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For immediate release:



WARDELL MILAN *Modern Utopia*

March 21 – May 24, 2024

Fraenkel Gallery is pleased to present *Modern Utopia*, an exhibition of new multimedia work by Wardell Milan. Ranging from intimate collages to large-scale narrative paintings, the artist depicts scenes of pleasure or violence, often imbued with a sense of unease. Long grounded in photography, his work is open-armed in its approach to materials. Images from photojournalism and news media often serve as references for figures in acrylic and oil pastel, and photographs by artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe are cut and recombined with graphite markings. This will be Milan's third solo show with the gallery since 2019. A reception with the artist will take place on Saturday, March 23, from 2-4pm.

Several large works depict scenes of strife, pictured in human terms. In one, a couple embrace in a vivid red room while bombs explode outside. In another, children anxiously look to a sky filled with gunfire or rockets. As in much of his work, Milan bases his figures on photographs that he finds in newspapers, online news sites, and magazines, often using many different sources for a single piece. The technique connects his work to current events, including themes of war and migration, while focusing on the individual relationships between his subjects.

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Other large works depict water, continuing Milan's formal engagement with the color blue. In one, a group lounges at the edge of a pond. Their poses are relaxed, but a note of foreboding pervades the dark water and sky. In another, men and women stand knee-deep in ocean waves, reaching towards two figures that slip into or out of the water. In these works, Milan considers the role that large bodies of water have played in narratives of escape, while also serving as a site of leisure or celebration.

In many works, Milan draws and redraws faces or body parts, creating surreal heads that look in several directions, or legs that twist and bend. A female figure reclines, framed by at least two sets of arms. In drawings of female bodybuilders, women flex many limbs. With a nod to Cubism, the approach implies movement, but also suggests an echo of violence.

Milan began drawing bodybuilders more than fifteen years ago—in returning to the subject, he was interested in the dedication required to transform the human body, a theme he relates to gender transition. Milan connects the drawings to two delicate portraits in charcoal and oil pastel titled *The Divine Feminine*. The portraits present a vulnerable yet wary picture of fictional subjects who claim an identity between the masculine and feminine.

Milan has described his ongoing series of tulip paintings as a kind of self-portraiture. In the latest, paint partially covers the fine charcoal and graphite underdrawings, creating abstracted, pastel colored groupings of flowers. In other works, Milan continues his unorthodox depictions of Klan members, taking humorous aim at dark imagery with references to sadomasochism.

Wardell Milan has been featured in solo shows at the Bronx Museum of Art, New York, and the Benton Museum of Art at Pomona College, Claremont, California. Group exhibitions include the three person shows *Please Stay Home* at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University, Boston, featuring the work of Darrel Ellis and Leslie Hewitt; and *Dawoud Bey, John Edmonds, Wardell Milan* at the Art Gallery of Ontario. His works are in the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago; Brooklyn Museum, New York; Denver Art Museum; Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago; Museum of Modern Art, New York; The Morgan Library & Museum, New York; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; UBS Art Collection; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, among others. Milan's work was the subject of the 2015 monograph *between late summer and early fall*, edited by Cay Sophie Rabinowitz and published by Osmos Books.

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Image: Wardell Milan, *You Belong Here*, 2023

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