induced

YOU WOULD KNOW GODDAMN IT. AND NEVER BE ABLE TO SAY., 2017
OIL ON CANVAS
73 X 93 IN.



hallucinatory sequence, the result of Babe Ruth's smoking magic mushrooms. Denis transforms and shape shifts into Babe Ruth, culminating with the two characters merging into one figure. In Denis's surreal adventure, the pirate conspires with a motley troupe of secular prophets and religious gods—shared messianic figures for friends Messer and Johnson—including Jesus Christ, Buddha, Moses, James Brown, Elvis Presley, Walt Whitman, William Shakespeare, and, of course, Babe Ruth.

While the visual narrative designed by Messer stands as a singular and epic achievement, Messer also invited members of his extended family to collaborate on the soundtrack of the project. All told, the cast includes celebrated figures from literature, film, TV, music, and the visual arts. Beginning with Denis Johnson's bedtime/ghost story, the tale is animated by Messer's etchings, narrated by actor Liev Schreiber, edited by Russell Yaffe, and set to music by Arcade Fire's Sarah Neufeld with fellow musician Colin Stetson.

PIETÁ, 2015
OIL ON CANVAS
88 X 96 IN.



As the centerpiece of the MATRIX exhibition, *Denis the Pirate* is presented as a wall-size projection in a discrete video space. The entry wall of the video gallery is a “wallpapered” grid—floor to ceiling and wall to wall—with a selection of approximately 140 etchings from Messer’s video presented in narrative sequence. The centerline of the etching wall depicts seascapes that create a horizon line across the wall to reflect the setting of the story. The gallery includes additional paintings and sculptures to enliven the themes of *Denis the Pirate*, with a focus on portraits of the mythical Denis.

For many years, Messer has focused on portrait painting, with a tendency toward the surrealistic overtones that evoke Pablo Picasso and Francisco Goya. He wields an expressionistic brush and applies paint thickly to produce a dynamic, decisive, loose, and quick approach to painting. In a double portrait painting of Denis the Pirate and Babe Ruth, Messer invokes the classical composition of Michelangelo’s *Pietà*

HOW BEAUTIFUL IS THE TIGER WHO KILLED ME., 2017
OIL ON CANVAS
44 X 60 IN.



(1498-99). However, instead of Christ's lifeless body being cradled in his mother's lap, Messer's seaside *Pietà* (2015) depicts Denis the Pirate lying across the lap of Babe Ruth. Denis writes "NOW" on a piece of paper in the sand, with the face of his wristwatch depicting the same word. "Now is the time," notes Messer.³ He and Johnson jokingly considered producing a watch whose face would simply state "now" for the present time.

How beautiful is the tiger who killed me depicts the eye-patched, double-left-eyed Denis as half man, half dog—a reference to Denis as a morphological trickster, magician, and mythological Pan-like creature. Floating on air with a paned window hovering in front of him, the fantastical Denis communicates the titular text in cursive, scrawled across the bottom of the canvas. These words derive from an unpublished poem that Johnson shared with Messer.⁴ The titles of the paintings and sculptures relate lines or key words from Johnson's poems. These portraits are rife with personal references to Messer and Johnson's special friendship as the larger project of Denis the Pirate developed across media.

KEEL--HAULED, 2017
IRON, PLASTER, STEEL
26 X 20 X 12 IN.



NEXT, 1994
OIL ON CANVAS
58 X 48 IN.
GIFT OF JANICE AND MICKEY CARTIN, 1994.51.1



Throughout the film, and in his prints, paintings, and sculpture, Messer's recurring image of a ship with eyes on the sails serves as a narrative pivot. In the midst of a perilous voyage, the ship faces two equally disastrous choices, either tumble over a waterfall or crash into the rocks. In the sculptures, Messer's ship becomes anthropomorphic. The sail of the ship in *Keel--hauled* is pierced with holes that represent eyes, and the curving shape of the ship's hull suggests Denis's wicked grin. The pirate's haunting armless and legless torso features arms of heavy chains, which pool on the floor. In *Sojourner*, the ship head tops an elongated branch of an aluminum and bronze body supported by an oversize pair of feet. Messer's aesthetic is at once rough, repellant, otherworldly...and completely charming and engaging. In the multi-media, cross-disciplinary *Denis the Pirate*, Sam Messer has more than risen to Denis Johnson's inferred challenge: "Anything is possible, and it could be extraordinary."⁵

PATRICIA HICKSON

Emily Hall Tremain Curator of Contemporary Art

SAM MESSER

EDUCATION

- 1982 MFA, Yale University, New Haven, CT
1976 BFA, The Cooper Union, New York, NY

