



MARC DENNIS

by Shana Beth Mason

“So what gets you really pumped? What’s your catnip?” I ask Brooklyn-based painter and filmmaker Marc Dennis, as he works diligently on a new painting (which I am forbidden to describe), while I sit on the floor.

“Catnip? What the hell is that? I never had a cat. I never had pets. Try having kids, that will keep you busy enough.” He takes out his cell phone and flips the screen around, “See? Those are my monsters and I love them more than anything.”

Dennis is nothing if not frank and gregarious. He is a dead-ringer for Johnny Depp (a tidbit he gladly confirms via an actual response from the actor on Twitter), a brusque, fast-talking sports fan raised outside Boston (but also lived in Puerto Rico as a child) whose body of work (in paintings, specifically) has become of one contemporary art’s most recognizable signatures. Dennis defies quotidian associations with the solitary, brutish artist. He moves his body, he uses his hands to talk, he professes a shameless love for Transformers, “and that was before I had kids,” he adds. His proficiency with pop culture is matched, if not exceeded, by his proficiency with elevated culture. It is equally

entertaining watching him speak as it is watching him work. He is constantly alert, constantly turned on by whatever surrounds him. Over a lovely Cuban lunch nearby the studio, he points to an unassuming relief painting on the wall. “I love that,” he says unapologetically, “that fires up my imagination. Everything in this restaurant excites me. That might be my problem, is that I’m never really put off by anything.”

Like Dennis, himself, his work holds more than meets the eye - and there is quite a lot for the eye to process. The works operate as mere masks to the multitude of contradictions inherent in the act of looking at art. His large-scale paintings are carefully

The End of the World
oil on linen
36 x 40in., 2014

staged scenes, where an adult man or woman (dressed in garb that suggests anything but the stereotypical "art world professional") faces an artwork firmly entrenched in the art historical canon. Dennis's own audience is as much of an interruption into a scene in progress as is the viewer in his painting. But more importantly, the scene is always set at a place where art is enshrined, or as critic Boris Groys would put it, "falsely sanctified". He does not shy away from the idea that he copies great masterworks and inserts contemporary characters into their midst. "I love history," he says, "but this is the way I want to be. This is what looking at art comes down to. True, a Dallas Cowboys cheerleader wouldn't show up to MoMA in her uniform, but this is the way real people regard great art. Because it's great to look at." Dennis achieves far more than near-flawless replications of Manet's *Un Bar aux Folies Begère*, Courbet's *L'Origine du monde*, or Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*: he hypothesizes that these works are stages in and of themselves, where alternate meanings and reactions are possible aside from

what is written in the gospel of Art History, proper. The paintings are an act of voyeurism, doubled. A single person, sometimes up to three, will face a painting made by an artist long since dead. Then, Dennis's own audience renders their silent opinions on this act of looking. Yet, both exchanges are mute, secret, and often tantalizing: we crave the knowledge that these figures share our own judgments about great art, but we are left to our own devices, instead. Dennis is invariably drawn to painters such as Velázquez, Caravaggio, Goya, Picasso, and Manet, but also has works from Hirst, Basquiat, Richter, and Koons in his proverbial toolkit. The works that Dennis's characters (and his "second" audience) observe are always distanced enough in the historical timeline that they avoid being muddled by the esoteric,



self-generated aura of confusion surrounding Postmodernism and the Post-Internet generation.

While the unflinching realism (or hyperrealism) of each work is a reflection of Dennis as a perfectionist, it also reveals a deeper appreciation for art as a discipline, in and of itself. He received his B.F.A from the Tyler School of Art at Temple University (Philadelphia) and his M.F.A from The University of Texas (Austin). Alongside his full-time work as an artist, Dennis is an assistant professor of art at Elmira College in upstate New York. He created an offsite course called "*Project Dumbo*", where after a two-week preparation period, select students live in a loft in Brooklyn's "*Dumbo*" neighborhood (long considered an artist's haven in the borough) where they embark on artist studio visits, attend gallery and museum exhibitions, and acquire other practical skills readying them for a career in the creative arts. Add to these educational pursuits his work as a filmmaker (his preferred working genre is the Holocaust and stories surrounding events related to the seizure, loss, and anticipated recovery of fine art), and his role as both husband and father, it seems that Dennis runs solely on adrenaline, searching for that next wave to ride. Regardless, he presses onward,



making no judgments on those who approach his art, nor those in the paintings looking further into art than, perhaps, he ever could. "I don't judge anyone," he says flatly, "no one. Unless they're unkind or inconsiderate. That gets me." That said, he keeps his opinion of his contemporaries closer to his chest. And for good reason. A talented artist is only that if they cannot share their craft willingly, and easily, with others. Rather than hoarding his skill behind a veneer of aloofness or academic posturing, Dennis is approachable. Artists, in general, are justified in shielding themselves from the dalliances of those who possess

greater networks of wealth or influence (quite often, these qualities rear their ugliest heads in the slim class of contemporary art collectors and private dealers); it takes another force of will to meet these challenges without alienating themselves. Dennis capably handles both forces of great talent and great will power.

<http://marcdennis.com>

(far right) **Uncontrollable Beauty**
oil on linen
58 x 72 in., 2014

(facing page) **The Necessity of Judgment**
oil on linen
44 x 46", 2013

(left) **Three Jews Walk Into a Bar**
oil on linen
34 x 40", 2014

