

YOSSI MILO



Conversation: Joel Mesler with Cameron Welch

JOEL MESLER:

Well, to start at the beginning, I was thinking about how I was first introduced to your work. When I first saw it, I thought, “Oh, this is Cameron’s world, right?” It was materially formalized. It was not work that was just “from the mind of the artist” but comes, physically, from a world, from Cameron’s world.

The first time I was in your studio, I was asking like, “Where does this broom come from?!” You started to take me along your path, telling me where these things came from—some were found, some were purchased.

You told me a story about a woman who had this table that you would buy things from.

I’m trying to remember the details because it’s become almost this mythology in my head after that studio visit. . .

CAMERON WELCH:

Yes, this woman had a small shop in Crown Heights that’s probably no longer there. She had had it for thirty or forty years, and she would get all these imported products from Ghana. She built a relationship with the neighborhood because there’s an incredible African community in Crown Heights. We built a relationship, and I would go to her to get these objects because, you know, there is a difference between purchasing them on Amazon, for example, versus getting them from a woman who was shipped these things from a country that she has an intimate relationship with.

In that first show we did together, *Retrograde* at Rental, it was important to try to get the gap between people and the work much smaller, you know?

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JM:

Right. I almost thought of it as your walk. It was local— it was your world and the space you were occupying. The scale of things was appropriate; it was the scale your body took. This was your path, and these were the people you were talking to and interacting with. That's why it felt real.

Having a gallery out here [in the Hamptons] was a change; I went from New York City— the big, scary art world of New York City— to a different scale, where it was like, "Oh, people are people, and you can just talk to the one percent just like they're anybody." They're not like these scary monsters, and I think there was a kind of kismet between you, the scale of your work, and my understanding of bringing art to the one percent in the Hamptons.

CW:

Yeah, I totally agree. I think there was something really potent and cool about showing up there— building a relationship with an amazing community that made the wading through I would've had to do in all of these spaces easier because everyone lets their hair down out there.

With you, Rashid [Johnson], and Harper [Levine], and everyone I met out there, I have such a close relationship— that is sort of impossible in the city because there are all these roadblocks all the time. But out there— along with the Hamptons light that's so incredible— there's these opportunities. The exhibition out there was this great platform for me to start from.

JM:

Yeah, you built this language of connections and these relationships at a real scale; it was about person to person as opposed to, again, big, bad, New York City and navigating that [scene].

Someone like Rashid Johnson, who is this kind of heroic figure, becomes just this friendly, kind human you could talk about art with, or Harper, who's this goofy man just building his dreams, which is different than in the city, where everybody's got their own hustle.

CW:

You're also able to see things more in terms of scale; I think perspective out there is heightened in a way that allows you to see things a little easier.

JM:

And time is a little different.

CW:

Yeah, for sure. Time slows down in a way that I was really surprised by.

JM:

Yeah, that's why I immediately wanted to show your work when I first saw it. I keep bringing up scale, but I don't mean the size of your work— I mean the scale of the material choices, the messaging, the content. The scale was right and genuine with where you were as an artist, how you're approaching your artwork, and what you were communicating about.

You weren't bullshitting anybody. You were dipping your toes in exactly the waters you were supposed to be dipping your feet in, you know? That's what was so refreshing. It was so interesting to have the show in the Hamptons— it was almost more sympatico to do it here than if that show was in the Lower East Side or in Williamsburg.

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We've talked about it in the past, but your path is so unique and specific to you in that way. You came into your own— or what do they say, “cut your teeth?”— not in the standard New York City way, but now you're in it. You just got there without following the traditional matrix.

CW:

For sure. I'm so grateful to you for extending your hand and giving me a space to show that first body of work because it was so important. And, like you said, I feel like it was received in that space in a way that would not have been the same here [New York City].

It was important to be around and to try to make sure that the work was seen and understood. It's a literacy thing almost, where the language is understood by all those people [who] saw it up there because they see so much all the time.

JM:

Right. I think some of that had to do with the fact that you were bringing some of the materials that you were working with literally into, not just the white box, but the white box in East Hampton...

CW:

Yeah, it's like the zenith of the white box or something.

JM:

Right, which I think added even another dimension.

CW:

Totally. Getting all that stuff— things people had thrown out, objects people had handled, all this ephemera of my surroundings, keyboards and stuff that children had played with— putting all of that in a painting that then was going to hang on the wall at your space...It's making something with this thing that came from someone's hands and then showing it in a gallery that's super specific in a place where that person might feel excluded, a place [the Hamptons] that they've probably never been to. It's about bringing all of that material to that place.

JM:

You mentioned a keyboard, but even more to the point, something like a car hubcap that did not belong to, let's say, a Mercedes, Porsche, or Bentley, but that came from something more like a Hyundai, Honda, Toyota, or Nissan that was a fucking beater from twenty years ago—getting that onto the picture, elevating it to the white box, and bringing it out here.

CW:

Yeah [*laughs*]. I mean it becomes so much about community and communication. I feel like your work does that too, right? I feel like you're making a space— which I really love— for people to be vulnerable. And that's really powerful.

There's a similar sort of scale and distancing with the way you're using language and the way you're using autobiography. I feel like you're trying to make space for people to feel themselves when they're looking at work. This is coming from a similar goal, I believe.

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JM:

Yeah. I mean, hopefully that vulnerability is the bridge to connection. That's all we've got, you know. I've been told recently that if we do anything else, it's called mansplaining, so I guess I'll stick to what I know [laughs].

