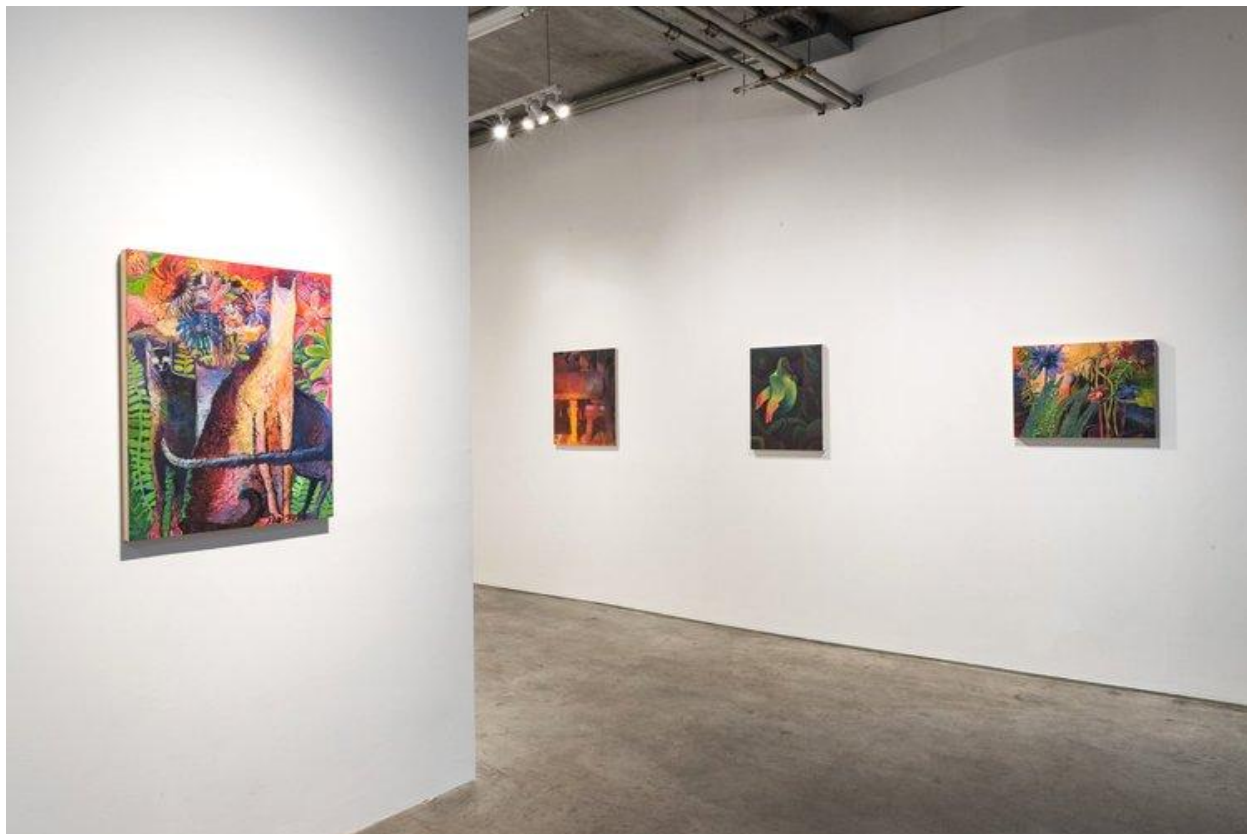


Search Party

Matt Haywood, Raymie Iadevaia, Michael Gac Levin, and Bruna Massadas

April 22 - May 15, 2022

An Interview with artist Michael Gac Levin on the Unconscious, Being a Father, and the Common Root



Walking into the opening night of *Search Party*, a group exhibition featuring work by Matt Haywood, Raymie Iadevaia, Michael Gac Levin, and Bruna Massadas at My Pet Ram Gallery in the LES, the walls buzz with bright color and common imagery rendered fantastical and dreamy. Despite this buzz, and the buzz of viewers starting the party early, I was able to sit down and talk with Michael Gac Levin about his life and his contributions to the exhibition:

Sarah Posey:

Tell me a little bit about yourself and your background.

