

# Mark Michael

Written by John Hayes



**Mark Michael** is a British artist best known for combining evocative imagery, symbols and hand written word art to create compelling psychological portraits that give form to the invisible inner realm that lurks behind the persona - the dwelling place of dark secrets, taboo desires and unspeakable truths about the human condition. His major themes include isolation, estrangement, re-invention and how the passing of time changes our relationship with others and ourselves.

Mark Michael's 'psychological portraits' inevitably mirror his own afflictions and yearnings - they are confessions, in a sense - but the artist himself is deliberately absent from his work. His circumstances of time and place, purely symbolic in the emotional realm, are replaced by blocks of strong colour and abstract hinterlands on which the inner story reveals itself through the exquisite juxtaposition on the canvass of figures, symbols, ciphers, totems and hand written messages, each one hinting at a 'truth' or 'revelation' that has the power to simultaneously excite, repel and liberate the viewer.

While the artwork is provocative and compelling, Mark Michael does not set out to shock or judge. His compositions are imbued with the compassion and kindness of his own perturbed yet gentle soul. His jester-like sense of humour also finds its way into his compositions, providing levity to his often dark secrets. The artist's own view is that the more authentic and truthful he is with his artwork, the more likely the viewer will feel it.

**“The more authentic and truthful I am with my work,  
the more likely the viewer will feel it.**

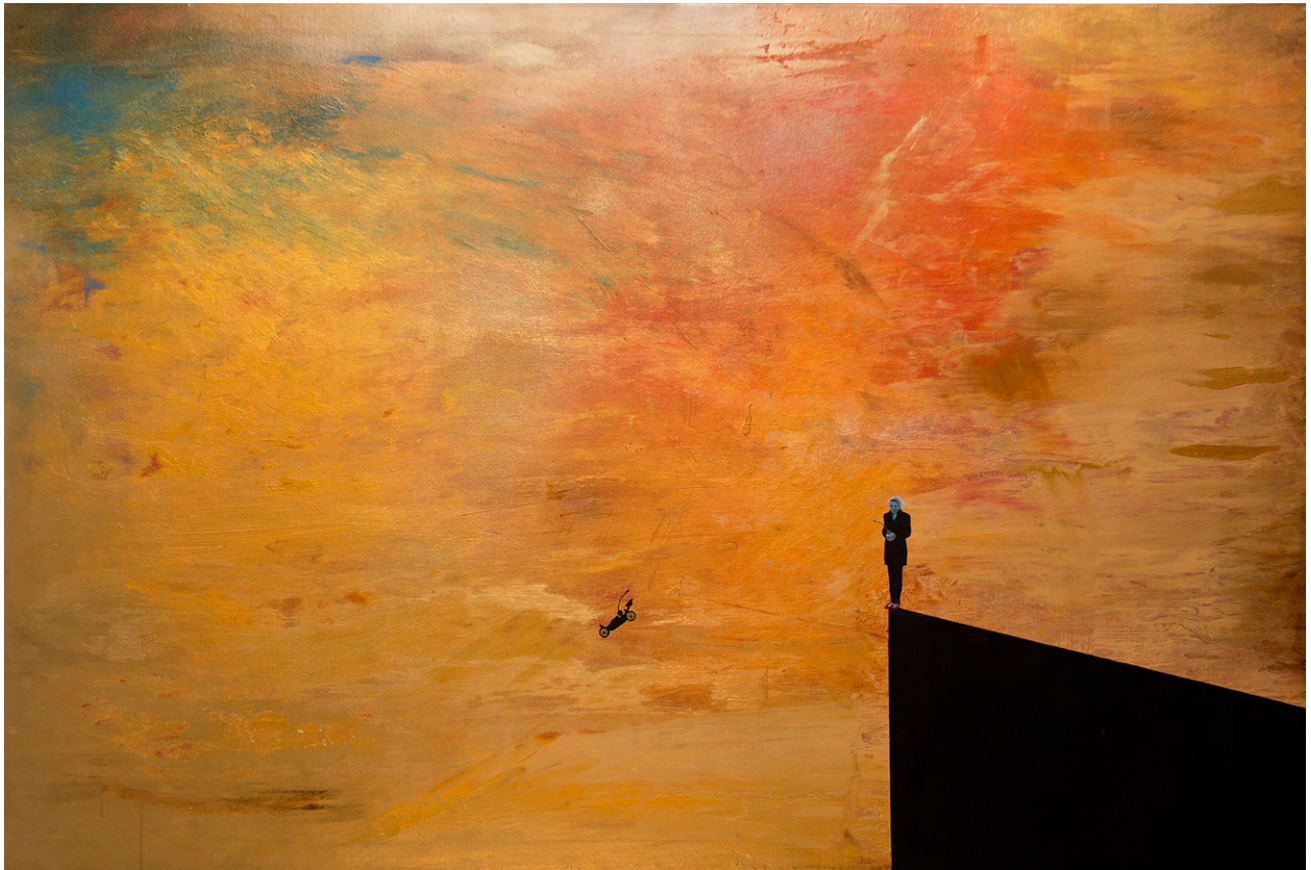
What ‘truths’ and stories Mark Michael compositions mirror entirely depend on the viewers own story, mood and psychological makeup. Each composition, like the subjects they grapple with, is multilayered, ambivalent and entirely open to interpretation.



