

Gabriel Madan

Severance

Los Angeles: January 7 - February 4th, 2023 | New York: January 28 - February 25th, 2023



By some lights, the best pages of Marcel Proust's serpentine seven-volume meditation on memory, love, lust, art and other things are the very first, when the protagonist reminisces about Combray, the fictional French seaside town of his youth, revisits his evenings at home, his pining for his mother's kiss, the drama of being shattered every time said kiss doesn't come. These delicious and "confused gusts of memory" offer up an amuse-bouche for the sensual adventures to come.

Place and childhood function in equally powerful ways in *Severance*, Gabriel Madan's new suite of paintings. The Cuban-American Miami of the artist's youth, and by extension, its seaside, are his omphalos, his own Combray, suggestive settings which inflect and inform his adamantly affecting art.

There are several primal scenes to speak of. One features Elián González: back in 1999, the story of a young Cuban boy found at sea, floating in a pathetic dinghy just three miles from the Florida shoreline, captivated the world. Only five-years-old, González, whose mother had drowned while trying to ferry him to America, swiftly became the object of a complex geopolitical spat. "My mother is not in heaven. Not lost. She must have lost her memory and just doesn't know I'm here," González, practically a baby, told an interviewer on *Good Morning America*. Madan, as it happens, was almost exactly the same age as the beleaguered little boy on the television screen; they even looked alike.

Sixteen years later, Madan's beloved older sister, Rebecca, lost her life in a freak health accident at a beach near where they grew up. When Madan was little, this sister, playing doctor, would sometimes tease him with the following refrain: "Do you have amnesia? We have to operate! We have to cut your brain out."

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Do you know that a grandmother's cremated remains were arranged in the shape of a starfish?

Such curiosities, coincidences, and echoes puncture and permeate these works; an exquisite corpse of associations. Visual totems are everywhere, many arranged in rings, a little like constellations in the sky. Or tchotchkes arranged in an antique shop. A cast of recurring characters make cameos in this bespoke cosmology: a childhood cockatoo stricken by a debilitating disease, clip art gecko playing the harp, a frog resuscitated and recycled from another painting, or traces of Mike Kelley, whose own work hovers over these proceedings like a kindly specter. Starfish are everywhere; they cling to the surface of one painting like a band-aid on wounded skin. An image of Elián and his mother; an image of the artist and his own mother. A father's throbbing, ulcerous foot. The poet Louise Gluck, too, is very present. "We look at the world once, in childhood," she once wrote. "The rest is memory." This is capacious painting that thumbs its nose at hierarchy, that borrows freely, that indulges in sincerity and irony both.

A digression on animals, of which there are many in these tableaux. The Viennese philosopher Fahim Amir has argued that animals are given a bad rap, that one ought to learn from them—their vicissitudes, their spirit of resistance—rather than relegate them to lowly side-show status. Madan's ennobled, if hobbled cockatoos, lounge act geckos and dogs are revelatory, stand-ins for motley psychic states (desire, dread, death), but also ways of being in the world. Like the hokey clip-art that also suffuses these paintings, and much like the emojis which suffuse our lives, these animals offer up shortcuts to feeling, windy joke-studded highways to the subconscious.

If some of Madan's coloring book iconography feels slight, bottom of the barrel, surface, if you will, it's doing its work. (If originality is a cult like any other, why shouldn't the Jpeg be king?) Paintings "can feel so dumb!" says the artist to me one day as we chat on the phone. His flirt with both dimensionality and flatness, to an almost cartoonish degree. And yet surfaces are almost always deceiving. "A good one," said Richard Avedon, is "full of clues." Or, as Mike Kelley put it in "The Territorial Hound," a work on paper from 1984 featuring a dog that appears in facsimile form on one of Madan's paintings: "A cosmetic front hides a diseased rear."

"God," I am reminded, is "dog" backwards.

Madan's bespoke memory bath is an archaeology of past and present; figures are born, others die, and still others undergo metaphysical transformation as they vibrate on the canvas. In yet another perfect poem that appears on one of these evocative surfaces, Louise Gluck—her again—suggests this: "There is no perfect ending. Indeed, there are infinite endings." And so, Madan mines and mines again.

Written by Negar Azimi.

Gabriel Madan (b. 1993, Miami, FL) is a multimedia artist who lives and works in Los Angeles. He received his MFA from ArtCenter College of Art and Design (2020) and BFA in Printmaking from the University of Miami (2015). Recent solo exhibitions include François Ghebaly, Los Angeles and New York (2023); Red Baron Pizza, Hesperia (curated by Aram Moshayedi and Shahryar Nashat) (2022); Gattopardo, Los Angeles (2021); and the Artcenter College of Design, Pasadena (2020). Additionally, his work has been included in group presentations at Baik Art, Seoul, Korea (2022); Gattopardo, Los Angeles (2022); Kristina Kite Gallery, Los Angeles (2021) and Artcenter, Los Angeles (2020). Screenings of his work have been presented via Magic Rectangles (2021); Renaissance Society (2020); and Los Angeles Nomadic Division (2020). His work resides in the collection of the Hammer Museum. *Severance* is a two part exhibition that begins at François Ghebaly, Los Angeles and extends to Francois Ghebaly, New York, opening in both locations in January 2023.