Michael Gac Levin:

Yeah! I'm originally from LA. I've been in New York since 2005, so that's almost 20 years, I guess. And yeah, I've been painting, not really that long, but I've been making art for, you know, years and years. I got my MFA at Pratt Institute in 2015. Now I've been teaching there for the last five years. I teach drawing and I teach a class on the unconscious. So that's a class that I designed for Pratt about three years ago before the pandemic to help students from all over the Institute, design students and art students, find ways to bring their other levels of intention out for their work, other than just the conscious kind of planned idea.

M.G.L.:

[On the exhibition] And then these painters are people that, you know, I mostly found over Instagram. I visited Raymie in his studio last year because I happened to be in LA., but I didn't know him beforehand and I really wanted to show with him and really wanted to show with Bruna and other painters that I found online and that Marcello from the gallery brought in [Matt Hayward] who I didn't really know about, but we're so happy to have him.

S.P.:

Yeah. I was going to ask about that too, because everything works together really well and you all seem to have similar subject matters. Some of you have similar colors. It's interesting. I thought you were all friends or in a collective or something?

M.G.L.:

No, I mean it's not a case of direct influence. I think if anything, um, what I like about this show and what I like about the painters is that it is kind of this argument for there being commonality in the way people approach things, you know, a certain, uh, effect that comes through in all of our work that goes beyond a case of direct influence, you know, something deeper than that, which I think we all really relate to in each other's work, which is kind of what brought about the show's title and the press release.

S.P.:

Definitely. So what role does repetition play in your work?

M.G.L.:

For me it's huge. It's kind of everything. My sketchbook is kind of like, I don't draw on it as much as I used to, but there was a period, um, I think in about 2018 that I spent about eight to ten months only drawing in my sketchbook and not making any other art and not showing my sketchbook to anybody and all I would do is just repeat shapes and repeat motifs over and over and over again in pen so that I couldn't edit them. And I would do five drawings of basically the same thing. And then I'd look at those five and I'd sort of figure out, which was the one that I liked the most. And then I try to make a copy of that drawing without, you know, it's on a different page, so I'd flip it and then draw it and then flip it back to look at it and then draw more. And they would inevitably change because I wasn't tracing them or copying them directly. And that process of repetition ultimately leads to new paintings and new compositions and new motifs, um, that kind of generate all the imagery that I use in my paintings.

S.P.:

Did that come from something in your practice that you were wanting to change or?

M.G.L.:

Definitely.

S.P.:

Did you have an issue? <laugh>

M.G.L.:

Oh yeah. I had a big issue.

S.P.:

What was that?

M.G.L.:

I was making really labor intensive drawings, really big, really labor intensive drawings which would take me hundreds of hours and after my wife and I had our first kid, I couldn't do it anymore. Because I was at home doing childcare and we kind of thought that maybe I'd be able to draw with the baby in a carrier or with the baby on the floor playing, but it never ever worked out. So it became totally impossible for me to make anything, which really let me down in the sense that I felt really stuck and then it created a situation where I needed to turn to the sketchbook because that was the only thing I could do. You know, just during nap times or after bedtime, just making little sketches really quickly. I happened to be looking for a way forward in my work at the time. It was very timely and very effective at breaking my patterns.

S.P.:

Do you find that doing that helps you with production?

M.G.L.:

Yeah. Well, I mean part of the problem with making work that's so labor intensive is that it was always also really idea heavy. It was always really heavily ideated before I even started making it, so I would have an idea, make the drawing, spend hundreds of hours on the drawing. And then by the time that was over, I would already have moved seven steps ahead in terms of what I was thinking about. So the second drawing or the third drawing or the fourth drawing, I would make, never had such strong connections to the prior work. So being able to close that gap and have things come out more quickly in terms of paintings, drawings, other artworks, producing more, helps get a lot of connective tissue into that work.

S.P.:

That's honestly something that I'm trying to work through right now. I'm at a hard pause in my studio practice because I can't figure out how to make things take less time.

