Juan Bolivar POWERAGE

JGM GALLERY



Juan Bolivar POWERAGE

July 7 - August 7 2021

JGM GALLERY

Published on the occasion of the exhibition by

JGM Gallery 24 Howie Street London SW11 4AY info@jgmgallery.com

Catalogue Design: Alice Wilson Photography: Damian Griffiths and Simon Goodwin

> ISBN 978-1-9196153-0-1 © 2021 JGM Gallery and the artist All rights reserved

Cover: detail of *Deposition*, 2021, 153 x 77cm, acrylic on canvas Opposite: Juan Bolivar in studio 2021 (photo credit Simon Goodwin)



It is over five years since Juan and I were introduced to one another by fellow artist and friend Ralph Anderson, and just under four since Juan's first solo exhibition at JGM Gallery *High Voltage* and our co-curation *Earth, Wind and Fire* at The Griffin Gallery, London.

Looking back at the previous publication for *High Voltage*, it once again excited me as I think of Juan's indomitable enthusiasm and dedication to the weaving together of popular culture and art historical references. It has been a great pleasure and very informative to have been taken on London gallery tours by Juan and his partner Karen David, the excitement and giddiness Juan has for his subject is palpable, and always well communicated through his ability to animate ideas and engage with a broad cultural diaspora.

As many will know I have a shared passion for Juan's love of both AC/DC and Australian contemporary indigenous painting. The dialogue that developed as Juan introduced many painters to me and I to him through the curation of *Earth Wind and Fire* has been an education for us both, and I am grateful to his support and friendship as JGM Gallery has continued to grow and prosper since its opening in 2017.

It is with added serendipity that our shared interest in Colourfield painting has fuelled the careers of both Juan and myself. I have regaled stories to Juan with great fondness of driving Kenneth Noland around the landscape of Victoria when I was Director of *Powell Street* Gallery, Melbourne in the 70's. As I introduced him to the native flora and fauna of my hometown, Kenneth returned the favour with an education in Tequila! It was only a few years prior that I had been captured by these works in my schooling and further study of Art History, to then meet and spend time with the artists I greatly admire has been a privilege, and to witness Juan's enthusiasm 40 or more years on is a wonderful reminder of my journey here.

Like many exhibitions postponed over the last year, *Powerage* (titled after my favourite AC/DC album) has had more time in gestation than expected, which has added to the anticipation and development of this new body of work. In the weeks leading up to the exhibition I've had emails with ideas for merchandise, making the 'build up' akin to that of a festival or concert, (which of course is no surprise) and I for one look forward to sporting an editioned T-Shirt!

Thank you Juan, and congratulations on a fantastic new body of work that I'm delighted to share with everyone here at JGM Gallery.

Jennifer Guerrini Maraldi July 2021

Powerage

Juan Bolivar has described *Powerage* the 1978 album by AC/DC as their most authentic. For heavy rock enthusiasts it has a purity within it. It's one hundred percent rock-and-roll, but with its intermingling of biography and fiction, it's pure storytelling as well. That Bolivar has chosen *Powerage* as the title for his second solo presentation at JGM Gallery makes twisted sense, as his new paintings also entwine narratives with purity – the supposed purity and reception of late modernist painting.¹

In Maestà (2020-21), Charlie Brown quizzically stares out from the middle of a Morris Louis painting. The principal protagonist in the famous US comic strip *Peanuts* however is mute. His mouth is absent, removed in what is otherwise a faithful depiction of this much-loved cartoon character. He is also hemmed in and trapped in a void between two bands of painted rivulets which typify Louis' *Unfurled* series of paintings. These works, which Louis made between 1960 and 1961, are the Washington Colour School artist's most well-known paintings and were created by pouring and soaking liquid paint onto unprimed canvas. Bolivar's treatment is very different, however. He has painted both Charlie Brown, the raw canvas, and the painted stains through a deft and matter-of-fact use of stencils and masking. This process, which is similar within all of Bolivar's works, gives these acrylic paintings a hard-edged smooth feel. It is a quality that is completely foreign to Louis' integration of colour into an untouched physical picture-plane, but it sits harmoniously with the more graphic look of the Charles M Schultz cartoon figure. Indeed, it is reminiscent of the look and feel of the flat-colour in painted cell-based animation.

