

MARIANNE BOESKY GALLERY

NEW YORK | ASPEN

JAY HEIKES

DEVOLVE

On View: September 5 – October 5, 2024
Opening Reception: Thursday, September 5 | 6–8 PM
509 West 24th Street, New York, NY 10011



Jay Heikes, *Textuality*, 2023. Oil on stained canvas, 75 1/8 x 112 inches, 190.8 x 284.5 cm

"It is somewhat disconcerting, given the record of unending change physically altering artworks, that many people continue to believe that art is immutable, that the artist's intentions are paramount, and that original works should be 'preserved' from various agents of change. Perhaps this is simply a reflection of our desire for stability and order: to think of art (as Seneca said) as something that will endure—unlike life itself. Art does endure, of course, and one reason it endures is because it is able to absorb and incorporate change of various kinds."

– Joseph Grigely, *Textuality*

"When we are gone, and rows of ants become lines of form, will the artwork take on a new life with new meaning?"

– Jay Heikes

NEW YORK, NY – Marianne Boesky Gallery is pleased to present *Devolve*, an exhibition of new work by Jay Heikes (b. 1975; Princeton, NJ). For his sixth solo exhibition with the gallery, Heikes peers into an imagined, post-human future as nature takes hold of the ruins and relics of human society.

Throughout his materially innovative and richly conceptual practice, Heikes continuously reimagines an atlas of signs and symbols and stories, largely of his own creation. Drawing on art's divergent

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histories—from the material and alchemical preoccupations of Arte Povera to the revolutionary critique of Russian Constructivism to the Romantic fascination with the sublime—Heikes examines themes of evolution and regeneration, stasis and corrosion, entropy and transformation. Acknowledging that there are no truly *new* ideas to be had, Heikes turns to what has already been; his practice is in a continual state of borrowing, transposing, appropriating, and reinterpreting old ideas and forms and narratives using a kaleidoscopic array of media, remaining perpetually open to transformation within his work and within himself.

With *Devolve*, Heikes transports viewers to an imagined future—one devoid of human civilization—as plants and animals continue to transform the languishing artifacts of a distant past society. Weaving together inspiration from an array of divergent source material—from the creation story told in the Book of Genesis, from Joseph Grigely's 1995 *Textualterity*, from Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, from a dissent in a 2022 New York Court of Appeals decision regarding the fate of Happy the elephant—Heikes reflects on the signs and omens that foretold man's imminent demise. Through paintings, installations, and a monumental new sculpture, Heikes examines theories of evolution and creationism, notions of agency and authorship, and the inevitable end of our collective march toward progress.

Each work in the exhibition builds on a constellation of allusions—to the history of art, to literary theory, to anthropological and legal discourse, to the artist's own oeuvre—all embodying the notion of transformation itself. For the titular *Devolve* (2024), Heikes cannibalizes elements of previous bodies of work to reconstruct a series of hooks, descending in height—an evolution chart in reverse. The hook—a recurring motif in the artist's practice—brings to mind a litany of referents: a shepherd's crook, a cane yanking unwelcome performers off stage, a Grim Reaper's scythe. For Heikes, the *Devolve* hooks—the tallest of which is coated with sand and shellac, the secretions of the lac beetle—represents the cyclical nature of that which is old becoming new once again, the form itself drawing the artist in and out of seduction. Insects claim the surface of Heikes's painting, too: In *Textualterity* (2023), hundreds of subtly rendered black ants trawl across the surface of a splatter-painted canvas. The subject—and title—reference *Textualterity*, Grigely's book, an early edition of which featured a detailed image of a cicada embedded within the enamel house paint of Jackson Pollock's *Number 1, 1950 (Lavender Mist)* (1950).

The centerpiece of the exhibition—the monumental *Department of Seagulls*—traces the history of humanity through materials: a stone-age slab supports a bronze-age cast sea lion; on its nose, the sea lion balances a Brancusian, wood-age column; a cement-age sphere rests atop the column; a poly-resin seagull, marking our current material era, stands atop the concrete sphere. With *Department of Seagulls*, Heikes alludes to Marcel Broodthaers's infamous 1968 institutional parody, the *Department of Eagles*—a fictitious department within the Museum of Modern Art. In Heikes's hands, the facetious avian bureau becomes a reminder that the natural world will always have the upper hand—that even at our most satisfied and unsuspecting, a seagull waits nearby, ready to steal your lunch. Ultimately, the work is a meditation on both derivation and the absurdity of creation itself.

At the very end of the exhibition, the viewer encounters a doorway cut into the gallery wall; bright light shines out between the cracks in the handleless, arched wooden door. With *Where the Monks Dance* (2023–2024), Heikes reimagines *Outside World* (2010). For *Outside World*, Heikes cut a hole in an exterior wall of the gallery in the shape of a Mack truck radiator cover. Possibly an escape, possibly a wormhole back to an earlier iteration of the work, *Where the Monks Dance*, is an enchanting, seductive symbol: an illuminated passageway that is never accessible and never knowable.

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With *Devolve*, Heikes opens a door to a possible future, narrating a tale at once alarming and comforting, bittersweet and anxiety-inducing. Where, Heikes seems to ask, will this endless pursuit of progress eventually lead us? What have we lost along the way? What, he asks us to consider, will be left when we are all gone? Perhaps there is a strange comfort in knowing that the beetles and ants and cicadas and seagulls will continue to reinvent and reimagine human creations when they ultimately inherit the earth.

ABOUT JAY HEIKES

Heikes's work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at the Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, NE; the Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive, CA; the Aspen Art Museum, CO; and the Institute of Contemporary Art Philadelphia, PA. His work has been featured in group exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago, IL; the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL; MoMA PS1, Long Island City, NY; the Bronx Museum of the Arts, NY; and the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, NY. He was also featured in the 2006 Whitney Biennial, curated by Chrissie Iles and Philippe Vergne, at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York NY. Heikes earned an MFA from Yale University and a BFA from the University of Michigan. The artist lives in St. Paul and works in Minneapolis, MN.

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