

Joseph Grazi: *Prehysteria*

Oct. 19 – Nov. 20, 2017

Castle Fitzjohns Gallery

98 Orchard Street NYC

Opening: Oct. 19, 7 – 10 p.m.

PRESS CONTACT

Molly Krause

molly@molly.nyc

Molly Krause Communications

Images: molly.nyc/prehysteria

Joseph Grazi to stage month-long NYC exhibition featuring a 240-square-foot floor work—unavoidable and designed to be walked on—containing 70 live mice* neatly organized within a Plexi-covered network of uniform modular habitats

Balancing themes of chaos and control, the immersive nature of the exhibition and its sprawling, crawling centerpiece will enable visitors to confront their primordial fears in the context of a carefully controlled and aesthetically compelling environment

New York, NY – October 16, 2017 – Visitors to Joseph Grazi's *Prehysteria*, a solo exhibition of 12 new works including nine paintings and a playfully hued, jumbo-scale sculpture of a saber tooth tiger skeleton, will navigate the show atop a four-inch-tall, wall-to-wall, Plexiglas-covered checkerboard of 140 sixteen-by-sixteen-inch squares. The jet-black half of these checkerboard tiles will be solitary modular habitats, each containing food, water, organic black hamster substrate, and a single white mouse. The alternating white tiles will be slick-topped, hollow wood boxes, their sides perforated with internal air ducts and designed to absorb shock. The exhibition will seek to raise, but not necessarily to answer, the following questions: Why are we afraid of certain pests; why did we create and why do we continue to perpetuate the construct of "pests" in the first place; and what happens to this irrational fear when we exert manmade control over it with tangible aesthetic precision?

To that end, *The Social Network*, as the centerpiece work is called, will allow its viewer to get up-close-and-personal with an animal that is largely considered to be on the lowest end of the human value system, simultaneously feared and reviled. The piece is designed to literally elevate humans above the "lesser species" and to illustrate the unchallenged dominance we exert over mice. To walk on the piece may initially elicit fear and disgust in many (even while the viewer knows that the mice can't make physical contact with them)—though its precise and clearly manmade aesthetic will soon establish a controlled, safe space for the viewer to confront and perhaps reconcile his or her fear.

Central to *The Social Network* and exhibition overall, explains Grazi, is its commentary on the fact that Western culture, specifically New York City, has assigned the animal world an arbitrary hierarchy of worthiness of life; the idea of "*pests versus pets*." Continues the artist: "When a person sees a mouse in their apartment, trauma-by-broom might be that poor mouse's fate. But elevate the intruder to a small puppy, and they'd probably want to pet it rather than kill it—and the idea of harming one can actually land you in legal trouble or jail, let alone social obliteration. But why? Mice and rats are extremely intelligent with innate self-sufficiency and social instinct, but they are considered pests to be inconsequentially dealt with."

In addition to addressing the human-assigned animal world hierarchy, *Prehysteria* will intend to find humor in how the course of evolution has played out. The focal point of the exhibition will be its namesake work, a 10-foot-tall sculptural rendering of a saber tooth tiger skeleton, which will be made more menacing by its unnaturally large dimension yet less threatening by its light-pink color and the fact that it's simply a children's 3D wood puzzle scaled up a thousand fold. The playful hue of the creature—which will be three times its subject's actual size, to represent the magnitude of our predatory fear—will comment on the irrationality of fearing a species that humans evolutionarily outlasted.

Said Grazi: "The saber tooth tiger may be the most notorious of the many extinct prehistoric animals that once hunted our species. But we lived alongside them for most of our existence; they even existed in small pockets at the time when man was creating complex-narrative cave artwork. But in the end, they were no match for our brains, technology, and opposable thumbs. The sculpture will aim to highlight that evolution

doesn't always favor brawn, and if our success as a species is any indication, perhaps it's actually brains that are the more formidable weapon."

