



Joseph Holtzman's unusual artistic sensibility evolved from his close study of historical painting and his connoisseurship of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century decorative arts. His themes and motifs draw on these diverse sources as well as allude to family and friends, cultural personalities, historical figures, and literary characters. Balancing his wide-ranging references is an intensely sensual connection to paint and surface. "I want to get *in* painting," Holtzman said recently, "past the graphic image. It's painting as a sculpture and as an object."

Holtzman's concerted engagement with painting began in 2004 after eight years working as the publisher and designer of the renowned magazine *Nest: A Quarterly of Interiors*. He made *Nest* exceptional, in part, by treating each issue as a remarkable physical object, incorporating shape and texture as well as a highly imaginative approach to pattern and color. As a segue between his work on the magazine and his new artistic vocation, Holtzman painted the cover design of the final issue, using acrylic paint on gessoed slate, which was then photographed for use in the magazine.

Holtzman is unusually attentive to the unique qualities of color and texture that can be expressed through the medium of paint on various grounds. After his early experiments with slate, he shifted to marble, which gave him the white ground he desired without having to introduce an intermediary material. His palette is fantastically rich and varied and he achieves remarkable chromatic and tonal effects by exploiting not only the transparency of the oil medium but also the unusual capacity of marble to absorb and reflect light. On these marble surfaces, his paint seems to be suspended in space, existing more like a cloud than a covering.

At times, Holtzman applies paint so sparsely that the mineral nature—the veins and imperfections—of the marble itself is clearly visible. In works like these, such as *Untitled* (2007) and *Jane Austen, November 1815* (2007), the compositions are open and lyrical, while the marks themselves possess an ephemeral, windblown affect. At times, Holtzman scores his surfaces in the manner of an engraving, allowing the white surface to glint through the painted surface. In other works, where the paint application is thick and the ground is lost beneath dense layers, Holtzman often brings order to the picture by means of an all-over compositional grid. The grid that defines the portrait of his mother, *Frieda Holtzman, With the Phases of the Moon* (2009), was inspired by the vignettes of Jan and Hubert Van Eyck's fifteenth-century *Ghent Altarpiece*. Holtzman's heartfelt paean to maternal fertility instills a quasi-pagan spirit into the format that the Van Eyck brothers deftly used to convey the orderly virtues of the Christian hierarchy. Holtzman pays as much attention as the Van Eycks to the tiniest details of his paintings. To study closely Holtzman's work is to become immersed—indeed, nearly lost—in his universe of infinitesimal contemplation and care.

Many of Holtzman's paintings are portraits or, at least, one can say that a particular person or character emerges for him in the process of painting. The titles often reveal the subjects: Frieda (Holtzman's mother); Monsieur de Charlus (the closeted gay aristocrat in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*); Mary Todd Lincoln ("a driven decorator," according to Holtzman); the composer Stephen



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Sondheim (whose work has been a major inspiration for Holtzman); Robert Offit (his childhood friend); and Carl Skoggard (Holtzman's husband) The subjects are evoked less through the depiction of their faces and bodies (which are typically rather ephemeral or otherwise difficult to ascertain) than through their environments and accouterments, which like saintly "attributes" convey symbolic meaning. Frieda herself, for example, never appears physically but is suggested only through vignettes of rich color, isolated images of spoons, vegetal forms, and other indecipherable shapes. Stephen Sondheim, meanwhile, is represented by a proscenium and stage as seen from an upper box seat, with a surround of scenes that allude to the composer's various productions.

