

527 West 29th Street New York NY 10001

Tel 212-925-6190 Fax 212-334-9139

info@davidnolangallery.com

www.davidnolangallery.com

# ARTFORUM

## Jonathan Meese at David Nolan Gallery

By Michael Wilson

February 2017



Jonathan Meese, *Fort d'EVOLUTIONSKNOXOX de ZARDOZEDADADDY 2 (ERZ JOHNNY WAYNE IS DADDY COOLISMEESE)*, 2016, mixed media. Installation view. Photo: Stan Narten.

Inspired by the singular if unfashionable vision of Franz Erhard Walther, under whom he studied at Hamburg's Hochschule für Bildende Künste in the late 1990s, Jonathan Meese has developed a self-consciously grandiose vision of "total art" that continues to shape his output and its reception. This exhibition, "DR. TRANS-FORM-ERZ," gathered seventy-odd drawings made by the German artist over the past twenty years or so, but only scratched the surface of his expansive and deliberately contrarian practice. A scattershot installation of works on paper in the gallery's ground-level space was paired with a chaotic new installation in its upstairs room; together, these constituted a partial but characteristically ripe sampling of Meese's various fixations, which are centered on historic cultural figures from Nero to Stalin, Richard Wagner to John Wayne.

Like many artists with similarly sprawling practices (Joseph Beuys being the most iconic), Meese doesn't place too much emphasis on any singular work; rather, to him it is the cumulative effect that really matters. Numerous contemporary practitioners work across multiple mediums, but the fact that "opera directing" appears prominently on Meese's résumé is a notable detail, signaling that he is happier than most to take on the challenge of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. And while Meese denies that his project is fueled by egoism, claiming, "I have to serve art. I don't serve myself," his image and touch are everywhere in his

output, as immediately identifiable as that of Matthew Barney or Damien Hirst—two other artists whose public presence is defined in part by macho posturing.

In Meese's case, the positioning of art as a force—more weapon than tool—is made explicit by his focus on military imagery, and on the figure of the cowboy, six-shooter perpetually drawn. Meese has a fondness for Napoleonic headgear and medals, and for pronouncements that spell out his intention to attack convention—artistic conservatism very much included. This antiestablishment strain is what binds him most lastingly to Walther, and to the utopian ideals of the 1960s. Whether Meese's work functions in anything like the same way as his forebear's is highly debatable; this dilemma is revealed in the artist's gradual and ongoing shift from a visible embrace of the professionalized art world toward a studied indifference. He remains, in theory, future-focused—but from a distance.

What then stood out from this particular selection? Meese makes drawings using a variety of materials, including acrylic, crayon, graphite, ink, and watercolor, also producing collages of found and original photographs combined with clipped, drawn, painted, and photocopied elements. Created over the past two decades, all shared an expressionistic look, often suggesting abandoned experiments or studies for larger works. Many featured captions and speech bubbles scrawled in marker or pencil, and there was a palpable sense of haste to them, as if the artist's main desire was to move on to the next before any image or idea became overwrought. Paint had been applied in quick, thick strokes; collage components were chopped up and slapped down. The drawings thus tended to be more memorable for their "stars"—Hitler, Yukio Mishima, Ezra Pound—than for their appearance.

The installation *Fort d'EVOLUTIONSKNOXOZ de ZARDOZEDADADDY 2 (ERZ JOHNNY WAYNE IS DADDY COOLISMEESE)*, 2016, was, for its part, basically formless, a roughly thirteen-foot-square room in which every wall and most of the ceiling had been plastered with paintings, drawings, and objects, the dense accumulation extending onto the interior surfaces themselves. (Such installations by Meese are very rarely seen in the United States, primarily because he refuses to fly; to make this piece, the artist constructed a replica of the gallery in his studio, which was then disassembled and shipped to David Nolan.) The imagery and texts on display took up the themes and iconography of the work downstairs, pursuing the cowboy line, for example, via ersatz saloon doors and a scattering of toy rifles. It's another example of that casual Berlin-squat aesthetic that always feels slightly awkward in a clean, legal gallery, but which was here entirely consistent with Meese's aspiration to an art of "total evolution" characterized above all by rapid, unending production.