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Michael Abel: *Mutt*

By William Corwin



Michael Abel, *Lady Liberty Bounce V02*, 2024. Oil and oil stick on linen, 40 x 48 inches. Courtesy the artist and YveYang Gallery.

Michael Abel's exhibition *Mutt* at YveYANG Gallery is a sweet and meditative return to the Impressionist/Post-Impressionist fixation on the everyday, the pedestrian, and the momentary. As stylistic references in several of the works in the show attest—*Moonlight (After Munch)* (2024) and *The Green Christ (After Denis)* (2024) come immediately to mind—Abel's painting technique is suited to this endeavor. The unintended surrealism of combinations of objects with a visual narrative expressed by color, form, and texture is the key to the livelier works in the exhibition. In *Lady Liberty Bounce V02* (2024), a dark, creepy, bobbing Statue of Liberty seems to oscillate back and forth in front of a car, its open doors revealing an equally ominous interior. Liberty is rendered expressionistically, with rough, hairy strokes, emphasizing black shadows among her green highlights. Whether they are something the artist once directly saw and noted, or drew from a found image, or invented, these details have the quality of a personal observation, of a seemingly innocent assemblage of objects.



Michael Abel, *Mutt (Spike)*, 2024. Oil and oil stick on linen. 72 x 60 inches. Courtesy the artist and YveYang Gallery.

Passing observation captured in paint is heightened and made far more personal in a pair of large canvases focusing on the artist's own hair. In *Mutt* (2024) and *Mutt (Spike)* (2024), Abel examines the amusing irony of the back of one's head. Most of us only really catch this elusive view at the close of a session with the barber, yet we see the backs of other heads all the time. Abel loses himself in this rare-yet-banal stepchild of self portraiture. *Mutt* presents much of the head, a shoulder, and an upper arm. Forms are cropped in such a way as to add a touch of mystery to what we are looking at, and Abel flips the composition upside down to further reduce familiarity. We instead find ourselves focusing on the dark mass of the hair and the gray creases, pink shadows, and pale highlights of the flesh. *Mutt (Spike)* dispenses with the body completely, and the artist instead chooses to employ a single tuft of hair as a visual metonym. There's a lot more meat here—the brushstrokes streak outward, mostly black, but depth is added by sienna and umber, and hazy white, which serves to blend some parts with the surrounding flesh tones while keeping other “spikes” crisp and independent. The artist then scrapes lines into the hair-burst, gently offering an abstract interpretation. Another painting, *Burning Bin (Moonlight)* (2024), similarly employs the bursting visual symbolism, but, as per the title, it's literal this time.

The haphazard-seeming, almost-surreal arrangements of disparate objects in several of the paintings are reminiscent of the late, great Philip Pearlstein's paintings, where the addition of odd tchotchkes to the foreground or background was a common motif. In Pearlstein's work, the unexpected colors, textures, geometries, and forms played a foil to the flesh tones. Abel dispenses with the figure for the most part, instead making the tchotchkes the main characters. This is most delightfully apparent in the pair of paintings, *Lifesavers* (2024) and *Blotter* (2024), in which two “things” (I'm not sure we can even call them objects because one is simply the logo “Lifesavers”) switch positions in the picture plane—the logo and a serpent-like creature. The slick green back of the fish or snake, with its beady eye, alternates with the corporate Lifesavers image. They don't accommodate each other, instead forming a jarring, dystopic still life. A slight explanation is offered in *Blotter*: a ghostly scuba diver appears in the background, indicating some kind of underwater scenario. *Forbidden Mickey* (2024) places smooth and fragile against hard and sharp: a red Mickey Mouse balloon, glistening and bulbous, floats next to another

serpentine trinket. Its menace is doubled by the shadow of the demonic form, while the gentleness of the red balloon is amplified by its proximity to a red wall of slightly different hue. In these contradictory sharp and soft forms, hair and flesh, balloon and spike, Abel gently arranges incongruities that are always present, but rarely gain our attention, to maximum effect.



Installation view: Michael Abel: Mutt, YveYANG Gallery, New York, 2025. Courtesy the artist and YveYang Gallery.

William Corwin is a sculptor and writer based in New York. Besides the Rail, he writes regularly for Art & Antiques and Art Papers. He is an avid opera fan.