Although started in the 1950s as a newspaper funny, it was a decade later that *Peanuts* really came of age. In the 1960s, the same decade that saw Louis create visual clarity with his series of *Unfurled* paintings, Charlie and the gang not only left the page, and became animations, but also found themselves commenting, through having strong female characters, cross-racial friendships and pointed gnomic narratives on societal issues. Bolivar's paintings, by jamming together references from high-art modernist painting with retro-cartoons, also speak directly to both society and culture. It is no coincidence that Bolivar's mute Charlie Brown is alone. He was painted in a year of covid-lockdowns. His isolation and inability to speak is testament to our own isolation this past year. And hidden within other, but not all of these seemingly happy-go-lucky paintings are subtle references to being trapped, blocked-out or released. Indeed, is there in at least one of the exhibited works, a discrete but even more direct commentary on this past year? Could the depiction of a blind Donald Duck in *The Healing of the Blind* (2021) be a reference to another blind Donald, Trump?

In modernism, popular culture and abstract painting are often seen to inhabit completely different worlds. With the former expunged at all costs from the latter, in pursuit of a formal and self-referential dialogue with the materiality and qualities of painting itself. Bolivar brings these ideas together. In doing so he reminds us that the history of cartoons and comics runs parallel

¹ Pertinent to the title *Powerage* intersecting directly with the reception of modernist painting is how the title links for Bolivar with that of Bruce Barber, Serge Guilbaut and John O'Brian publication *Voices of Fire: Art, Rage, Power, and The State.* Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1996. This book recounts the acquisition of Barnett Newman *Voice of Fire* (1967) by the National Gallery of Canada in 1989 and the ensuing financial and aesthetic controversy.



Maestà, 2020-21 Acrylic on Canvas, 143 x 187cm

to the development of modernist abstract painting. Both are, after all, visual idioms that have deep roots in the nineteenth century, that they slowly move away from as a more reduced visual language emerged. Both are essentially modernist languages - one high, one low - and both in different ways are indebted to the visual revolution of cubism. A revolutionary form of representation that shattered the traditional picture-plane, with its multiple, non-objective viewpoints, and which emerged in dialogue with popular culture such as developments in modern advertising and typography, as well as with past painting.²

The entwining of these parallel histories is sometimes played out directly. In The Flood (2020) Bolivar depicts the Dutch painter Piet Mondrian's painting Composition B (No.II) with Red (1935) with a linear depiction of one of the magic brooms from the 'Sorcerer's Apprentice' section of Walt Disney's animated film Fantasia (1940). In Bolivar's hands Mondrian's carefully balanced composition - one that sought a visual equilibrium through limited colours and carefully tuned planes and lines - has been wilfully disrupted by the imposition of a cartoon dynamic. Through visual subterfuge, the 'pure' plastic harmony has been disrupted. Yet this is not just an arbitrary coming together. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly Mondrian was deeply appreciative of Disney animations and popular music. After he moved to New York in 1940, he saw Fantasia a number of times. This was, though, a transatlantic love affair. Mondrian saw Disney's Snow White (1937) in Paris in 1938, and in the same year after he had moved to London sent a series of postcards to his brother where he recounted his new surroundings through the prism of the film, signing himself off as Sleepy.³ The Flood reflects both visually and theoretically on this entanglement. In doing so Bolivar collapses art historical hierarchies whilst considering how the private and the public intermingle. This meshing is of course pointed not just at Mondrian, but at the artist himself. These painting also reflect on Bolivar's

² The relationship between popular culture and early modernism was explored in Kirk Varnedoe, Adam Gopnik, *High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1991; for a history of early cartoon animation see: Adam Gopnik, 'Hot Ice-Cream Dreams, The marvellously mixed-up masters of early animated cartoons', New Yorker, 28 December 2020, pp.78-81

³ Simon Grant, *Hello from 'Sleepy'*, London: Tate Etc, September 2010





Baptism, 2020-21 Acrylic on Canvas, 150 x 150cm

Spring Call, 1961, by Kenneth Noland Acrylic on Canvas, 209 x 209cm

own ongoing and deep love of high modernism and its disconnects - be that in paintings, the utopian modernist architecture of Caracas, where he spent his very earliest years, the TV cartoons of his later childhood or within the exhibition's title; the rock music of his adolescence.

