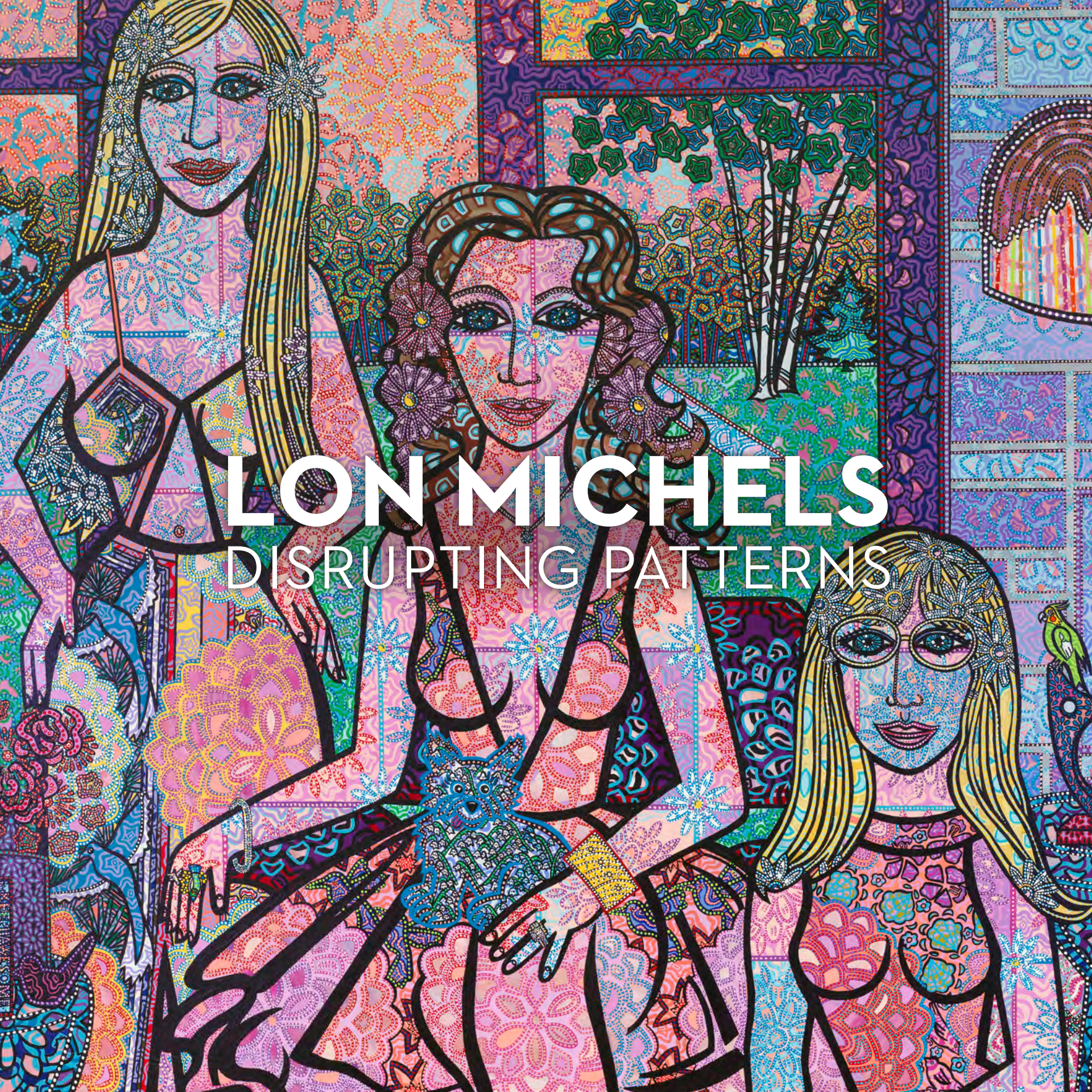
LON MICHELS
DISRUPTING PATTERNS

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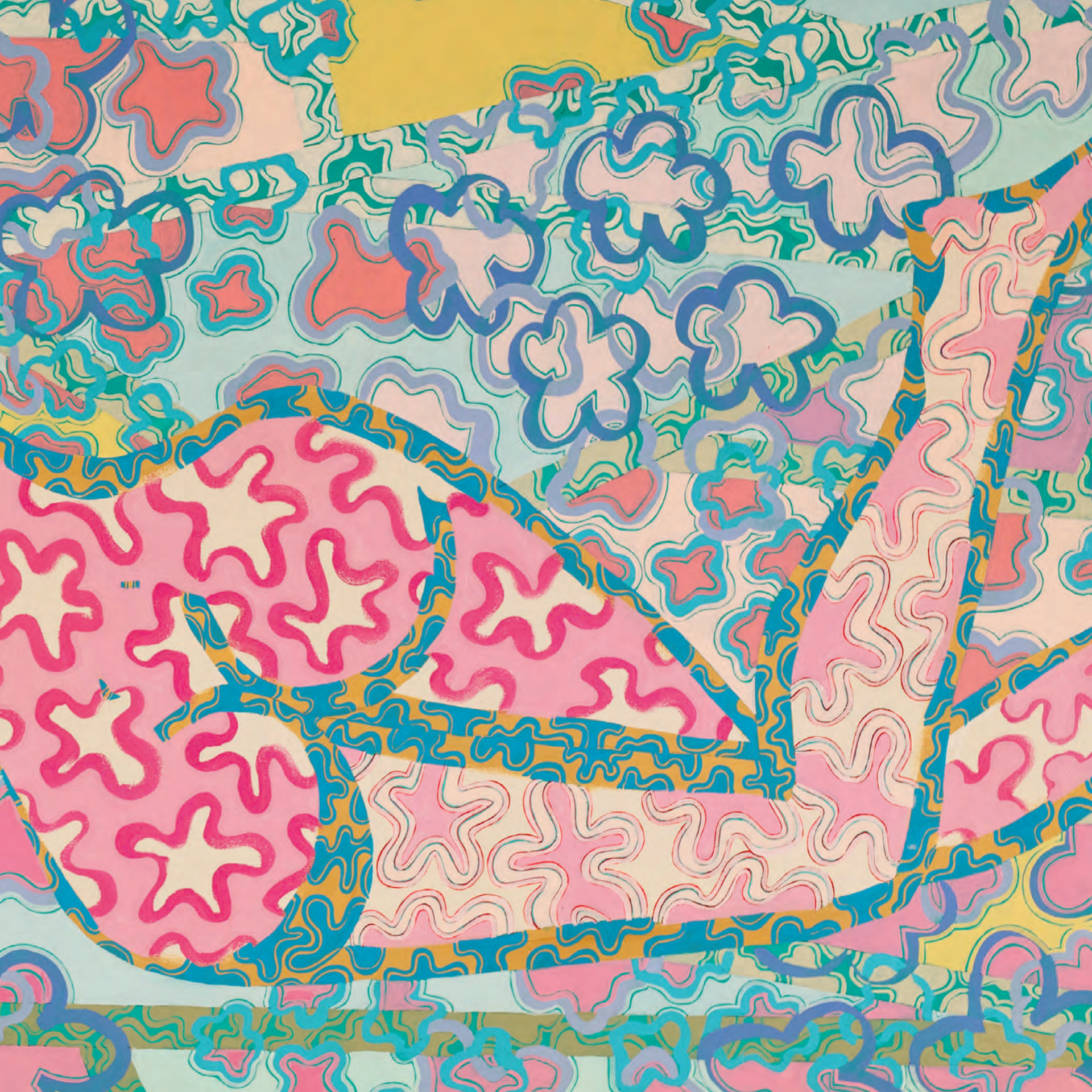
CURATED BY LAURIE WINTERS

WITH A CONTRIBUTION FROM LEX MORGAN LANCASTER

PUBLISHED BY MUSEUM OF WISCONSIN ART


Lori Michels



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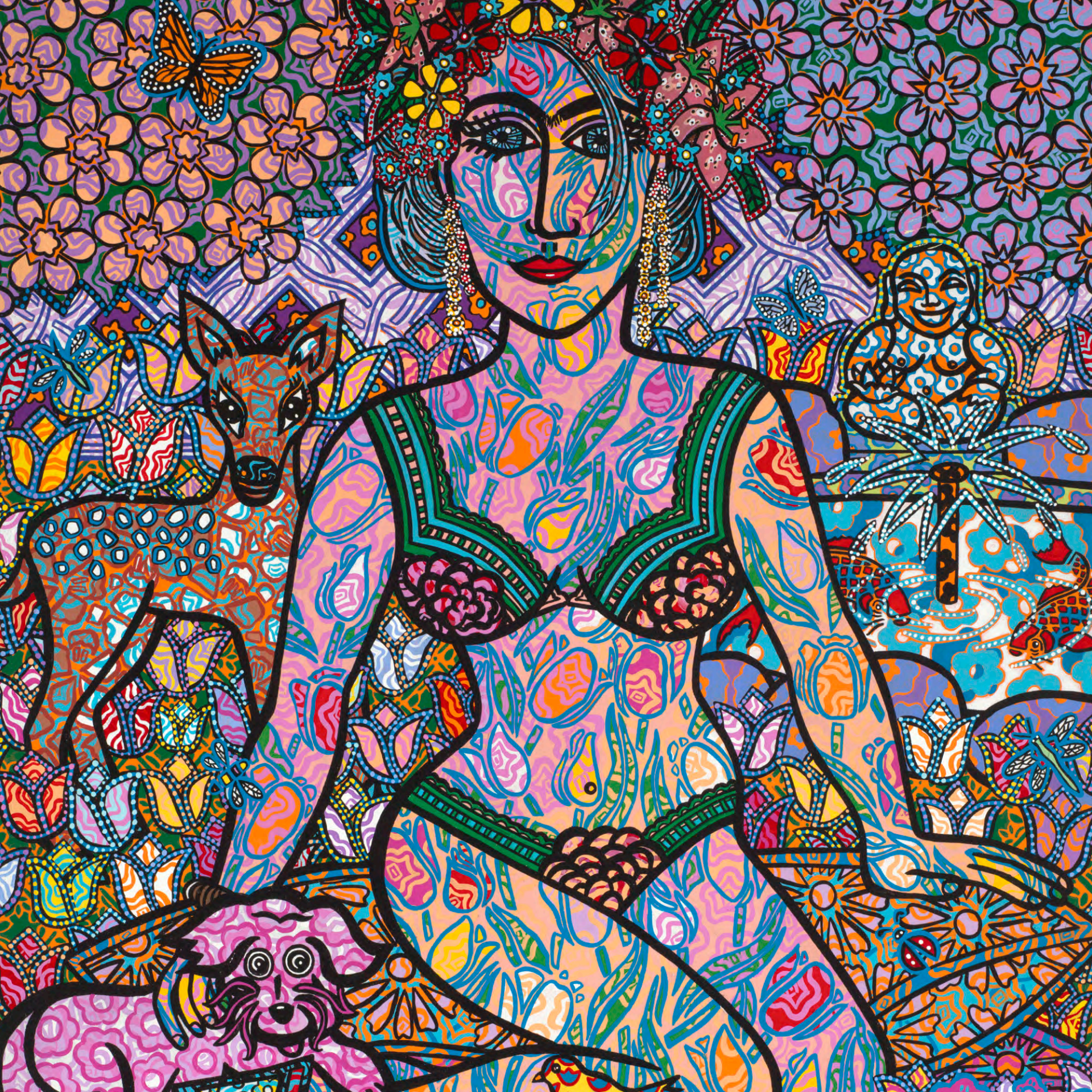


FOREWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Lon Michels: Disrupting Patterns celebrates the life and career of one of Wisconsin's most distinguished artists with the artist's first major retrospective and the largest exhibition of his work to date. The decision to undertake this project was an easy one for the Museum of Wisconsin Art. Michels's Neo-Pop figuration with its use of decorative pattern is strikingly original and not as well known as it deserves. A reassessment of his work and career was definitely in order.

Spanning more than four decades, Michels's painting intuitively navigates the boundaries between figuration, abstraction, and the projection of queer identity through decorative pattern. His colorful portraits from every stage of his career and a series of reimagined "masterpieces" from the Western art-historical canon vibrate with jarring decorative patterns that pack a wallop and destabilize our visual expectations. It is tempting to read Michels's figures as direct portrayals of queer identity, but everyone—queer or not—is represented this way. There are clear figures and even narratives, but no element in his paintings is "natural" or even neutral: Michels instead uses decorative pattern to *disrupt* conventional ways of looking and understanding in order to challenge normative expectations of identity.

A project of this scale would not have been possible without the collaboration of a number of individuals who generously contributed their time and talent. Our greatest appreciation goes to Lon Michels himself, who enthusiastically agreed to the exhibition and who openly shared the story of his childhood and life as a young gay man in New York at the height of the AIDS epidemic—experiences that profoundly influenced the trajectory of his life and work. Lex Morgan Lancaster, assistant professor of art history at the Cooper Union in New York, deserves a special note of gratitude for their exceptional catalogue essay that helps illuminate our understanding of the depth and complexity of Michels's work and positions it within the larger context of queer art and theory.

Our thanks go to our talented book editor, Terry Ann R. Neff; the book's designer, Steve Biel; the book's photographer, Jamie Stukenberg, and Michels's studio assistant, Josefin Nordgren, *who* helped prepare the works for exhibition. Thanks also go to Andrea Waala, MOWA's registrar, Paul Churchill, collections manager, and the many staff members whose hard work behind the scenes played essential roles in bringing this project to fruition.

Sincere gratitude also goes to the many lenders who were willing to part with their cherished paintings during the run of the exhibition. Michels's large-scale works hold places of prominence in their homes, so their absence is keenly felt. Thank you.

For their generous support of this exhibition, we sincerely thank the National Endowment for the Arts, the Leola Culver Family Foundation, and Vivent Health, as well as our 2023 exhibition sponsors The Hyde Family Fund, Pick Heaters, Prudy Pick Hway, Thomas J. Rolfs Family Foundation, and the Wisconsin Arts Board. We are genuinely grateful to these sponsors for helping us share the many patterns of Lon Michels.

