

## For Immediate Release

**John Bankston**

***The Companion***

**6 May – 1 July 2023**

**Opening Reception: Saturday, May 6, 3:00 – 7:00pm**

Walter Maciel Gallery is pleased to present the exhibition, *The Companion* by San Francisco based artist, John Bankston marking his eighth solo show with our gallery. As in past series, the show includes narrative paintings that depict the curious and playful interactions of a lead protagonist character within animated landscapes. The exhibition includes a range of paintings made in varying mediums reflecting Bankston's interest in exploring new materials and surfaces.

This body of work started from a small painting on panel depicting a man leaning against a lion made from traditional oil stick. The image was derived from Bankston's concern for safety and trust in a world with black men being apprehended by police officers and the overall inequality that has stirred a greater awareness of the Black Lives Matter movement during the pandemic. The figure cradles into the lion in an ambiguous way with a lack of clarity whether the lion is a protector of the man offering affection or a captor pursuing him with harm. The small painting led to a larger painting with a similar scenario including the man with a lion with very little emotion that would suggest fright or concern. Unlike previous series depicting the protagonist figure in a magical forest where he is introduced to other human characters, this body of work focuses on the interactions and relationships made with animals. The imagery includes playful gestures with different animals such tigers, birds, and a spotted creature he calls "the Beast," with varying levels of affection and closeness. As the series evolved, the animals took on an equal presence and became companions for the main character much like the costumed figures in previous work. Conceptually, Bankston draws an association with the animals representing his art practice where he is enveloped by the notion to make art but weary of its outcome to be a protector or a captor. Like the wild animals in the paintings, art is the untamed companion that is there at every moment.

As in previous bodies of work, Bankston explores acrylic and oil-based pigments on canvas, linen and paper to create surfaces that emulate crayon drawings found in a child's coloring book. He often mixes oil sticks with acrylic paint to distinguish the foreground and background of the pictorial field with washy layers of paint interacting with heavier gritty splatters of pigment. Bankston uses the fictitious realm of dreamlike landscapes as a safe space to explore both the complicated and intimate relationships of male bonding. In most of his other series the works focused on the relationship made by his protagonist with a cast of male characters belonging to cliques or groups based on a specific dress code. This new group of paintings is less interested in human relationships and more contemplative within oneself in developing a trust and admiration of animals as well as a greater awareness of the beauty of nature. Perhaps Bankston is suggesting we slow down and appreciate our fragile relationship with the environment before we further destroy it and its inhabitants from the effects of global warming.

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. In 2021, Bankston was invited to teach at Stanford University as a Holt Visiting Artist and he taught a course on narrative painting. He maintained a studio on campus where he completed a monumental public commission for technology giant, Meta. His work was featured in the solo exhibition, *John Bankston: Painting as Storytelling* at Stanford University's Coulter Art Gallery. Bankston's 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 American and European museums since 2008. Bankston's work is in the collections of San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, de Young Museum, Studio Museum in Harlem, Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, Miami Art Museum, Orange County Museum of Art, Berkeley Art Museum, Birmingham Museum of Art, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University and Smith College Museum of Art. 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.

A catalog with this new series of work and an essay by Bridget R. Cooks (PhD in Visual and Cultural studies and professor in the Departments of African American Studies and Art History at UC Irvine) will be released later this year.