

## Introspection, Disruption, Discovery: Michael David's *The Mirror Stage*

by Paul D'Agostino

Michael David has never been one to look away. Whether in his visual art, his teaching, or his curatorial pursuits, he confronts tasks and challenges head on, peeking in and poking around only momentarily before digging in, charging along, plowing through. His operative mode is energetic, vigorous, even aggressive, yet it is the consequence of an aggressive, vigorous, energetic curiosity – of a tireless drive to discover, disrupt, and possibly rupture so as to expose anew, reconfigure, and suture. His bullishness of approach is born of a bullishness on creativity, and of an unwavering bullishness on, and unrelenting quest for, beauty. The artist's conviction, in art and life alike, is that by shaking things up and interrupting norms to see what's left standing, steadfastly, upon their settling, he'll eventually find something that is, and that he might leave newly, right.

David's recent works showcased in *The Mirror Stage*, the artist's latest of numerous solo exhibitions at Bill Lowe Gallery, are wholly demonstrative of the artist's operative tendencies and creative ideals. Here, we see him not merely not looking away from the challenge of taking his art to some substantially, and indeed substantively, next level, but in fact looking most critically at and into his own practice, in terms of materials and process alike, until the very stuff of his practice looks back at, and into, him. At this juncture, his manner of digging in and plowing through has led him to untether himself from certain aspects of his longstanding modes of working, on the one hand, and to discover, on the other, a host of new skills to hone, implements to master, and media to mix. He shook up and ruptured various norms of his own

practice until it jostled into unfamiliar territory, located the means and modes of a new self-ascribed norm, then shattered that norm. What has resulted is that what was aggressively auto-critical and eventually self-ascribed has yielded inspired new works that are self-reflective, even literally, and self-inscribed.

In this sense, *The Mirror Stage* is both revelatory and retrospectively expansive. Although it features all recently completed works, and consists primarily of David's newest pieces incorporating mirrors and other mixed media, it nonetheless charts the artist's initially gradual, then quite precipitous transitional period bridging his manners of working in recent decades with his patently divergent processes and materials today. This allows viewers familiar with the artist's work

to engage with several formidable new pieces in encaustic that they'll readily recognize as his, and to trace an aesthetic trajectory linking those with the markedly different works he's making now. What they'll find is that the novel path of inspiration and discovery David has been following of late is not a matter of abandoning or exhausting the possibilities of previous pursuits. Considered inspection reveals, rather, that while the artist's means and materials have shifted quite dramatically in many ways, his thematic stimuli and conceptual interests, as well as his rigor, sincerity, and intensity of expression, remain unchanged. David didn't take on new works by turning away from anything, or by leaving anything behind. Instead, with a refreshed openness of mind, he embraced and internalized it all, recalibrated his emphases, and left himself open to finding new solutions just beyond.

What David has embraced and internalized primarily, perhaps, and now externalized rather more openly than ever, are his multifarious sources of inspiration – many of them not strictly art-related – and a deeply self-reflective sense of urgency and



Fig.2, Exhibition view: Michael David, *The Mirror Stage*, Johnson Lowe Gallery, 2022 - 2023

vulnerability. As an artist of a certain generation who cut his creative teeth and amalgamated his aesthetics during a certain era, and within a certain artistic milieu, of particularly lasting impact on cultural production in New York City – namely the 60's, 70's, and 80's – David found himself heavily influenced by Abstract Expressionism, chiefly, but also by Pop Art, street art, Beat poetry, cinema, and not least, rock and roll, especially punk rock. Immersed in such fecundity of creative expression, young emerging artists in those days, particularly those with David's ranging curiosities, were drawn ineluctably to interdisciplinary activities, hoping to individuate themselves by distilling their various experiences in novel ways, developing what might come to be identified as their look, their style, their voice. For David, this became a highly personalized channeling of Ab- Ex-like admixtures of media, assemblages, and intertextual referencing. Aesthetically or conceptually, Willem de Kooning, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Jackson Pollock spoke directly to his enthusiasms, as did many of the artists associated with Arte Povera. The rock-star-ism of Pop Art, as

well, factored in. And it would be churlish to imply that earlier titans of Modernism weren't also whispering in his ear.