Laurie Winters
The James and Karen Hyde Executive Director

LON MICHELS
DISRUPTING PATTERNS

Laurie Winters

"I knew the pattern of my life. I didn't know the living of it, but I knew the line."—LOUISE NEVELSON

Lon Michels: Disrupting Patterns accompanies the artist's first major retrospective spanning the arc of his career from the early 1980s to the present day. Even a cursory look at Michels's forty-year career reveals that the pattern of his life was established from childhood. Echoing the words of sculptor Louise Nevelson, for whom Michels's had worked as a studio assistant in the mid-1980s, the direction of his life seemed predetermined: he knew he would be an artist. What he did not know was that the living would be so hard or filled with so much tragedy.

A PLACE BOTH REAL AND IMAGINED

Michels was born in 1962 in Marquette, Wisconsin, a village of about 150 residents set in the middle of rural Wisconsin on the shores of Lake Puckaway. A magnificent view from a cemetery on top of a nearby hill overlooking the village and lake is a subject that Michels has returned to seven times during his career, always at moments of personal crisis. From that vantage point, high above the village and burdens of daily life, he found solace in the beauty of a place that was both real and imagined (p. 48).

Michels's father was a fifth-generation stonemason and his mother an amateur artist who painted cheerful flowers and landscapes; they were devoted to their seven children. The family lived in a pink asphalt-shingled house inherited from an uncle who worked as the local mortician. The house came with an elaborate jerry-rigged pulley and cable system that the children used as jungle gym; its previous function had been to store coffins until the ground thawed enough for grave digging in the spring. Perhaps in an effort to transform their home's legacy, Michels's mother painted large, 1960s-style floral patterns on the walls of every room in the house and even on the kitchen cabinets and refrigerator. Posters of old master paintings and illustrations torn from books on Manet, Picasso, and Velázquez took pride of place in the dining room. Michels remembers their home as a safe space in a village where life outside could be harsh. By the time his mother died in 2015, the now-dilapidated house was condemned and torn down. The children had all moved on.

Young Michels knew that he was not like the other children even though he was unable to articulate that difference until he was much older. Being gay was not something anyone talked about in those days,

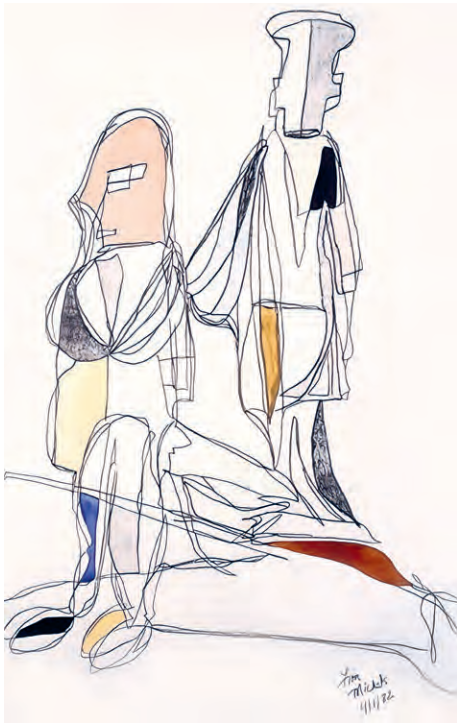


Fig 1–3. Lon Michels, *Untitled, no. 4* (from the series Two Men), Lon Michels, *Untitled* (from the series *Two Men*, nos. 6, 11, 12), 1982. Location unknown

and being different was cause for bullying. Michels often matter-of-factly recounts the story of older boys in a pickup truck chasing him into a cornfield and beating him to a bloody pulp. He remembers his mother painting his and his sisters' fingernails bright red which went without comment in the family home, but the next day in school the boys bullied and hit him for looking like a girl. On another occasion, when the family dressed in their Sunday best for church, the young Michels, with his mother's permission, decided to wear her high-heel shoes. The parishioners laughed riotously when he tripped and fell on his way to receive communion. Gossip spread like wildfire through the village.

Michels and his siblings believe their parents did the best they could. His father worked long and physically demanding hours and his mother supported her children despite mental illness, which, though never diagnosed, fits the description of bipolar disorder with extreme swings in behavior. Michels and his older sister vividly recall a day when the children came home from school to discover their mother in a fetal position on the living room floor. She remained there for days. The children coped by simply walking around her and taking care of each other.

In 1980, Michels received financial assistance and enrolled in Ripon College, a liberal arts school with about 750 students in Ripon, Wisconsin. Movie stars Harrison Ford and Spencer Tracy number among the college's notable alumni. Michels majored in fine arts and slowly began to develop the themes and style that would distinguish his work throughout his career. In *Two Men*, a series of drawings from 1982, he explored intertwining figures in semi-abstracted compositions (figs. 1–3). His signature push-pull between abstraction and figuration is already present in these remarkably sophisticated early drawings.

As his self-confidence as an artist grew, Michels also came to more fully understand and articulate his own identity. The catalyst was a

Fig 4. Lon Michels, *Hilarie's Birthday Party*, 1986. Acrylic and mixed media on canvas. Location unknown

Fig 5. Louise Nevelson, 1972. Photograph courtesy of Arnold Newman/Getty Images

1983 Barbara Walters television interview with actor Harvey Fierstein. This brief twelve-minute exchange won Walters wide acclaim in the gay community and gave ordinary Americans the permission to talk openly and with compassion about their own families. For Michels, it was liberating: for the first time in his life, he realized there were other people like him.

Michels graduated from Ripon College in 1984 and briefly toyed with the idea of doing a graduate degree in fine arts. His mother pushed him to find a life outside of Wisconsin: she gave him $300 and a one-way ticket to New York. So began the next chapter.

NEW YORK WAS PANDEMONIUM

The story of Michels's arrival in the Big Apple in 1985 reads like a sitcom. A cab driver swindled him out of more than half his cash on the ride from the airport. Desperate for money and work, he got up early the next morning to apply for a position at Bloomingdales, where by chance he met a talent scout for Calvin Klein who helped him get headshots and a start on a modeling career. His entire life changed overnight. Michels, who was born with a deformed left hand and had weighed more than four hundred pounds in high school, was suddenly a tall, handsome twenty-three-year-old object of desire in a city where desire is everything.

New York in the 1980s was pandemonium, with the worst crime in the city's history, a record number of homicides, and a raging cocaine epidemic. A boom on Wall Street catalyzed urban construction and development, generated money to burn in a thriving art market, and fostered an ethos of pleasure-seeking that included an unprecedented sexual liberalism. In the midst of these extremes, Michels met playwright James Edwin Parker, who would become a lifelong friend, and, through him, Hilarie Delman, a New Yorker born in Queens, who became his model, muse, and lover. In *Hilarie's Birthday Party*, a collage made for her birthday early in 1986, Michels blends photographic fragments, paper, and paint in a constructed surface that flows alluringly between abstraction and figurative pattern (fig. 4). Michels, who remained closeted throughout much of the 1980s, lived with Delman for nearly three years.

Around the same time, Michels met sculptor Louise Nevelson, who had become a leading figure in the art world with commissions from the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art (fig. 5). A friend of Michels mentioned that Nevelson was looking for a studio assistant and encouraged him to apply. Although he did not know who she was, Michels applied and got the job. He helped Nevelson with cutting and painting wood for large monochromatic wall pieces and a variety of other tasks from building crates to driving her around the Upper East Side in an old station wagon on Sunday mornings to scrap for discarded furniture and wooden boxes that would find new life in her work. On occasion, he escorted her to parties where they hobnobbed with celebrities like Andy Warhol and the Studio 54 crowd.

Nevelson graciously offered constructive criticism on Michels's own art. From her, he learned the visual power of scale and constructed environments and he quickly adopted her indomitable work ethic. Michels was also influenced by the broader art scene. Warhol's palette and conception of celebrity, for instance, affirmed Michels's penchant for brilliant color and his inclination to highlight celebrity. Michels's arresting looks, magnetic personality, and distinctive use of vibrant color and bold pattern soon caught the attention of the art establishment. In 1988, he participated in a group show at American Primitive Gallery, *Obsessive and Accumulative Art*, his first major exhibition in New York.

Life was good, until it was not. By the mid-1980s, New York had become the epicenter of the AIDS epidemic. It seemed like every New Yorker knew someone who had tested HIV positive or had full-blown AIDS. Those in the arts were especially hard hit. Early in January of 1988, Michels and Parker visited a friend in Saint Vincent's Hospital, ground zero for patients suffering from AIDS-related complications. The hospital had designated an entire floor for AIDS patients, but there were so many sick and dying that the hospital resorted to lining the hallways with gurneys. Michels found himself staring helplessly at the open lesions known as Kaposi sarcoma that covered his friend's body. Despite the horror of the disease, he saw beauty in their leopardlike pattern. Michels and Parker stayed for about an hour and then hit the nearest bar to get drunk. A few days later, working on the painting

Fig 6. Lon Michels, *Christina's World,* c. 1988, Acrylic on canvas, Lent by Patricia K. Wood, Delmar, New York
Fig 7. Andrew Wyeth, *Christina's World*, 1948, Tempera on panel, Museum of Modern Art, New York

Christina's World, he rendered the eponymous Christina with patterns covering her skin (fig. 6, p. 39).

A frequent visitor to the Museum of Modern Art, Michels had long admired Andrew Wyeth's 1948 painting *Christina's World* (fig. 7). The eponymous young woman in the painting suffered from a congenital muscular disorder and, despite being unable to walk since childhood, refused to use a wheelchair. Inspired by the painting and her courage, Michels turned the figure into a virtual odalisque with her body now filling the canvas. Her serpentine curves serve as a counterpoint to the strained posture of her limbs. Michels further compressed and flattened the composition by covering the entire canvas and frame with Pop Art floral patterning that both masks and reveals the complexity of human suffering. In Michels's painting, the female body functions as the locus of his internalized fears about Kaposi sarcoma, the childhood trauma of his own imperfect body, and an intense, deteriorating relationship with Hilarie Delman, who modeled for the painting. This was the first time Michels used pattern to cover skin. In Wyeth's world, Christina is a small figure within a peaceful but enormously larger natural world. In Michels's version, Christina—her body—*is* the world.

Michels's world crashed. His increasingly turbulent relationship with Delman ended abruptly and definitively when she cleaned out their apartment and joint bank account. Her infidelities and his questions about his own sexual identity had proved irreparable. Strapped financially, he lived in his studio, which had no running water (fig. 8). Then, on April 17, 1988, Louise Nevelson died. Michels had viewed Nevelson as a sort of mother figure and her loss left him devastated. One night, unmoored and drunk, he jumped into the Hudson River in an effort to swim to New Jersey. A police patrol boat fished him out of the water and took him to Bellevue Hospital in a straightjacket for assessment. He told police and doctors that he just wanted to get home to Wisconsin. Diana McGowan, who had been Nevelson's personal assistant, arranged his release the next day, but clearly, life in New York was becoming unbearable.

The final blow struck the following spring, in 1989, when Michels tested positive for HIV. He remembers that it was a cold gray day and that the wind and rain pelted his face, mixing with tears as he walked home alone to his studio. Certain that he had received a death sentence, he had to do something, anything. He could not die like so many others in Saint Vincent's Hospital. For whatever reason, he believed he could no longer go back to Wisconsin and he could no longer bear the loneliness of New York. He opted to go to Key West.

THE LOST DECADE

Michels arrived in Key West on September 26, 1989, his twenty-seventh birthday. He viewed it as a new beginning. The weather was restorative and the gay community was organized and welcoming. After a few short weeks, he began to paint again. His work quickly attracted an enthusiastic market. Before long, he met Dominick Dombrowski on the dance floor of a local gay bar. The two had much in common: both were HIV positive and their life stories complemented each other in interesting ways. By November, they were sharing an apartment.

Over the following decade, escalating cycles of intimate partner abuse and sexual violence dominated their life together. It was chaos. They changed households more than a dozen times, made multiple moves across country, and underwent numerous family interventions and lengthy periods of estrangement. Fueled by alcohol and drugs, physical violence was commonplace. An assault in a hot tub in June 1993 left Michels hospitalized and with permanent damage to his genitalia. His parents flew from Wisconsin to care for their son and extricate him from the Dombrowski household. However, Michels declined to press charges, and in a few months the two were back together.

For three years, their life unfolded in an endless loop of abuse, separation, and dislocation. In January 1994, Michels's brothers moved him back home to Wisconsin, where he had a successful solo exhibition at Ripon College. When Dombrowski showed up on the closing day of the exhibition, Michels returned with him to Key West. A few months later, they moved together to Barrington, Massachusetts to live near Dombrowski's family. By early fall, Michels feared for his life: he fled to New York to live with his friend Parker, but by Thanksgiving Michels and Dombrowski were back together and living in yet another location in Great Barrington. Around this time, Dombrowski received a sub-

Fig 8. Lon Michels in His New York Studio, c. 1987. Photograph courtesy of the artist

Fig 9. Lon Michels, *Family Ties*, 1996. Acrylic on canvas. Location unknown
Fig 10. Lon Michels, *Kyle and Parker*, 2007. Acrylic on canvas. Lent by James Edwin Parker, Accord, New York

stantial family inheritance, prompting another move back to Key West in January 1996.

Michels movingly plumbed the psychological depths of their relationship in a double portrait called *Family Ties* (fig. 9). Their home is grand with a dramatic ocean vista, but between Michels on the left and Dombrowski on the right is a window to the outside world and an angular floor whose black-and-white tiles create energy but also visually separate and divide. Pets, a white Russian wolfhound and a black Burmese cat, seem to face off, heightening the tension. Unlike the dog, the cat is not being petted and seems to have its own independent existence, which is underscored by its unblinking gaze at the viewer. Michels's pose is open and welcoming. The image of a goldfish bowl above his head references a favorite painting by Matisse at the Museum of Modern Art, which here alludes to a state of captivity and to a transparent world in which nothing is private. Dombrowski, who appears to be the physically taller and more dominant of the two men, is in reality smaller in stature than Michels.

The complex psychology of the composition and their poses is distinctly unlike that of a later 2007 double portrait of his New York friends playwright James Edwin Parker and his partner, Kyle Shadix (fig. 10). They sit closely and comfortably on a patterned loveseat, mirroring each other's pose and gestures. Their striped paints, bold jackets, and neckties reflect an intentional pairing. Looping cat tails add whimsy and a rhythmic movement that binds the sitters together. It is a charming portrayal of a close-knit couple. *Family Ties*, by contrast, is visually discordant and unsettling.

