

***Laughing Along with a Lump in my Throat:
Mark Joshua Epstein at Matéria Core City***

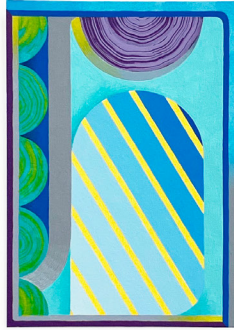
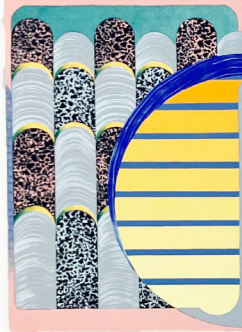
Ashley Cook

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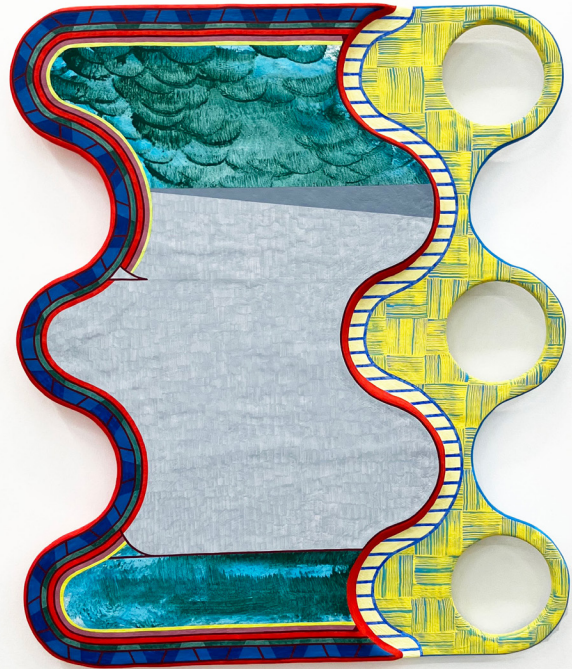
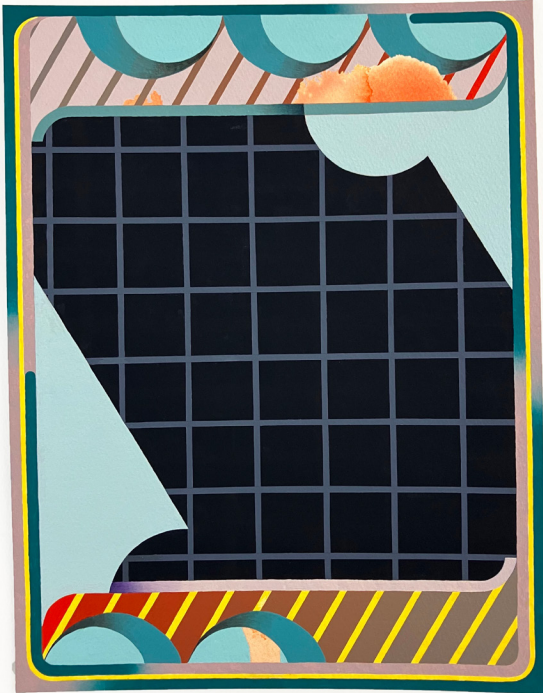
Laughing Along with a Lump in my Throat: Mark Joshua Epstein at Matéria Core City

The collection of works on view at Matéria Core City represents Mark Joshua Epstein's ongoing inquiry into the creative practice and its relationship to the process of weaving. Facets of identity become unique tapestries of expression as color and shape are joined by cultural nuances in these thirteen compositions. While each one is playful enough to enjoy without context, the depths of the Jewish, Queer and Gen X experiences are hidden throughout. The power of dialect as a unifying force is evident as the works become visual playgrounds of reminiscence for these specific social groups. What is also clear is how one person can comfortably embody many ideologies, lifestyles and preferences simultaneously.



(Left) *A Litany of Loopholes*, 2024, Acrylic on Watercolor Paper
(Middle) *Lounging at Altitude*, 2024 Acrylic on Watercolor Paper
(Right) *Falling Apart Eight Times a Week*, 2024 Acrylic on Watercolor Paper

A first glance reveals the artist’s reverence for the bright colors, graphic patterns and geometric shapes; viewers are invited to step into dreamscapes inspired by the digital worlds and physical realities of the 1980s. This now widely-appreciated aesthetic started with the work of Italian designer Ettore Sottsass and the Memphis Group, who were known for their “radical, funny, and outrageous” styles that challenged ideals of good taste at the time. What is interesting is that Sottsass was actually a militant of the Italian Republican Fascist Party¹ before pursuing a career in the arts, but his liberal combinations of pattern, color, and shape propelled the voices of a new generation, who fought for a greater acceptance of sexual and cultural diversity around the world. His influence began to be seen in art galleries, magazines, clothing racks and furniture shops. It was a collective world-building effort that ultimately led to the invention of the internet. Today, a nostalgia for this era of punk rock and digital pioneers manifests through graphic art movements like Vaporwave, which draws influence from Japanese anime, ancient cultures and the digital world to continue the exploration of infinity that came with the birth of the world wide web. Epstein helps bring this sentiment into contemporary art through his use of amorphous shapes, glitchy patterns, overlays and voids.



