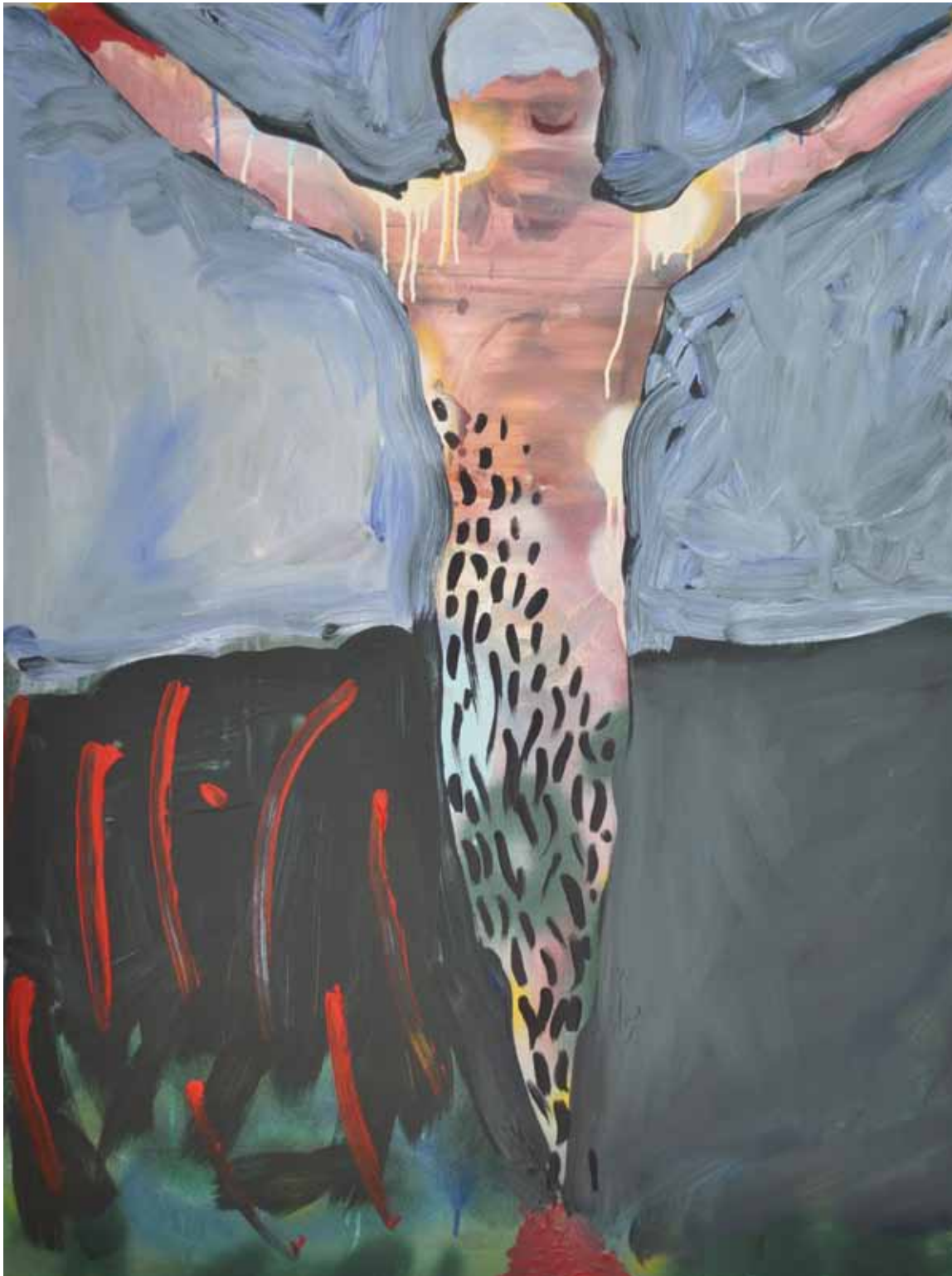


Everyday Transcendence

Jonathan Howse pursues a sacred ordinary

ALLISON GRAVES



Jonathan Howse, *Messiah*, 2016,
oil, acrylic and spray paint on canvas 122 x 91 cm.



Jonathan Howse, *Jeff Werner*, 2017,
oil on canvas, 91 × 61 cm.

Understanding someone is a sacred and special thing. Perhaps it's even glorious. Jonathan Howse's solo exhibition at Christina Parker Gallery in St. John's, Newfoundland attempts to reveal common things as transcendent and transcendent things as common. By subverting these colloquial understandings of what is glorious, this work makes the audience uncomfortable as we unlearn what we think we know. The subversive search for the contemporary equivalent to the halo leads to the irrelevance of classic understandings and the remoteness of our traditional perceptions of identity.