M.G.L.:

It's really challenging. It's easy to get carried away in that, you know. I think finding a way to work from the gut and from instinct really was everything.

S.P.:

Yeah. Yeah. So does Freud's theory of the unconscious mind play a part in your work?

M.G.L.:

Hugely. The class that I teach is basically about Freud and about how Freud's ideas work into surrealism and then where they go from there in terms of art and design. Um, yeah, I'm a big Freud dude.

S.P.:

So what is the significance of that in your work? Why did you choose to do that?

M.G.L.:

Well I have an uncle that's a psychoanalyst and he was always ready to have long and interesting conversations about Freud's ideas and what psychoanalysis is and how it's different from conventional therapy. So it was always kind of there for me in a way. And when I was looking for a way out of the really heavily ideated work, um, I think one of the things that happened was that I had a lot of studio visits and critiques where I felt like this work that I'd fine tuned to the nth degree, you know, making sure that the idea was really smart and refined and that the work was really refined. I would find that in critiques people would tell me that it was getting them to places in their own minds that were very different from what I intended. Very, very different.

S.P.:

Did you care?

M.G.L.:

YES, because, you know, I put so much labor into conveying a very particular thought and then seeing that I was communicating something totally different really bothered me.

S.P.:

Was everyone getting the same different thing or were they completely different?

M.G.L.:

Not always, but sometimes some people had really compelling reads of my work that I found very difficult to hear about reflections of ideas that I had that, um, or that sentiments that I might carry deeper within me that are not okay. Which then started to get me into this place of reflecting about 'Am I sending those messages unintentionally? Am I still responsible for those messages that people are taking from my work?' And I think, I felt at the time, yes. I turned to Freud to sort of explain it, you know, that the unconscious was working through whatever I was deciding and telling a completely different story.

S.P.:

Did you go on a therapy kick?

M.G.L.:

Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. I'm a big therapy person. I actually unfortunately had to stop not too long ago because of time constraints, but I would love to be in therapy permanently. Therapy is very important to me. Yes. Um, and also having a little kid really brings a lot to the surface in terms of experiences you've had, memories you've had, feelings that you had from when you were a baby or a small child, reflections on your own upbringing, your parents, you know, so all that stuff, the, the Freud context was very useful for that.

M.G.L.:

Did you thinking about your childhood, because you had a kid, play into some of your pieces?

M.G.L.:

Yeah. Yeah. Hugely, definitely. Um, I think that mirror aspect of having little kids and looking at them and feeling about the way that you're reacting to them as being about the way you're ultimately reacting to your own self as a child. That really is a major inspiration for my work.

S.P.:

Do any of your pieces use existing symbolism, like vanitas symbolism, etc.?

M.G.L.:

I mean, after the fact, yes. I recognize those connections after I do it. Part of privileging the unconscious in the work is that I make decisions in the work as much as I can just based on instinct and what feels right at the time. And I really try not to consciously choose anything. The drawings, the sketchbook practice just brings up imagery as I'm kind of just mindlessly sketching in this book in pen, so that I can't erase or change anything. And then after the fact, after I see those things, I recognize a lot of their art historical references, um, which is something that I think is an absolute plus, but I'm not in there kind of thinking, 'I want this to be vanitas painting and I need a skull and I need a fiddle and I need a book and how am I going to bring those things together?' It's always after the fact.

S.P.:

Do you wish that you hadn't been educated in art?

M.G.L.:

No. No. I very, very much prize my art education. I didn't have much of an art education before grad school, so that's kind of why I'm so grateful for it.

M.G.L.:

What was your bachelor's in?

M.G.L.:
Classics.

S.P.:
Oh, classics.

