

Henry

VIEWPOINTS: *Mazel Tov Group* by Karl Haendel
May 11, 2019 – November 3, 2019

Viewpoints is a rotating series that highlights works from the Henry's collection, paired with commentary and insights from University of Washington faculty. By offering diverse perspectives across academic fields, the series encourages open inquiry and presents diverse ways of seeing and interpreting the art on view. This iteration of the series features [Mazel Tov Group](#) by Karl Haendel, a work in five parts including four drawings and a photograph, made from a drawing, made from a photograph.



Clockwise from top: Karl Haendel (U.S., born 1976), Installation view of *Mazel Tov Group* by Karl Haendel, 2019, Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle, Photo credit: Mark Woods; Karl Haendel, *Mazel Tov Group* (*New Yorker* Cartoon Drawing #27), 2007. Pencil drawing on Arches paper with MDF frame. Henry Art Gallery, gift from the Gail and Stanley Hollander Collection, 2016.183, © Karl Haendel; Karl Haendel, *Mazel Tov Group* (*Emmett Kelly [mirrored negative]*), 2007. Chromogenic color print. Henry Art Gallery, gift from the Gail and Stanley Hollander Collection, 2016.183, © Karl Haendel.

VIEWPOINTS: *Mazel Tov Group* by Karl Haendel 1

Karl Haendel (U.S., born 1976)

Mazel Tov Group, 2006-7

Left to right: *Emmett Kelly (mirrored negative)*, 2007, chromogenic color print made from a drawing; *Dylan Lyrics #2*, 2006, pencil drawing on paper; *Untitled (Whale)*, 2006, pencil drawing on paper; *New Yorker Cartoon Drawing #27*, pencil drawing on paper; *Circus #3*, 2007, pencil on paper

Henry Art Gallery, Gift from Gail and Stanley Hollander Collection, FA2016.183

Known for his catalogue of found images reworked through drawing, Karl Haendel's installations recontextualize images culled from vernacular sources such as advertisements, frozen food labels, newspapers, sports, and celebrity images, and bring seemingly disparate content into conversation. Haendel's process typically involves making a slide transparency of his source imagery, which he projects onto a wall and uses as a template to generate his drawing. Through the distortion of scale, isolation of figures, and translation through graphite, Haendel strips away context, recasting the familiar anew. Interested in semiotics (the study of signs and symbols and their interpretation) and art history, Haendel then uses these new, "stripped" images to build meaning in the way one might build a sentence. By choosing to painstakingly recreate these images by hand, Haendel creates a pause in the incessant flow of image circulation, inviting viewers to consider processes of visual consumption, modes of meaning making, and the role of the artist in an image-saturated landscape.

The five framed pieces that comprise *Mazel Tov Group* include four intricate graphite drawings and one photograph that can be read as individual expressions, or pieced together to form networks of potential associations. The images include drawings of the lyrics to Bob Dylan's "Jokerman" (the opening track of the 1983 album *Infidels*); a smiling performer atop an elephant; a breaching whale; a Jewish-American themed cartoon from *The New Yorker*; and a photograph of Emmet Kelly, the popular American circus performer, in costume as his clown character "Weary Willie". (For his Weary Willie image, Haendel made a graphite drawing of an image he sourced from the Internet and photographed the result to generate the negative image we see here.) Rather than forming a single narrative, Haendel's grouping of these pieces points to multiple themes—such as the culture of American entertainment or relationships between nature and culture—while ultimately inviting viewers to construct their own connections.

Karl Haendel (U.S., born 1976) lives and works in Los Angeles. With degrees in art, art history, and semiotics and a certificate from the Whitney Independent Study Program, Haendel's practice has roots in the history of appropriation art and theory. For the past twenty years Haendel has centered his practice on sorting, indexing, and translating images through drawing.

FACULTY CONTRIBUTIONS

Consider this—

Joe Milutis

Associate Professor, School of Interdisciplinary Arts & Sciences, University of Washington, Bothell

It takes significant energy for a humpback whale to breach. *Mazel tov* to the whale! For the whale, this leap is a form of communication, and, given the current interest in the ways an artist can speculate about communication beyond the human and the phenomenal, we should take seriously what the whale might be “saying” in Haendel’s constellation of images. And “constellation” may be the best word for this work, as perhaps too is the word “essay”: *mazel* means “luck” and—in Hebrew as in Latin—is correspondingly related to the disposition of the stars. The essay is, similarly, lucky. Theorist Theodor Adorno’s description of the essay, which for him grazes this realm beyond the phenomenal by forgoing a logical ordering of objects, is powered by a sense of *mazel*: “Luck and play are essential to the essay.”

So, in reading Haendel’s essay, we should note that the density of each pencil-traced image is poised against the fragile connections and contrasts drawn across the whole—difficultly, yet aptly, as if by luck. The number of images equals a poker hand. An elephant-surmounting blond and the energetic whale seem the same suit, whereas the weary Emmett Kelly is of a kind with the circus imagery and the Dylan song. But anything goes with the Dylan song, since “Jokerman” is literally a wild card. And this wild is the wild of the whale, the wild of the elephant, and the wild of forty years in the wilderness (the story of Moses and the Israelites) reduced to a *New Yorker* cartoon.

