

JOEY TEPEDINO: THE ART OF MISCHIEF



Joey Tepedino, *GRAT 647*, 2024. Mixed media on canvas, 48 x 36 inches

Outsider artist Joey Tepedino's second solo exhibition at Hal Bromm, featuring twenty-six new paintings and drawings, offers a strikingly vibrant and unfiltered representation of the human mind's contradictions and eclecticism, in this case the mind of the artist himself. Joey's artistic journey is multidisciplinary, spanning from stand-up comedy to painting, zine-making, and social media video skits. His paintings offer an alluring hypnotic quality despite their loud colors and dense webs of graffiti-like phrases scrawled across their surfaces.

Raised in Pennsylvania's Pocono mountains by parents from Brooklyn and New Jersey, Tepedino blends an inherited city sensibility with a growing relationship with nature. While he expresses an interest in outdoor exploration, including a yet-to-be-attempted solo camping trip, it seems his creative world remains introspective. Tepedino's trajectory continually sharpens itself while staying anchored in his distinct voice.

Beneath the humor and emotional energy of his work, Tepedino embraces a philosophy of existential absurdity: "The world is absurd...I think we have no idea why we're here or what we're doing." Yet Tepedino's existentialism is grounded in a love of nature and the act of

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creation. The paintings' daring quotations should not betray a cynical view of humanity, but rather an embrace of the unpredictable and the irrational. Tepedino works instinctually. Central to Tepedino's creative process is the pursuit of aesthetics. Tepedino is interested in creating beauty, in summoning what did not previously exist. His paintings are raw expressions of emotion as filtered through the human brain and its relationship to language, showcasing humor, sadness, sex, anger, and above all, Tepedino's mischievousness.

The works are maximalist masterpieces covered in what long-time collector Don Dal Maso calls "hieroglyphic" elements, ranging from the vulgar "MUST DO METH" to the sweetly nostalgic "My father told me to dream." Dal Maso, the man who bought Tepedino's first painting and who now owns five, met the artist at a jazz bar comedy show in Easton, Pennsylvania. "I love stand-up and Joey was hysterical," Dal Maso told us, remembering the immediate draw of Tepedino's sharp wit. Indeed, comedy is just one of Tepedino's many creative outlets. Perhaps comedy, the most self-aware art form, has influenced the unpretentious and startling way Tepedino paints.

Dal Maso's admiration has grown "geometrically," culminating in what he describes as a breakthrough in the artist's approach to the canvas in the current show. Viewing Joey's paintings, he experiences a sensation akin to music-induced "exhilaration and euphoria," an emotional resonance beyond language. For Joey, however, such praise is met with a characteristic self-effacement. He admits to feeling awkward hearing such direct acclaim.

Yet for all his humility, this introverted artist's oeuvre speaks with boldly dramatic flairs of color. In Tepedino's own words, he is "throwing [his] emotions out there," shaping and molding them into a canvas brimming with luminous details. First, Tepedino's compositions often feature a dominant figure or face set against a highly contrasting background. While Tepedino has no formal painterly training, he understands the relationship between subject and background and employs an incredible mastery of color to illustrate this affinity, creating harmony out of rapturous complementary colors.

One of Tepedino's standout works, titled *TOHG 680*, exemplifies this technique. The painting features a red skull-like face with oblong yellow eyes and muddy orange lips before a field of azure. In typical Tepedino fashion no surface on the canvas is left bare. The skull is encircled by smaller faces, some with a similar frontal treatment and others in profile with stuck-out tongues. Even the industrial-yellow eyes contain universes, populated by tiny stick figures and double-digit numbers. Measuring four by three feet in size, the painting dominates the gallery wall. When asked if canvas size affects his working process, given the incredible density of his details and patterns, Tepedino laughed and answered sensibly: "I have this weird thing where I have to fill spaces... That one was, that one...it drove me crazy."

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This obsessive need to cover every inch of the canvas is part of what he describes as his “stream-of-consciousness” approach. While he gravitates toward these terrifying and imposing figures, the background unfolds organically, becoming a layered world of intricacies and subtle narratives. Because of his resistance to refining or erasing mistakes, it came as a surprise that Tepedino admires the “perfectionists” David Fincher and Stanley Kubrick. Though their precise and polished filmmaking contrasts sharply with Tepedino’s spontaneous methods, his respect for film and these directors influences the energy Tepedino brings to his painting.

The balance between raw instinct and intricate control is part of what captivates collector Dal Maso, who finds *TOHG 680* to represent one of Tepedino’s strongest efforts. Speaking on their explosive originality, Dal Maso said “I’ve had to create a kind of vocabulary to talk about Joey’s paintings.” The exhibition’s opening reception hummed with people allured by the labyrinthine layers of text, colors, figures, and numerals, trying to make sense of the myriad elements in each work. A number of possible inspirations were heard floating through the air, ranging from African, Indian and Basquiat to Mexican Day of the Dead costumes. Yet Tepedino considers his work to be fundamentally his own, declaring it derives from “the chaos of my brain and the way that I think and the way that I live in the world.”

Indeed, Tepedino’s art is not imitative. Dal Maso pointed out two historical precedents, Mark Rothko and Red Grooms, to better contextualize Tepedino’s work within the New York art tradition. These two references are fitting to qualify the dance between the sublime and the absurd in Tepedino’s art. With Tepedino’s dazzling use of color and the nonsensicality of the scribbles, his work can be viewed in comparison to the emotional gravitas of Rothko and the kitschy genius of Mr. Grooms. Any attempt to create an explicit, conscious relationship between these artists misunderstands the extremely personal aspect of Tepedino’s work. Still, the juxtaposition of brilliant color and the strong emotional undercurrent lends Tepedino’s work an inexhaustible quality. It demands your attention and then your meditation.

Dal Maso refers to a dream episode chronicled by the Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard in his 1843 book *Either/Or* to situate Tepedino’s art and its reception. In the dream, as elaborated in the section “Diapsalmata,” the gods in the Seventh Heaven grant the man a single favor. Kierkegaard writes,

‘Most honorable contemporaries, I choose one thing—that I may always have the laughs on MY side.’ Not one god made answer, but all began to laugh. From this I concluded that my wish had been granted and thought that the gods knew how to express themselves with good taste: for it surely would have been inappropriate to answer gravely: your wish has been granted.

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Much like Kierkegaard's dream, Tepedino's paintings embrace a paradoxical existence, neither rejecting nor attempting to censor the mischief-laced profundity of his, and all of ours', mental landscapes. Reveling in humor, chaos, death, love, childhood, and the melancholy of daily life, Tepedino remarks: "Every painting has... it's funny, it's sad, it's scary, it's everything. Sexual, it's everything all at once. It's kind of a journal. There's no intention behind it, but when you look back, you can find intention."

—Bobby Zabin

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