

ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS

New York Keith Mayerson

MARLBOROUGH CONTEMPORARY | NEW YORK
545 West 25th Street
October 12–November 11

A famous photograph taken in 1970 depicts Elvis Presley—caped in black velvet, his mouth slightly agape—shaking Richard Nixon’s hand: an enduring spectacle of fading Americana clasped with disastrous politics. It’s no wonder Keith Mayerson chose to paint the encounter, *Elvis Nixon* (all works 2017), for “My American Dream: Mystery Train (in loving memory of Daniel Tinker Knapp),” a show whose nostalgia is menaced by the tensions of an increasingly fractured country. Here, American landscapes often threaten to implode into abstraction, as in the monumental *Paso del Norte: the US/Mexico Border*, which portrays Ciudad Juárez as a near-mutilated slab of mustard yellows and bright grays. Nearby, a nuclear power plant and steel factory hint at the deindustrialization that helped fuel last year’s election.

In *Resurrection (The Trumps Meet The Pope)*, Donald, Ivanka, Melania, and Jared pose with the pontiff in front of Pietro Perugino’s 1499 painting *Christ on the Sarcophagus*. Trump’s mouth contorts into a ghoulish smile; Francis wears a stonier expression. In three purely abstract works, intestinal thickets of paint—mostly putrid skin tones and vile greens—are politicized by their parenthetical dedications. *Iconscape (POTUS)* doesn’t differ much from *Iconscape (Heather D. Heyer)*, though both muster a cathartic wrath denied by the other works.



Keith Mayerson, *Resurrection (The Trumps Meet The Pope)*, 2017, oil on linen, 29 x 22".

Mayerson began this ongoing series during the George W. Bush administration, in 1999; the project now spans three American presidencies. Much has been made of Bush’s own oil paintings, and perhaps a juxtaposition is useful, as Bush and Mayerson both shroud patriotic spirit in ominous sentimentality. Yet this exhibition derives its quiet force by challenging power, not through empty homage. Rather than attempting to comfort or atone, Mayerson seeks to question: Does the American dream still exist, or did it ever, and to whom, exactly, might it belong?

— Zack Hatfield