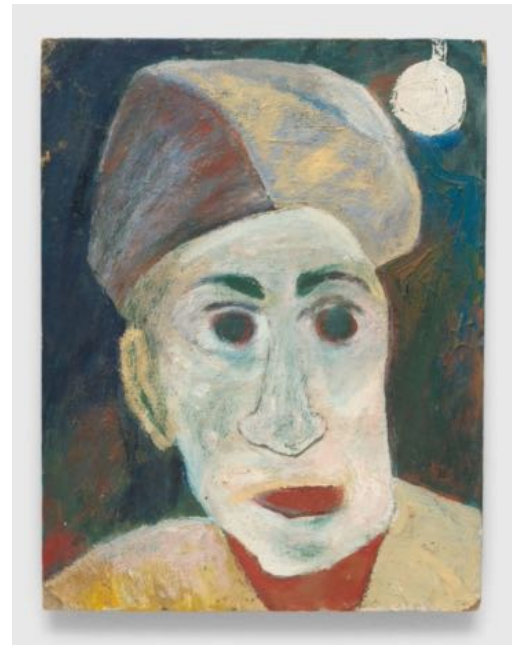


## Jon Serl *No straight lines*

September 19–October 26, 2024  
34 East 69th Street, New York



Jon Serl, *Untitled*, c. 1980–1985. Courtesy David Zwirner

David Zwirner is pleased to announce an exhibition exploring the art and legacy of self-taught American painter Jon Serl (Joseph Searles, 1894–1993), which will take place at the gallery's East 69th Street location in New York. Organized in collaboration with the artist Sam Messer, this exhibition will feature a robust selection of works by Serl as well as those by contemporary painters—including Messer, Katherine Bradford, Louis Fratino, Brook Hsu, Andy Robert, Dana Schutz, and Josh Smith—who are inspired by his imaginative compositions.

The son of a vaudeville family, Serl—who was also known as Slats, Jerry Palmer, and Ned Palmer at various points in his life—acted in traveling shows as a child, took on other unconventional roles, and came to painting seriously later, in the 1940s. In 1971, after meandering through the American West, he moved to Lake Elsinore, California—just south of Los Angeles County—where he built a ramshackle home for himself and remained for the rest of his life.

Serl began painting, as he claimed, to fill up a blank wall in his home. The artist indulged in a vibrant construction of self through his creative practice as well as through his public persona, which he performed with gusto. Drawing from his own freewheeling life, Serl adopted a pictorial idiom and highly expressionistic style that embrace the spectrum between reality and fantasy; his figurative paintings depict still lifes, landscapes, and a range of everyday subject matter—an artist in the studio, a procession of chapel attendees, a couple waltzing—in bold colors and formations that appear as if presented on stage. These inventive images simultaneously reveal the scope of Serl's myriad experiences and his deep-seated need to create, which manifested passionately in his diurnal painting practice. As Messer observes, "*No straight lines* is really about [the artist's] spirit of making and the necessity to make."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sam Messer, in conversation with the gallery, July 2024.

*No straight lines* presents a range of work by Serl from all eras, encompassing a perspective shaped by the full span of the twentieth century. The paintings demonstrate an assertive style that was developed largely through the artist's own experimentations. Serl primarily worked in oil, which he applied to wood panels, Masonite, and found objects that could withstand his forceful brushstrokes. He also squeezed paint directly onto the surface to build up thick impasto. Serl's earlier output embraced genres such as landscape and portraiture, as seen in *Look Up* (1955), but at times included abstract elements that mystify what seem like simple compositions—as in *Blue Poppy* (1962). His later work would become more autobiographical, featuring subjects from his surroundings of Lake Elsinore, as well as from his past. *Working* (c. 1970–1979) features an artist at an easel, while *Cockfight* (c. 1960–1979) illustrates a battle between animals—likely ones that were in Serl's own home. Serl's practice, defined as that of an outsider artist by critics of his time, evolved over the years in which he was active. Though he fabricated a sense of naivete in his work, the paintings reveal an enhanced sense of structure and compositional balance.

