

What on Earth Are We Supposed to Do With the Outrageous Art of CumWizard69420?

Let me take you on a little tour of "The Americans" at Cheim & Read.

Ben Davis, February 28, 2023



CumWizard69420, *Woman Screams at Trump's Inauguration* (2020). Photo by Ben Davis.

A painter named CumWizard69420 is a modest sensation right now. Rising from almost nowhere, the colorfully named character is currently attracting some media heat with a painting show at Cheim & Read in Chelsea. If I were a struggling figurative painter, I might be thinking of changing my name to something like IEatPoops! or MilfManiac666 right about now.

I'm left scratching my head wondering what the appearance of CumWizard on the scene says about this chaotic and transitional time in art.

Here's what you see in the gallery: The paintings, which he churns out, are modest in size and done in a deskilled, cartoony, and abject style, an unlikely fusion of Grandma Moses and the painting output of Jim Carrey. They are not the worst paintings ever, while still preserving the look of being a joke about painting.



Installation view of CumWizard69420, "The Americans" at Cheim & Read. Photo by Ben Davis.

As for subject matter: There's a preppy, smiling portrait of sexual predator Jeffrey Epstein and one that renders a widely circulated photo of his consort Ghislaine Maxwell giving Epstein a foot massage. There's Woody Allen. There's a ghastly Donald Trump. There's Kanye West in a red MAGA hat.

There's an unflattering Caitlyn Jenner titled *The Beautiful Caitlyn Jenner*. There's a picture of Ellen Degeneres with monstrously bloodshot eyes.



CumWizard69420, *Ellen Come and See Face* (2020). Photo by Ben Davis.

This last I thought was about the talk show host's fall from grace, but realize it is a riff on a meme that takes a clip of her crying about the police murder of Breonna Taylor and re-captions it "When you get so high, you start getting scared."

As for the non-celebs, the images of them convey universal repulsion. The show is called "The Americans," channeling Robert Frank's '50s photo series surveying the alienation of U.S. life. CumWizard takes the "portrait of a nation" idea in a particularly curdled, irony-poisoned direction.



CumWizard69420, *Mother and Child* (2022). Photo by Ben Davis.

There's a mother breast-feeding her baby while shooting heroin; a painting of an elderly man with a walker whose pants have fallen down, showing his butt crack; a picture drawn from a widely ridiculed clip of a woman howling in anguish when Trump was inaugurated—sometimes called "[Luke Crywalker](#)" and often used as a meme to mock "snowflake liberals."

There are a bunch of canvasses of naked, obese women rendered as lumpy, misshapen grotesques. One, recumbent on a red background, shows her with mouth open and eyes closed in ecstasy as she eats Crisco from a bucket. It's called *Girl's Gotta Eat*.



CumWizard69420, *Girl's Gotta Eat* (2022). Photo by Ben Davis.

The artist told my colleague Annie Armstrong that his real name is Michael Clark. “CumWizard69420” was just the first name he thought of when he had to generate an online handle. He’s in his mid-20s, and was an UberEats driver until his painting became an object of fascination on Instagram after he started posting his internet-fried output during the pandemic. As influences, he lists the comedy podcast *Cum Town*—indeed, he began his art career by posting his paintings in the *Cum Town* subreddit—as well as artists such as [Katherine Bradford](#), [Keith Boadwee](#), and [Johnny Ryan](#). But he’s not so into contemporary art.

It is not clear to me whether Cheim & Read knows what it has on its hands here. The show press release states: “these images, which are often unnerving and frequently grotesque, are also generously human, laced with affection and humor.” It then invokes a line from a 1995 review of Diane Arbus by Hilton Als (because “The Americans” is the counterpoint to a Arbus show, running concurrently at the gallery), suggesting that CumWizard’s paintings “don’t feel exploitative in the least, because they are filled with love and discipline.”

It's hard to be objectively wrong when writing about art, but that is objectively wrong.



CumWizard69420, *Portrait of Ghislaine Maxwell* (2021). Photo by Ben Davis.

I think it's fair to say that the images are exercises in the ironic dehumanization that comes from viewing humanity mainly through the lens of the internet circus. "I get my inspiration from Google, Bing, and social media," CumWizard told Armstrong. His goal is just "to be funny online and to get a reaction out of people, really," he told the Contain podcast.

I get why their *South Park*-ish, everyone-sucks vibe rises to the top of the Instagram Discover Feed (where Cheim found it). Cranking up the outrage just to the edge of violating some standard that gets you banned is one way to get attention—and CumWizard's sensibilities have gotten him banned several times, at least once for a sexually explicit painting of singer James Brown (whether it was the one of Brown on his knees fellating a bunch of guys, called *I Feel Good*, or the one of Brown being sodomized, called *Get Up Offa That Thing and Fuck my Tight Lil Butthole*, I'm not quite clear).