Kenneth Noland's Spring Call from 1961 is one of a number of that artist's classic circle paintings, that Bolivar has appropriated within his work. Here perhaps the connections are more deadpan and visual. The concentric circles which stain this Washington colourist's canvas end with a soft pink. This colour seems to dictate Bolivar's choice of the Pink Panther being superimposed on to Noland's rings of colour. In Baptism (2021) Bolivar has noticed how the composition of Spring Call also echoes the closing circles of a Looney Tunes cartoon. Although the Pink Panther is a Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer figure his general mischievousness makes his sauntering across an echo of their credit line, or indeed an actual Noland painting, highly appropriate. But that's not all folks, the way the figure in Bolivar's painting is in fact in front of the stencilled and cartooned work by Noland, also opens up a much older dialogue about pictorial space. This is not concerned, however, with debates about modernist flatness that so concerned Noland and his circle, rather, the shallow depth that Bolivar has created through the flatness of the cartoon figure imposed onto the flatness of painted background link to a similar pictorial depth in Italian trecento painting. In works, by Giotto or Duccio a similar measure can be seen. Bolivar has referenced this debate directly by titling the Charlie Brown painting Maestà, a title taken from Duccio's altarpiece which itself can be seen as response to the development of pictorial space in Giotto's work. These Italian paintings, frescos and altarpieces also often utilise storytelling through the use of repeated panels or frames. Frames that can be read much like a comic strip. And these early Renaissance paintings were through their internal geometry, flatness and visual clarity instrumental to the development of formalist criticism in the early twentieth century. Criticism which was so instrumental to the development of modernist painting. In Bolivar's hands these references, nods, connections and conjectures are far from arbitrary.



Maestà, Duccio di Buoninsegna, 1308–1311

That Bolivar chooses Colourfield painting as the lodestone for this exhibition reflects an understanding that those late modernist works marked the end of something and the beginning of something else. Although championed in formalist circles for their pure opticality they perhaps also latently contained an echo of the popular culture outside of what was supposedly their raison d'etre. To the dogmatism of pure formal abstraction any such contamination was heresy. It has been argued by the American painter David Reed that the bold colours in Barnett Newman's Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III (1967-68), a painting that Bolivar himself references in a work, echoes the colours in pop art and of the fictional superhero from DC Comics, Superman.⁴ If some Colourfield works hinted at a mass-produced world through their use of colour, then their clean and clear visual compositions can also be seen to resonate with the logos and insignia of corporate America. Bolivar's paintings in Powerage further complicate these observations as they bring those worlds together but also solicit the projection of narrative on to them that is both real and fictional. These are paintings shaped by connections and quotations from within art history and popular culture that are tempered by more subjective and personal leanings. In that respect Bolivar's use of other people's images is miles away from the post-modern pick-and-mix aesthetic of painters such as David Salle, where he just "took images because it was easier than making them up, like using readymade paint in the sixties".⁵ Rather it is a borrowing that is more akin to T S Eliot's belief that to electively use another's image one must have something spontaneously like the feeling which created the original image. Bolivar inhabits this feeling - with a love and respect for his sources - but also realises their twisted intertextual connections.

> Daniel Sturgis April 2021

4 David Reed, artist talk in association with Barnet Newman, London: Tate Modern, 20 September 2002 –5 January 2003

5 David Salle quoted in, Peter Schjeldahl, *An Interview with David Salle*, New York: Avedon/Vintage Books, 1987, p.37





Comiquitas

"Entertainment is America's second biggest net export (behind aerospace)... Today culture may be the country's most important product, the real source of economic power and its political influence in the world." (*Time*, 24 December 1991)

David Kunzle Introduction to the 1991 English Edition of, *How to Read Donald Duck*, by Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart (1971)

The ancient Egyptians were amongst the first to create schematised images of anthropomorphic cartoon-like characters; however Rodolphe Töpffer is often referred to as the originator of the modern day comic strip when he published *The Story of Mr. Wooden Head* (1837), a collection of caricatures presented as captioned panels. Comic strips found their way into newspapers in the late 19th century as newspapers competing against each other provided amusement alongside the news. In 1895 the *New York World* used colour printing in a newspaper for the first time and published *The Yellow Kid*, the first ever regular-running comic strip character. Drawn by Richard F. Outcault, it was the first of many which would begin to fill Sunday comic book pages.

With the aid of technology the language of comics developed into animated cartoons, and after *Steamboat Willie* was shown in cinemas in 1928, short animated reels of Mickey Mouse became so popular that people would go to movies just to see these. Floyd Gottfredson defined the look of Mickey Mouse in a comic strip he drew in 1935, and with this cartoon characters became increasingly familiar to our imagination with animated characters becoming household names made popular by Walt Disney in the 1950s. In the history of 20th century visual arts, the language of comic strips and cartoons coincide with developments in Europe of Bauhaus and De Stijl movements and later with Post-War Modernism in America; creating a rich and problematised zone where entertainment, popular culture and high modernism converge and overlap.