Throughout the gallery space, Serl's works are installed with a selection of paintings by contemporary artists that speak to various aspects of his practice. Sam Messer, who first became acquainted with Serl in 1989, has shepherded his work to public audiences for years. They formed a close relationship and conferred regularly until Serl passed away in 1993. In this period, Messer also painted dozens of portraits of the elder artist in situ, one of which—exhibited here—he reworked recently to convey the feeling of being in Serl's home. Quick, loose brushstrokes render the sitter's distinctive silvery beard and his prominent facial features, as well as Serl's dog Patches, whose head is lovingly clasped between the artist's distinctive hands. Messer's practice has long engaged this level of collaboration with others, evident in his oil-on-canvas work *and "here no longer" (for P.A.)* (2024) that renders in swirling impasto the typewriter of the late American writer Paul Auster, whom Messer first met when he contacted the celebrated author to contribute a text to his book he compiled of his paintings of Serl.

A professor emeritus of the Yale School of Art, Messer introduced many former colleagues and students to Serl's work, including Louis Fratino and Brook Hsu, both of whom share a close affinity to Serl and are featured in *No straight lines*. Hsu's elegant compositions recall the poetry of Serl's, while Fratino's figurative works hold a tenderness that responds to current sensibilities in a way that resonates with Serl's own ability to take his world in and evocatively recast it. Other tensions and harmonies inform the exhibition. The exuberant colors and enigmatic subjects of Katherine Bradford respond to Serl's own, acknowledging the ghosts who materialize in our collective visions. Andy Robert's technical approach dovetails with Serl's exploratory and improvisatory methods, while Serl's self-mythologizing is seen in the work of Dana Schutz, whose paintings disclose an allegorical impulse that has been refined over time. Like Messer, Josh Smith has been a longtime admirer of Serl's work. Smith's prolific output and experimentation emphasize the compulsion to make—a spirit that centers all of the work in *No straight lines*.

Jon Serl was born Joseph Searles in Olean, New York, in 1894. As a child, Serl acted in traveling shows produced by his vaudevillian family. Through this idiosyncratic trajectory, Serl found himself in a number of other roles that were unconventional for the time, such as performing in drag, dancing for hire, picking stone fruit at orchards, cultivating the grounds of Howard Hughes's estate, and playing bit parts in studio productions and taking on voiceover roles that placed him in the company of Hollywood luminaries such as the gossip columnist Hedda Hopper and the movie star Clark Gable. In 1971, he moved to Lake Elsinore, California, where he lived and worked until his death in 1993.

The artist's first solo exhibition was a traveling display of forty-one paintings organized by the Municipal Arts Department of Los Angeles in 1970. Though he had been making work for more than twenty years prior, the Municipal Arts tour was the first time Serl had allowed his works to be exhibited publicly. The artist has since been the focus of a number of solo exhibitions across the United States. In 1981, *Psychological Paintings: The Personal Vision of Jon Serl* was held at the Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, California. Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York, hosted a forty-year retrospective of Serl's work in 1990, in addition to solo exhibitions held at the gallery in 1987, 1991, 1993, 1995, and 1996. More recently, in 2013, the Natalie and James Thompson Art Gallery at San José State University, California, presented *Jon Serl: The Mutability of Being*, which was accompanied by an illustrated exhibition catalogue including essays by Randall Morris and Cara Zimmerman.

Solo exhibitions of Serl's work have also been held at Jamison/Thomas Gallery, Portland (1986, 1988, 1989 [concurrent shows occurred at Mia Gallery, Seattle; Rainbow Man Gallery, Santa Fe; Oneiros Gallery, San Diego; and Gasperi Gallery, New Orleans], 1991, 1993); The Art Galleries of Ramapo College, Mahwah, New Jersey (1986); Art Alliance Gallery, Riverside Art Museum, California (1994); Art Resource Group, Corona del Mar, California (2005); and Good Luck Gallery, Los Angeles (2018).

Serl has been included in several notable group exhibitions, including *Self-Taught Artists of the 20th Century: An American Anthology*, organized by the American Folk Art Museum (traveled to multiple venues, 1998–1999); *Perspectives: Setting the Scene in American Folk Art*, American Folk Art Museum, New York (2010); *We Are Made of Stories: Self-Taught Artists in the Robson Family Collection*, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC (2022); and *Of God and Country: American Art from the Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection*, Philadelphia Museum of Art (2023).

Work by the artist is included in prominent institutional collections worldwide, including the American Folk Art Museum, New York; Intuit, The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art, Chicago; Laguna Art Museum, Laguna Beach, California; Milwaukee Art Museum, Wisconsin; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; New Orleans Museum of Art; Oakland Museum of California; Orange County Museum of Art, Costa Mesa, California; Philadelphia Museum of Art; and Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC.

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