Screenshot of CumWizart69420's personal website.

On his website, CumWizart introduces himself with a photo of a Black teenager with Down Syndrome, hunched over a canvas. Image search tells me that the image is of a real person, though probably *not* the real CumWizart: His name is Rahmel, and the picture is from a support group for kids with Down Syndrome in Evansville, Indiana, circa 2013.

What is CumWizart's message of "love and discipline" here? Based on his interviews and painting output, I know I *think* what CumWizart is mainly trying to pick the most offensive possible image to represent himself.

"The Americans" is a "vibe shift" painting show. Seeing this kind of material at a Chelsea gallery would have been unthinkable for most of the last six years, which were all about social justice rhetoric and symbolic reckoning. Trump, after all, proved that the Pepe the Frog vote could be an engine for actual reaction—so the mainstream of art and media became about very clear-cut moralizing.

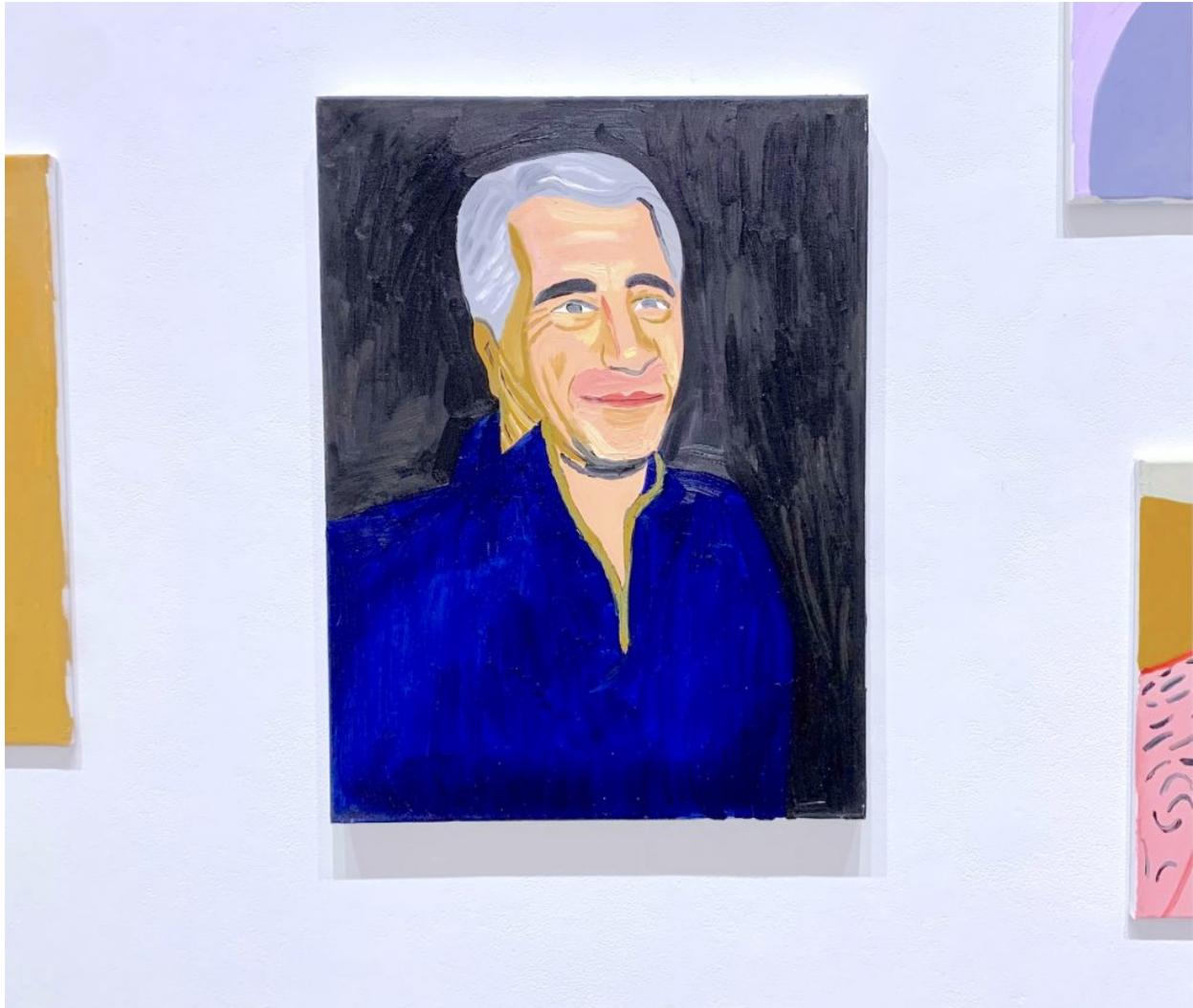


Installation view of CumWizard69420, “The Americans” at Cheim & Read. Photo by Ben Davis. But over time the hyper-moralistic discourse of “Pop Culture’s Great Awakening”—as Molly Fischer described it, writing of the precious, PSA-quality vibe of mainstream culture in this period—has started to come apart on its own contradictions.