Growing up in Caracas, Venezuela in the early 70s, I witnessed first-hand this type of multicultural convergence. Between 1950-70 Venezuela experienced a boom in the oil industry becoming one of the world's biggest exporters of crude oil. American influence was evident in the way that Venezuela adopted baseball as its national sport, after American workers arrived to work there for the booming oil industry. Venezuela developed a polysemic mix-and-match relationship to culture(s) and in particular popular-culture(s); mixing baseball, hotdogs, advertising, movies, TV, salsa music, disco and rock, against its own Latin American backdrop.



Ciudad Universitaria Caracas, Venezuela, 1967

Parallel to this, Venezuela like many Latin American countries, embraced ideas of utopian European modernism and the Venezuelan architect Carlos Villanueva (who was heavily influence by Le Corbusier) led the urban development of Caracas between 1930-70 including the design of the *Ciudad Universitaria*, the main campus of the Central University of Venezuela (UCV), where my brother and I would often meet our father for lunch.

Aged 10, after a school visit to a pencil factory, I began drawing geometric pictures similar to the modernist murals I had seen at the *Ciudad Universitaria*; pressing hard with pencils on paper in an attempt to create solid blocks of colour. Following a long period of illness where I was bedridden for months I spent my time copying from '*comiquitas y calcomanias*' (comics and stickers); deconstructing the compositional shapes of Asterix and Obelix into their basic forms, and learning to draw many other characters from memory.

For this exhibition at JGM Gallery I have drawn inspiration from all of these memories and brought them into dialogue with 20th century abstraction. My conflated relationship with modernist painting and popular culture has been further exasperated by my recent research into *Trecento* pictorial space – in particular the *Sienese* school of painting – comparing the multiple-panel altarpiece of Duccio's *Maestà* completed in 1311, to a proto-conceptual origin of the modern day comic strip, and the comic strip's use of the 'gutter' (the narrow space between sequential panels suggesting the passing of time). I have attempted to highlight these links and comparisons by titling new paintings in this exhibition with biblical references connecting to Duccio's *Maestà*. The type of intertextuality being proposed reads at times like a far-fetched plot or absurd comedy involving Duccio, Snow White's Sleepy and Newman's 'zip' paintings, so I would like to thank Daniel Sturgis for eloquently and generously coalescing these ideas in his text.

This past year will need no future explanation and 2020/21 will forever be acronyms for shared anxieties, and I would like to thank all friends whose voices, telephone calls, text

messages, zoom parties, unexpected visits or 'food-drops', have made this period not only bearable, but a space for creativity. To the NHS, nurses, doctors, care workers, caretakers and emergency personnel who have been at the frontline of this experience making it possible for all of us to emerge from isolation. I would like to thank all of my students and colleagues at Camberwell College of Arts for sharing these past few months. I am in their admiration for their perseverance to engage with painting ideas and world issues despite these challenging months.