M.G.L.:
Yes. So I did, I drew a ton as a kid. I wanted to do special effects for movies. That's what I wanted to do more than anything. I desperately wanted to do that when I was growing up and then wasn't able to make it happen in college for a number of reasons. And I just got interested in other things. Um, I never really thought about being an artist then. I grew up in LA which at the time didn't have much of an art scene. That was not something that I really had access to. It's not such a big part of the culture as it is here. Um, and Hollywood was so much bigger of a part of the culture. I had connections to Hollywood from friends that I grew up with. So that was what kind of channeled all my interests and my creative interests, the movie industry. It was only after I moved to New York that I sort of realized that you could be a professional artist, that 'artist' is something that you could do, you know? you could just make paintings. I got here and I saw these, I had all these friends that I knew from, from LA or that were friends of friends from college. And a lot of them were artists at that time. And I remember feeling 'That's what I should be doing! I'm an artist!' I just didn't know how to channel it. You know? Um, so from about 2005 onwards, I really committed myself to making art as a serious kind of endeavor, but I never had any real education. I didn't have art school behind me. I didn't even have after school art classes in high school. So it was not until 2013 that I started grad school. That was, 'I'm going to get an art education. I'm going to learn about contemporary art. I'm going to learn about painting. I'm going to learn about, you know, what it means to be an artist today in New York.' And I hugely value that.

S.P.:
Can you tell me about your color choices and the gaussian blur that seems to be going on?

M.G.L.:
Oh yeah. I think that comes just from the brushes that I use. I use really rough Bristol brushes, really cheap Bristol brushes and the canvas is relatively smooth and usually primed. So the blur effect just kind of comes from the roughness of the brush and I do a lot of kinds of scrubbing with it. So I don't get very crisp strokes very often nor do I want them. My color choices are almost entirely intuitive. They just happen, you know, gradually. I'll have one idea for a palette at the beginning and it'll get totally changed by the end, just based on what feels right in the moment and what you know, combines with what, and um, for the most part, the paintings in this show all went through a period of destruction after they were fairly close to being finished where I just paint over them with a lot of different colors to just see what happens. They get a little tight and then I feel I need to break them up to introduce more possibilities. So in some of the paintings you'll see that there's these large color shifts throughout the painting. That's mostly from that layer of me just trying to paint over it and then painting back into it after that.

S.P.:

I think in visual effects they call that 'killing your baby.'

M.G.L.:

Oh really? Yeah. That's what it feels like. Right. Yeah. You make the thing and it's perfect. But you also feel too attached to it. And it's never going to be anything better than what you have at that moment. I definitely 'kill the baby' every time in the context of our conversations about childhood and being a parent.

S.P.:

What are your (or have been) your biggest influences in your life and in your art?

M.G.L.:

My children for sure. Um, really being a parent and being in relation to my children and my wife have been enormously influential. My community at Pratt, hugely influential. I learned a lot from my MFA class, especially my direct cohort, um, were very influential. And then I would say a number of shows in New York in around 2016, 2017, right after I came out of school really helped put me on the path that I think I'm still on. The Chicago Imagists and the Harry Who? Group had some big shows at Matthew Marks gallery around then. That was really pivotal for me to see that. I didn't know about that work. There were starting to be surrealist shows and galleries, you know, before the MET had its big show. There were a lot of shows that had de Chirico's. Yeah, those are some really big influences. And films, honestly movies and literature, uh, Philip Roth is very influential for me constantly. I don't read Philip Roth really anymore, but I still go back to it as a touchstone.

S.P.:

What do you feel the show as a whole has to say?

M.G.L.:

I think it's about, so, we talked about Freud a little bit. I actually think it's a little bit more about Jung. I think it's about a substrate of experience that we can all access being **in** different places, being **from** different places. I mean, we were all born around the same time, but we were born in different places. Matt's from the Midwest. Bruna is from Brazil, originally Raymie and I are both from Southern California, but this feeling that there's a certain commonality to a certain type of activity, you know, that there are palette resonances, material resonances, shape resonances. The subject matter resonances are not accidental nor are they a case of direct influence. **I think we're all tapping into a common root and I think that's what the show is about. It's about what that common root is.**

S.P.:

What is the common root?

M.G.L.: **I can't describe it except to reference the art. I think that's what makes it valuable. It's something that can't be put so easily into words. It's something that you can see.**



Kids Table, Michael Gac Levin, Acrylic on Canvas, 22"x 26," 2021