*Robert Offit Dying with AIDS, 1989* (2006), a portrait of one of Holtzman's friends, began as an homage to the great Mississippi ceramicist George Ohr, and a silhouette of one of Ohr's eccentrically shaped vessels can be seen on the left side of the painting. The words "George Ohr Killed Baby" inscribed on this vessel refer to the 1894 fire that destroyed Ohr's studio, after which he referred to his ruined ceramics as his "burned babies." In the painting, the titular subject does appear—as a ghostly face near the center of the picture—but so do other images, including at least one rabbit (a kind of guardian spirit that appears in a number of Holtzman's pictures) and a host of elusive abstract forms. According to Holtzman the image of Offit simply appeared in the painting, though he suggests a possible connection to the book he was reading at the time, Randy Shilts's history of the AIDS epidemic, *And the Band Played On*. "What I read," says Holtzman, "is what I paint."



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Other books that have influenced Holtzman's paintings include Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* and the Old Testament. We see echoes of Proust in *M. de Charlus at Home in Spanish Dress* (2006), in which Charlus himself is inexplicably represented as something resembling a fantastically coiffed potato whereas the details of his apartment's decor (the wall paneling and its ornamentation) are precisely rendered. Proust is also there, of course, in *Balbec Springtime* (2007), which evokes the setting of the seaside hotel where the young narrator of *In Search of Lost Time* spent holidays with his grandmother while pining for a person going by the name of Albertine: "Behind this girl, as behind the purple light that used to filter beneath the curtains of my room at Balbec while outside the concert blared, there shone the blue-green undulations of the sea."<sup>1</sup> In this painting, Holtzman captures not only the iridescent, erotically tinged flavor of Proust's text but also obscure yet redolent details like the hotel's purple curtains. Like Proust, Holtzman's imagination comes to life through the recollection of seemingly incidental facets of decor. His approach to the Old Testament, meanwhile, includes such grand themes as Genesis, which is the subject of *Untitled* (2007). Here we see the primordial division of light from dark or, symbolically, heaven and hell. Yet, Holtzman has deigned to include in this canonical scene the image of his own poodle puppies, who can be made out as black shapes in the upper-right quadrant.

Through his highly personal and inventive engagement with painting, Holtzman has invested new life into this versatile medium while nodding to the admired forebears of his, and our, cultural past.

Lawrence Rinder  
DIRECTOR

1. Marcel Proust, "The Captive," vol. 5 of *In Search of Lost Time*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, rev. D.J. Enright (New York: Modern Library, 2010), 81.



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## Biography

Joseph Holtzman (born 1957) is a painter residing in Valatie, New York. He was the editor, publisher, and designer of *Nest: A Quarterly of Interiors* between 1997 and 2004. MATRIX 256, his first solo exhibition, will travel to the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles in summer 2016.

## Works in the exhibition

*M. de Charlus at Home in Spanish Dress*  
2006  
Oil and acrylic on slate  
34 ¼ x 26 ¼ in.

*Robert Offit Dying with AIDS, 1989*  
2006  
Oil and acrylic on slate  
40 x 50 in.

*Untitled*  
2007  
Oil on marble  
22 x 32 in.

*Mary Todd Lincoln, 1880*  
2007  
Oil on marble  
44 x 35 in.

*Abraham Lincoln Speaking to the Multitudes*  
2007  
Oil on marble  
43 7/8 x 35 in.

*Frieda Holtzman, with the Phases of the Moon*  
2009  
Oil on marble  
44 x 35 in.

*Stephen Sondheim, May 2, 1984*  
2009  
Oil on marble  
27 x 33 in.

*Carl Skoggard*  
2011  
Oil on marble  
32 x 40 in.

*Balbec Springtime*  
2007  
Oil on marble  
43 7/8 x 35 in.

*Jane Austen, November 1815*  
2007  
Oil on marble  
37 x 46 ¼ in.

All works courtesy of the artist.

FRONT *Mary Todd Lincoln, 1880*

2 *Frieda Holtzman, with the Phases of the Moon*

3 *Stephen Sondheim, May 2, 1984*

4 *Robert Offit Dying with AIDS, 1989*

5 *Balbec Springtime*

6 *M. de Charlus at Home in Spanish Dress*

7 *Untitled*

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