Corporations have seized en masse on social justice as a trend to woke-wash affluent consumption (see: Brooklinen’s “revolution starts between the sheets” campaign) leading observers to associate it with cynical marketing. The punishing social-media vigilanteism of the last years has created a situation where no one believes anyone else’s social-justice rhetoric, since it feels compelled (the social scientists call this “informational contamination”). Constant outrage over trivial matters has trivialized outrage (though maybe I need to stress: There are still a lot of very serious things that actually deserve outrage!)

I won’t go into all the signs that the social-justice consensus is falling apart. One of the big harbingers of the end of the “woke” moment has been the rise of New York’s “downtown reactionary” scene—“boredom with performative outrage and disdain for overbearingly earnest didacticism” among the cool kids, as Dean Kissick writes. I think that its coherence and influence is way overstated by thirsty trend-spotters. I

also agree with Kissick that this sensibility doesn't *necessarily* represent "opposition to progressive values"—though there *are* definitely actual reactionaries going fishing in those waters as well.



CumWizard69420, *A Study of Jeffrey Epstein* (2022). Photo by Ben Davis.

But the depth of a subculture is determined by what it is defining itself against. The reigning virtue-signal-y vibe of the #Resistance era was so shallow, indiscriminate, and brittle that you didn't have to do too much in this time period to seem like you were part of some taboo intellectual subculture. You could get a lot of mileage, and attract a lot of attention, just by being irreverent about liberal pieties. And a number of trend-conscious cultural operators replaced "triggering the libs" with any sort of creative personality or conviction.

If the mainstream vibe does truly shift, and the dominant culture stops being so earnest and irony-averse denying the anti-woke posturing its foil, I'm guessing that

most of the jokes produced in this discursive hot house won't be that funny, and most of the art won't seem that interesting.

Dealer John Cheim told my colleague Annie Armstrong that what interested him in CumWizard was his "brazen subject matter and the very clear and direct painting method." Well, I've been through the CumWizard archive, and I will agree that amid all the many, many paintings of celebrities in blackface, 9/11-themed comedy, and scat porn there are flashes of memorably unhinged comedy (e.g. *Tom Cruise in Mission Impossible Trying to Be Sneaky But He Shits Himself*). There are even semi-tender moments, usually drawn from movies he's watched.

But is "brazen subject matter" the way to refer to CumWizard's canvas of a screaming woman being gang raped by koala bears? Or the one where a cartoon Native American man is shown with a talking balloon stating "I can hear the buffalo? They are calling the N word"? Or *No Ticky No Laundry*, rendering Jack Nicholson's mob boss character from *The Departed* as a bucktoothed Chinese caricature? Or *Down Syndrome Man Attempts Suicide With a Banana*? Or *Napalm Girl With Big Tits*? Or *The Trans Kids Are Coming Up From Behind*?

I hate "performative outrage" too. But for the most part, all this is just kinda puerile. The joke is just, here's a thing that's offensive... and I'm saying it!

This is a back-gallery show, with paintings priced at a few thousand each. The truth is that neither I nor, indeed, the Wizard himself (according to what he said to Armstrong) think that he is about to rocket to the heights of fame and success. It's hard to square respectability with a sensibility whose near total identity is invested in making "respectable" people pissed off. There's not going to be a CumWizard AmEx card the way there are Kehinde Wiley and Julie Mehretu AmEx cards.

The fact that the gallery deliberately mis-recognizes such fully baked nihilism as impish humanism tells me that the official art discourse is not really ready, or able, to assimilate this material. And yet, nevertheless, here's CumWizard, in Chelsea. So you can take "The Americans" as a small sign that the "LOL nothing matters" mindset is far more pervasive than people are able to say out loud. That reality sits in the gallery like a stain on someone's pants that everyone at the party is too polite to point out.

"CumWizard69420: The Americans," is on view at Cheim & Read, 547 West 25th Street, New York, New York, January 12–March 18, 2023.