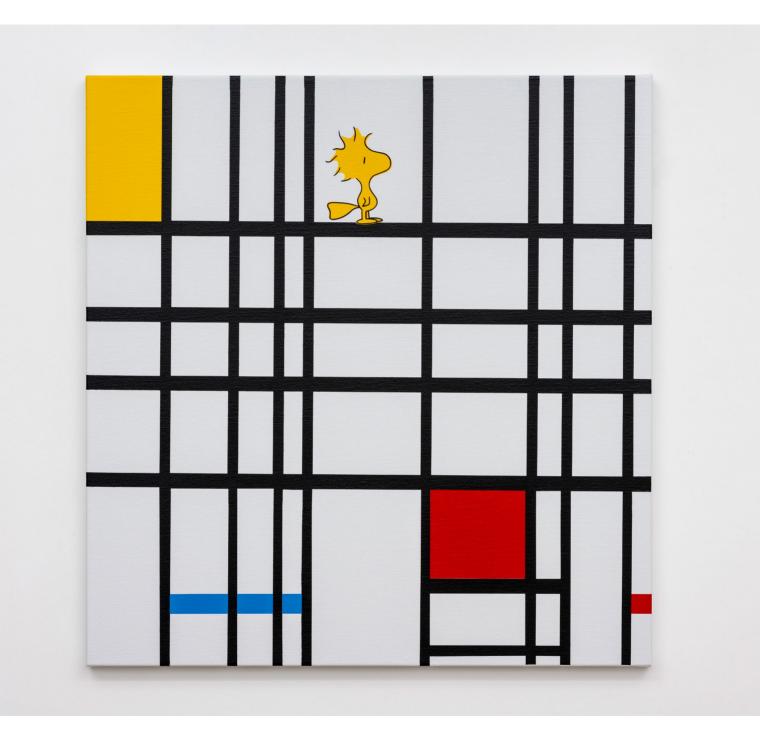
To my scattered family and father's memory, whose thoughts have been with me throughout: Ximena, José and Adriana, the latter with eternal thanks for introducing me to Julia Kristeva's 'intertextuality'; a concept which now permeates my thinking. This is the tenth solo exhibition whose journey I have shared with Karen David and my thanks go to Karen for encouraging me to write these words; for all the late night/early morning conversations, and for allowing our studio-home to become populated with my 'expandable-foam' paintings and yellow and purple 'post-it' notes. To Gerard Hemsworth who sadly never got to see these new works, but without whose critique these paintings would not exist. To Jennifer with thanks for hosting this second solo show at JGM, and to its brilliant team. With thanks to my 'primo assistente' John Richert and to friends and assistants who have helped to stretch, move, wrap and unwrap paintings these past 18 months, and finally to Duccio, Malevich, Mondrian, Albers, Noland, Louis and Barney, whose paintings I reference in this exhibition.