But I keep returning to the clown—pachydermic, ancient, almost Biblical. Generations of paint-by-numbers aficionados would fill him in, honoring his image in a painstaking way not unlike the drawing process on display here. *Mazel tov* to the exhausted clown renewed by the diligent inspiration of others!

Glad to Greet You

Brian Reed

Milliman Endowed Chair in the Humanities, Department of English

What is a drawing? An artist takes a piece of paper, doodles on it, imitates something seen, or sketches something imagined. The result can be passed around, pasted up, or Instagrammed.

Mazel Tov doesn’t work that way. There are four drawings, but their subject matter is peculiar. Three of them enlarge preexisting images: a circus scene, a *New Yorker* cartoon, and a photograph of a breaching whale. Haendel has also drawn the lyrics to a

Bob Dylan song—copied how they would look in a book or in liner notes. *Mazel Tov* takes the viewer on a carefully plotted 3D journey: You enter the room and spot a woman on an elephant. Your eye is then drawn further left until it reaches the only non-drawing, a print, a blow up of a negative of Emmett Kelly's famous clown Weary Willie.

Showcasing the patience and diligence of an artist who has reproduced by hand a gallery of images and words, *Mazel Tov* is like a Facebook feed, but solid not virtual, a record of affective connections: a prized joke, a favorite song, photos that convey playfulness. The tone is nostalgic. The whale could have appeared on a dorm room wall in the 1970s. The circus drawing evokes the golden age of *Life* magazine. The ghostly sad clown is a final twist, a reminder that, however happy a person's past may appear in retrospect, it is also lost and gone, to be grieved.

Mazel Tov could be autobiographical. Its pieces add up in suggestive ways. The title is Hebrew, the comic depicts a "menorah tree," Dylan was born Robert Zimmerman and had his Bar Mitzvah in 1954. It draws you into a life and asks you to think about drawing as an act of devotion and commemoration.

(Wait For The) Light To Shine

Timea Tihanyi

Senior Lecturer, School of Art + Art History + Design

Mazel Tov Group unfolds like a three-ring circus act or a black-and-white silent movie. Bookended by a brooding clown and a graceful acrobat, the installation simultaneously entices and pushes us away, performing all this with interludes of lyrical and comic intentions. The highly crafted reinterpretations of found imagery come together the same way random thoughts crisscross the mind as we flip through magazines in a waiting room while Bob Dylan's voice on the radio seeps in from somewhere.

What holds this eclectic array of actors together can be found directly on the surface of the paper. A closely woven network of pencil lines draw us beyond the picture plane into depths made up of light and shadow. The surfaces—painstakingly inscribed with delicate lines of graphite—are thrice removed. Imagine the artist pointing the light beam from a projector onto a large sheet of paper and matching the projected image with graphite layer upon layer. How long might it have taken? Lingering in the world of light and shadow, Haendel recreates the image from minute marks made with care and intention. Each time the pencil passes, the artist is adding and observing, obscuring perhaps but never erasing what he has already put down on the paper. Can building and refining with repeated gestures also be a process of self-searching? Vaudeville came to age in the United States in the early 1900s from an immigrant experience of self-definition through reflection, repetition, and back breaking labor. Similarly to Haendel's process, vaudevillean acts required both patient practice and self-deprecating humor. As Dylan says "Shedding off one more layer of skin, Keeping one

step ahead of the persecutor within.” Haendel’s trick is to deconstruct and reveal by accumulation, refocusing us not on the image but on the processes of relating and re-defining. As we step back, the image solidifies from the shapeless marks with a renewed meaning.

Nature–Culture Entanglements

Sabine Wilke

Joff Hanauer Distinguished Professor in Western Civilization, Department of Germanics

Mazel tov stands for “good fortune” in Yiddish. With this phrase you congratulate someone on a happy occasion. What is the happy occasion here: A performance? A holiday ritual? A sign of communication in nature? Haendel’s images draw on these semantic fields.

The source is already an image that was reproduced: a photograph, a cartoon, a copy of the lyrics for a song, or perhaps a drawing that was altered and taken out of context like the whale. Individually, these images are powerful. Together they create a network of interrelated themes that range from the circus to performance and nature–culture entanglements. Emmett Kelly, the legendary clown, started out as a trapeze artist and cartoonist before he became Weary Willie, the tragic character that we recognize in the negative. Bob Dylan’s “Jokerman,” a dream twister and manipulator of clouds, is encouraged to “dance to the nightingale tune.” The whale and the circus elephant show off their mighty strength, and the father and son in the David Sipress cartoon from *The New Yorker* are marveling at a Christmas tree in the shape of a menorah.

One common theme that emerges from these images is the strangeness and incomprehensibility of these entanglements. Haendel gives them meaning in the texture of his drawings and the specific arrangement of his images. As performances, the objects depicted like the tree come alive and tell a story about the interrelationship between nature and culture. We may never know the full story behind them, and an aspect of strangeness will always remain.