I guess the question with your work, then, is: what happens now as your language evolves? Your works keep getting more beautiful and, in a sense, less about what's happening across the street and maybe more about what's happening in your heart or mental space, what's going on inside of Cameron. How, then, do you bridge some of those elements of the earlier work?

CW:

Totally [laughs]. I mean, I do think that the conversations became very external and about my relationship with the world around me— both the intimacy and the potency of that. If I stick this thing in the painting, it's going to build this relationship that people have innately with objects. Everyone knows that this is a keyboard, and they can enter the work this way. It's very immediate and also talks to a specific community. But now, I've really tried to sit with the work for a while and boil it down to, why I am interested in a particular thing and mining my own autobiography in a sort of archaeological sense. I think it's become super potent, and thinking about archaeology, now I'm starting to use all this marble and stone materials that are quarried from these giant fucking mountains that have been around for a million years.

It's a material set that is analogous to the early work but used to talk about a site that's slightly more internal— it went from outside to something more about self-actualization. It's becoming more abstract and leaving space for people to ask, "What is this, and where am I within that?" That's been really exciting in the studio recently.

JM:

Because it's your internal voice, almost a quieter, softer voice. The longer we have the privilege of doing what we're doing, the longer we get to keep exploring. In that exploration, by going deeper, we almost get to let go. And so, the antennas go up, and the voices go quieter. You've let go of the self a little bit, and you're—I love that idea of excavation. We're digging, we're looking, but it's not with these voices that we already know. We have to let go a little bit to discover things.

CW:

Yeah, seeing what comes in and finding spaces that give you moments of inspiration. That was the thing—I would walk around, and I would see these objects, and there's a shift between walking a path externally versus walking one internally...

JM:

Right, right, right. It's almost like we can now feel safe because we have established the outside voice. We've got our armor, we've got our thing, but, okay, what's the inside voice? What's the internal thing that got us? I love what you said about the motivation to put a keyboard into a painting. "Why did I do such a thing," you know? [laughs]

Like all great artists, you had an impulse. It made you do it. You did it, and then you're like, huh, this works. And now, it's almost like you get to like study yourself, study your motivations, and study your intuition.

CW:

Which is a huge privilege, but also one that I think you can track through a lot of other artists' careers. You find a space where everything was reactionary, and then the next body of work comes, and it opens up in

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this way. It's like you're in fifth gear and, all of a sudden, you're able to drive really fast— there's less resistance or something.

JM:

I was talking to a friend of mine about how people hate boundaries, but to define what your edge is or what your boundary is, you really have to walk it. Like you're saying, you've got to pop it into fifth gear every once in a while to know what your own speed limit is, and maybe some of us don't even have a fifth gear, you know what I mean? We don't all have the same top speed.

I love that— just in the time that I have known you and seen your artistic journey, which isn't a very long time— you have had this arc. One of the many beauties of being an artist is that we get these journeys, that we get to discover what our edges and boundaries are.

It's so exciting to watch you work, you know. That show we did together was right at the end of my art-dealing career, but if I wasn't ending my art-dealing career, I would say, "Cameron is the exact artist I would want to stand behind." It's the push-pull of wanting to be an art dealer. It's really rewarding to watch.

CW:

Ditto. Watching your whole path has been really great. I think the last time I saw you in person was at your show at Cheim & Read, which is crazy to think about. I love those rabbi paintings, and every time I see a new work of yours, I get to learn, and I get to know a part of you that I wasn't familiar with before. It's a beautiful sense of discovery.

JM:

Thank you. Like we were saying, man, it's such a gift. I'm an old man, and the fact we connect on this thing of making art is a blessing. It's amazing to see somebody younger be grateful because— speaking as an art dealer— not every young artist is. It gets missed sometimes when there's success early on. When we did our show together, it was a sold-out show, and you had all these people buzzing about your work, but you never let it get to your head.

When I was your age, if that would've happened to me, I mean, holy shit— the amount of cocaine I would've stuck in my nose would've been worse than it was [*laughs*].

CW:

[*laughs*] But it comes from having a community of elders around me to talk to, telling me what they did, a "Do as I say, not as I do" kind of a thing. "I did this, don't do that."

JM:

And wasn't Rashid's first bit of advice to you to pay your taxes. Like, "Listen, I'm going to give you one piece of advice: Pay your fucking taxes."

CW:

Yeah, that's an important piece of advice [*laughs*].

JM:

They're good people to have around; our generation didn't really have that. It's amazing to have somebody say that to you, you know, because it's fucking true. Paying your taxes and that kind of stuff— that's how you survive in this crazy game, and if you stick around long enough, great shit happens, you know.

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CW:

Yeah, I think that's a great thing to think about. A lot of the work I'm making now is dealing with the psychology of self-actualization and this cyclical path that we're all walking in order to find ourselves. What is it? "Free your mind and your ass will follow," or something like that? There's something to that.

JM:

One hundred percent. And, again, it's about action. Speaking from artist to artist, you know, painting is the most naked medium there is. You can't just think about it; you've got to take the action. And if you think too long about the action, it never works out. It's like life, and I love that your work and the way you're talking about excavation is hitting that. Beautiful.

Image: Cameron Welch, *The Waltz*, 2024, 120 3/4" x 145 3/8" (306.5 x 369 cm)