

An abstract painting by Chris Nau. The foreground is dominated by thick, expressive brushstrokes in shades of green, blue, and purple, suggesting a textured, organic form. The background consists of broad, sweeping strokes of light blue and white, creating a sense of depth and atmosphere. The overall style is gestural and expressive, with a focus on color and texture.

CHRIS NAU

Cover Image:

I'm Not Your Animal (detail), 2022

Acrylic on canvas

24 x 18 inches

Chris Nau

I'm Not Your Animal

October 4 - 29, 2022

Essay by Barbara O'Brien

THE PAINTING CENTER

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Remnants and Ashes: Chris Nau's Brilliant Evasions

What we first encounter in a painting by Chris Nau is a central figure splayed and thrashing, emerging from paint both layered and banded in aggressively abutting passages, held in a moment of agitated stasis. Flaunting a jam-packed, saturated palette, the central figure is theatrically foregrounded in an uneasy truce against either a geometric pattern as in *Remembered and Forgotten* (2021) or an atmospheric setting, sometimes with the suggestion of a horizon line as in *Air the River* (2022). The grounds serve to open the space of the painting and loosen the bonds of the tightly constricted central form, allowing the artist, in his words, to "aggressively experiment with internal fragmentation."

Nau's experience working across painting, printmaking, drawing, and sculpture informs the new paintings on view. All of the paintings, ranging in scale from a modest 24-by-18 inches to a dramatic 56-by-42 inches, evolve from small graphite-on-paper sketches—erased and redrawn so often that the paper itself barely holds—that are transferred to canvas. Nau uses what he calls "a rough and clumsy approach" utilizing all manner of brushes, implements, and tools to create loosely controlled marks "set onto the rigid skeleton of the original drawing."



Choices of No Meaning, 2021
Acrylic on canvas
18 x 24 inches

Using wide tape to mask areas of the expanded source drawing, Nau's process obscures the boundaries between painting and drawing, masked and unmasked, until the tape is pulled off of the canvas.

The title of the exhibition is drawn from the song "Riverbed" by Another Sky; with its crashes and implosions, the music mirrors the manner in which the signature painting *I'm Not Your Animal* (2022) resolved in the artist's Brooklyn studio. *I'm Not Your Animal* presents a self-contained universe of layered, seemingly collaged, ragged-edged forms, floating in a sea or sky of cerulean blue. The paint is emphatic in its physicality, coddling the perimeter of the central form, offering solace as it, and we, free float into a world of mystery and longing crafted of paint and originated in the sketch made by an artist on the subway going to and from work.

In *Choices of No Meaning* (2021) opposing forces—perhaps a mirror image of the same energy—pull our gaze toward the far edges of the painting. The featured figure of a horse—its heads lowered in agitation, saddle thrown, and hoofs raised as if to beat darkly against a ground that offers no purchase—stands in dramatic contrast to the softly cascading scalloped pattern in a palette of sun-faded yellow and taupe. Nau uses a background of geometric patterning to move our understanding

of the place of the painting from a space of reality to a theater of the mind and a simultaneous reference to what might be seen as competing art histories: geometric abstraction and expressive figuration. *Choices of No Meaning* does not shy away from a charged composition that suggests the remnants of a violent encounter. The horse and rider are a recurring motif for Nau, turning toward the heraldic with suggestions of the majesty of battle and a tension regarding the masculine in contemporary culture; the human figure though, whatever its heft or training, is no match for the primal energy and power of a horse. *Brilliant Evasion* (2020) suggests a tragic tumble without a rising from the ashes, yet the title implies an escape, after all. From this same timeframe came *Rotting Pajamas* (2020) which the artist describes as "a true pandemic painting. It originated during a time of anxiety, frustration, and sadness, but also sprang forth from an environment of a deeply restorative studio practice." The paintings exist in a space of conflicted fantasy, memory and longing, where the pleasures of pattern and color are undercut by awkward and restless forms.

The ambiguous relationship between the figures and the background furthers Nau's goal to "make something completely new and impossible to predict; and to end up with a dynamic hybrid form that suggests the beauty and power as well as the complicated problems and destructive tendencies of human beings."

He recombines sketches and erasures and layers of paint in a reincarnation of a painting; the figure is alive, but seems to have had another, earlier life, whether human or animal, one moment or many. The theatrical presentation of a solo figure commanding center stage produces a challenge to the viewer (an audience of one) to face this unknown form emerging from a ground filled with steam or mist or paint—for Nau relishes the paint, and all is paint and tape and torn forms and layered shapes and solid against striated and pretty against rough and hopeful against forlorn. The central character is set against a scrim of white-enhanced colors or an atmospheric fog, brought into focus only by chance as if stopped in its tracks, as if we have been stopped in ours by these dynamic abstractions that refuse to turn away from the emotions that well up in the process of loss, erasure, and joy.

— Barbara O'Brien

Quotes from the artist were shared directly with the author in a series of video conferences and email correspondence, March – July 2022.

An independent curator and critic based in Milwaukee, O'Brien is the former Executive Director of the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art. She is an elected member of AICA – USA, International Association of Art Critics.



Brilliant Evasion, 2020
Acrylic on canvas
18 x 24 inches

Air the River, 2022
Acrylic on canvas
24 x 18 inches



I'm Not Your Animal, 2022
Acrylic on canvas
24 x 18 inches



Remembered and Forgotten, 2021
Acrylic on canvas
24 x 18 inches



Rotting Pajamas, 2020
Acrylic on canvas
24 x 18 inches



I Miss You, 2020
Acrylic on canvas
24 x 30 inches



Over Wire and Wood, 2022
Acrylic on canvas
30 x 24 inches





Psychopomp, 2022
Acrylic on canvas
30 x 24 inches

The Messenger Witch, 2022

Acrylic on canvas

30 x 24 inches



Thanatos, 2022
Acrylic on canvas
40 x 30 inches





It's Got Everything Written All Over It, 2022

Acrylic on canvas

56 x 42 inches

Chris Nau

For his MFA thesis exhibition at Massachusetts College of Art and Design, Chris Nau cut a drawing into the gallery wall, challenging expectations of painting by collapsing making with destroying; figure into ground; precious with not precious. Layering opposing concepts into paradoxes remains the core of his practice. He paints dynamic forms and figures that suggest the beauty and power as well as the complicated problems and destructive tendencies of human beings. It is ambiguous whether the centralized figures and forms in his paintings are canceling themselves out, being erased as if by time, or posing heroically while signifying nothing and having lost their story, shattering their own meaning.

Born in 1973 in Elgin, Illinois Chris Nau learned how to paint under grey skies in Oregon and Washington before moving to the East Coast. His work has been exhibited at institutions including Wellesley College, Galerie Kristine Hamann in Wismar, Germany, The Drawing Center NYC, The Boston Center for the Arts, The Portland Art Museum in Oregon, Cathouse Funeral in Brooklyn, The Norwegian Center for Drawing Tegnerforbundet in Oslo, and G.A.S-Station Galerie in Berlin. Nau has received awards that include a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship, a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant, a Dieu Donné Workspace Residency, a Sitka Center for Art and Ecology Printmaking Residency, and a grant from the American Embassy in Oslo. He lives in Brooklyn.

For more information, visit: www.chrisnau.com and Instagram @nauhaus.

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