

Keith Mayerson Reimagines Our World

By Ricki Morse

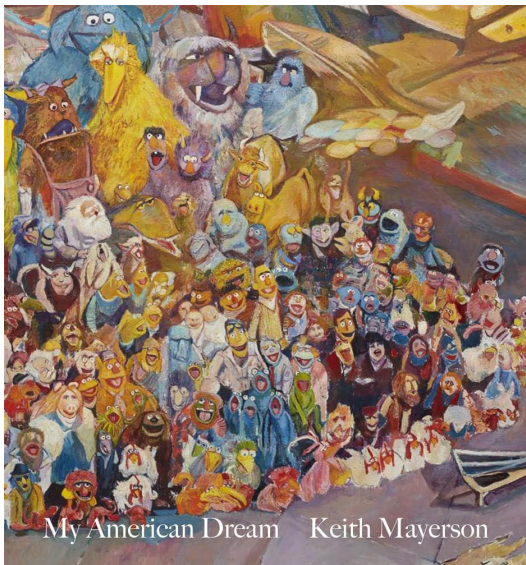


Keith Mayerson was born in 1966 into an unusual family in Cincinnati, Ohio, the creators of a foundation dedicated to community support and Judaism. His buoyant optimism, humor, even naiveté, is contagious and feels particularly welcome in our divided world of hate and war.

Today he is an art professor at the Roski School of Art and Design at the University of Southern California, lives in Riverside with his husband, has published a graphic novel, "Horror Hospital Unplugged" in 1997, and his epic volume, "My American Dream," in 2023—427 pages, with images of his paintings and monographs on each work. Selections were shown in the 2014 Whitney Biennial, *America Is Hard To See*. Broadly edu-



The artist, *Self Portrait*, before his 1997 "Large Iconscape." oil on linen.



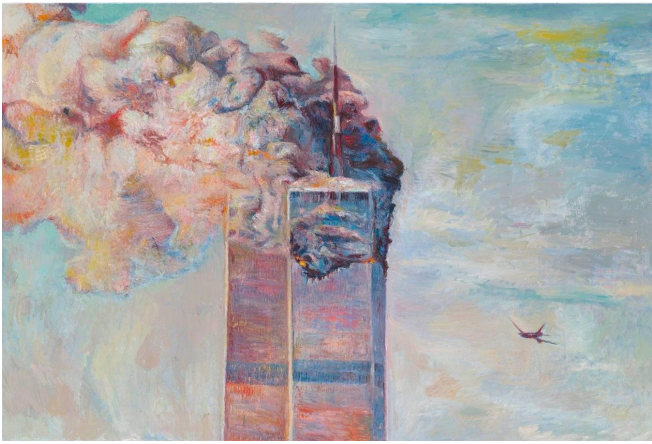
cated, he studied semiotics and studio arts at Brown University, graduating in 1988, and after moving to the West coast, received his MFA at UC Irvine in 1993. His inherent artistic skills are enhanced by his desire to convey the emotional content of a scene, his ability to take you there, either to the horror of 9/11, the warmth of his boyhood home or the joyful rainbow world of Kermit the Frog. His childhood delight with the Muppets, Sesame Street puppets who taught children the alphabet, expanded into a frog who rode a bicycle, led us on a search for the rainbow and celebrated the moment, even painted as an 18th century dandy channeling Gainsborough. Mayerson's irreverent adoption of Kermit breaks down the barrier between serious art and cartoon, inviting us to open our boundaries.

At the same time his tiny brush strokes, meticulously applied, reflect the work of the old masters, bringing Gainsborough's formal protocols to Kermit, strumming his banjo, his image reflected in the pool at his feet. In 2007 Mayerson was living in Soho and heard planes flying overhead as he prepared to give his drawing class at New York University. Shortly the television was showing pictures of the first Trade Tower hit by a



plane. By the time he got to his class, the second plane had hit, and he led his students to Washington Park, watching as bodies dropped from the towers. His father was in New York, and they spent the rest of the day together, his father gathering newspaper pictures of the burning towers, telling his son that he should paint what they were witnessing. At the time it felt inappropriate to paint the scene of so much death and

Keith Mayerson, *It's Not Easy Being Green*, 2022, oil on linen, conveys the power of the moment he is creating, the tiny brush strokes, the broader human relevance.



Keith Mayerson, *9-11*, 2007, oil on linen, Whitney Museum.

suffering. But then the dreams began. Being the son of a psychoanalyst, he took dreams seriously, and after one particularly vivid nightmare, he retrieved the newspapers his father had collected and began to paint. There were no more nightmares.

Mayerson shares celebrating his love of his family and of his husband, insisting on every person's right to be himself or herself. He painted this family portrait as an 80th birthday present for his father, picturing himself at four years old, his husband Andrew, his mother tickling his sister to get her to smile for a picture taken by a cousin commemorating the family watching a new television given them by their grandmother. That photograph, saved by his father, inspired this painting. He remembers listening to his parents' favorite records while painting the scene, *West Side Story* and *The Sound of Music*, feeling the way their world felt then.



Keith Mayerson, *My Family*, 2013, oil on linen, Whitney Museum.

Mayerson's loving family and love for his family informed his view of the people he admired, particularly Martin Luther King, Jr., and Barack Obama, individualizing his American Dream. Just as the intricate, colorful, interwoven design of the bed-spread reflects the woven togetherness of his family, the interwovenness of the wallpaper design behind the King family conveys that intricate togetherness, and centers King's innovative power in the unity of family. Mayerson was at first loathe to use the NY Times front page inaugural photograph of Obama and his family as the subject of his painting, but as he thought about it, the appropriateness became apparent. What better way to express the American Dream—"Anyone could grow up to be president!" Mayerson's ebullient, optimistic view of our world echoes the title of his work in our collection as Kermit the Frog peddles his bicycle down the road, "*Someday we'll find it, the Rainbow Connection, the lovers, the dreamers and me.*"



Keith Mayerson, *Drum Majors*, 2008, oil on linen, Whitney Museum.



Keith Mayerson, *Obama's Night*, 2017 oil on linen, Cleveland Museum