> Juan Bolivar May 2021





The Plague, 2020-21 Acrylic on Canvas, 25 x 19cm





The Flood, 2020 Acrylic on Canvas, 80 x 64cm

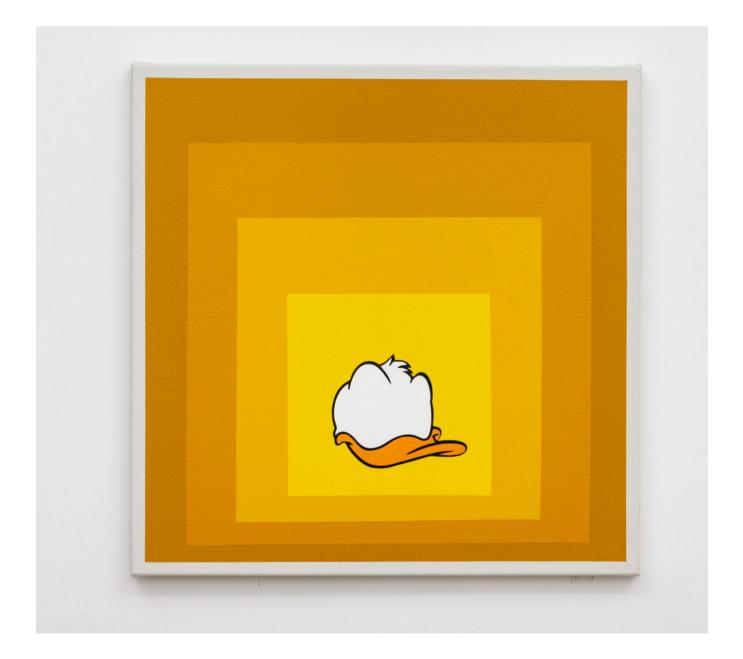


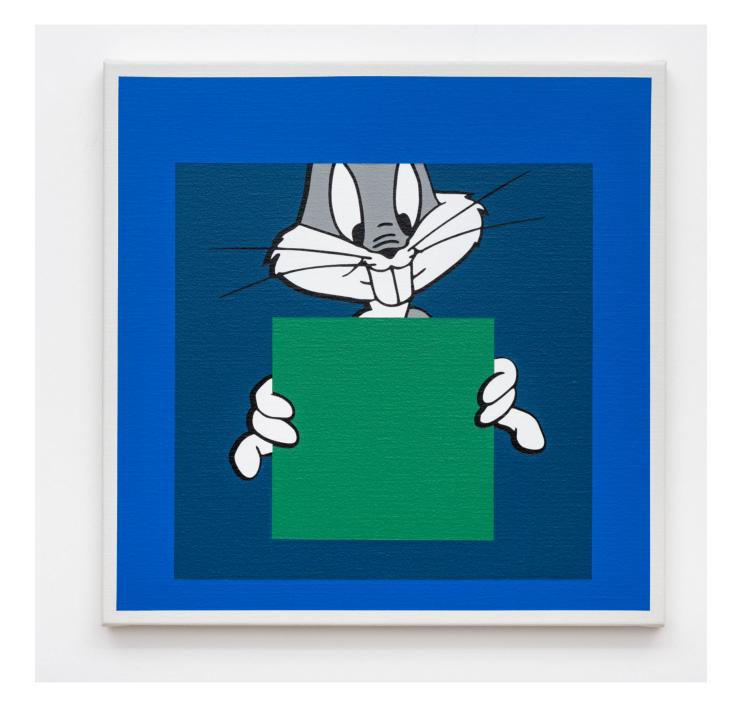






Darkness, 2020-21 Acrylic on Canvas, 46 x 46cm





Entombment, 2020-21 Acrylic on Canvas, 40 x 40cm



Gabriel, 2020-21 Acrylic on Canvas, 54 x 54cm

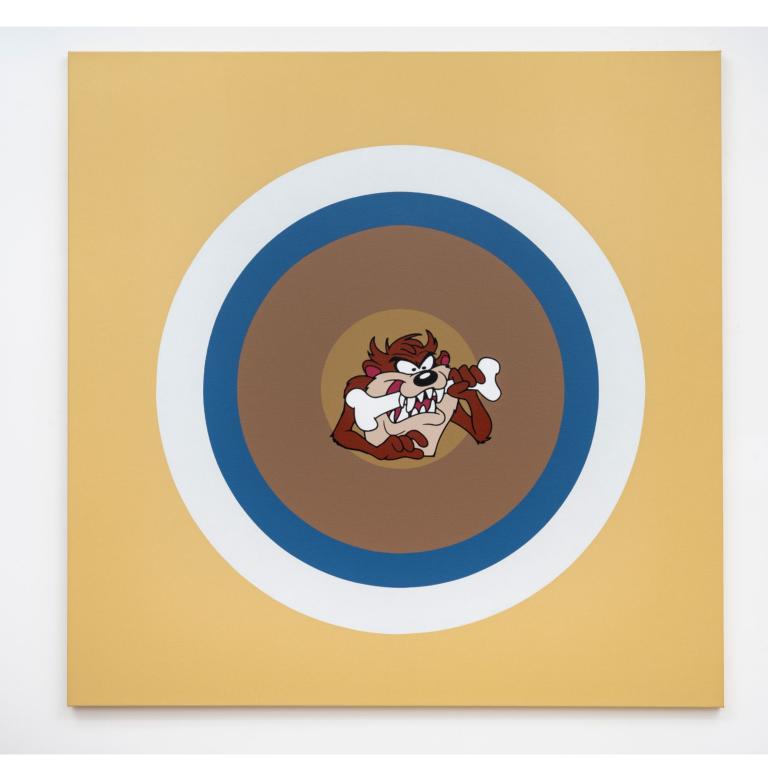


Hail, 2020-21 Acrylic on Canvas, 40 x 40cm



