

**ArtSeen**

# Hans-Jörg Mayer

By [Jason Rosenfeld](#)



Installation view: *Hans-Jörg Mayer*, Martos Gallery, New York, 2023. Courtesy Martos Gallery.

Four canvases in acrylic and six in oil at Martos Gallery constitute a mini-survey of the German artist Hans-Jörg Mayer's work over the past three decades. Conceived with Galerie Nagel Draxler in Berlin where he has had thirteen solo shows, the exhibition is his first representation in any quantity in New York, and reveals an artist restive in his subject matter and engagingly unruly with his brush. Born in Singen in 1955, Mayer trained at the Academy of Fine Art in Munich and has since lived and worked in Cologne and now, Berlin. He trades in a chaotically dreamy, superficially expressionistic zone of Western pop and fashion-inflected culture, but the facture is not fatuous or inarticulate—quite the opposite. Mayer subversively gestures to the recent German tradition of vigorous mark making in the service of the epic or mythopoetic, and its baggage, as found in Kiefer, Baselitz, and Immendorf and akin to the kind of meaningful gusto on display in Julian Schnabel's recent show at Pace Gallery. Draining the activated surface of pathos, evident social activism, or the momentous, Mayer's gambit favors meditations on bizarre and curiously recalled personal experiences or tweaks of high-end advertising. His tongue may be in cheek, especially when he tells people tales about each canvas, but his eyes are ever scanning the detritus of Western culture, both high and low.

NEW YORK

Martos Gallery

*Hans-Jörg Mayer*

November 2, 2023 –

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# MARTOS GALLERY



Hans-Jörg Mayer, *Mondo Cane Nonne*, 2001. Oil on canvas 94 1/2 x 78 3/4 inches. Courtesy Martos Gallery.

Earlier work features monumental figures against nocturnal backdrops wrenched from the Old Masters and subjected to Mayer's slathering brushwork, as in *Mondo Cane Nonne* (2001) and *Hänsel und Gretel* (2003). The former, with its titular connection to the Italian pseudo-documentary shock film of 1962 and German reference to nuns, more than anything resembles Sissy Spacek's Carrie at the end of the eponymous Brian De Palma film (1976), with rivulets of blood running down the frame of Mayer's female protagonist (perhaps a nun?) who is sunk down at the lower right. In this sanguine picture, the gore-slathered and naked figure leans her right hand on a cross/sword as rags, resembling the Rapunzelian hair of Mary Magdalene in Donatello's wooden statue (c. 1440) at the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo in Florence, fall around her body. That most gripping image of wasting and regret is well channeled in Mayer's picture, whose Guston-hued and parqueted painted background affords the viewer, like Christ's penitent, no release. In *Hänsel und Gretel*, the Grimms' female protagonist has morphed into a stylish twenty-something, again with a callback to Mary Magdalene, this time El Greco's numerous versions of her with upturned head and glassy eyes. But the writhing naked Hänsel in the background pulls from El Greco's *Laocoön* of c. 1610/1614 at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and *Opening of the Fifth Seal* (1608-14) at the Met, cementing the fear of prophecy and fate ingrained in these two pictures that communicate the parlous new world order of the early twenty first century.

## MARTOS GALLERY

The macabre and conflicted gives way, however, to typical Mayer zaniness in *Mistral* (2003), with its hulking form of an overly muscular Bruce Willis during a dry period in the actor's career between *Unbreakable* (2000) and *Sin City* (2005). Willis proffers a Klee-like fish lying on a platter like the head of John the Baptist while flanked by models/hostesses/waitresses in some seaside resort in the Cote d'Azur as the wind from the north churns the Mediterranean and sends the sky into chromatic paroxysms. Ask Mayer about this work and—as he can supply about every picture—he will spin a yarn about the specific fish, the place, and the people he drank with. The head of Willis is more of a mystery, added later via pieces of paper onto the canvas surface. In the same year, Mayer painted the monumental, multi-figured *Dreamers* (2003): five dissolute youths, some bare chested, all clearly posed and derived perhaps from print media or an album cover. It bears an air of charged languidness, enhanced by cracks of lightning in the upper distance, pallid European Caucasian flesh, scumbled paint, and trendy fashions like Elizabeth Peyton subjects grown huge in Wonderland. The picture contains an entrancing, freakish power as its characters all lock eyes on you. It's the most serious and self-regarding pajama party you will see in paint.



Hans-Jörg Mayer, *NEWCROMANCER*, 2020. Acrylic on canvas, 94 1/2 x 55 1/8 inches. Courtesy Martos Gallery.

# MARTOS GALLERY

*Lipstick* (2017) signals new concerns, with its white background and pendant mirror ball rising just above center. Our disordered world, now a tesseral, reflective, and monochromatic orb, drips liquid acrylic in twelve streams from its lower section, while tethered by a chain to an unpictured ceiling. Elsewhere, a disco ball reflection of our fractured present rises in the rosé-drenched *NEWCROMANCER* and its partner *CHTHULU*, (both 2020). Mayer seems to be accessing not an inner state but taking Dior ads and pulling them apart, both bodily and facially until, inevitably, the models become zombies in their own pictorial apocalypses. Donatello's and El Greco's wasted and repentant Magdalenes have become the preening and posing undead, animated capitalist corpses in rainbow hues, like the slender pink-suited Newcromancer/Necromancer with his decaying Jonah Hex face, or the cyborg-legged, Lovecraftian Chthulu/Cthulhu, wearing a butterfly-winged headdress. There is a calculated and winning hokeyness in Mayer's recent work, but it cannot long cloak the evident societal rot that lies at the core of these energetically painted pictures.

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## Contributor

### Jason Rosenfeld

**Jason Rosenfeld Ph.D.**, is Distinguished Chair and Professor of Art History at Marymount Manhattan College. He was co-curator of the exhibitions *John Everett Millais* (Tate Britain, Van Gogh Museum), *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde* (Tate Britain and the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.), and *River Crossings* (Olana and Cedar Grove, Hudson and Catskill, New York). He is a Senior Writer and Editor-at-Large for the *Brooklyn Rail*.