Completed in November 1996, *Families Ties* was the last painting Michels did before developing pneumocystis pneumonia associated with full-blown AIDS. In mid-January 1997, Michels was admitted to the Lower Keys Medical Center. Doctors feared he would die, but they started him on a new antiretroviral medication and put him into an induced coma. In April, when he was finally well enough to be released, his mother and one of his brothers moved Michels and Dombrowski to an apartment in Miami Beach. Michels's ongoing medical treatment included counseling on partner abuse, which he believes saved his life.

Over the next year, the two men lived together and separately in Miami Beach. It was a surprisingly productive period for the artist with a solo exhibition in the summer of 1997 at the Foundation for Contemporary

Arts and a grant and accompanying solo exhibition from the Center for Emerging Art in 1998. By early 1999, with his health and career back on track, Michels and Dombrowksi returned together to Key West. He was eager to get back to his established patron base and a solo exhibition of architectural paintings at the Gallery on the Green. But Dombrowski's bizarre behavior increased.

Fearing the collapse of world order with the dawn of the millennium in 2000, Dombrowski bought a house in Newport, Vermont, a few miles from the Canadian border. Michels agreed to move with him—he liked the idea of being close to his sister Leann who lived in Vermont. Within a few months, he participated in an exhibition at the Frederick Amsden House Art Gallery in Stamstead, Quebec, and in 2001 he was selected for a prestigious solo exhibition at the State Supreme Court in Montpelier, Vermont. However, Dombrowski continued his abuse. Michels finally had enough. At the closing of the exhibition in Montpelier, he and his sister quietly planned his departure. On the morning of September 26, 2001, his thirty-ninth birthday, she drove him to the airport; he arrived in Key West ready to begin again.

SEEING A WAY FORWARD

For the first time in over a decade, Michels was living on his own and embracing his newfound independence. In an effort to turn his life in a new direction, he decided to paint *Freedom*, the largest canvas he had ever attempted, measuring ten-by-twelve feet, on the subject of freedom (p. 41). He conceptualized the painting in the fall of 2001 as a re-envisioning of Édouard Manet's *Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe* with a similarly seated nude figure placed prominently in the foreground.

The painting was well underway when, one day without warning, Michels's field of vision narrowed until everything went black as he sat in front the canvas. Doctors at the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute in Miami diagnosed him with blindness caused by syphilis, which they believed had gone untreated for more than a decade. It had escaped earlier detection because HIV testing in the early days of the disease was separate from testing for other sexually transmitted diseases; one had to request each test. Procedures in the US have since evolved, but Michels's diagnosis fell through the cracks—more than once.

When his eyesight returned and he was able to resume work after seventeen months, Michels painted with a new intensity to free himself from the difficulties of his past. Embodying everything he wanted to say about his life and art, *Freedom* is a virtual interior monologue: a compendium of figures and symbols drawn from mythology, religion, art history—reference upon reference to entities and events significant to the artist personally and professionally.

The pictorial elements are juxtaposed and layered. Complicating their arrangement is Michels's use of flat pattern, which here both unifies and obscures. That tension is appropriate: the variously hidden and exposed imagery cuts across time and cultures. Among the deities represented are the ancient Greek god Zephyrus, the Hindu gods Shiva and Ganesha, the Buddhist mother goddess Tara, and nature spirits suggested by the blue deer and shaman. Invoked as agents of protection and healing, this pantheon of deities and hundreds of butterflies symbolize transformation. The two dominant orbs, all-seeing eyes, emphasize the personal nature of the work—truly "the mind's eye," here both the mind and the eye of the artist himself.

In addition to its autobiographical intimacy, *Freedom* also functions as a manifesto on the use of pattern. Staring at and directly engaging the viewer, the signature nude derived from Manet's masterpiece is here reimagined as a personal manifesto on the use of decorative pattern as a statement of queer identity. Unlike *Christina's World*, where pattern on the female body seemed to function as a coping mechanism, Michels here fully exploits pattern both to posit his queer identity and to assert new strategies for re-thinking the Western art-historical canon.

In early 2004, Michels exhibited *Freedom* at the Key West Museum of Art & History to great critical success. A trusted collector advised him to move to a city with a larger market, so he moved to New Orleans where he only stayed about a year. In August 2005, just days before the devastating impact of Hurricane Katrina, he returned to Wisconsin to resume his graduate studies (2006–2007) at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. After nearly two decades of peripatetic living and devastating illness, Michels had finally found his way home.

RE-CREATING THE "MASTERPIECE"

Invigorated and armed with newfound confidence, Michels produced some of his most important work over the next decade. In *Christina's World* and *Freedom*, he had used female bodies from iconic paintings as a source of inspiration and reinvention: the female bodies functioned as both the locus of experimentation and as personal manifesto on the use of pattern to express identity. In an expansion of these initial ideas, Michels turned to the challenge of re-imagining well-known masterpieces from the Western art historical canon. In these re-created "masterpieces," he paid tribute to that canon while simultaneously dissolving their original art historical significance into complex patterns that disrupt traditional ways of seeing and understanding.

In *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon (Tribute to Picasso)*, 2007, Michels pushed these ideas further in his appropriation of an iconic painting that has long been recognized for its brutal, masculine portrayal of sexual otherness in the depiction of five nude prostitutes (p. 44). In a reimagined statement of artistic masculinity, he rejects Picasso's shattering of forms and restores the prostitutes' voluminous bodies and facial features as their African masks fall to the side. Michels's intervention is more fully articulated by the inclusion of Michelangelo's *Pietà*, which here transforms one of the prostitutes into the timeless image of motherhood.

Similarly, in *New American Gothic (Tribute to Grant Wood)*, 2008, Michels re-creates Wood's 1930 midwestern farm family (p. 46). The entire surface of his depiction of a young, urban queer couple embracing country life is covered in bright floral patterns—walls, decorative objects, pets, and the skin of the figures are saturated with unnaturally colorful and sometimes jarring motifs. Michels's patterned figures are here reminders that bodies are seen in the world through certain patterns of visibility that mark and produce difference, and that body surface can also be used to undermine the assumptions we make when we look at others. Despite the clear figures and narratives in this painting, nothing is natural or neutral. Everything seems to vibrate with an unsettling energy that also destabilizes our visual expectations.

As in other re-creations of the Western art historical canon, Michels here playfully complicates the way the viewer reads gender and therein disrupts the need to assign gender. Wood's iconic painting is often interpreted wrongly as an elderly married man and woman who represent the backbone of rural life in the Midwest. In fact, Woods used models to portray a father and daughter. Michels builds on this initial confusion to challenge traditional notions of marriage and gendered roles.

Inspired by Leonardo da Vinci's renowned Renaissance depiction of the *Last Supper*—perhaps the most famous visual image in the Western world—Michels re-creates the biblical scene with Jesus and his apostles (p. 50). In a dramatic realigning of religious significance, Michels shifts the theme of Christian salvation to a more universal perspective, symbolizing the unity of world religions. Jesus sits in a lotus position and is covered with a yin-yang pattern that symbolizes harmony and love. In addition to a crown of thorns, he wears a *tilaka*, a symbol of the third or mind's eye in Hindu cultures. Judas, on the far right, is identified by a black heart on his chest and a swastika pattern, here functioning as the ancient Indian sign for primordial cosmic energy. Michels's *Last Supper* conveys inclusivity and optimistic hope for unity of all people of the world.

Michels further transforms the solemn religious occasion of Leonardo's painting by emphasizing that his work is a gathering of friends. In the queer community, where its members may feel disenfranchised from their traditional families, friends often play a heightened role in personal relationships. Instead of the traditional thirteen men, the twenty-nine figural elements also include three women and family pets. In Michels's work, there is often no distinction between portraits of friends and posing as a model for a historical reinvention. Among the friends and acquaintances who modeled for this painting are his friend and partner, Todd Olsen, figure skater Paul Sibley, a former director of the New York State Bar Association Patricia K. Wood, the artist's longtime friend and playwright James Edwin Parker, and well-known Wisconsin artist Dr. Evermore, seated in a wheelchair near the painting's center.

In his 2022 painting of an *Artist Garden Party (Tribute to Edouard Manet)*, Michels once again drew inspiration from *Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe* (p. 72). This time, he transformed Manet's woodland narrative into a summer gathering of artists. Vibrant and colorful, filled with harmony, Michels's painting is also startling, even jarring, to view. Skin, faces, clothing, even

dogs—along with colorful garden trees—are covered in an all-over decorative patterning that reads like flat wallpaper. In Michels's painting, everyone—queer or not—is represented this way. Pattern pulls our gaze to the surface of the figures and the painting itself, which becomes an unnatural and sensuous place to play—a place where abstraction and figuration compete in a delicate balance that challenges conventional ways of processing visual information. In Michels's paintings, nothing can be taken for granted.

PORTRAITURE UNBOUND

"Some of us come on earth seeing—some of us come on earth seeing color."—LOUISE NEVELSON

In the two decades during which Michels's made his series of re-created "masterpieces," he also produced a large number of portraits that capture members of his social circle informally at home or at work, surrounded by the banal ephemera of daily life. Within the ordinary aspects of their lives, Michels highlights their idiosyncrasies and emphasizes their fragile, approachable humanity. Color and pattern explode with an intensity and sophistication that pushes at the boundaries between figuration and the flat abstraction of decorative repetition. Tapping into Nevelson's constructed tableaus, Warhol's brilliant graphic color, and the advances of the Pattern and Decoration Movement that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, Michels forged a language of his own.

A groundbreaking work for Michels was the 2014 *Garden Portrait of Noi* (p. 53). He met Noi in Palm Springs at a black-tie AIDS benefit. Admiring her dress, he arranged to paint her portrait in the garden of her Palm Springs home using patterns that reflect the traditional textiles of her native Thailand. Noi holds a bouquet of flowers at her waist, juxtaposing the cut flowers with the living blooms surrounding her and the Warhol-esque floral patterns of the background—a visual dynamic that raises questions about the relationship of nature and artifice. The gridded pattern of subtly differentiated orange hues on Noi's dress and the gridded pattern of the surrounding landscape together contribute to an overall compression of space. Pushed onto the surface of the canvas, shapes and forms function as sensuous fields of color and pattern.

Also in 2014, Michels painted *The Dream*, a tribute to Henri Rousseau that defies traditional expectations of color (p. 54). To underscore the exoticism of his figure, Michels boldly transformed the nude into a blue odalisque of patterning that resembles Turkish mosaics. Similarly, in a 2020 painting, *Josefin in Blue*, featuring a favored model and studio assistant, Michels revisited the subject of the blue odalisque (p. 71). Set this time within his studio, he whimsically references several painted mannequins in the background. The blue mannequin suggests that model and mannequin have equivalent surface values—rather than an object of desire, his odalisque is to be admired for its color and repetitive pattern.

In a related portrait, *Josefin as Frida Kahlo*, the artist covers his sitter's skin with a large, flat tulip pattern that appears to float both over her body and on the surface of the canvas (p. 58). The effect is magnified by the lack of compositional depth and the seated placement of her body. The sitter's eyes invite the viewer into the composition, but the prickly pine cones covering her breasts and pubic area constitute a barrier: her body—adorned in florals from head to toe—is not for touching but for the pleasure of seeing only.

Between 2019 and 2022, Michels's obsession with the visual possibilities of pattern found a new outlet in a series of portraits of married couples—a portrait genre of increased complexity. In *Kristen and Randy*, he painted the couple's skin in a pattern of blue peacock feathers that he felt expressed their vibrant personalities (p. 78). In the *Gypsy Brewer and Beautiful Vera*, Michels bathed Vera's skin in a field of lilies of the valley, her favorite flower, and based her clothing on textile designs from her native Belgium (p. 79). Intimate and physically connected, *Kate and Rafael Salas* is remarkable for its expression of distinctly feminine and masculine references that simultaneously separate and complement (p. 68). Michels portrays all of his sitters surrounded by the ordinary aspects of their lives—memorabilia, family photographs, pets, and in some instances, literally emblazoned with their professional attributes.

Sophisticated and harmonious, *A Mother and Her Daughters* (2022) represents a culmination of the artist's ideas about portraiture (p. 82). In contrast to earlier works in which vibrant color and pattern convey individual identity, here the family's common bond is prioritized. At a

Fig 12. Lon Michels Canvas Room, Saint Kate—The Arts Hotel, Milwaukee, 2019

Fig 12. Lois Bielefeld, *Lon and Todd* (from *New Domesticity*), 2022

distance, the entire canvas seems to blush in delicate pink flesh tones that unite the three overlapping figures. Seated prominently in the middle, the mother anchors the composition and provides visual stability for the daughters. Fluid black lines separate the figures into distinct silhouettes and simultaneously subordinate the ethereal, lacy floral pattern that undergirds the entire composition. Behind the figures, views into a garden reference nature's fecundity and, metaphorically, daughters who are in the spring of their lives. In this exquisite family portrait, color and pattern do not obscure traditional ways of seeing and understanding, but rather contribute to meaning.

A PLACE OF HIS OWN

In 2019, Michels's obsession with the power of pattern found full expression, not in a portrait or re-created masterpiece, but in a hotel room he designed for Saint Kate—The Arts Hotel in Milwaukee, which Conde Nast recently ranked as one of the top art hotels in the United States (fig. 11). Commissioned to design one of four artist rooms in the newly renovated hotel, Michels covered the entire space—carpet, bedding, walls, lamp shades, sculptures, even taxidermy deer heads—in bold leopard patterns, a décor that is featured in his own home (fig. 12). Jarring, even disorienting, the room vibrates with an unsettling energy that disrupts visual expectations. Nonetheless, it remains the hotel's most requested room.

Liberated by the commission, Michels soon turned to new ways of thinking about paintable surfaces and environments. Floor-length dresses, mink coats, Buddha sculptures, taxidermy animals, and a vast array of interior furnishings all became canvases for adornment. In 2023, he painted a VW and a 1961 camper van, inside and out, with his signature leopard pattern in shades of hot pink. On occasion, he even painted his own clothing, becoming the very subject of his art.

