

For Immediate Release

John Bankston

Escape

12 September – 31 October 2020

Social Distance Opening Reception: Saturday, September 12, 2:00 – 6:00pm

Walter Maciel Gallery is pleased to present the exhibition, *Escape* by San Francisco based artist, John Bankston marking his seventh solo show with our gallery. The show includes small to mid-sized paintings continuing his exploration of identity based on aspects of male bonding, racial awareness and dress code.

Bankston began the production of his show last year with a group of larger panels to tell the story of two men in bunny masks who escape together and go on an adventure in a new imaginary world. The couple would have new experiences within different male groups where issues of trust, familiarity, comfort and likeness come into play in a formative way. As soon as San Francisco officials announced the stay-at-home order in mid-March, he moved from his large waterfront studio overlooking the bay to a newly converted studio in one of the bedrooms in his home. The constraints of the new space dictated the smaller format of the remaining works that were created for the show. The scenarios continue with interest in male relationships based on different dress codes and attire, however once the pandemic hit and he was isolated at home, Bankston started to consider his own escape from his studio, restaurants, social life and planned travels. The subjects became a visual diary about being quarantined with the reoccurring representation of an ordinary clothed man viewed as the protagonist of the overall narrative. He focused on the positive aspects of our new way of life and the freedom of being able to paint which has always been his passion. The imagery continues with a few of the masked men disguised as bunnies hiding from or interacting with other characters in different costumes. In many of the smaller more recently finished works, solitary figures are composed in contemplative gestures responding to both human behavior and nature. In one painting the figure even encounters a large lion and is greeted with caution.

During the pandemic and early production for our show, the George Floyd shooting occurred and the Black Lives Movement reignited in a poignant way. San Francisco, as well as many other communities in the US and around the world responded with protests and civil unrest demonstrating the anger of systemic racism and abuse of power within the police force throughout America. The unfair injustice and criminal procedures resulting from a delay in prosecution of the four officers would not be ignored and city leaders responded with curfews for a tighter control over perceived unsafe behavior. This experience reinforced thoughts of oppression to minority voices and in particular the black community. Bankston began thinking about the meaning of freedom as an opposite of oppression. This thought led to a broader definition of escape for the title of the show and his execution in making the work became freer with loose brushstrokes and carefree applications of overlapping pigments. The paintings are set within colorful landscapes that are softly rendered with sketchy pigments to emulate the gritty surface of the pages in a coloring book. Using a range of mediums from acrylic to oils, the settings are achieved through a layering sequence with the bold black outline of each figure creating depth set atop of the natural elements and horizons. The painterly gestures are more aggressive than previous work and contrasting colors are used to distinguish the landscapes from the sky. For Bankston, making these paintings at home during the pandemic was certainly an escape but not in the sense of running away from his studio practice but rather moving forward within it.

Born in Benton Harbor, Michigan, Bankston received his BA from the University of Chicago and his MFA in painting from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. His work has been included in several important museum shows such as *On the Edge: Art of California*, artwork from the permanent collection at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; *Dream to Dream: The Art of John Bankston* at the Krasl Art Center in St. Joseph, MI (catalog); California-Pacific Triennial at the Orange County Museum of Art in Newport Beach; *Figure Studies: Recent Representational Works on Paper* at the Contemporary Art Museum in St. Louis and *Freestyle* at the Studio Museum in Harlem. His work continues to travel in the exhibition, *30 Americans* organized by the Rubell Collection in Miami which has been on display at several US museums since 2008. Bankston's work is in the collections of San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, de Young Museum in San Francisco, Studio Museum in Harlem, Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, Orange County Museum of Art in Costa Mesa, CA, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, CT, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University in Ithaca, NY and Smith College Museum of Art in Northampton, MA. Bankston is the recipient of many prestigious awards including a Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters and Sculptors Grant, a Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Grant and a Fleishhacker Foundation Eureka Fellowship.