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An Homage to NYC's Religious Leaders

“Praise New York” is artist Karl Haendel’s tribute to those who helped New Yorkers during the pandemic, through portraits of their hands

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Karl Haendel, installation view of “Praise New York” at Mitchell-Innes Nash. Photo courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.

Artist Karl Haendel has been thinking about the idea of portraiture for a number of years, but as a contemporary artist, “not in a 19th-century way,” he said.

He wanted a fresh way to represent someone, or a community, through his drawings, the medium through which he works through ideas and thinks best.

“The concept of portraiture is still very relevant,” said the New York-born, now L.A. based artist. “Humans are interesting, [and] a few years ago I thought about this idea of representing people through their hands – through my hands to sort of draw their hands – in a kind of homage” to his subjects.

Haendel’s nearly nine-foot tall, wow-inspiring realist depictions of the hands of some of New York City’s Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Christian and Sikh faith leaders on exhibition at the Mitchell-Innes & Nash gallery in West Chelsea, is certainly a fresh way to create a group portrait.

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On view until April 16, “Praise New York” honors a diverse group of pastors, imams, rabbis and priests who helped New Yorkers cope throughout the worst days of the pandemic.

“In Western societies, the government helped with basic needs such as food,” Haendel said about the early months of the COVID crisis. “But there was grief and fear and that was something people dealt with in different ways.” He said that the religious leaders he spoke with for the project couldn’t hold traditional services, but their community still needed the emotional/spiritual support they offered.

“When something like this [crisis] happens, then your emotional and spiritual needs become apparent, and even among secular people, the return to rituals provide solace, some outline for framing our grief and understanding,” he said.

And because the hands are very important in ritual - in prayer, in blessing – in different cultures where a rabbi or pastor might put a hand on someone’s head, or the use of the various hand motions of the Mudras in Buddhism or Hinduism, he was drawn to the idea of representing religious leaders in this manner. Additionally, Haendel felt the centuries-old way of representing people through their faces allows one to fall into certain tropes of beauty, of ideas of age, race or gender that are not as easily discernible when someone is portrayed through their hands.

“Representing a Time and Place”

The subjects of the exhibition are male and female, young and older, from the East Village to Chelsea, Harlem to the Bronx, Queens, Staten Island and Brooklyn. What started as a new practice of individual portraits over the last two years, evolved to be the portrait of a community of progressive religious leaders in New York City.

“I was representing a time and place in New York,” Haendel said. “To talk about touch that we were not having during the pandemic, alone in our apartments.” Yet, he said, the project became bigger, “it became all about these different faiths and races and ethnicities all over New York and how New York is an incredibly diverse, interesting place.”

The process of creating the drawings involved him meeting with each leader in their place of worship, learning about their community and each person’s journey into religion, Haendel said. He would then ask how they want to be represented, for example, “What kind of hand motion do you make when praying?” Then he would take pictures of their hands to take to his studio to eventually draw and translate into the large-scale drawings currently on display.

While the hand portraits are realist drawings of each leader’s hands, Haendel said some of the positions, if you look closely, are impossible to do with the hands under normal circumstances, and that he didn’t think to make the portraits literal “but to make them interpretative and new.” And how religious is Haendel?

“Personally, I’m not that religious, although I am Jewish and sometimes I do the holidays ... Sabbath I light the candles,” he said. Adding that while all religions have a more orthodox or conservative

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group, there is also a more tolerant, secular group, but “it doesn’t mean we have any less faith or any less belief.”

One of Haendel’s overarching interest in religion lies in his ongoing questioning of “why do people believe what they believe; how do they believe it; how does their life have meaning?” he said. It was those questions that led, just over 20 years ago, to an early study of religious studies in college “more like comparative religion” and later switching to semiotics – which was “sort of an art major/cultural studies” type program, he said.

“I’ve always been interested in why people believe what they believe,” he said. “And you could answer that question in many ways.”