Now, after living for nearly twenty years in his native Wisconsin, Michels seems to have found contentment. Upon finishing his MFA in 2007, he received the Joan Mitchell Prize for painting, but he declined the award, fearful that it would lead him back to New York and his personal angst there in the late 1980s. Instead, he opted to live and work in Wisconsin. Michels and his then partner, Todd Olsen, lived in the small town of Lodi and wintered in Palm Springs for more than a decade. Aside from operating a gallery in Palm Springs from 2013 to 2015, they lived quietly on their bucolic Wisconsin farmstead. Today, Michels lives by himself in nearby Sauk City in a refurbished old church. He joyfully refers to the surrounding land and its gardens as his Giverny, finding in them endless sources of inspiration.

As a young man, Michels had often found solace in painting the magnificent views of his family's village nestled along the shores of Lake Puckaway. Now in his early sixties, Michels begins another chapter by returning to visualizing the land of his home state, a place that has given him so much pleasure and comfort as an adult. Not surprisingly, it is a world of pattern.

QUEER PATTERN AND FIGURATION IN THE WORK OF LON MICHELS

Lex Morgan Lancaster

In Lon Michels's *New American Gothic (Tribute to Grant Wood)*, 2008, a queer couple poses in an ornate domestic setting (fig. 1). Forms are defined by contour lines, but each solid form and the negative spaces of the entire surface of the painting are covered in bright floral patterns—walls, decorative objects, pets, and the skin of the figures are saturated with unnaturally colorful and sometimes jarring motifs. A bare-breasted figure holds a pitchfork in one hand (the iconic prop of Wood's painting), and has a chicken tucked under the other arm; their companion drapes an arm over their shoulder. Like nearly every subject in Michels's portraits, the couple gazes at the viewer with wide open eyes and soft smiles. Behind them, an open doorway reveals the distant Wisconsin State Capitol.

New American Gothic demonstrates several characteristics of Michels's oeuvre: excessive allover decorative patterning; the re-creation of "masterpieces" from the Western art historical canon; and the depiction of figures from the artist's social circle. Queer friends often pose in their homes, or they become the central figures of these canonical works, lovingly adorned with ornamental designs.

We can understand Michels's portraits of friends and acquaintances along with his re-creation of art historical "masterpieces" as particular tendencies of queer art practices. While "queer" might normally be considered a term of self-identification, it also describes a set of strategies that have been used to intervene in the dominant narratives of art history, and to assert queer people, perspectives, and ways of being into these narratives. In the field of queer studies, "queer" also functions as a verb to describe these interventions and shifts in perspective: *queering*. When I describe Michels as a queer artist, I mean that his work communicates a queer point of view, but not only because Michels himself is queer. Rather, his work aligns with a larger field of queer art that has long been preoccupied with depicting queer lifeworlds (particularly through portraiture), and reckoning with the history of art that has excluded queer perspectives. This essay considers the queer patterns of Michels's work: both the decorative patterns within the paintings and the canonical art historical works and strategies he re-uses or *queers* in order to undermine particular tropes within Western art along with normative notions of identity.

For viewers familiar with Western modernism, Michels's style might recall the unnatural colors, bold outlines, and flattened forms of Matisse or Picasso. The bright colors and patterns, as well as the re-creation of well-known paintings in American art, also signal Pop art aesthetics and strategies of appropriation. Michels's irreverent mish-mash of modern art references is a quintessentially postmodern approach, as seen in the movement known as Neo-Expressionism of the 1980s (when he also began painting). The style and subjects of his work (portraiture, reclining nudes, and classical figures) are all familiar tropes with numerous associations. *New American Gothic*, for example, features

Fig 1. Grant Wood, *American Gothic*, 1930, Oil on Beaver Board, The Art Institute of Chicago

Fig 2. Opposite: *New American Gothic* (Tribute to Grant Wood) (detail), 2008

a painting that has been appropriated so often that the "original" no longer wields the power of authenticity (fig. 2). The iconic image has become detached from Grant Wood's authorship. So why re-create it—or any other memorable famous work—yet again?

On the one hand, Michels's portraits serve a classically honorific function: to uplift *his* subjects to the status of high art icons. This practice was historically the function of queer portraiture, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, at the height of the AIDS epidemic. At the same time, these are irreverent "tributes" in which everything is shown to be artificial, and any faith in the authenticity of earlier painting is abandoned. These notions of authenticity or originality upheld assumptions of hetero-patriarchal kinship structures. Michels's queer figures disrupt them. As with Pop art and the postmodern interventions that followed, the idea of an authentic cultural expression begins to unravel. This intervention becomes more apparent when we consider the objects often surrounding Michels's figures: kitschy masks and vaguely Middle Eastern or Asian objects recall the problematic primitivism and orientalism of modernists such as Picasso and Gauguin (particularly when combined with the trope of topless nudes, which reproduced both racial and sexual otherness in modern painting). But in Michels's paintings, nothing is taken for granted as a reliable reflection of identity. Although it is tempting to read the portraits as direct portrayals of queer identities, his use of pattern in particular disrupts the assumption that the surface of the body will reveal the truth of the subject.

Vibrant and colorful, seemingly optimistic in tone, Michels's paintings are also jarring to view. In *Kyle and Parker*, 2002, for example, a couple sits on a couch, surrounded by cats (fig. 3). Clothing, faces, and cats—along with the couch, walls, and floor—are covered in all-over decorative patterning. The patterns are often floral, geometric, organic, and flat like wallpaper. The composition reads like a collage in which all forms are distinguished by sharp outlines filled in with specific patterns rather than any painterly illusion of depth. All elements occupy the same plane and it is difficult to distinguish between foreground and background. There is very little sense of spatial recession apart from the way forms are layered or varied in size.

There are multiple precedents for Michels's style: the obsessive floral patterns painted by his mother on the walls of the home where he grew up; the boldness and repetition of Warhol's Pop art; and the modernist stylistic strategies associated with European painters of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But this excessive patterning also signals a queer approach.

In the Western history of art, ornament has been associated with the superficial, the feminine, the "primitive," the perverse and queer. Artists of the Pattern and Decoration Movement of the 1970s, Valerie Jaudon and Joyce Kozloff, wrote that the term "decorative" has a long history of debasement in the texts of modern Western art, based on sexist and racist beliefs of white male superiority in "high art." Due to its association with women, African and Middle Eastern cultures, domesticity, and sensuality, decoration has been considered "low" both in terms of artistic style and moral value.[1] Decoration was long considered a dirty word. In the white supremacist contexts of modern discourse, it evokes fears of gendered and racial contamination. There is a parallel fear of color in Western culture that painter and author David Batchelor has termed "chromophobia," because color is so often considered "the property of some 'foreign' body—usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological," and at the same time "relegated to the realm of the superficial, the supplementary, the inessential or the cosmetic."[2] By the end of the twentieth century, some artists in the United States and Europe embraced these features of the ornamental and colorful that were rejected by the racist and sexist rhetorics of "purity" attached to Western modernism. Michels's paintings similarly refuse notions of purity and instead delight in the sensuous surface play of vibrant patterning and color, relating both to some earlier modernist strategies of abstraction and to current feminist and queer approaches.

Combining abstraction and figuration, Michels's use of pattern makes figures in particular difficult to distinguish from the background, undermining the demand that minority subjects must always appear as expected in the visual field (appearing in order to serve patterns of visibility that reaffirm their "otherness"). Queer people are often represented, but not in a way that purports to render them authentically, as though the surface of their bodies or attire would betray their hidden nature. In fact, in Michels's work, everyone—queer or not—is represented this way. Pattern pulls our gaze to the surface of the figure

Fig 3. *Kyle and Parker* (detail), 2007

and the painting itself, which becomes a cosmetic, unnatural, sensuous place to play.

Michels uses painting to perform a kind of drag, disrupting the compulsory assignment of gender, of identity, to the body (in the way that, for example, a drag queen's performance disrupts our assumptions about femininity and how it attaches to particular bodies). Visual studies scholar Nicole Archer has written about the significance of pattern as both ideologically loaded—a tool for normalization or making certain bodies recognizable as deviant, securing the "natural" order of things—and as a tool in queer and trans art practice for scrambling these symbolic functions in order to subvert the coherence of gender, race, and nation. According to Archer, queer and trans artists often use "pattern-jamming" along with figuration in order to complicate the ways that we might normally read gender and race on the body, or how these categories are defined within normative social patterns.[3] The patterning of Michels's paintings similarly scrambles our field of vision, making it difficult to distinguish between the spaces occupied by bodies versus their context. This push-pull creates a tension that might evoke the difficulty of certain subjects who are made to appear as "other" in the larger visual field.

Decoration on the skin might remind us of tattooing, but Michels's frequent circular leopard print pattern, as seen on the left figure in *Kyle and Parker*, is also reminiscent of Kaposi sarcoma, the skin cancer lesions that form in the later stages of HIV. These red, purple, or brown blotches would mark an AIDS patient for death, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, when Michels also contracted HIV. Potential signs of disease are made decorative in his paintings, but they also show how subjects are often socially marked by surface appearance. Michels denaturalizes this process by making the patterns as artificial as wallpaper or a rug, a strange version of camouflage that paradoxically makes the figure hyper-visible, constrained by outlines and pattern and yet also a site for imagining otherwise. In these paintings, bodies are sites of fantasy and projection like any other surface in a painting. The painting serves as a metaphor for a larger visual field against which a figure is both defined and constrained. It also creates a space of indeterminacy, or a lack of certainty about relations between figures and their worlds, linking them to queer experiences while also producing a queer experience for the viewer.

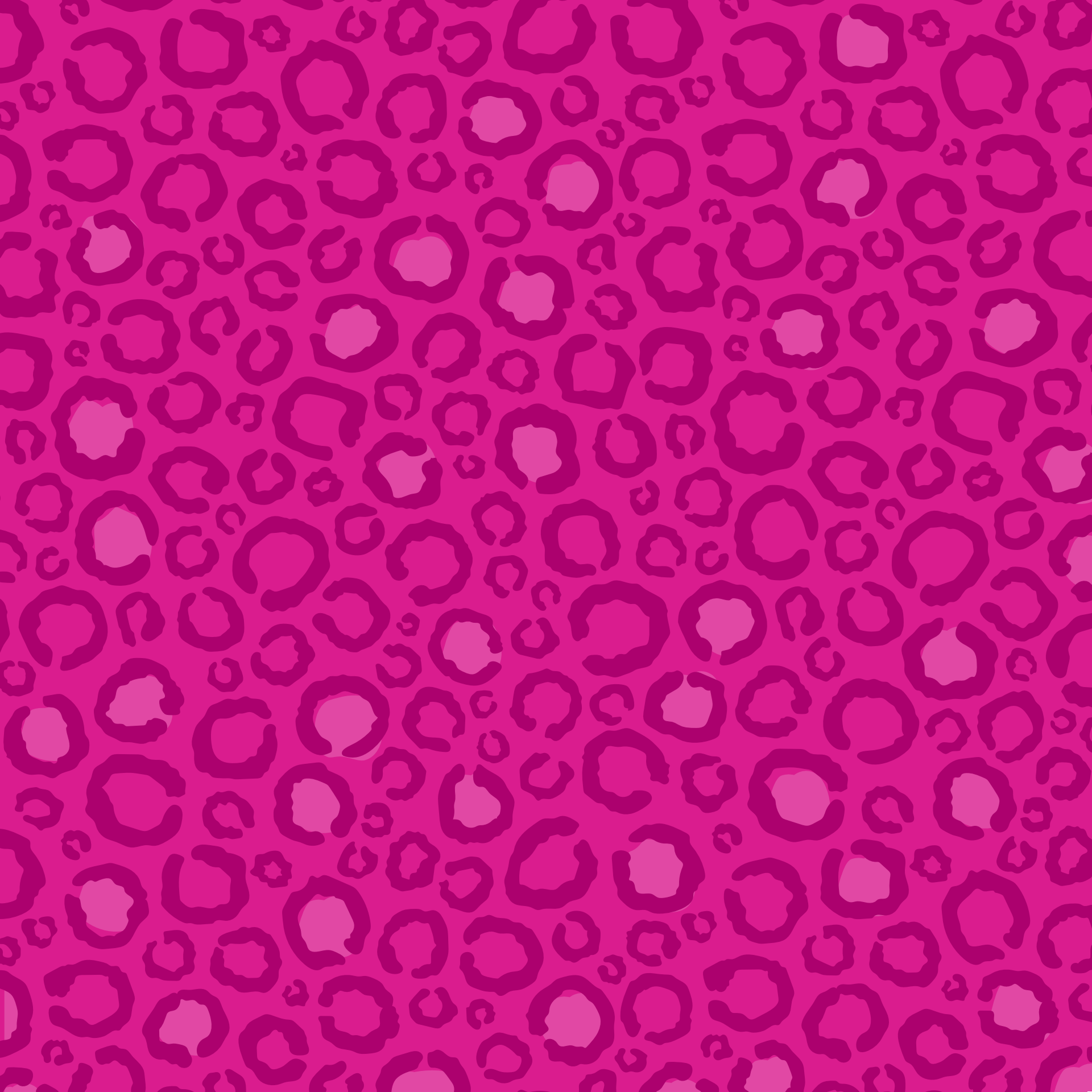
Lon Michels's patterned figures are both jarring reminders that bodies are seen in the world through certain patterns of visibility that mark and produce difference, and that bodily surface can also be used to undermine the assumptions we make when we look at others. Queerness may be projected onto some bodies in the world, but bodies are likewise used as a device of queering in art that exposes, undermines, and exceeds those projections by making them indeterminate sites for creative imagining. Similarly, the seemingly neutral narratives attached to art historical "masterpieces" can be queered through playful re-creation that draws attention to the gendered, sexual, and racialized relations that reinforce dominant power structures and patterns of oppression. While there are clear figures and narratives in Michels's paintings, nothing is natural or neutral. Everything seems to vibrate with an unsettling energy that also destabilizes our visual expectations.

1 Valerie Jaudon and Joyce Kozloff, "Art Hysterical Notions of Progress and Culture (1977–78)," in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, edited by Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2012), 177.

2 David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion, 2000), 22–23.

3 Nicole Archer, "Dynamic Static" in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, edited by Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2017), 312.

