



REAL
ART WAYS

Jeff Ostergren
High Society

June 20, 2024 - August 4, 2024

About the Artist

Originally trained as an anthropologist, Jeff Ostergren has been a practicing artist for two decades. Ostergren received his MFA from Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, CA in 2006, following upon receiving a BA in a double major of anthropology and gender studies at Rice University in Houston, TX in 1998.

Ostergren is a recipient of a 2024 Lillian Orlowsky and William Freed Grant from the Provincetown Art Association and Museum. He also received an Artist Grant from the Puffin Foundation earlier this year. In 2023, he was awarded an Artist Fellowship Grant from the Connecticut Office of the Arts, and The Bitsie Clark Fund for Artists Grant, an annual project based-grant in New Haven. He was also chosen a 2021 "Artist-To-Watch" by Ortega y Gasset Projects in Brooklyn, NY.

Recent exhibitions include "Double Take: Familiar Objects in Unexpected Materials" at the Mattatuck Museum in Waterbury, CT, "The Past Pushes Forward" at Omola Studios in New Haven, CT, and "Circadian Rhythms," curated by URSA Gallery in Bridgeport, CT. In 2018, he completed a 2,400 square foot solo site-specific installation "Science For a Better Life," in which he explored the chemical and visual history of Bayer Pharmaceuticals at Yale University's West Campus in New Haven, a former Bayer facility.

As a curator, Ostergren organized "False Flag: The Space Between Reason and Paranoia" an exhibition at Franklin Street Works in Stamford, CT in 2018. In addition, from 2018-2019, Ostergren ran Tilia Projects, a community exhibition space, out of his studio in New Haven.

Jeff Ostergren lives and works in New Haven, CT.



About the Exhibit

Jeff Ostergren makes art about the parallel histories of paint and pharmaceuticals. His pointillist, color-saturated paintings infused with pharmaceuticals and chemicals, utilize imagery from art history and advertising to explore the ecstasy and toxicity of our present moment. The "pharmakon," a Greek term that simultaneously means cure, poison, and paint and is the origin of the English words "pharmaceutical" and "toxic," is a concept that centers the work.

Ostergren works from images taken from pharmaceutical advertising that bear an uncanny reference to art historical works, particularly from the Impressionist period, which was contemporaneous with the rise of synthetic chemistry. These images of idealized leisure form potent means of understanding representations of race, gender, sexuality, disability, and class.

Working on synthetic substrates such as polyester canvas stretched over PVC bars, each dot, made with custom tools, is a particular pill's exact size and shape. Each oval is the color that corresponds to the branding of that pharmaceutical, an actual sample of which is mixed into the paint.

Pharmaceuticals have played a significant role throughout human history, both in terms of their prescribed usage and recreational function. Today, the interplay of politics and economics in the pharmaceutical industry is a pressing societal issue. As a barrage of pharmaceutical options is on offer, our society is simultaneously faced with commemorable mental health advancements and nationwide addictive behavior. Ostergren's exhibition serves as a timely and thought-provoking exploration of these complex dynamics.

High Society brings together a selection of Ostergren's paintings pushing his signature "pharmaceutical pointillist" style into new realms of monumental scale and kaleidoscopic optical vibrations.



This exhibition is sponsored
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Installation view: Real Art Ways, Hartford, CT

A Poignant Riff

Essay by **nico w. okoro**

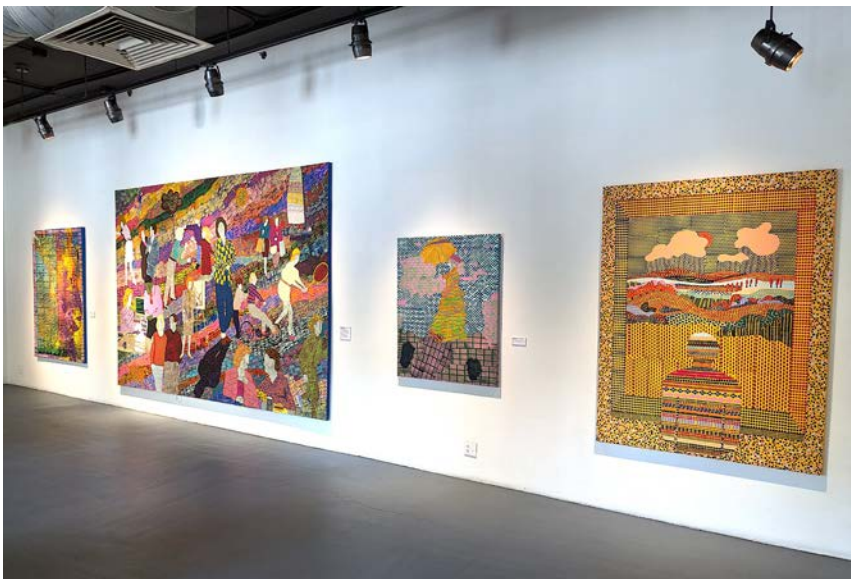
For multidisciplinary artist and trained anthropologist Jeff Ostergren, the intersecting histories of pharmaceuticals and color provide rich source material. Across his extensive body of work, Ostergren considers the historical importance of the Plein-Air Impressionism Movement, which emerged concurrent to the rise of both synthetic drugs and pigments in the late 19th century. Employing figuration and abstraction, Ostergren's vibrant, pointillist paintings echo the Impressionist landscapes appropriated by contemporary pharmaceutical advertisements to produce kaleidoscopic scenes marked by drug-induced serenity.