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2017 Sam Messer/*MATRIX 178: Denis the Pirate*, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT
Sam Messer: Portraits of Brooklyn, BRIC HOUSE, Brooklyn, NY
- 2013 *Hell Hurts*, Gasser Grunert, New York, NY
- 2007 *The Evolution of Desire*, Nielsen Gallery, Boston, MA
- 2006 *Self-Portraits*, Nielsen Gallery, Boston, MA
- 2004 *Paintings*, Nielsen Gallery, Boston, MA
- 2002 *New Work*, Shoshanna Wayne Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
- 2000 *Sam Messer: 20 Years of Painting*, Nielsen Gallery, Boston, MA
- 1999 Shoshanna Wayne Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
- 1998 David Beitzel Gallery, New York, NY
- 1997 *The Four Seasons*, Shoshanna Wayne Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
- 1994 *Work, Death, Play*, David Beitzel Gallery, New York, NY
- 1992 Stellar Gallery, Paris, France
- 1989 Ruth Siegel Ltd, New York, NY
- 1988 Spoleto Festival, Gibbes Museum, Charleston, SC

COLLABORATIVE EXHIBITIONS

- 2015 *Collaborations: Sam Messer with Jonathan Safran Foer and Denis Johnson*, Fredericks & Freiser Gallery, New York, NY
- 2013-2014 *Hanging Conversation II, Jonathan Safran Foer/Sam Messer*, Southern Georgia University, Statesboro, GA
- 2009 *Hanging Conversations, Messer/Safran Foer*, Nielsen Gallery, Boston, MA
- 1982 *Red Darkness, Sam Messer with Denis Johnson*, Hudson D. Walker Gallery, Fine Arts Work Center, Provincetown, MA

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2017 *B3: Biennial of the Moving Image*, Frankfurt am Main, Germany
- 2016 *Invitational Exhibition of Visual Arts*, American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York, NY
- 2015 *Shorts*, New York Film Festival, New York, NY
- 2013 *Flesh and Blood*, Museum on the Seam, Jerusalem, Israel
- 2006 National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC
- 2005 *Cloud of Chalk*, Freight + Volume Gallery, New York, NY
- 2001 *The Changing Face of Portraiture*, Chapman University, Orange, CA
- 1995 *Inside Out*, Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, CT
- 1994 *Small Works*, Sculpture Center, Long Island City, NY
- 1991 *Cruciformed: Images of the Cross in Contemporary Art*, Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, Cleveland, OH

Born in 1955, New York, NY
Lives and works in Brooklyn, NY; New Haven, CT;
and Norfolk, CT

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Denis the Pirate, 2017
Digital video with sound
Running time: 10 minutes, 57 seconds

Written by Denis Johnson
Animation by Sam Messer
Narration by Liev Schreiber
Music by Sarah Neufeld and Colin Stetson
Edited by Russell Yaffe

Pietá, 2015
Oil on canvas
88 x 96 in.

How beautiful is the tiger who killed me., 2017
Oil on canvas
44 x 60 in.

*You would know goddamn it. And never be able
to say.*, 2017
Oil on canvas
73 x 93 in.

An eye that is a mouth that is a face, 2017
Oil on canvas
80 x 44 in.

Keel--hauled, 2017
Iron, plaster, steel
26 x 20 x 12 in.

Babe Ruth, 2015
Cement
17 x 12 x 15 in.

Sojourner, 2017
Aluminum and bronze
80 x 36 x 26 in.

Double Portrait: Denis and Babe Ruth, 2016
Etching on paper
13 ¼ x 18 ½ in.

Selection of 137 etchings and 3 copper etching
plates from *Denis the Pirate*, 2011-17
Etchings with color
11 x 14 in. each

Also on view:

Next, 1994
Oil on canvas
58 x 48 in.
Gift of Janice and Mickey Cartin, 1994.51.1

The artist would like to thank the people of Bequia
and the Moonhole Artist Residency, where *Denis the
Pirate* was originally conceived and written.

All works courtesy of the artist.

¹ Jonathan Safran Foer, "Sam Messer Goes Fishing," *Modern Painters*, vol. 14., no. 3, Autumn 2001, p. 30.

² Jon Serl quoted in *One Man by Himself: Portraits of Jon Serl by Sam Messer* (West Stockbridge, MA: Hard Press, 1995).

³ Sam Messer in conversation with the author at the Wadsworth Atheneum, 10 March 2016.

⁴ Sam Messer in a telephone conversation with the author, 2 September 2017.

⁵ Denis Johnson quoted in Jonathan Safran Foer, "Sam Messer Goes Fishing," *Modern Painters*, p. 31.

GALLERY TALKS AND PROGRAMS

Sam Messer, MATRIX artist

Thursday, October 5

6:00 pm

Free with museum admission to Art After Dark

Patricia Hickson, Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of
Contemporary Art

Friday, October 20

Noon

Free with museum admission

Sam Messer and Jonathan Safran Foer:

Artistic Collaborations

Wednesday, November 15

5:00 pm

Exhibition Viewing

Public Reception

6:00 pm

Screening, Reading & Discussion



WADSWORTH ATHENEUM
MUSEUM OF ART

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thewadsworth.org

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