His paintings *Pop Mercer* and *Nan Reid* appear to be family portraits, featuring people the artist has descended from. Both images show these people doing normal things: reading a book and sitting in a rocking chair. These paintings encapsulate how Howse works. He takes a specific image that is committed to his memory and changes it until it becomes something totally different. Painted over *Nan Reid* is a layer of polka dots. And over *Pop Mercer* is a yellow line, and perhaps most importantly, a halo. Howse says, "I start with something real: an old family photograph, a memory, an image from my life. I start by drawing the image on the canvas ... As I paint the image, I find something in the marks that is more real than the memory or the photo. Then my focus shifts. Everything becomes about that mark that changed all marks."

Beside these paintings hang self portraits of the artist, such as his *Self Portrait with Coffee Plants*. But the face is covered, making it impossible for us to know whose face it actually is. Now, instead of looking to the face to understand a reaction, the audience must look somewhere else, they must work harder. The title tells you this is him, but the image tells you this could be anyone. On top of the covered face, is again a halo. *Angel* features a white man in a jacket, slacks and a white button up. This man looks like a lot of people. His hands are in his pockets and he appears humble. Red angel wings emerge from behind him, while a yellow halo rests above his head. Howse transforms this person who could be anybody into someone who is suddenly holy.

In the painting *A Cup of Tea* we see a man pouring tea out of a thermos, the steam from the drink rising in lines and dots that cover a portion of the man's face. The tea makes me think of the Newfoundland tradition called 'Mug Up,' an evening snack that brings a family together and encourages reconciliation. A place where we all look at each other in the face.

Dispersed between these images are smaller works, indistinguishable in their layers. *Painting #8* features many layers and marks on top of an ambiguous form that appears suffocated, squished and trapped. It's not clear what this object is, or if it is an object at all—we just know what's on top of it. In juxtaposition to the larger portraits, *Nan Reid* and *Pop Mercer*, we wonder if this might feature someone important too—someone who was more well-guarded and harder to remember. "The purpose of my paintings is not the image," Howse says. "I believe the most beautiful painting points to something it does not show."

"A painting depicts the world, but the marks conjure up the

gods," Howse says to me. I think about this as I observe the works along the front wall: images of sacrificial men—figures with their arms out, their faces indistinguishable. He calls these paintings *He Has Risen* and *Messiah*. These figures don't have halos but they depict traditional ideas of masculinity and traditional understandings of glory and sacrifice that exists within certain gender binaries.

This type of mark-making, which Howse is so partial to, involves huge elements of chance. Adding the distracting and all-consuming layers painted over top of a perfected image takes the same kind of courage as breaking down a layer that sits over top of someone's soul. Through the experimental mark-making and the pursuit of optically enhanced and expansive visual planes, Howse is ultimately discovering new ways to be human. He is creating and removing new identities as well as creating new spaces in which those identities can exist. By imposing the halo on images of a man pouring a cup of tea or a woman sitting in a rocking chair, Howse is showing that these people too, are holy. He is looking for a visual symbol to solve the problem of how to represent the glory of an individual in pictures.

I consider parallels to the work of Gerhard Richter in Howse's work. Rachel Barker, a painting conservator at Tate, said of Richter's work: "The film of Richter painting shows how he frequently paints quite detailed under-paintings, which he might muse over and consider for some time. This is an extraordinary process bearing in mind that 90% of this image will be permanently hidden by subsequent paint coverage" (in a 2011 interview on tate.org.uk). This process, reminiscent of Howse's process, reminds me that even though the face is hidden, it doesn't mean there isn't a thoughtful and important expression hidden beneath the paint coverage. Considering the detail of the under-paintings is equally as important as considering the detail of what is on top.

In a smaller painting I see last, *Saviour*, a woman looks like she's drowning. This image hangs beside a painting of the St. John's Harbour, commonly referred to as The Narrows. The woman in *Saviour* looks like she needs to be saved, but I wonder if she too has saved others. Parts of her arms are extended in the same way as the men on the opposing wall, the men who have sacrificed. The woman's face is covered but her breasts are visible. I look to the portrait of the St. John's Harbour and I think about Newfoundland and how people interpret and simplify the culture here—in ways that are so often wrong. Howse has imposed circles and lines of all different colours and shapes over The Narrows, changing it, making it something different, making it more than one thing. I think about how Newfoundland was my saviour and I wonder if the woman drowned. ■

Allison Graves' work has appeared in Riddle Fence Magazine, The Impression Gang, The Sappy Times, and The Overcast. She has curated exhibitions and projects for Eastern Edge Gallery, HOLD FAST Contemporary Art Festival and is the current editor of Memorial's creative writing journal, Paragon.

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