Continuing Grazi's commentary on the counterintuitive course of evolution will be a pattern-oriented series of paintings and a black-and-white mural of the same design, the latter of which will serve as a full-wall backdrop for the pink saber tooth tiger sculpture. Onomatopoeically encapsulating the humors of evolution through sarcastic laughter—a background motif comprising dozens of maniacally written "HAs"—the paintings will be punctuated by tiny birds flying against the insanity and outlines of dinosaurs inhabiting its chaos. In two paintings, crisply painted, flatly iconographic dinosaurs will comment mockingly on how the great phylum could not keep up with time; in addition to outlasting dinosaurs, we remember their legacy with cartoonish iconography. In two other paintings, an iconographic skull will represent mortality in the same evolutionary context. In this series of motif-oriented paintings, the constituent elements seem innocent (laughter and rainbow colors), yet their contextual implications are rather cynical.

The exhibition's title, *Prehysteria*, is a portmanteau of "prehistoric" and "hysteria," referencing how our inherited cognitive disposition to ward off prehistoric dangers manifests itself in the context of modern-day NYC. In other words, even after our initial startle reflex, why do we remain wary of a tiny mouse or cockroach on the street? Why does the mere act of them *moving* so utterly disconcert us, when we know with modern medicine that brief contact would no longer present a fatal risk? When our innate cognitive impulse is taken out of its prehistoric context, the irrationality of the fact that we still experience even the smallest jolt of "hysteria" at a mouse or insect in a first-world urban environment is what Grazi seeks to address in the exhibition. Said Grazi: "While rodents can sometimes carry disease (and once helped the bubonic plague kill a quarter of the world's population), nobody has a story of a friend dying from brief contact with a New York street mouse. Add some harmless cockroaches to the mix, and an able-bodied human might just move apartments rather than deal with it. Our now-unfounded prehistoric fears persist."

The mouse work, *The Social Network*, is named for the metaphor created by the effect of the piece's most prominent design element: the mice, while free to roam within their relatively luxurious habitats and while aware of each others' scent by way of the ample air ducts, will be physically separated within a stark grid of contrasting checkerboard tiles. "In many ways, these mice in the floor are just like us," explains Grazi. "They are an intensely social species; in this case, they feel togetherness from the wafting scents, but are physically separated by some wood—a metaphor for our devices and screens. With the advent and proliferation of social media, we no longer have to be physically present to meaningfully communicate." Concluded the artist, regarding the intention of *The Social Network's* interactive effect: "the work will force the viewer to face a phobia and hopefully realize the irrationality of it all. Mice are just animals. Nothing more. But certainly nothing less."

Following an opening reception from 7 – 10 p.m. on Thursday, October 19, Prehysteria will be on view at Castle Fitzjohns (98 Orchard) through Monday, November 20. Gallery opening hours are Tuesday through Sunday, noon – 7 p.m., and Mondays by appointment.

*** A NOTE ON ANIMALS USED IN THE SHOW:**

The mice on view as part of *The Social Network* are feeder mice purchased from pet stores. The artist has a 13-year-old Ball Python named Mr. Clip that eats four pet store feeder mice each week. In purchasing the mice for the exhibition, Grazi will be removing his snake from the pet store "predator pool" for 5 ½ weeks following the show, purchasing in bulk the same number of mice that he would otherwise buy one-by-one over time.

Comments Grazi: "The mice in *Prehysteria* can also serve the important purpose of highlighting the intense inconsistencies in humans' varied treatment of different species. These mice were born, raised, and sold as feeder mice for snakes like the Ball Python, which can only eat live prey. But the same snake would be happy to eat a healthy baby rabbit, kitten, or puppy—the mere thought of which would be reviled. Equality of the aforementioned animals aside, I hope that anyone concerned with the use of mice in this show will consider that the only ethical question at hand rests in the concept of owning a pet snake. The mice will be incredibly well-cared-for during the run of the show and for 5 ½ weeks following, while their wild relatives tolerate thunderous subway tracks, eat street waste, and get arbitrarily killed to alleviate irrational human fear rather than to directly sustain another animal."

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Born and raised in an Orthodox Jewish community in Flatbush, Brooklyn, Joseph Grazi received a classic arts education at the School of Visual Arts and has exhibited widely throughout NYC. He uses a wide variety of media such as taxidermic animals, acrylics, wood and other materials, compositionally designed to neutralize fear through order and arrangement. Animal and human skulls, bones and taxidermic bats are only some of the elements that, when put together, can trigger fright and relief at the same time. His goal is to alleviate the most ancient fears through acknowledgment of individual power and control in the hope that such acknowledgment can lead to a better understanding of our place in the natural world.