PLATES



Christina's World, c. 1988

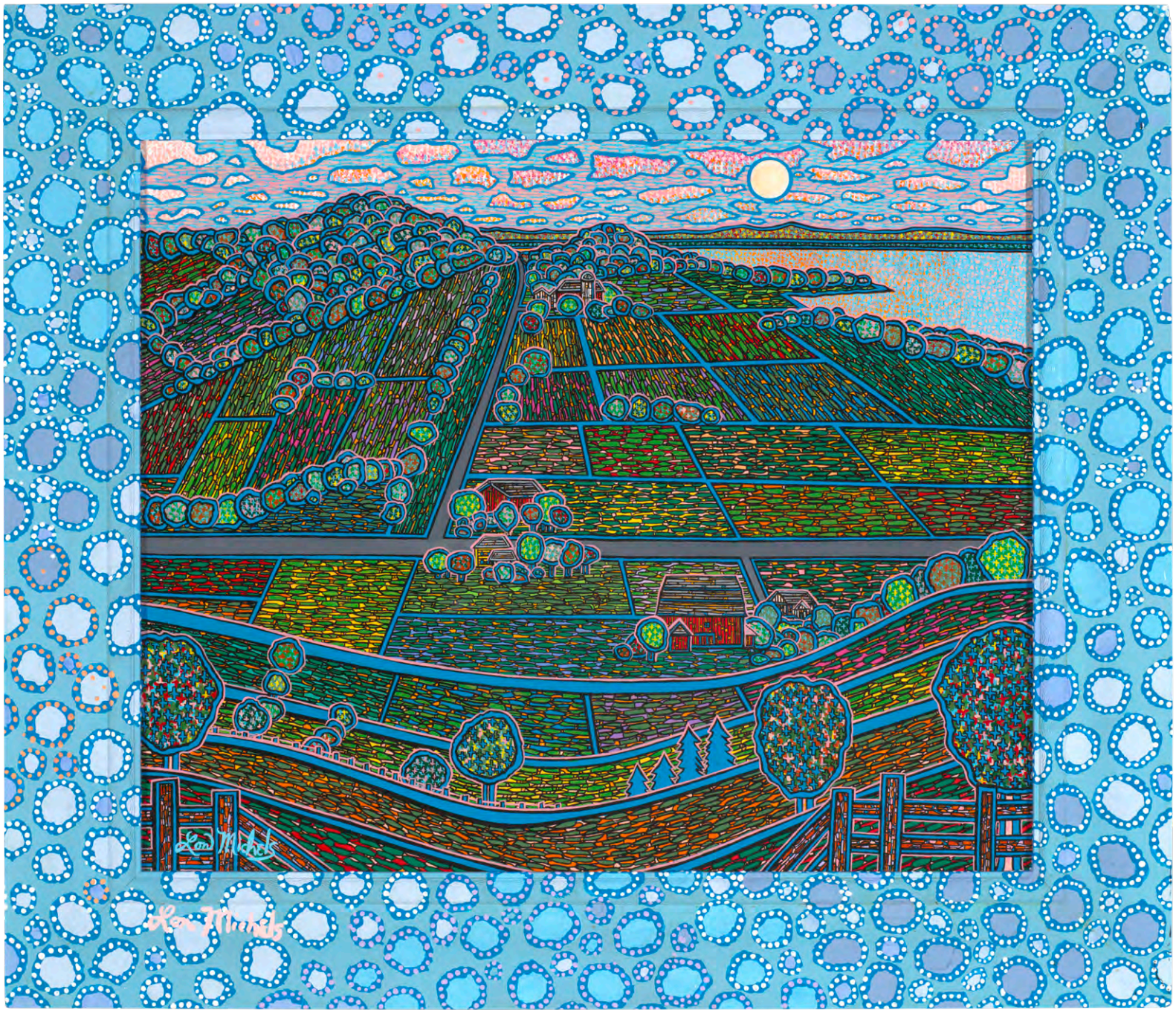
Freedom (Tribute to Édouard Manet), 2001/2004

Kyle and Parker, 2007

Les Demoiselles d'Avignon (Tribute to Pablo Picasso), 2007

New American Gothic (Tribute to Grant Wood), 2008

Harley Chic, 2009

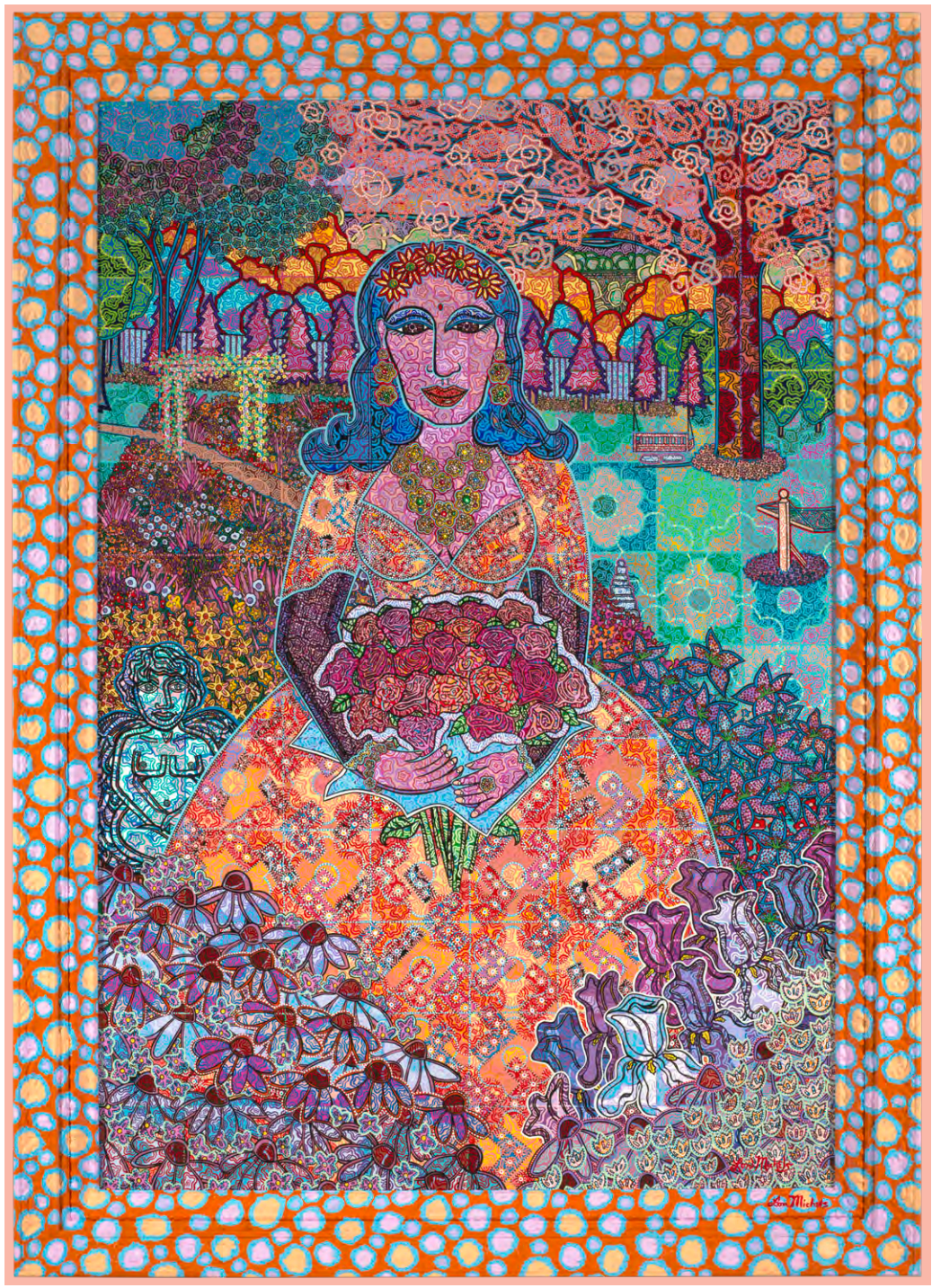


Wisconsin Late Afternoon, 2009

Gibraltar Rock, 2013

The Last Supper, 2014

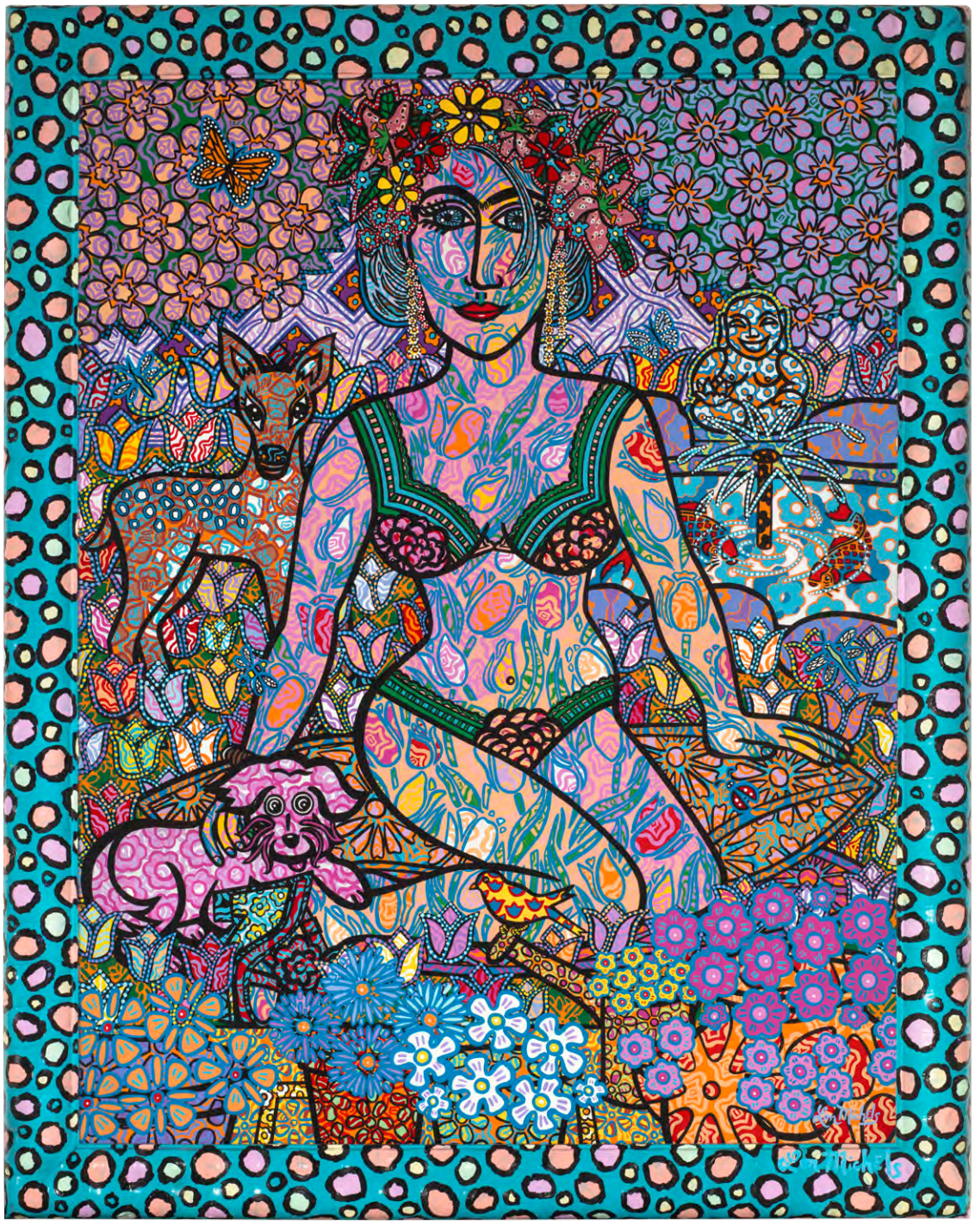
Leola and Her Grandchildren, 2014



Garden Portrait of Noi, 2015

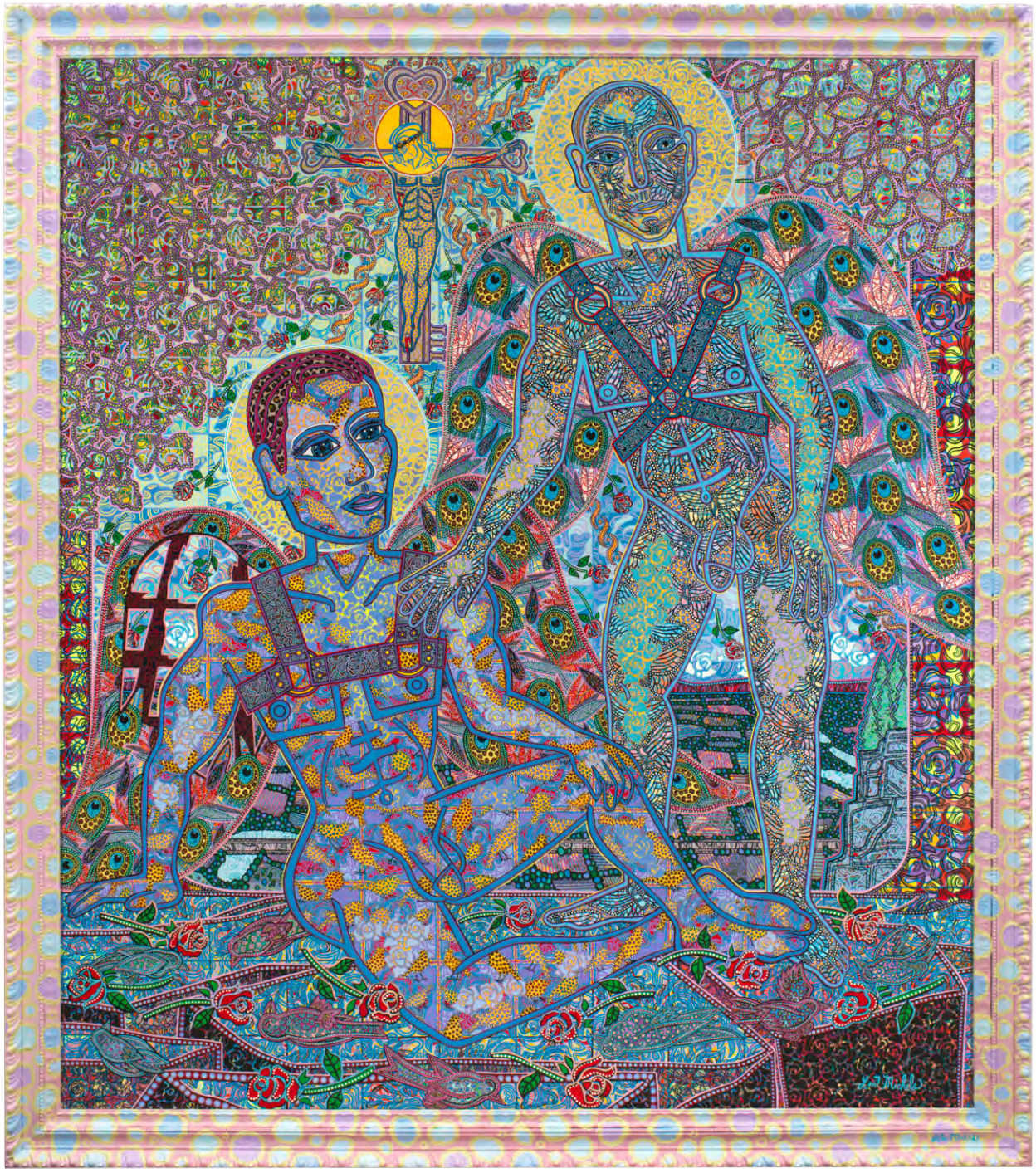
The Dream (Tribute to Henri Rousseau), 2015

