



CALVIN MARCUS | *HOME IS WHERE THE UNDULATING, WISE,  
AND AQUARIST SCALE IS*  
Flaunt, January 2020  
(author: Ben Noam)  
1/5

## FLAUNT



Calvin Marcus is a quintessentially California artist— an avid lover of nature with an energetic feeling for life. He's got two dogs, a 1974 brown-on-brown Mercedes, and a very positive attitude. One of the most exciting young artists to emerge on the LA art scene in the past decade, he likes to keep his audience on their toes. Self portraits embedded into a chicken's carcass, a painting of a frog watching an airplane take off, Venus surfing her shell in Malibu. People often leave his shows scratching their heads, chuckling to themselves but also thinking, WTF?

Marcus was born in San Francisco in July 1988, a Cancer. He studied at the University of Oregon in Eugene, where he picked up a certain earthy charm, then moved to LA in 2012 to pursue an MFA at UCLA. This was during the height of the Bay Area tech-inspired cultural exodus when Silicon Valley bros would rather spend two million on a camping trip to Yosemite than two thousand on a painting. So Marcus, like many other California artists, headed south in search of the new cool school. Ferus might be long gone, but in its stead there is now Kordansky, Blum + Poe, and, more recently, every other blue chip gallery from around the world. Marcus' rising star has been in parallel to the rise of LA as an international art center, up and up.

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2/5

We meet in his dream studio, a converted synagogue in West Adams that he has spent the past four years tirelessly renovating, to discuss his recent work at the Whitney Biennial and solo show at David Kordansky Gallery, *GO HANG A SALAMI IM A LASAGNA HOG*.



CALVIN MARCUS "YOU SEE ME" 2019. WATERCOLOR, OIL, VINYL, AND EMULSIFIED GESSO ON LINEN/CANVAS BLEND. 79 X 101 1/2 X 1 IN. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY, LOS ANGELES.

**BEN NOAM:** What did you dream about last night?

**CALVIN MARCUS:** I dreamt I had poison oak on my stomach—I didn't realize it was a dream until a moment ago when I was hiking in the woods and actually saw poison oak. I checked my stomach and was relieved I had dreamt it.

Would you describe yourself as a surrealist?

No, but I understand why someone would think that I'm interested in that.

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3/5

The Dadaists believed that the 'reason' and 'logic' of bourgeois capitalist society had led people into the first World War. Your last show was of larger-than-life, dead WWI soldiers, and it seemed to introduce these themes. How would you define your relationship to logic and reason today?

My relationship to reason is my interest in self-change; recognizing that freedom is what I really want for myself and my art. I use rules and logic to define the parameters for the body of work, which gives me a sense of what can and cannot be a part of it.

What role does humor play in your work?

I think the reason people have been using the word "absurd" lately to describe my paintings is that there's a feeling there shouldn't be paintings like mine. It's "absurd" because it's unexpected or even unpleasant at times. The surprise of that is what makes them humorous, but I think the humor is actually discomfort—uncomfortable laughter that comes when you don't know what else to do. Confrontation is an important part of my visual language, sometimes that can be as simple as bold color, but more often than not, it's the intensity of the image or strangeness that creates the initial cranial penetration. Then, hopefully, one has been lured in enough to keep looking.

In the show, you have a room of epically long paintings of 22' sturgeon fish. Scale has been an important conceptual tool for artists. For instance, the abstract expressionists broke out of the renaissance's illusionistic perspective systems to engage with a human scale. What the hell is going on with your scale?