Infusing his paints with actual pharmaceuticals—and using an array of colored dots that reference a pill's exact size, shape and brand—Ostergren expertly makes his subject matter his material through a uniquely scientific approach to artistic production. He believes that “each molecule of pigment or drug, be it pleasurably mind-altering, physically poisonous, or both, contains the entire history of its invention, production, marketing, and consumption,” and produces politically-charged works that both visualize and critique invisible power dynamics behind commercializing pharmaceuticals.

High Society features a rich cross section of works produced over the past few years, during which Ostergren has experimented with scale and perception, such as using specific dot patterns to create optical vibrations that produce an intoxicating effect on his viewer. The title itself is a double entendre that both references advertising's use of archetypal, white families to market its products to "the fashionable elite", and speaks to what the artist has described as, "the pervasive narcotization of our society." In either interpretation, there is a clear class discussion—perhaps rendered most strikingly in *Tristes Nootropiques (White Heteronormative Million Dollar Family)*, 2022 (**Fig.1**)—through which Ostergren openly questions art's role in advertising and advertising's role in reinforcing white supremacy and nuclear family dynamics.



Fig 1.



Installation view: Real Art Ways, Hartford, CT



Fig 2.

Specifically, Ostergren observes “an overlap between art, science, and medicine in that from the Renaissance through the present, the white male body has served as the ‘standard’ body of Western medical and artistic practice.” He continues, “The white figure that was dominant in Impressionism persists today through advertising, where other identities are often marginalized, tokenized or stereotyped.” Impressionism, more than any other art historical movement, reverberates to this day as the primary aesthetic

of contemporary pharmaceutical ads, reinforcing what Ostergren terms, “the subconscious reification of norms,” while conflating the ideals of bourgeois leisure with those of health.

Whether he is reproducing an ad to look like an Impressionist painting—as in *Some tranquilizers over tranquilize, but on Stelazine she's calm and alert*—or reproducing a painting to look like a theoretical advertisement—as in *Proposal for an Advertisement for the Abortion Pill (Woman With Parasol)* (**Fig.2**)—Ostergren questions both the conscious and unconscious biases behind these visual representations.

A poignant riff on the politicized nature of both drugs and color, *High Society* speaks to numerous tensions and contradictions held within our current political moment, from the proliferation of health and wellness shams to the persistence of racism and chromophobia within the artworld. These complexly nuanced and layered works ask us to consider the broader interplay between science and culture, weighing advances in human health against the pervasive social ills of overconsumption. While the works included in *High Society* are largely figurative, abstract works like *Abstraction and Empathy* (**Fig.3**) open up much needed meditative space in which to consider the timely yet difficult questions posed by Ostergren's transcendent works.

nico w. okoro is an independent arts consultant, curator, educator, and writer working across sectors to nurture reciprocity between artists, communities, and cultural institutions. She is founder and principal of the bldg fund, llc, a collaborative engine for the cultivation of place-based projects in New Haven, CT. An independent curator, nico's recent exhibitions include *Gather* at Orchid Gallery and *Century: 100 Years of Black Art* at the Montclair Art Museum (2024). She's served as an adjunct professor of art at the Yale School of Art (2022-present), Brown University (2021), Hartford Art School (2016-21), and Barnard College (2017-19). nico is the author of *Museum Metamorphosis: Cultivating Change Through Cultural Citizenship*, published by Rowman & Littlefield and the American Alliance of Museums Press (2022). In recent posts, nico served as Inaugural Executive Director of NXTHVN (2019-20); Director of Public Programs and Community Engagement at the Studio Museum in Harlem (2014-19); Curatorial Director of Rush Arts Gallery (2007-10); and Curatorial Assistant at The Studio Museum in Harlem (2006-07). She holds an MA in Creative & Cultural Entrepreneurship from Goldsmiths, University of London (2011), and a BA in Art-Semiotics from Brown University (2006).

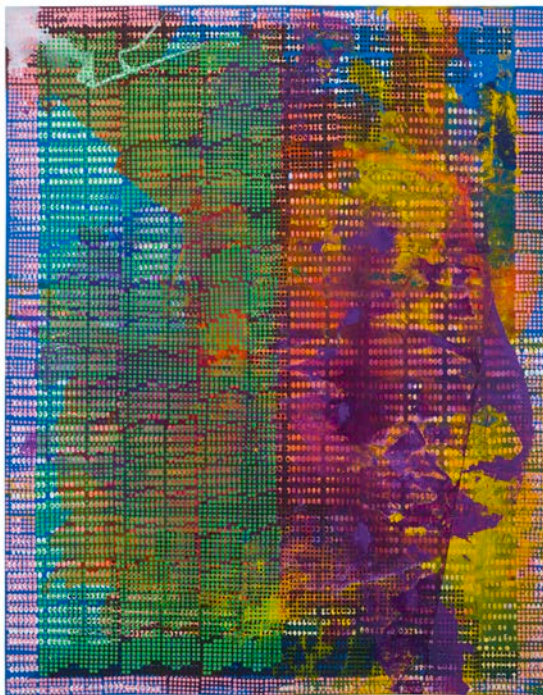


Fig 3.

For purchase inquiries, please contact:
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Real Art Ways is a contemporary arts organization with a record of linking artists, innovation and community. Programs include visual arts, with exhibitions, public art projects, and artist presentations; cinema, with independent and international films; music; performance; literary events; community and educational programming.



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