David left his other ear open, however, to all manner of singing and shouting, and trained his eyes on all manner of other aesthetic transmissions and creative stimuli. His social coterie consisted of artists, musicians, writers, filmmakers, and athletes, and his own modes of activity were often just as various. If fellow artists and the greats of art history were communicating certain things to him about art, then singers, actors, pop icons, poets, and sports stars were stoking his passions and

fueling his creative engines in other ways. Modernists and Ab-Ex artists counseled him in one ear, while The Beatles, Bob Dylan, David Bowie, The Ramones, Prince, and countless others did the same in the other. David frequented galleries and museums aplenty, but he also spent plenty of time in the thrall of movie screens. Akira Kurosawa, Andrei Tarkovsky, Orson Welles, Federico Fellini, film noir, and auteurs of the French New Wave

stirred his mind and soul, yet gangster movies, kung fu flicks, and slapstick comedies packed an inspirational punch as well. David sought out aesthetic cues and painterly insights in some places, and raw energies, visual dynamisms, and expressive moods in others. Back in the studio, he threw it all in the creative blender, and he got to work.



Fig.3, Michael David, *Pink Moon (For Astrid)*, 2022, tar, resin, mirror, oil on birch ply, 43.5x32.25 Inches

Work he did, and hard. And before long, and with enough ardent homing in on his true strengths and interests, a post-Ab-Ex aesthetic all his own came into resolve. Visually and conceptually alike, it was a matter of prodigious toil, vigorousness, and grit, and its incipient musculature at the time was one he'd continue to build upon, flesh out, and flex for decades to come. Now with similar materials, now with somewhat different ones, this is still the vein he's working in today. In his trademark works, this vein is characterized by an unwavering, materially resourceful, sometimes almost outrageously ranging mixing of media within a robust bedrock of strata, crusts, and pilings of colors locked in hefty encaustic. Works along these lines tend to reach a

substantive zenith when the extent to which they're visually and materially wrought stops just shy of total, such that selective pockets and swaths of compositions convey a kind of levity, maintain a kind of calm. Even when working at rather large scales, as he customarily does, David generously builds up weighty, waxy substrates, and fortifies them with collaged interventions and incorporated objects. Vibrant passages or less distressed areas beneath foregrounded surfaces poke through, peeking out into visibility through splits, folds, excavated passages, or pale encaustic frosts like geological interruptions in heavily sedimented terrains. David's strongest paintings tend toward a graver end of gravitas without going all the way. Even his most visually and thematically weighty pieces feature moments of quiet, and open themselves up to states of grace. Thickly mediated works such as these appear to slowly, ceaselessly morph, heave, and shift, creating a sense of textural push and pull that ensnares viewers in their buckling, viscous grip.

By and large, David's variant visual fields and ruptured picture planes resolve into abstract images, or revolve around the symbolic suggestiveness of embedded objects. Their materials and textures might be many, but their palettes chart a more limited range, tending to register as generally deeply, darkly hued, or generally brighter, suffused with blanched-like, stone-chalky whites. Exemplary of all this, and of David's most mature, assured works of recent decades, are two formidable new pieces in *The Mirror Stage*, works the artist has been toiling away at for years. They are *The Inevitable* and *The End of the World As We Know It*, and they both feature abundant mixes of media, are both heftily scaled, and both churn with evocative auras of profound mystery and ambiguous spirituality. *The Inevitable* is of a generally whitish palette, but it's the white of varicolorfully veiny marble, with patches of misty pink and pale green, and errant threads of blue. These spare hues cover or poke through layers of waxy buildups and beds of organic matter. At right,