Using scale for me has been a way to engage with a sculptural space, literally. A friend of mine, David Korty, had shown me delicate paintings of trout that fly fisherman had documented in a scientific manner, centered in a rectangular format and painted in watercolor. The fish end up becoming a kind of self representation of the fishermen who painted them. So, I wanted to make a self portrait through fish, which I thought should have a "once in a lifetime catch" grandeur. I started by digitally enlarging random fish with a projector on the wall, and, in doing so, I found that the idea left reality, became Disney, and had lost my interest. Weeks later, I found myself looking at these amazing auto body projects that some brothers had done in the '70s. They were making novelty limousines out of preexisting vehicles. They took many of the same cars, chopped and welded many centers of the same car to a single front and back to create stretch limousine all with custom upholstery and beautiful paint to look like it had always been on the road. The signifiers of the original car are still present, so the car still sits in the mind the same way, only elongated. It's an incredible way to enlarge something, because it rests comfortably with something you understand. I thought this was the perfect way to make my fish portrait. I ended up choosing a sturgeon because they are somewhat of a dinosaur—a prehistoric presence that can live up to 100 years. That's a knowledgeable fish.

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4/5

And in the next room there is a small photograph of a large sculpture—a giant, 10-foot asparagus on a giant fiberglass plate.

"7 a.m. Asparagus" is a medium-format image produced in-studio. It's meant to feel like early morning. I think of this work more as a sculptural event, something that occurs as a sculpture but doesn't really end up being a physical sculpture in the end. The photograph really functions as a documentation of something temporal. It started from the agaves blooming in Southern California. Their large stalks resemble asparagus. I thought I could produce some kind of context to actually transform them into asparagus. I then made a 9-foot diameter plate out of foam and fiberglass and resin to stage the stalks on, and photographed them, sealing them in this faux still-life. Most people can't really tell the true proportions. This was engaged with a surrealist narrative more than any of the paintings: at first, I even wanted to produce the image in black and white in a silver gelatin process, because I really wanted to be shaking hands with Man Ray. I love his surrealist photography works.

Do you believe in avant-garde painting?

Yes I do. There is always something new to do.

What is the importance of drawing to you?

Drawing is the genesis of ideas. So, as someone who thinks of their paintings as ideas rather than sumptuous paintings, drawing is everything.

Your past shows have had a very unified aesthetic and serial formal structure: everything is the same size, the subjects repeat themselves. In 2015, you had eight 4x8-ft. green monochromes with ceramic chickens. In 2016, you showed 12 4x8-ft. black oil bar drawings on off-white linen. And in your last show at CLEARING, you showed 38 oil on canvas paintings of dead soldiers using only the colors of a Crayola crayon set. This show seems to be a departure for you. Each piece in the show is self-contained and conceptually inward-facing. Why the shift?

Seriality and installation for me has been something that go hand and hand, in that Warholian repetitious way that just penetrates so deeply. But all of a sudden, it seemed like such a trend. I guess I'm something of a contrarian. I don't like to do what others do, and I don't like to do what is easy. I think the green monochrome painting show was inescapably hardcore and not easy, but I didn't like the idea that someone could misinterpret that as commercial. So I wanted to make a show that was formatted in one sense, and very different in another as to challenge everything. I wanted to use the opportunity to show a range of hard, strange, and beautifully-painted ideas. So the shift was meant to challenge me and others.

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5/5

When confronted by work like this, it becomes an exercise in favoritism: the viewer must decide which piece in the group speaks to their individual preference. Which is your favorite painting in the show and why?

Yes, that is true. It's another thing I really like about the show. It really brings a viewer's subjectivity to the table. You're not going to like every painting in the show. Knowing this and making a show like this anyways felt really hardcore to me—knowing that people would really be forced to have an opinion and potentially only like one painting. I don't really have a favorite— more like favorites. The "City Pig/Wild Boar" painting is one of my favorites. Supposedly if you take a farm pig (pink and almost hairless) and release it into the wild, within a year or so it should grow tusks, its hair thickens and darkens and it reverts back to a wild boar. So the pig on the left, and the boar on the right of the canvas, are actually meant to be the same pig in alternate lives. I thought the idea of this painting was a perfect example of comparing primitivism to the human construct.



CALVIN MARCUS "ASPARAGUS 7 A.M." 2019. CHROMOGENIC PRINT. 7 X 8 1/8 IN. FRAMED: 15 3/4 X 17 1/2 X 1 1/4 IN.