

Jean-Guerly Pétion  
*Americana Dreaming*  
September 9 – October 16, 2021

*Americana Dreaming*, an exhibition of new work by Jean Guerly Pétion at Gallery 532 Thomas Jaeckel, presents 16 new works by the Haitian-born artist.

*Americana Dreaming* presents a disorderly, non-thematic body of work executed with stunning visual flair and stamped with a highly distinctive graphical sensibility. Fiercely, even overtly polemical, these artworks foreground the emotional life of the Black artist while simultaneously alluding to a broad range of literary and theoretical influences, ranging from classical myth to post-structuralist philosophy.

Using techniques from painting, mixed media, and assemblage, Pétion creates phantasmagorical vision-scapes in which colorful decorative elements, surrealist symbols, and potent images of Black identity come together in a dynamic visual carnival. Images of butterflies, flowers, soccer balls, and ferns create an oneiric vocabulary of signs and symbols; elsewhere, a series of densely layered abstractions, suggestive of TV static or electronic noise, showcase the artist's abiding interest in repetition as a formal tactic.

*Americana Dreaming* (2018; 27" x 27," acrylic and barbed wire on masonite) is a forceful image of Black freedom and the denial thereof by a racist and oppressive society. A Black woman's face, painted in dense and vivid colors reminiscent of the work of Beauford Delaney, looks out at the viewer with an unreadable look — sombre? tragic? defiant? while her hand, caressing a startling blond braid, protrudes from the American flag she is draped in. Most strikingly, the figure is outlined in actual barbed wire, which has been affixed to the surface of the painting; a crushingly specific and alarming visual touch. This sculptural touch endows the composition with a dimensionality that heightens the effect's chilling impact. The word "Americana," meanwhile, is redolent of artifacts, trinkets, kitsch, the manufactured visual language of a country trying to sell itself on its own image, but the reality of this image plays against this retrograde word with vatic force.

*In Between Beneath the Mirror* (2018; 80" x 54," mixed media: paper, fabrics, and acrylic on canvas) features an enigmatic dark-skinned figure with angel wings, blowing a trumpet beneath a sky spangled with lights and butterflies. This mysterious image, with its biblical overtones, seems to call up myriad associations without being tied down to any literal or narrative framework. It speaks of freedom and joy, maybe, but it has a haunted quality; the figure is encircled by a plank fence, suggesting limitations of ambit and agency. The disjunction of the figure's ethereal background and the jaunty harlequin colors of the figure's trousers adds an irreverent de-centering visual factor. What, exactly, is being announced?

*Reciprocal* (2021; 120 x 79", mixed media: acrylic, paper, collage, and fabric on canvas) is a compositionally complex, large-scale tour de force that is a virtual catalogue of Pétion's motifs. The painting is bifurcated into two large, panel-like halves, with a jewel-like trompe l'oeil pattern running across the entire bottom of the painting. The left-hand panel features a thin, glamorous-looking woman of indeterminate race in a star-spangled bikini, outlined against a zebra-skin

background; the right-hand panel is a kaleidoscopic roundelay of colorful orbs and collaged faces taken from magazines and fashion catalogues. The eyes of both the collaged faces and the mysterious woman are covered with black bars of the kind used to hide the eye color of suspected criminals in old-fashioned lineup photos; a literal de-facing, of sinister affect. Images of beach balls, pelicans, and a white picket fence suggest the iconography of the domestic utopia of middle-class leisure, which stands in sardonic contrast to the occluded faces. The painting as a whole synthesizes these images of the erotic, the exotic, and the domestic into a surreal and mysterious visual fugue.

Pétion, who has also authored surrealistic erotic narratives set in Port-au-Prince and in New York City, himself speaks of the ideas behind his work in dense, gnomic fragments. He describes the work featured in *title tk* as “a series of failures” whose “lacunae and repetition intentionally perform a syncretic cathartic liberating gesture” and whose “fragments and images are actually connected” as part of a “trajectory of rhizomic lines of flight and events.”

This tensile theoretical armature derives from his readings of the work of deconstructionist writers like Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan, as well as post-colonialist scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, whose concept of the subaltern informs the polemicist thrust and liberatory energy of much of Pétion’s visual narratives. The contrast between the hothouse explosion of Pétion visual style and the cool, cerebral armature of its intellectual grounding lends his artistic practice the gravity borne of a bracing dialectical interplay.

**Jean-Guerly Pétion** was born in Haiti and studied at the Kansas City Art Institute (BFA) and at CalArts (MFA). His paintings confront emotionally charged first- and third-world class issues via theoretical texts and compelling images. His art has been featured in the California African American Museum and the 18th Street Art Center. He currently lives in Los Angeles, California.

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