a small stretch of blazing red seems like either a source of warmth in an icy aftermath, or a signal of imminent or waning peril. At left is an elegantly inlaid photograph of two eerie oryxes, allegorical apparitions peering out at the viewer through the crusty brush-scape like the beastly overseers of this remnant terrain. The larger of these two works, *The End of the World As We Know It* is far darker in palette and suggestiveness alike. Its earthy ochres and tints of turquoise inhabit the umbrage of a charred out, carbonic, smoky atmosphere, one of secluded caves and ashy occlusion. Scantly visible at upper right, behind a kind of indeterminate barrier, is a small, desperately outstretched, devastatingly ghostly hand, less a sign of surrender than a hopeless final gesture before succumbing to the unavoidable fate of unseen flames. In the middle of the composition is a bony inlay, mask-like and cranial, portentous and ominous if not simply evil, demonic.

Albeit in subtly different ways, and with interrelated yet divergent overtones, *The Inevitable* and *The End of the World As We Know It* are wholly engrossing, arresting in their visual grip, and wholly indicative of the works David is most known for. They're also wholly momentous as ultimate markers of the artist's recent transitional period, one that unfolded over the past year. This is the same period that gave way to his strikingly different, altogether new works using mirrors, and to the ethos and concepts underlying *The Mirror Stage*. Of additional note about this period is that it's certainly the most recent, and likely the most trenchant, instance of the artist interrupting his own norms by shaking up his own practice. Again, for David, these moments of transition have never been matters of abandoning previous tendencies, and certainly not moments of looking away. Sometimes occasioned by working in different studios, or by having access to different materials, and surely to some extent brought about by serendipity, these moments have been overall somewhat infrequent for the artist, but always of great impact. In his latest evolution, transitioning

into an expansive new body of imposing, complicated works involving very little inherent color, a more limited approach to mixed media, and generally no encaustic at all, has allowed him to plow into all new territory. While David's general sources of inspiration aren't vastly different in the encaustic paintings, his processes and visual goals in those

works certainly are, and point to him leaning more heavily on his Ab-Ex rearing and aesthetics. Almost immediately upon starting to work with large, custom-ordered mirrors, and after finding a pictorial language by exploring the variably expressive linework he could achieve by using larger or smaller tools, and harsher or subtler interventions, to crack, split, fracture, and shatter these pristine surfaces before embedding or fastening things down with a pitch-like blend of oil and resin or tar, David realized he'd located the materials and processes that would permit him to give greater visual voice to his previously more hidden interests. His passions for cinema and spectacle, and his boundless zeal for rock music – especially for the vigorous, accelerated rhythms, stridently vital vocals, and recalcitrant attitudes of punk rock – come to the fore in these works. This other side of the artist, never secret yet not always readily visible in his art, is now unmistakable, uncompromising, and blatant. It takes center stage and shouts its presence. The yields of this approach are, in a word, smashing.

David brings his full self to the stage in *The Mirror Stage*, and in doing so fully expresses his personal credo: "If we see ourselves as damaged, we see ourselves as human. The object is complete when viewers see themselves in it." Here, he's not necessarily looking into the mirror and seeing himself for the first time, but he is gazing into it and seeing himself anew, discovering an 'other' he has become that's not unrecognizable, but that he can only embrace by coming to terms with the fallibility, brokenness, and vulnerability that are part and parcel of the course of life, and that are

essential in accepting mortality. David smashes his mirrors not as a simplistic act of aggression against himself or the woes of life, but as a pictorial process of general reflection on damaged lives, broken bridges, and shattered souls – metaphorical states from which we might find redemption by gazing into the looking glass with sincere honesty, humility, and compunction. We are delicate; life is fragile; mirrors are much the same. Out of violence or accident, mistake or circumstance, shattering happens. But things don't always fall fully apart.