Baptism, 2020-21 Acrylic on Canvas, 150 x 150cm





Apostle, 2020-21 Acrylic on Canvas, 150 x 150cm

Lazarus, 2020-21 Acrylic on Canvas, 150 x 150cm



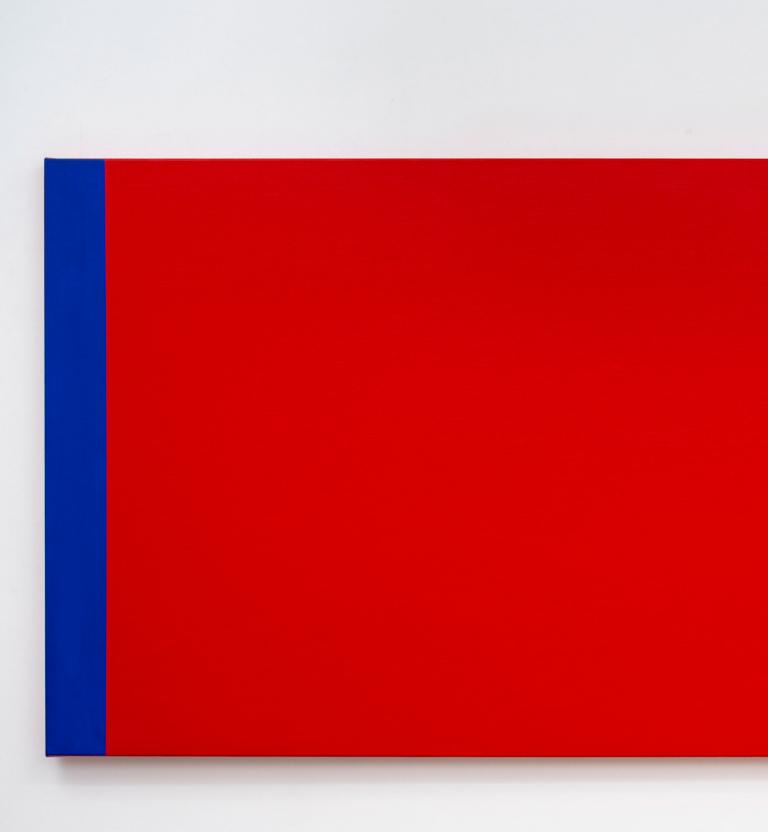


Maestà, 2020-21 Acrylic on Canvas, 143 x 187cm



Deposition, 2020-21 Acrylic on Canvas, 153 x 77cm





Predella, 2021 Acrylic on canvas, 215 x 89cm



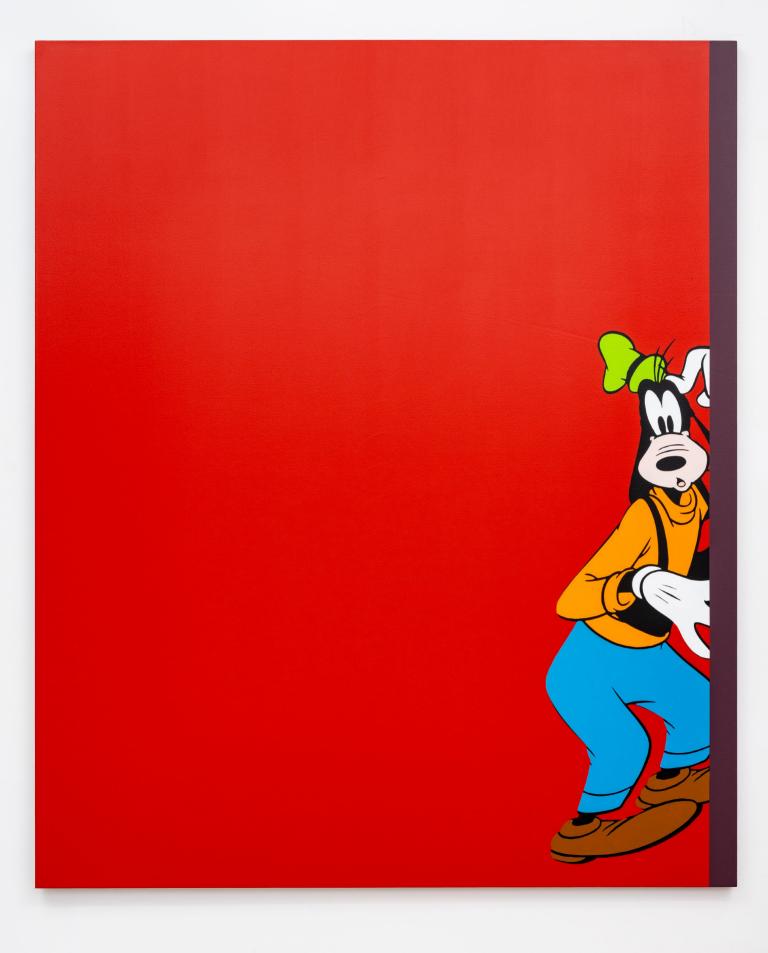
Eight Station, 2020-21 Acrylic on Canvas, 187 x 143cm



