

## WARDELL MILAN

*Bluets & 2 Years of Magical Thinking*

April 28 – June 3, 2023

Sikkema Jenkins & Co. is pleased to announce the inaugural exhibition of Wardell Milan, entitled *Bluets & 2 Years of Magical Thinking*. This exhibition presents recent small and large-scale drawings, along with sculptural works and a suite of etchings from Milan's printmaking project, *The Balcony*. *Bluets & 2 Years of Magical Thinking* will be on view April 28 through June 3.

Wardell Milan's multimedia practice employs collage, painting, and sculpture to explore conceptions of the body and its position within contemporary society. Working from a practical foundation in photography, and his own interest in cinematic mediums, Milan approaches figuration at the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, and representational history. His compositions incorporate a wide range of sources, including the photography of artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe and Charles Dureau, along with visual elements from magazines, models, pornography, and film stills. Cut-out body parts and limbs are carefully excised and arranged in a series of two-dimensional jump-cuts, emphasizing the interactions of folds, edges, overlays, and negative space. This fragmentation blurs the boundaries of a singular, coherent body to invoke collective experiences of marginalization and empowerment. Moving through a world of violence and beauty, Milan's subjects seek their own spaces where they are free to live and openly express themselves.

*Bluets & 2 Years of Magical Thinking* sees Milan continuing to engage questions of bodily subjectivity and the ever-necessary negotiation of selfhood within oppressive systems. He describes the show's thematic concerns as both universal and specific, drawing from personal experiences and introspection to expand on larger concepts and references to current events. The reclamation of sexual autonomy, freedom of gender expression, and racial solidarity against white supremacy and anti-Blackness are fundamental to the existence of Milan's subjects, played out in scenes of physical and psychological confrontation. In each of his "training" collages, a group of figures are shown sparring against a photographic background—men, on the shores of a monochrome ocean, and women, amongst verdant foliage. Their collaged limbs collide and overlap one another, utilizing the refuge of their respective pictorial realms to train against impending threats.

Silver leaf and blue feature prominently in Milan's collages and paintings. His use of silver leaf involves building up, then wearing down sections of the material on the canvas to produce a unique, inconstant quality of surface. Blue, for Milan, is a color of reverence; the blue skin tone of his figures marks them as subjects of dignity, uplifting and affirming their existence. The winding streams of blues seen in the collage works *3 warriors finding some piece of mind*, *Finding some paradise* (2023) and *King Kenta in deep meditation. Floatin' on 'em.* (2023) were inspired by the courtship ritual of the Bowerbird, and the brightly colored refuse it collects in the hope of attracting a mate. These ribbon-like elements adorn the silver leaf landscape with color and surround Milan's subjects in a protective veil of exaltation.

*Bluets & 2 Years of Magical Thinking* will also feature etchings from Milan's print series, *The Balcony*. Milan began this printmaking project in 2019, and recently extended the portfolio with a second suite of etchings produced last year, subtitled *The World is Made of Eggs*. Directly influenced by world events and current sociopolitical developments, Milan's etchings present a panoramic reflection on the nature of spectacle, power, isolation, and joy.

Wardell Milan (b. 1977, Knoxville, TN) received his BFA in photography from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (2001) and his MFA in Photography from Yale University (2004). His work is currently on view in the solo exhibition, *Wardell Milan: Recent Work* at the Benton Museum of Art, Pomona College, Claremont, CA (2022-23). His first major solo museum show, *America. God Bless You If It's Good To You*, was presented at the Bronx Museum of the Arts in 2021. Milan's work is included in the public collections of The Art Institute of Chicago, IL; Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago, IL; Denver Art Museum, CO; Brooklyn Museum, NY; Hessel Museum of Art, Bard College, NY; The Museum of Modern Art, NY; The Morgan Library & Museum, NY; The Studio Museum in Harlem, NY; Whitney Museum of Art, NY; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; Daniel and Florence Guerlain Contemporary Art Foundation, Paris; and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, CA. Milan lives and works in New York.

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MAGALIE GUÉRIN

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