Chinese Vases and Apples, 2017



Josefin as Frida Kahlo, 2017

Josefin in Matisse's Studio, 2017



Icarus and Daedalus, 2017

Las Meninas (Tribute to Diego Velázquez), 2018

Bryanna in the Mirror (Tribute to Pablo Picasso), 2018

Debra in the Gallery, 2018

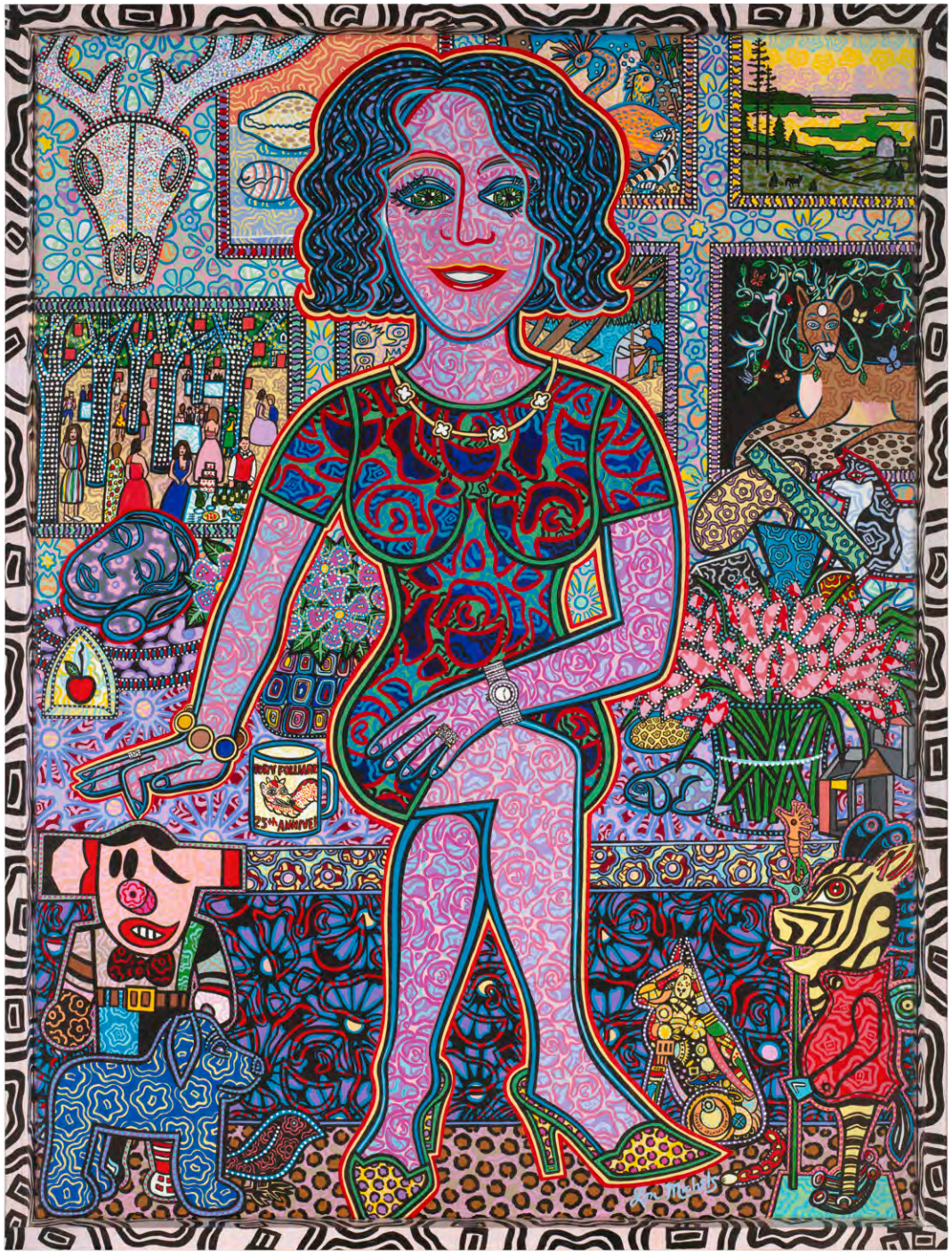
West Point, Wisconsin, 2018

Prairie Garden, 2018

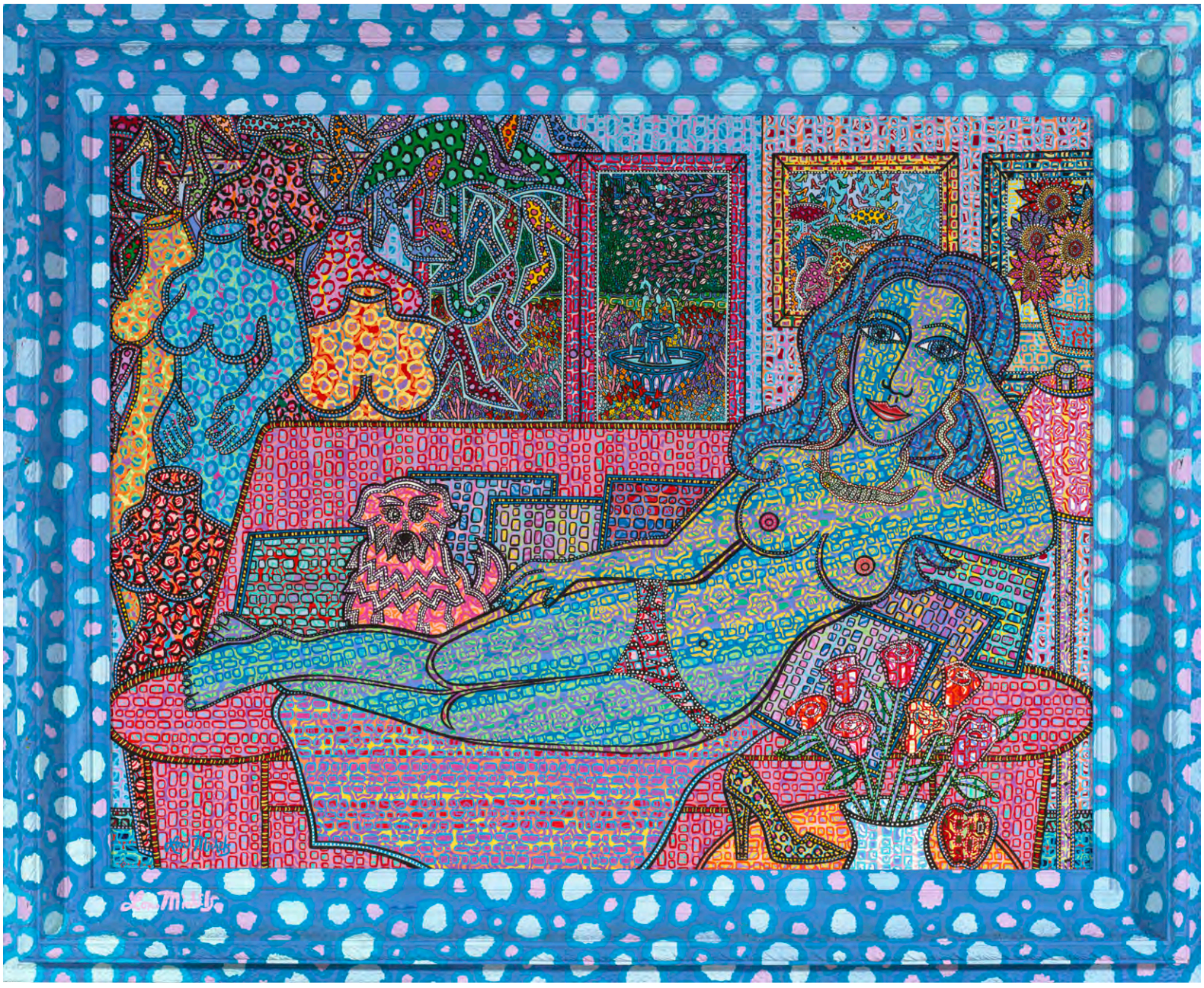
Oak Trees at Fish Tales, 2018

Still Life with Botero, 2019

Kate and Rafael Salas, 2020



The Gallerist, 2020



Josefin in Blue, 2020

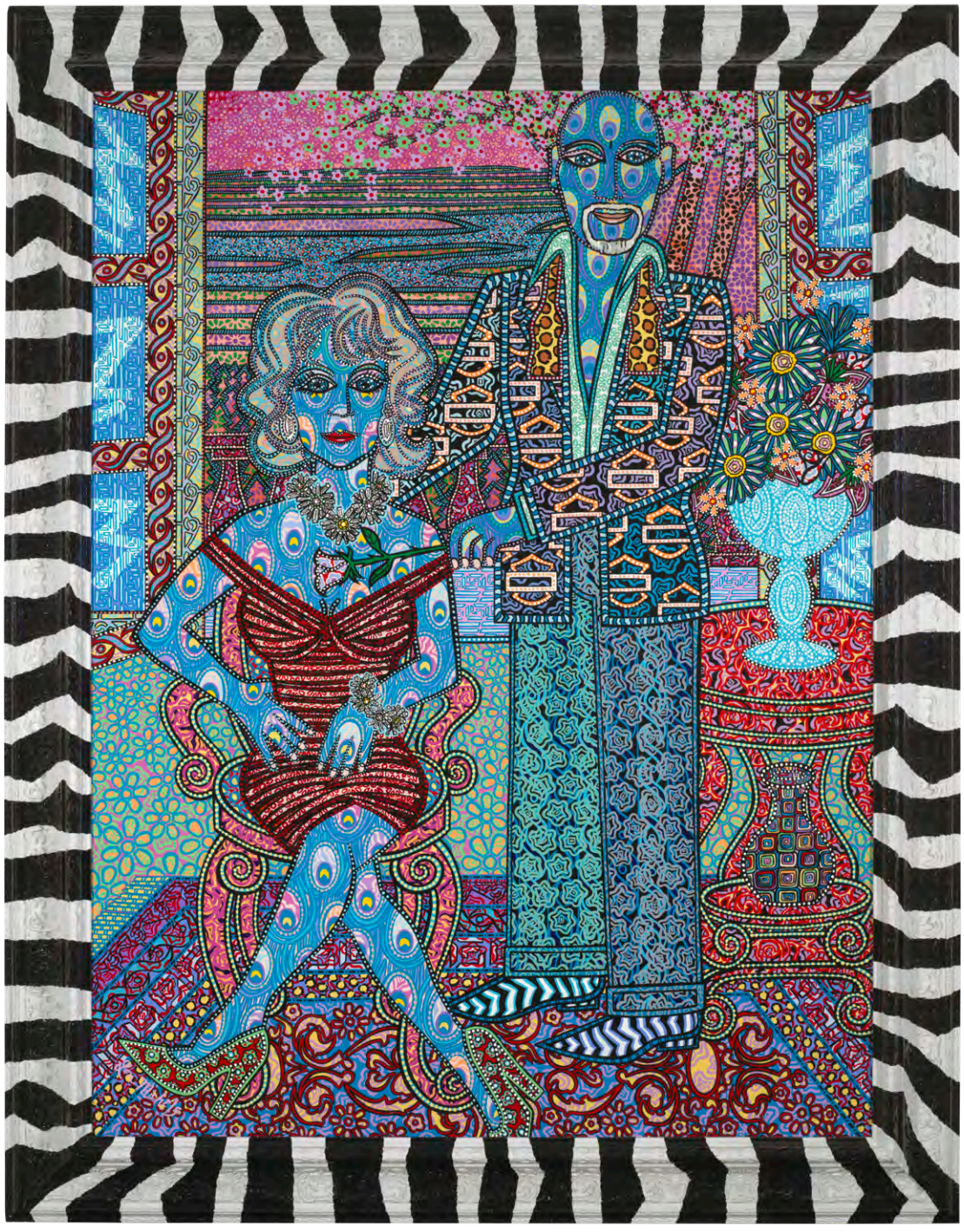
Artist Garden Party (Tribute to Édouard Manet), 2020