Dionysius, 2020-21 Acrylic on Canvas, 172 x 123cm



Angel, 2020-21 Acrylic on Canvas, 190 x 158cm



Annunciation, 2020-21 Acrylic on Canvas, 72 x 89cm



Resurrection, 2020-21 Acrylic on Canvas, 166 x 127cm



Pinnacle, 2021 Acrylic on Canvas, 213 x 94cm



Ascension, 2021 Acrylic on Canvas, 190 x 18cm







Styx (after Louis 1961), 2021 Acrylic on Canvas, 26 x 21cm

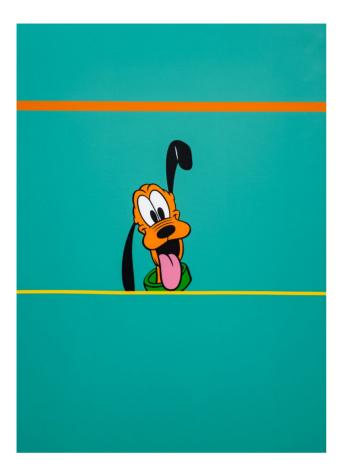


Rush (after Noland 1961), 2021 Acrylic on Canvas, 26 x 21cm



Kiss (after Mondrian), 2019 Acrylic on Canvas, 26 x 21cm



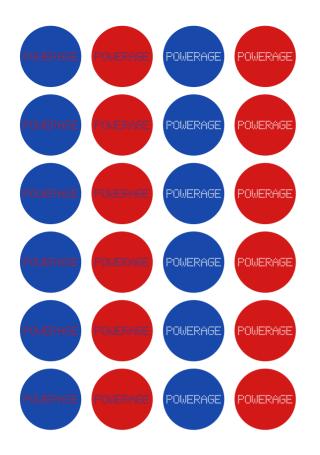


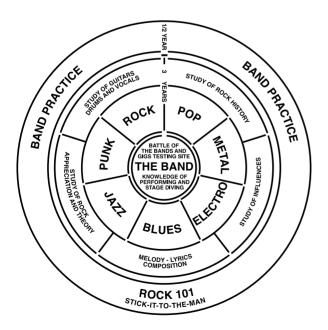


Limited Edition Prints

Opposite: *Thomas*, 2021 60 x 42cm Giclée print Edition of 5 Left: Dionysius, 2021 30 x 21cm Giclée print Edition of 10

Right: Goofy and Barney, 2021 30 x 21cm Giclée print Edition of 20





Top: Power Print, 2021 42 x 30cm Giclée print Edition of 10

Bottom: School of Rock (with High Voltage Embossing), 2021 42 x 30cm Giclée print Edition of 20

Opposite: *Power T-Shirt*, 2021 S. M. L Silk Screen Printed T-Shirt Edition of 50



Jennifer Guerrini Maraldi In the early 1970's Jennifer Guerrini Maraldi (nee Heathcote), 23 years old, became owner/director of the Powell Street Gallery in South Yarra, Melbourne. With the help of a distinguished stable of artists, including Alun Leach-Jones, Voctor Majzner, Fred Cress, Jenny Watson, Lesley Dumbrell, Inge King, David Wilson and Clive Murray-White, Powell Street Gallery was one of the most recognised and successful contemporary galleries at the cutting edge of the Australian contemporary art scene. Eventually moving to London and working in various fiels, including fifteen years as a member of the permanent editorial staff of *British Country Life* magazine, Jennifer was lured back to the art world after being completely blown away by a collection of contemporary Australian indigenous paintings she had seen. JGM Gallery was opened in March 2017 and Jennifer now exhibits Western contemporary art in parallel with the finestexamples of Australian Indigneous paintings and sculpture.

Juan Bolivar is a Venezuelan born British artist and lecturer in Painting at the University of the Arts London. Bolivar graduated from Goldsmiths College in 2003. His work is included in The Government Art Collection, and selected for significant exhibitions such as *New British Painting*, John Hansard Gallery, University of Southampton (2004), East International at Norwich School of Art (2007), *Nanjing International* (2015) where he was a prize winner, and has twice been a recipient of a *Pollock-Krasner* award (2001/2009). As an independent curator he has worked on over 50 exhibitions with a focus on inclusivity, multidisciplinary practice and polysemic cultural dialogues. He is a contributor to Turps Magazine. Recent residencies and exhibitions include Macro Museum, Rome (2019), Bauhaus Museum, Dessau (2019) and Bauhaus-Universität Weimar (2021).

Daniel Sturgis is a British artist and professor of painting at the University of the Arts London. He is represented by at Luca Tommasi gallery in Milan and was artist in residence at the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, USA (2016) and Chinati Foundation, Marfa, Texas (2007). In 2011 he co-curated the major international exhibition *The Indiscipline of Painting* Tate St Ives and Warwick Art Centre (2011/12). He is a founding associate editor of the Journal for Contemporary Painting, a specialist selector and chapter author for Phaidon's painting anthology *Vitamin P3* and he has written for Tate Papers, Burlington Magazine and Texte zur Kunst.



JGM GALLERY