

frieze

Jeffrey Joyal's 'Deepfake' Illustrates the Persistence of the Repressive American Class System

At David Lewis, the artist repurposes ephemeral Americana to remark on the disintegration of 1960s countercultural dreams and ideals

by Robert Fitterman
December 18, 2019



Jeffrey Joyal, *The Narcissist's Prayer*, 2019, oil based block printing ink on 300gsm Arches Cover paper, MDF, polyurethane, steel poles, dock supports and magnets, 1.1 x 7 m. Courtesy: the artist and David Lewis, New York

The title of Jeffrey Joyal's latest solo show, 'Deepfake', initially appears to be something of a misnomer, since there's no obvious reference to the technology by which celebrity faces are seamlessly superimposed onto videos of political parody, revenge porn or fake news. Neither is there any evident allusion to fakery or quotational art practices, though Joyal uses his fair share of repurposed images and materials. Rather, the artist's work addresses a deeper problem: the obsolete, yet seemingly inescapable, American three-tier class system. And we, the quasi-emancipated spectators, are the deepfakes superimposed onto this outdated, neoliberal paradigm.

As in earlier works, Joyal traverses the limp, still undead iconography of Americana. In 'Deepfake', these images are installed in a tripartite structure. Closest to the ceiling - where the air is thin and the space bountiful - the artist displays nine athletic varsity letters. Dwarfed in relation to the other objects on display, the letters connote the lofty elites, the one percent, in Joyal's class allegory and, read left-to-right, spell out 'R-E-H-E-A-R-S-A-L'. It is entirely unclear, however, where the word starts and ends; even the closest observer might miss this particular subtlety. As in life, there is an unspoken code required to access the exclusive club at the top; this is a rehearsal for a future filled with victories, privileges and games of violence.

The middle class of 'Deepfake' is represented by a banner, like a billboard or a fence, stretching across the width of the gallery mid-sightline. Titled *The Narcissist's Prayer* (2019), the banner is redolent of two iconic graphic devices from the 1960s: wood-block printing and psychedelic lettering within circles (à la poster art for the Grateful Dead). The code to decipher these six text-filled rounds is less obtuse than that for the varsity letters, however. Most of the phrases echo each other as slant rhymes - 'sore throat', 'more rope', 'war haute' - mapping out a childlike, utopic innocence, although any joy or surprise the psychedelic fonts might have induced is long gone. The haunting, zombie-like emptiness of the banner seems to echo the way in which neoliberalism has supplanted the innocent dreams of the hippie era. Other recognizable symbols of 1960s naiveté - flower-printed rolls of fabric, for instance - are scattered about the gallery floor. The title of one of these sculptures, *A Flower's Dream* (2019), speaks succinctly to the haunting image of a counter-culture turned centrist. Here, Joyal points to how we have superimposed progressive politics onto a moderate face and vice versa: fake left; go right.



Jeffrey Joyal, *Untitled* (detail), 2019, found letterman patches, MDF, canvas and Lineco acid-free book binder board, dimensions variable. Courtesy: the artist and David Lewis, New York



Jeffrey Joyal, *A Flower's Dream*, 2019, Plastisol ink print on salvaged wool blanket and burlap, cardboard, vinyl and plastic, 33 × 158 × 38 cm. Courtesy: the artist and David Lewis, New York

As in reality, the middle classes experience greater physical proximity to the working classes in Joyal's allegory than do the upper classes. On the gallery floor, alongside the flower-printed rolls of fabric, are sculptural assemblages such as the aptly titled *Gallows Humor* (2019), comprised of MDF boards covered with repurposed green-felt military blankets strewn with ropes, cattle tags and knockdown carnival-clown faces. In the tradition of artists such as Robert Gober or Jason Rhoades, Joyal revivifies the detritus of Americana with elegant precision, deftly implementing these iconic images of identity to engage us with the deception and disservice of the class system. The deepfake faces that could so easily be superimposed onto these outdated, harmful and limited representations are, of course, our own.



Jeffrey Joyal, *Gallows Humor*, 2019, Plastisol ink print, acrylic, and extra heavy molding paste on salvaged wool blanket, MDF, 13 × 227 × 183 cm. Courtesy: the artist and David Lewis, New York