



WARREN ISENSEE AT MILES McENERY GALLERY

February 2023 | By David Ambrose



Warren Isensee, *Full Bloom*, 2021, oil on canvas, 60 x 60 inches.
Photo: Dan Bradica. Courtesy of the artist and Miles McEnery Gallery.

Miles McEnery Gallery

February 2 through March 11, 2023

Warren Isensee's current exhibition of paintings and small colored pencil drawings at Miles McEnery Gallery is a master class in the art of aging gracefully. At 66, Isensee's process remains as precise and exacting as ever. Each surface is caressed with a smooth, meticulous, handmade perfection which at first glance appears to be utterly seamless. Only upon closer inspection, one begins to notice subtle disturbances to the paint surfaces revealed by reflected light as marks begin to pulse and undulate with the delicate currents of shifting brushstrokes.

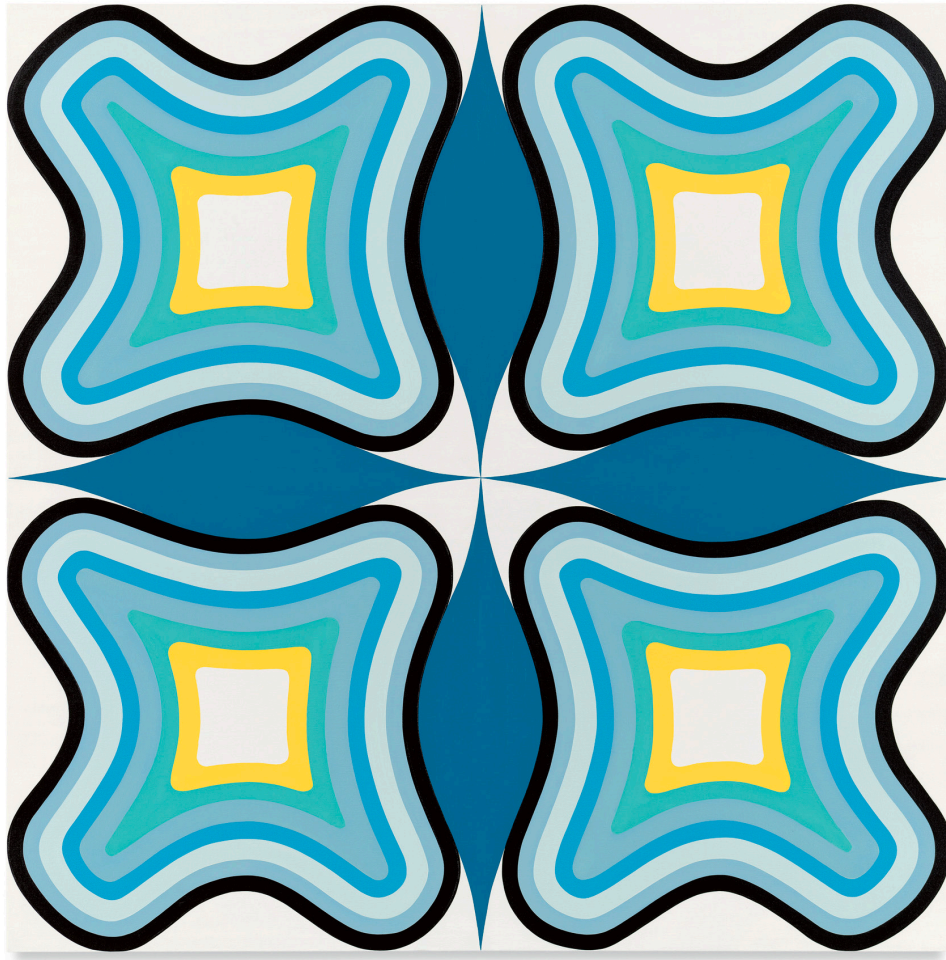
For years, Isensee has strung together or erected taut, linear compositions often by stacking rectangles as a foundation. In his current exhibition, the only true 90-degree angles are offered up by outside forces; the straightedge of a ruler to map a border or the joining of stretcher bars to create a literal one. Together these right angles function as an invisible fence to wrangle in the buoyant, bouncy, biomorphic compositions inside.



Warren Isensee, *Smiling Buddha*, 2021, oil on canvas, 50 x 50 inches.
Photo: Dan Bradica. Courtesy of the artist and Miles McEnery Gallery.

Yet, for all their precision, the shadow of old age has slowly begun to creep across these surfaces. Not the result of a trembling hand or weakened eyesight, but in the implied loss of elasticity to Isensee's line. The slack becomes a symbol of old age and the passage of time. Channels of cursive lines and shapes ripple, fold, and jiggle like aging skin or drooping muscles. Reinforcing the human connection is a subtle shift in Isensee's palette. His high-keyed, saturated color of the past begins to lower its temperature in tints of more subdued shades: warm flesh tones, charcoal grays, and flush, earthy reds. The *spring* previously seen in Isensee's stepped paintings, with their muscular repetition of right angles, has shifted to the rise and *fall* of a looping, circuitous, organic symmetry made up of painted visual palindromes.

The exhibition is comprised of two groups of work: medium-sized square canvases with the occasional horizontal rectangle and a group of fourteen untitled colored pencil drawings, some of which are studies for the larger canvases. In *Smiling Buddha* (2021) and *The Living Daylights* (2022), the symmetry of the compositions leads one to think of the cross-sectional anatomy associated with CT scans. The more one studies the paintings, faces begin to emerge in the form of glyphs reminiscent of the ancient Mayans, generated not by a stone artisan, but by an MRI machine. Unlike their Mayan predecessors, these blunt and rounded shapes are laced and lined with humor.



Warren Isensee, *To Be Clear*, 2022, oil on canvas, 40 x 40 inches.
Photo: Dan Bradica. Courtesy of the artist and Miles McEnery Gallery.

In *To Be Clear* (2022), four cerulean blue leaves are anchored by the arms of a Greek cross plan along the vertical and horizontal axis. The leaves double as cardinal points on a nautical compass. Magnetic north, however, has shifted from top to dead center, and in the process, pulls the four pinched concentric shapes from their perimeter quadrants towards the four white arches that pivot around the magnetic center. In *Back Pocket* (2023), a rule of four blankets the composition like a quilt as ovals, pinched squares, and teardrops all jockey for spaces. The whole evokes a frieze pattern folded over onto itself like origami.

The fourteen drawings hung in two rows of seven evoke medallions or square coins of a lost civilization. Upon closer inspection, one notices the drawings have more tactility than the surfaces of the paintings. The pressure applied to the tip of the colored pencil embosses the paper surface, causing it to ripple while it searches for a point of saturation. It's as if the head of a screw had been turned a couple of revolutions too tightly.

The more one studies the paintings the more one's thoughts begin to shift from field of vision to *feel of vision*. The modest scale of the majority of the squares allows one to comfortably wrap his or her eyes around the paintings from a few feet away. The leftover white spaces dotting the perimeter almost invite fingers into their implied holes. The optical hum of each enters through the retinas, but it travels down to the fingertips before settling into the ribcage in an organ of choice. The result is a living, breathing organic geometry. Formalism on a very human scale in search of a smile and a hug. A formalism on the clock, but far from punching out.