David expresses these ideas by meditating on their real and metaphorical meanings, but not by dwelling on or belaboring them into graver weightiness. To strike this balance, he eased up on grimness and gravitas by summoning refreshed energy, enthusiasm, and lust for life. He took chances and risks, and he messed things up to then make them right. In doing so, he quickly let go of go-to materials and methods, and he listened more closely to his mental council of musicians, filmmakers, and actors. Consequently, many of his works in *The Mirror Stage* read like a suite of

homages to some of the greatest greats in his personal hall of heroes, rendering the notable heft and considerable scale of these pieces anything but incidental. *A Day in the Life*, for example, is at once an ode to the groundbreaking

rise of The Beatles, and a reflection on paradoxes and polarities. Its line of horizontal bifurcation implies a landscape, and its holistic shattered-ness that tends toward smithereens suggests a deep vastness, so viewers might see it as a wide, twinkling night sky above, with the ground below coruscating in moonlight. Regarding their relative fracturing, the two readily differentiable registers of this piece also suggest greater and lesser states of breaking and mending, wounding and healing, trauma and recovery, self-destruction and self-discovery.

A number of David's other mirror pieces operate with similar modes of differentiability. *Violence and Compassion* features a smaller square above a slightly larger one, creating a slightly asymmetrical tower or full-body vertical. Both surfaces are quite



Fig.4, Michael David: *The Mirror Stage*, exhibition view at Johnson Lowe Gallery (Atlanta), 2022 - 2023

thoroughly smashed; one hopes that the larger one below is where the compassion implied here has settled, and where it stays and lasts. David's other manner of striking differentiable registers is in his more overtly compositional use of pitch-black resin or tar in certain areas, and in his selective removal of formally intriguing fragments and shards. *Dragon*, for instance, is strangely balanced by wide bands of black resin to the right and at top, both of which heighten the dynamism and spectacle of the giant serpent-monster-like form reigning over the middle of the surface. As David's homage to Bruce Lee, and to the great mirror-trickery scene in Lee's *Enter the Dragon*, we see here that the dragon itself has entered the fray of this fraught frame – and that the beast has been stirred to bust things up and battle its way out. Another nod to the allure, mystique, and manifold metaphorical meanings of halls of mirrors as they appear in movies is David's *The Lady From Shanghai*, for Orson Welles. A large square work with thick black bands of tar along almost all of its intermittently shard-jagged perimeter, this piece scans as a huge still frame or clipped bit of celluloid recovered from the floor of an editing room. As an altar to a titan of filmmaking, to one of the hallmark films in which the director cast himself, and to perhaps that film's most indelibly dramatic scene that unfolds with intense suspense in a mesmerizing hall of mirrors, this painting is itself, like the film in question, an epic text of ever-frozen, ever-shifting legibility. David zooms in on Welles' storied montage, recontextualizes its grandiose theatricality, and creates of it a glittering showcase of self-insertion, terse aggression, danger, deception, betrayal, and self-reflection. If all the interdisciplinary aspects of *The Mirror Stage* culminate in a mic-drop moment, its echoes emanate from this piece.

At once freshly revelatory and retrospective, groundbreaking and comprehensive, *The Mirror Stage* sheds ample light on the depth and range of Michael David's artwork, on the exciting new territory he's plowing through with it now, and on the artist – the *whole* artist – himself. Here, he

furnishes viewers with works that both allow them to recognize him, and that encourage them to see him differently. In doing so, he's also allowing himself to be more fully, truthfully seen. His implicit statement in this show is that a sincere sense of self entails honest self-regard, and that self-awareness is not something to extol or discard, praise or bury, fabricate or reject. It is, more simply, an essential aspect of life itself to somehow reckon with, and somehow accept. The heart of the matter is to never look away.

*The essay was written and published on occasion of Michael David's solo exhibition The Mirror Stage at Johnson Lowe Gallery (Atlanta, GA) in 2022-2023.*