Family, 2020

Claire with Matisse, 2020


éclatant
artiste
épanoui
succès

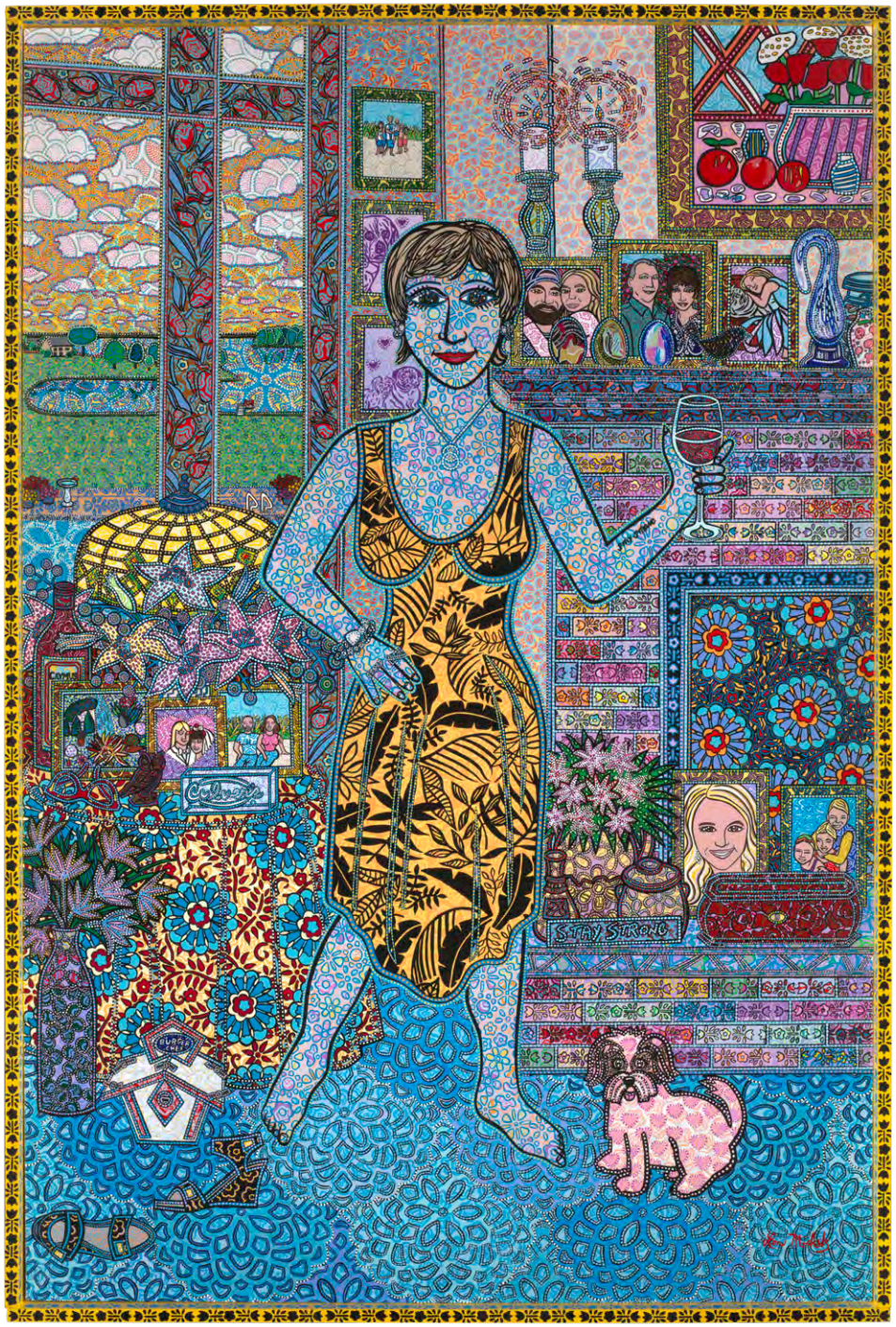
Leola Culver and Mabel, 2020



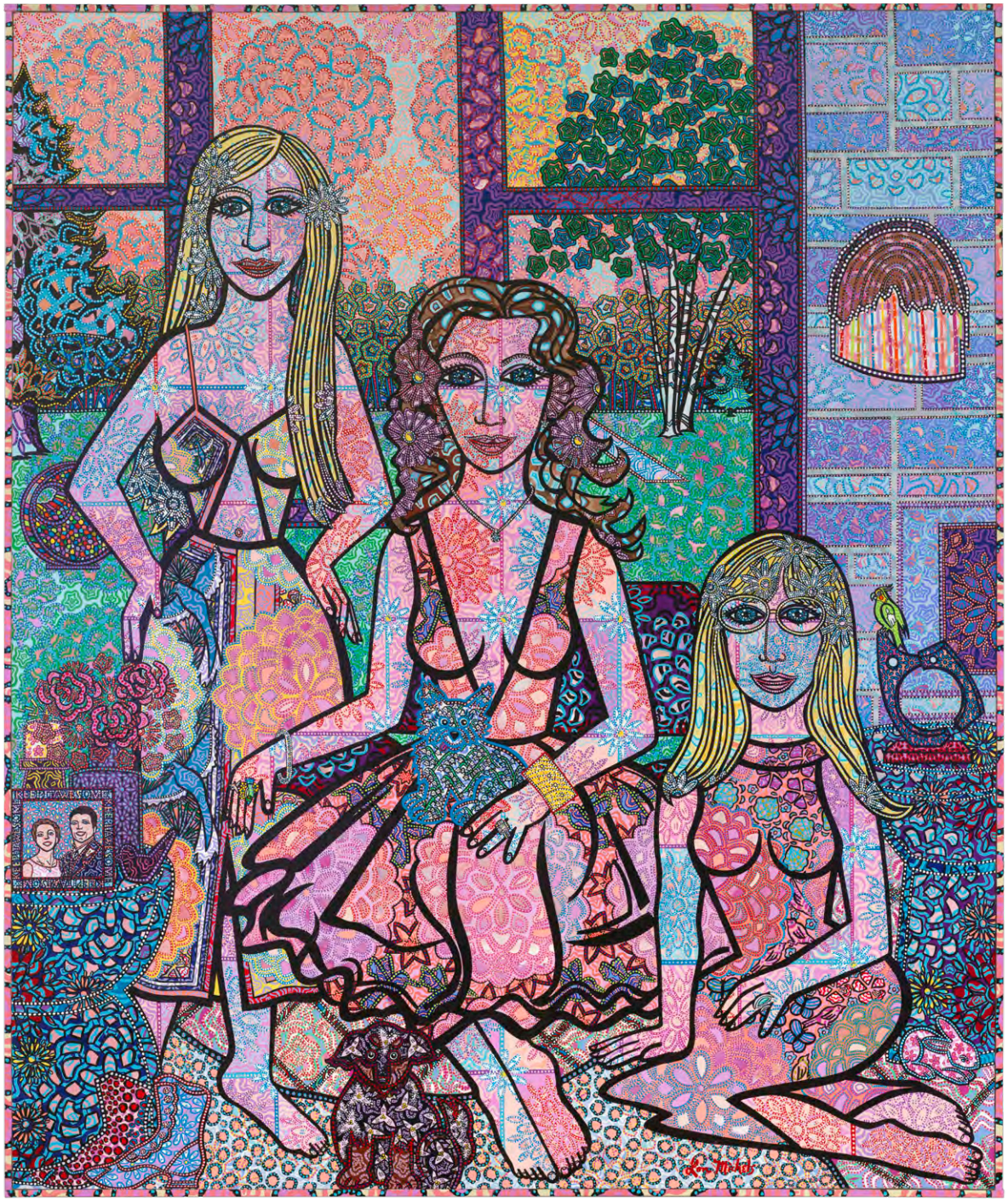
Kristen and Randy, 2019

Gypsy Brewer and Beautiful Vera, 2022

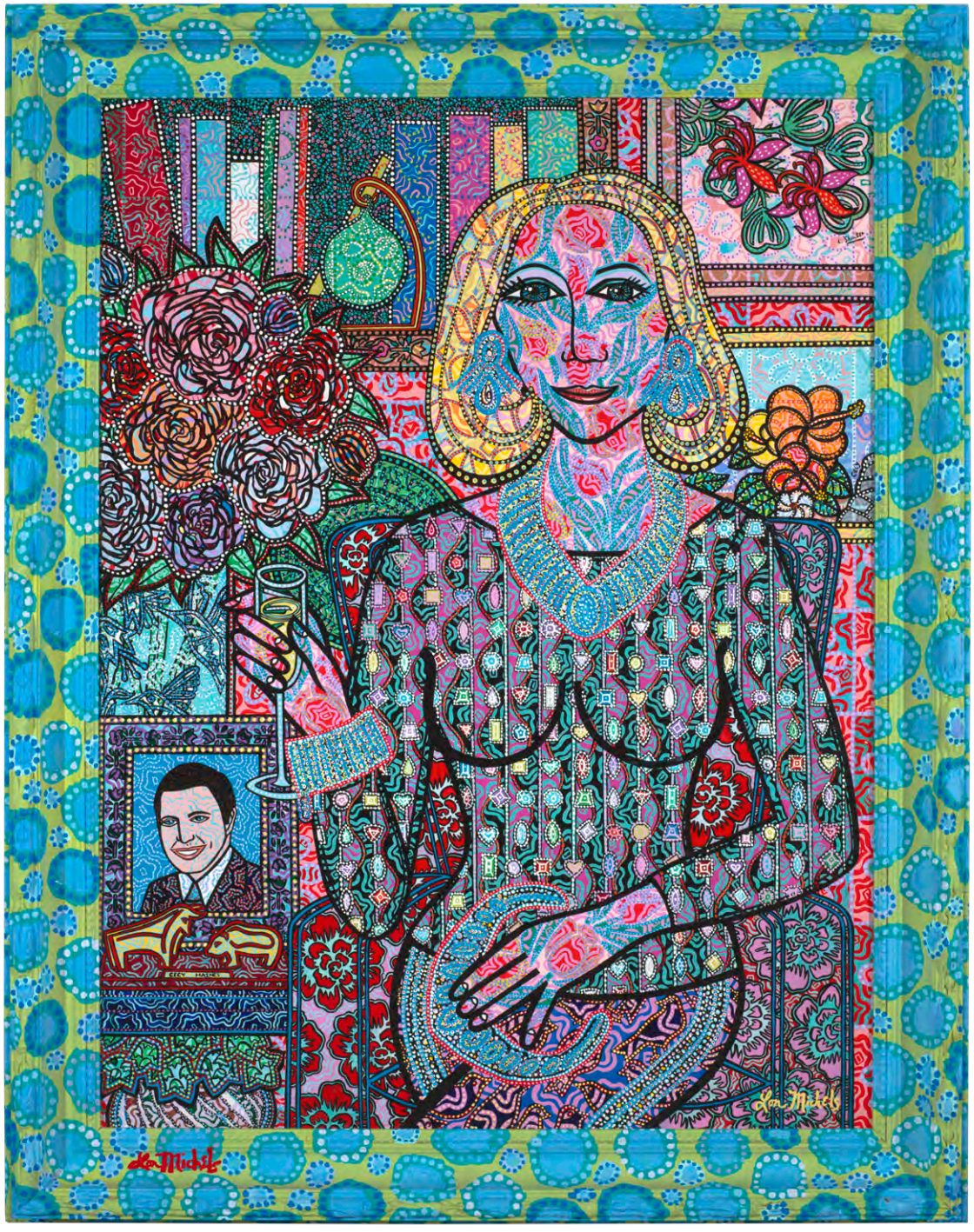
Beth at Home, 2022



Phil's Stay Strong, 2022

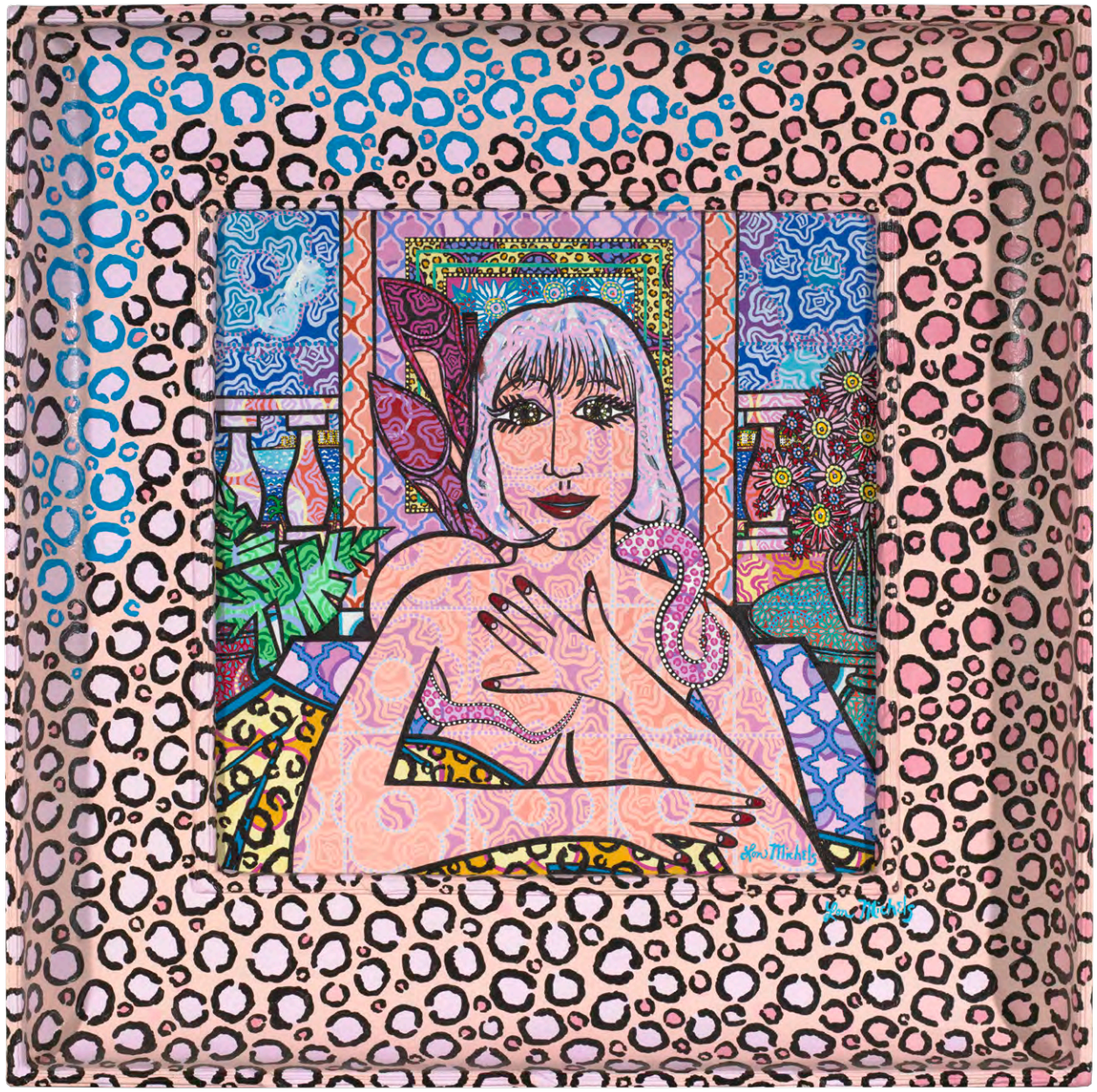


A Mother and Her Daugthers, 2022



Cecy Haines, 2022

Rachel and Michael Darrow, 2023



Ally, 2022

Roy Smith, 2023

Janel Maples, 2023

Primavera (Tribute to Sandro Botticelli), 2023


Lon Michels

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

The checklist is organized chronologically by date and then alphabetically by title.

