

LEIDY CHURCHMAN

Text by Faye Hirsch
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A scavenger whose painted appropriations strike an earnest chord, the New York-based artist Leidy Churchman (b. 1979) culls from the miraculous detritus of our visual world. His curiosity for materials high and low, along with a consistently light hand that alternates thinly applied descriptive stretches and somewhat heavier impasto in layered, patient strokes, made for a cohesive tone in what at first appeared to be a disparate display of 19 oils on linen. Only minor changes in palette flag as copies otherwise faithful renditions of Henri Rousseau's *Repast of the Lion* (1907), in which the titular beast gorges on a leopard, and Jacob Lawrence's *Victory* (1947), depicting a weary black soldier. Neither Churchman copy contains a trace of Pictures Generation irony, or any of the "vampirism" (as the critic John Kelsey put it) of Michael Krebber's chilly readymade Polkes and Baselitzes. Churchman's Rousseau and Lawrence, along with other images captured or invented, are produced with a uniform loving care that erases distinctions between different ways of devising content.

At 66 by 84 inches, and with some of the original yellow flowers changed to pink, *Rousseau* was the largest canvas in the show, Churchman's first solo at Murray Guy. The smallest (and earliest, at 2013; the rest are 2014 or '15) was *Insecure Rat*, a 12-by-13½-inch portrayal of a rat caught in a bramble beside a murky pool—an unlikely Narcissus. Falling in between: a rendering of an informational pamphlet on vegetarianism from a Brooklyn restaurant (*Jungle Café*); a crustacean floating in what looks like a starry sky (*Crab and Plankton*); an homage to a subcontinental tapestry with a monstrous red-striped beast at the center (*19th Century Flayed Elephant*); and *Billions of Never Ending Universes*, in which a big yellow stripe presents a borderless world map between bands of cosmic sky. Alighiero Boetti's maps come to mind—but here the sites are all place names in small lettering, a number of them misspelled.

One painting, *Native Elongating Transcript Sequencing Reveals Human Transcriptional Activity at Nucleotide Resolution*, was produced in honor of Churchman's sister, a DNA researcher; the work might be mistaken for a Terry Winters-like abstraction but for its reproduction on the cover of an issue of *Cell Magazine* (April 23, 2015—a commission, apparently), present on a bench in the gallery. Churchman clearly has a reverence for all kinds of science, though the emphasis in this show was on ecology. He imagines the last of the passenger pigeons sitting patiently on a branch (*Martha*), offers a view of a fish hovering over the watchful eye of a whale (*Pelagic Ocean Sunfish*) and charts ocean currents in red and blue (*The Great Global Ocean Conveyor Belt*). However, just as you think you've understood his themes as nature-based, you find *Tallest Residential Tower in the Western Hemisphere*, a view of Manhattan from a luxury bathroom tinted sunset pink (the image taken from a high-end realtor's ad), or *So-Called "Islamic State"*, in which the flag of ISIS appears in black and gold against what looks like a graph-paper background.

But there is also a large, handsome canvas presenting obscurely related objects, de Chirico-style: a half-open door, a duck sitting on eggs, and an empty highway, among other vignettes. The painting is titled *Freud!*; one guesses its symbols to be the contents of a dream. It reminds us of an era in which the unconscious provided the kind of incongruous imagery that Churchman mainly discovers in what he has called "the extraordinary junkyard" of contemporary culture—the preoccupation of much of his generation. Apparently, we now need seek no deeper.

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