(Left Top) *We've Been Here and it Wasn't That Long Ago*, 2024, Acrylic on Watercolor Paper

(Left Bottom) *Breaking Through or Breaking Down*, 2024, Acrylic on Watercolor Paper

(Right) *Laughing Along with a Lump in my Throat*, 2024, Acrylic on artist-made Panel

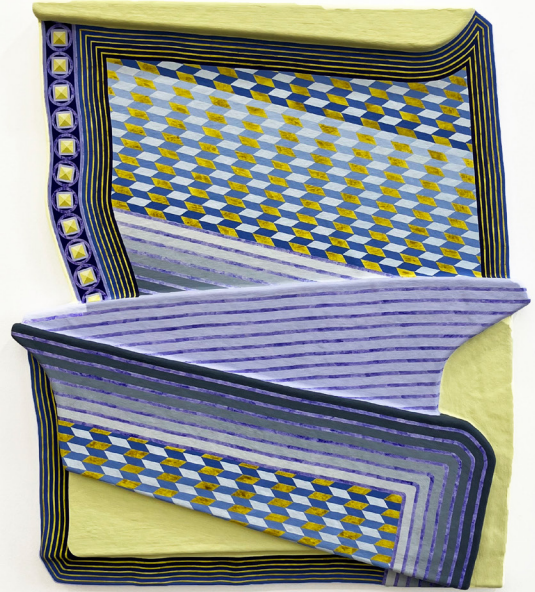
Abstraction is as much a means of communication as it is an investigation of harmony. Obscured messages and identity markers have always saturated the artistry of marginalized groups, proving the essential role that creativity and art has in resiliency. The 2019 exhibition *Queer Abstraction* at Des Moines Art Center in Iowa surveyed works by LGBTQ artists throughout history in an effort to identify characteristics that have been carried from one generation to the next. What stood out was an exploration of alternative compositional structures, consistent use of bright colors, gradients and flattened forms. There was also a blending of the past and present, and an employment of various aesthetics with a particular emphasis on styles from the Women's Pattern and Decoration Movement, Hindu Art, Indigenous Art, and other disenfranchised communities.²



Within the Realm of the Possible, 2024, Acrylic on artist-made Panel



The Potential for Redemption (in every moment), 2021, Acrylic on artist-made Panel



Every Beginning They Had Ever Represented, 2021, Acrylic on artist-made Panel

Mark Joshua Epstein is a contemporary staple in this complex lineage of abstraction, approaching conversations on identity in subtle ways as he transgresses traditional formats and material applications to explore realms on the margins of expectation. His intricately painted patterns draw from video-game-like landscapes, classical paintings and Jewish traditions. As mentioned in the exhibition text, the entanglement that is present in his practice reflects both an acceptance of diversity and preservation of the cut-paper techniques of late 18th-early 19th century Jews in Eastern Europe. It was a craft that was practiced in domestic and religious spaces, by professional and amateur hands. Epstein's reclamation of this form of creative expression is a chance to uncover an ancestral practice that was nearly lost in the second world war, fuel its resurgence, and secure its place in the future of Jewish culture.



Up and Alert but with the Curtains Closed, 2022, Acrylic on artist-made Panel



New Poems for New Normals, 2020, Acrylic on artist-made Panel

Many sources fuse into colorful alloys of intricate patterns and liberated forms, inspiring considerations on how incredibly fragile the concept of *purity* truly is. Minority communities have found safety in what Epstein refers to as “code-switching”. It is a kind of camouflaging to disguise the language used; a haven to protect the people using it. Solidarity comes with discernment and confidentiality, and hope comes with the ability to adapt. The title of the exhibition could be the artist’s way of expressing the concurrence of joy and fear that together define such a life; survival through clandestinity.

Laughing Along with a Lump in my Throat by Mark Joshua Epstein at Matéria Core City opened on January 18 and will be on view until March 15, 2025.

www.materia-art.com

1. “Ettore Sottsass.” Wikipedia, January 30, 2025. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ettore_Sottsass.

2. “How Queer Artists Used Abstraction to Express Themselves: Ideelart.” IdeelArt.com. Accessed March 13, 2025. <https://www.ideelart.com/magazine/queer-abstract-artists>.

Images by Ashley Cook