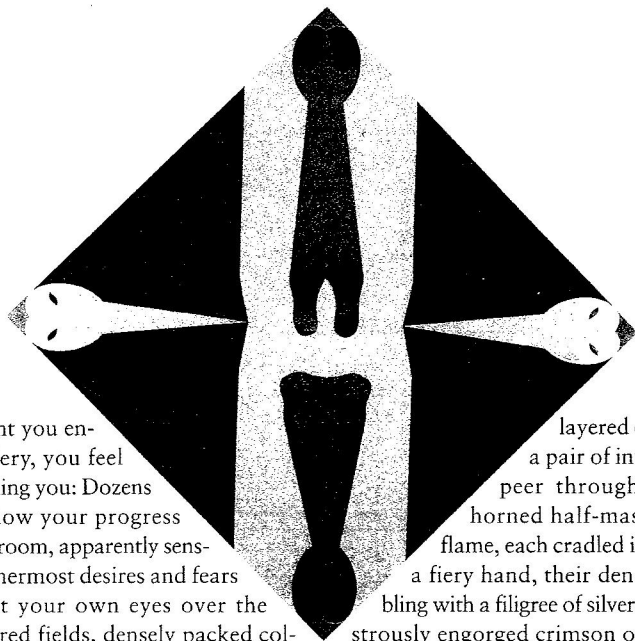


Michael Lazarus

at MARC FOXX, 8 September–6 October



The moment you enter the gallery, you feel them watching you: Dozens of eyes follow your progress around the room, apparently sensing your innermost desires and fears as you cast your own eyes over the candy-colored fields, densely packed collages, and potent primordial symbols in which they're embedded. Picking out the omnipresent jack-o'-lantern facemasks that lurk within Michael Lazarus's boldly hued, symmetrical paintings is like playing "Where's Waldo" with a deck of tarot cards. His deceptively declarative enamels on panel are rich with archetypal symbols that appeal to the collective unconscious, while reflecting a viewer's personal moods and inclinations. This back-and-forth ambivalence ensures that any meaning gleaned from the work arrives via hints, despite each painting's tendency to read like graphic, consumer-friendly signage, whose logo is the ubiquitous smiley face.

The nature of Lazarus's masks changes with each manifestation, sometimes exuding benign humor and other times grinning salaciously, or leering like Hannibal Lector behind a grisly veil of human flesh. In *Reasonable* (all works, 2001), several masks have been arranged to form the hollow eye-sockets and mouth of a huge, chortling skull, which hovers before four convergent triangles. One mask is inset in the skull's shriveled mouth-hole, its collaged surface resembling fossilized amber. Behind it appears a cascade of blonde hair, filling the yawning mouth and blind eyes like embalmer's straw. In the top half of Lazarus's multi-

layered composition, a pair of inverted masks peer through the skull's horned half-mask of molten flame, each cradled in the palm of a fiery hand, their denim skin bubbling with a filigree of silver dots. A monstrously engorged crimson orb, veined in Tiffany blue, rises over everything, resembling a seething red sun or an exposed brain's raw folds. In childish dismay, two fleshy fists also rise up, like some daemon superego rebuking the depravity of its soul. Behind every mask in Lazarus's morbid fractal-stereogram of a painting lies another mask, like an endless set of Russian nesting dolls. Every one you strip away is replaced by its mutant Doppelgänger, forming a world in which true selves must be found in the shuffle on the surface, amid the tumultuous, ever-changing masquerade.

Stay Right Here is more of a jovial Claymation still than an ominous totem, yet its dingy tones evoke a future more drab than cheerful. A dirty turquoise mask is stretched out to form a souped-up omnibus's grille. Hotrod flames streak across gleaming white panels and mottled blue fins cut a wake along a Pepto Bismol-pink highway. In each of Lazarus's nine shaped panels, there is a heaviness to the colors, a sadness that smacks of the downside of the nineteen seventies. Between bright swathes of Day-Glo lie shadows the color of old appliances and pantyhose, creating symmetrical forms that overlap and unfold like kaleidoscopic chips. At once primitive and contemporary, these geometric abstractions unfurl like Rorschach blots

viewed through the rose-tinted lenses of hippie mysticism.

Lazarus's *no title* is a modern mandala: a geometric diagram created through a ritualized process meant to focus one's innermost desires and whose final design is an outward manifestation of its creator's unconscious. In this collaged wheel of anonymous flesh, sensuous curves and suggestive shadows invite furtive, up-close inspection. Small elliptical masks, cut from magazine photographs of airbrushed nudes, are layered in concentric rings, forming a merry-go-round of indistinguishable body parts. Hacked up female figures are glimpsed through a web of simpering masks whose eyes, mouths, and noses slice through skin, leaving gaping wounds filled with poultices of greenish gold paint. Although the individual elements of Lazarus's mandala are disturbing, even gruesome, as a whole his image embodies experiences that are simply a part of life, including desire's underbelly, the give-and-take of selecting a mate, and the confrontation with death. Illuminating the psyche's full spectrum—including its dark pathways and shadowy corridors—Lazarus's elaborately crafted works cut off escape to easy illusions, leaving each of us face to face with phantoms that are more real than we usually imagine.

Zoey Mondt is a fiction writer living in Los Angeles.

Michael Lazarus
Caught Up, 2001
Oil, enamel,
and collage on panel
66" x 66"