Christina's World, c. 1988
Acrylic on canvas
24 x 48 ½ in.; 28 x 52 ½ in. framed
Lent by Patricia K. Wood, Delmar, New York
Page 39

Freedom (Tribute to Édouard Manet), 2001/2004
Acrylic on canvas
120 x 144 in.; 122 x 146 in. framed
Courtesy of the artist
Page 41

Les Demoiselles d'Avignon
(Tribute to Pablo Picasso), 2007
Acrylic on canvas
84 x 96 in.; 90 x 102 in. framed
Lent by Janel and Phillip Maples,
Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin
Page 45

Kyle and Parker, 2007
Acrylic on canvas
48 x 60 in.; 56 x 68 in. framed
Lent by James Edwin Parker,
Accord, New York
Page 42

New American Gothic
(Tribute to Grant Wood), 2008
Acrylic on canvas
60 x 48 in.; 65 x 53 in. framed
Lent by Rebecca Laird,
Sun Prairie, Wisconsin
Page 46

Harley Chic, 2009
Acrylic on canvas
50 x 43 in.; 54 x 47 in. framed
Lent by Katie Heil, Milwaukee
Page 47

Wisconsin Late Afternoon, 2009
Acrylic on canvas
18 x 24 in.; 24 x 30 in. framed
Lent by Betsy Keiser,
Prairie du Sac, Wisconsin
Page 49

Gibraltar Rock, 2013
Acrylic on canvas
60 x 96 in.; 66 x 102 in. framed
Lent by Leola Culver,
Prairie du Sac, Wisconsin
Page 49

The Last Supper
(Tribute to Leonardo da Vinci), 2014
Acrylic on canvas
84 x 144 in.; 90 x 150 in. framed
Museum of Wisconsin Art,
Gift of Susee Wiechmann
Page 50–51

Leola and Her Grandchildren, 2014
Acrylic on canvas
60 x 48 in.; 68 x 56 in. framed
Lent by Leola Culver,
Prairie du Sac, Wisconsin
Page 52

The Dream
(Tribute to Henri Rousseau), 2015
Acrylic on canvas
48 x 60 in.; 56 x 68 in. framed
Lent by Vera and David Ryder, Chicago
Page 54

Garden Portrait of Noi, 2015
Acrylic on canvas
96 x 72 in.; 108 x 84 in. framed
Courtesy of the artist
Page 53

Chinese Vases with Apples, 2017
Acrylic on canvas
24 x 30 in.; 36 x 42 in. framed
Lent by Lori and Kurt Bechthold,
Mequon, Wisconsin
Page 57

Icarus and Daedalus, 2017
Acrylic on canvas
96 x 84 in.; 104 x 92 in. framed
Courtesy of the artist
Not in Exhibition
Page 60

Josefin as Frida Kahlo, 2017
Acrylic on canvas
36 x 28 in.; 40 x 32 in. framed
Lent by Josefin Nordgren,
Stockholm, Sweden
Page 58

Josefin in Matisse's Studio, 2017
Acrylic on canvas
36 x 28 in.; 40 x 32 in. framed
Courtesy of the artist
Page 59

Bryanna in the Mirror
(Tribute to Pablo Picasso), 2018
Acrylic on canvas
60 x 48 in.; 68 x 56 in. framed
Lent by Bryanna and Max Ashenbrener,
Manitowoc, Wisconsin
Page 62

Debra in the Gallery, 2018
Acrylic on canvas
40 x 30 in.; 48 x 38 in. framed
Courtesy of the artist
Page 63

Las Meninas
(Tribute to Diego Velázquez), 2018
Acrylic on canvas
98 x 104 in.; 110 x 116 in. framed
Courtesy of the artist
Page 61

Oak Trees at Fish Tales, 2018
Acrylic on canvas
18 x 24 in., 26 x 32 in. framed
Courtesy of the artist
Page 66

Prairie Garden, 2018
Acrylic on canvas
18 x 24 in.; 26 x 32 in. framed
Lent by Heather and Brian Dunn,
West Bend, Wisconsin
Page 65

West Point, Wisconsin, 2018
Acrylic on canvas
18 x 24 in.; 26 x 32 in. framed
Lent anonymously, Milwaukee
Page 64

Kristen and Randy, 2019
Acrylic on canvas
60 x 48 in.; 68 x 56 in. framed
Lent by Randy Miles,
Waunakee, Wisconsin
Page 78

Still Life with Botero, 2019
Acrylic on canvas
24 x 18 in.; 28 x 22 in. framed
Courtesy of the artist
Page 67

Artist Garden Party
(Tribute to Édouard Manet), 2020
Acrylic on canvas
84 x 132 in.; 90 x 138 in. framed
Courtesy of the artist
Page 72

Claire with Matisse, 2020
Acrylic on canvas
36 x 28 in., 44 x 36 in. framed
Lent by Claire Rolfs,
Portland, Oregon
Page 75

Family, 2020
Acrylic on canvas
36 x 28 in., 44 x 36 in. framed
Lent anonymously,
West Bend, Wisconsin
Page 74

The Gallerist, 2020
Acrylic on canvas
40 x 30 in.; 42 x 32 in. framed
Courtesy of the artist
Page 69

Josefin in Blue, 2020
Acrylic on canvas
36 x 48 in.; 40 x 52 in. framed
Courtesy of the artist
Page 71

Kate and Rafael Salas, 2020
Acrylic on canvas
60 x 48 in.; 70 x 58 in. framed
Courtesy of the artist
Page 68

Leola Culver and Mabel, 2020
Acrylic on canvas
36 x 48 in.; 46 x 58 in. framed
Lent by Leola Culver,
Prairie du Sac, Wisconsin
Page 77

Beth at Home, 2022
Acrylic on canvas
60 x 48 in.; 68 x 56 in. framed
Lent by Beth Ramsthal, Milwaukee
Page 80

Cecy Haines, 2022
Acrylic on canvas
40 x 30 in., 50 x 40 in. framed
Lent by Cecy Haines,
Prairie du Sac, Wisconsin
Page 84

Gypsy Brewer and Beautiful Vera, 2022
Acrylic on canvas
84 x 72 in.; 86 x 74 in. framed
Lent by Vera and David Ryder, Chicago
Page 79

A Mother and Her Daughters, 2022
Acrylic on canvas
72 x 60 in.; 73 x 61 in. framed
Lent by Michelle and Michael Nast,
West Bend, Wisconsin
Page 82

Phil's Stay Strong, 2022
Acrylic on canvas
84 x 61 in.; 86 x 63 in. framed
Lent by Betsy Keiser,
Prairie du Sac, Wisconsin
Page 81

Ally, 2023
Acrylic on canvas
26 x 26 in., 40 x 40 in. framed
Courtesy of the artist
Page 86

Janel Maples, 2023
Acrylic on canvas
24 x 36 in.; 37 x 49 in. framed
Courtesy of the artist
Page 88

Primavera
(Tribute to Sandro Botticelli), 2023
Acrylic on canvas
108 x 166 in.; 110 x 168 in. framed
Courtesy of the artist
Page 90–91

Roy Smith, 2023
Acrylic on canvas
48 x 38 in.; 58 x 48 in. framed
Lent by Roy Smith, Palm Springs
Page 87

Rachel and Michael Darrow, 2023
Acrylic on canvas
40 x 60 in.; 48 x 68 in. framed
Lent by Rachel and Michael Darrow, Atlanta
Page 85

ARTIST PROFILE

BIOGRAPHY

Lon Michels was born in Marquette, Wisconsin in 1962. He graduated from Ripon College in 1984, and a year later moved to New York to pursue his art. In 1986, he became a studio assistant to pioneering sculptor and feminist Louise Nevelson, who introduced him to the New York art world. Unmoored by Nevelson's death in 1988, and diagnosed HIV positive, Michels fled the "pandemonium" of New York in 1989 for Key West.

IIn 2005, after more than a decade of peripatetic living and complications from AIDS-related illnesses, Michels returned to Wisconsin to complete an MFA at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. In 2007, he was awarded but declined the prestigious Joan Mitchell Prize for painting to live and work in Lodi, Wisconsin, where he and his partner lived for more than a decade on a bucolic farmstead. Today, Michels lives by himself in nearby Sauk City in a refurbished old church with surrounding gardens that provide endless sources of inspiration.

Michels's painting intuitively navigates the boundaries between figuration, abstraction, and the projection of queer identity. His portraits and reimagined "masterpieces" vibrate with jarring decorative patterns that disrupt visual conventions and challenge normative expectations of identity. Michels has been represented by American Primitive Gallery in New York, Great Southern and Lucky Street Galleries in Key West, and currently by Tory Folliard Gallery in Milwaukee.

Lon Michels, 2023

AWARDS

Joan Mitchell Prize, 2007 (declined)

Foundation for Contemporary Arts and United Airlines, Miami Beach, 1997 (stipend and exhibition to support emerging artists)

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

INSTALLATIONS

2019
Saint Kate—The Arts Hotel, Milwaukee, *Leopard Room* (hotel room installation, ongoing)

2018
Madison Business Chamber of Commerce, Madison, *Bucky on Parade for Guard against Cancer*

2017
Gio's Garden Gala, Edgewater Hotel, Madison (installation and performance)

2016
Overture Center for the Arts, Madison, *A Winter's Dream* (installation and performance)

2015
Gallery One, Rancho Mirage, Palm Springs, *Dinner at My Place/The Artist's Atelier* (performance and temporary exhibition)

2013
Copley's, Palm Springs, *Fall Garden Party and Runway* (painted fashions by the artist)

SOLO

2017
Portrait Society Gallery, Milwaukee, *Husband & Husband*

2012
AL Ringling Theatre, Baraboo, Wisconsin, *Spotlight on Fashion*

Tory Folliard Gallery, Milwaukee, *Life Lived Large*

2007
Caestecker Gallery, Ripon College, Ripon, *Lon Michels*

2004
Key West Museum of Art & History at the Custom House, Key West, *Freedom*

2002
The Wave Gallery, Key West, *Romance*

2001
Supreme Court of Vermont, Montpelier, *Objects of Passion and Desire*

2000
Gallery on the Green, Key West, *Lon Michels, A Solo Series Exhibition*

1996
Caribbean Gallery, Key West, *All that Glitters, (traveling exhibition)*

1995
Lyndon State College, Lyndonville, Vermont, *All that Glitters*

1994
Caestecker Gallery, Ripon College, Ripon, *Ten Years Past*

1992
Lucky Street Gallery, Key West, *Recent Works*

1991
Roberts Gallery, New York, *Recent Works*

GROUP

2019

MOWA| DTN, Milwaukee, *Downtown* (inaugural exhibition of the Museum of Wisconsin Art's satellite in conjunction with the opening of Saint Kate—The Arts Hotel)

Tory Folliard Gallery, Milwaukee, *Nature Morte*

2015

University of California, Riverside, *A Feast for the Eyes*

2014

Tory Folliard Gallery, Milwaukee, *The New Still Life*

Tory Folliard Gallery, Milwaukee, *Summer in Wisconsin*

2013

Tory Folliard Gallery, Milwaukee, 25th *Anniversary Group Exhibition*

2012

James Watrous Gallery, Madison, *Livija Patikne and Lon Michels*

Charles Allis Art Museum, Milwaukee, *Our Gardens Inside and Out*

2010

Tory Folliard Gallery, Milwaukee, *Group Show*

2007

Overture Center, Madison, *Quiet/Loud*

2006

Common Wealth Gallery, Madison, *Two Sides of One Story*

2004

Lemonade Stand Gallery, Key West, *24 Hours*

2000

Frederick Amsden House Art Gallery, Quebec, *2nd Annual Eastern Townships Art Competition* (awarded most popular work)

1998

Artists' Association, New York, *Open House–The Artists' Workshop*

1996

Calypso Gallery, Key West, *Key West Artist Group Show*

1994

Roberts Gallery, New York, *Island to Island*

Resurgence Art Alliance, New York, *Scary Beauty*

PS Lane Gallery, Key West, *Group Show*

1993

East Martello Museum, Key West, *Key West Arts Festival, Group Show*

1991

Artists' Association, New York, *Open House–The Artists' Workshop*

Great Southern Gallery, Key West, *Black and White*

Roberts Gallery, New York, *Group Show*

1990

Artists' Association, New York, *Open House–The Artists' Workshop*

New Art Association, Woodstock, New York, *Uncensored Art Show*

1988

American Primitive Gallery, New York, *Obsessive and Accumulative Art*

PUBLICATIONS

Barocas, Victor. “Form, Figure, Color.” *Coachella Valley Independent*, November 2013.

Blair, Rachel. “Through new eyes: Local artist puts modern twist to a famous classic.” *Lodi Enterprise* (Wisconsin), July 5, 2012.

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Buechler, Alexa. “Saint Kate unveils art-centric rooms.” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, May 31, 2019.

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Jozwik, Catherine. “All About Downtown.” *Urban Milwaukee*, June 26, 2019.

Meister, Jacob. “Local artist overcomes blindness in new documentary.” *The Sauk Prairie Eagle* (Wisconsin), July 11, 2012.

Michels, Lon. “Letters to the Editor: Michels’ exhibition was a sincere expression of artistic freedom.” *The Chronicle* (Montpelier, Vermont), July 3, 2001.

Murrell, Kat. “Michels’ art reflects a life lived large.” *Wisconsin Gazette*, June 16, 2012.

Nasett, Bjorn. “A Life Lived Large.” *Milwaukee Magazine*, May 17, 2012.

Rackl, Lori. “Milwaukee’s new arts hotel.” *Chicago Tribune*, June 16, 2019.

Raymond, Paulie. “Always knew I was going to be an artist.” *Key West Citizen*, August 7, 1992.

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Worland, Gayle. “Using the Mind’s Eye.” *Wisconsin State Journal*, August 14, 2012.

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