***‘The Architect’ Magic 2022***



In ***The Architect***, for example, a figure whose proportions, gender and basic physicality are totally askew, still manages to stand confidently, albeit unconventionally. Scrawled on the figure in multiple languages are the words *Goodbye Mr. Pinkerton* - a message to an old self perhaps, shackled to past preconceptions and to the rigidity of other people's expectation. Details in the composition hint at another story. Trapped by the figure's foot is the tale of an emancipated mouse trying to escape for food, suggestive of self-denial, or some other darker force at play.



***'Test Drive'*** Gold Series 2018

In ***Test Drive*** a silhouetted figure stands on a stark precipice and launches a remote controlled car into the void, representing the poignant act of contemplating suicide. Change the composition's title to ***Liberation*** and the figure is unburdening herself of an unwanted past. Clues exist in the details. The silhouetted woman is wearing a pair of bright red shoes. The car she catapults into the void is strangely antiquated. In the far corner of a magnificent golden sky, a small patch of blue is visible. It is dusk or dawn. Impending darkness or an end to darkness.

## Influences

Mark Michael draws inspiration from both the masters of the past and the present. Palpable in his melange of styles is the dark *Surrealism* of Frida Kahlo, the *Symbolism* of Aleksandra Waliszewska, the *Emotional Realism* of Reian Williams, the confessional word art of Sean Landers and the vibrant intensity of the Neo-expressionist Jean-Michel Basquiat. Art critic Karen Laponn dubbed him the Basquiat of the 21st Century.

**“I like to imagine my paintings as magic mirrors that afford the viewer glimpse of shared inner conflict, taboo desires and hidden truths.**

Mark Michael himself gives particular significance to figureheads from the great artistic movements including Edvard Munch, Francis Bacon, Leonora Carrington and Egon Schiele. His writing and candid exploration of the human condition also draws him to the confessional poets Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath. While Mark Michael himself is a shy, understated human being, his artwork possesses all the extravagant excesses of the notorious haute couture collections from Alexander McQueen. Music also inspires Mark Michael's creativity, with the likes of Radiohead, Joy Division, Miles Davis and Derek Bailey played throughout his studio. Such an eclectic mix of associations make Mark Michael compositions strangely familiar, but his artwork is utterly unique and instantly recognisable as his own.

## Bio



Mark Michael is a British artist based in Hampshire who graduated from Winchester School of Art with a BA first class honours degree in Fine Art Sculpture. Coming from a close-knit family, throughout his life he has had to deal with the struggles of his own mental health and that of his mother's. The act of creating art he views as a therapeutic process of deconstructing, exploring and growing the self. "Art," he advocates, "is a way to both escape from and confront head-on the inner world. With my compositions I hope to facilitate this shared experience of both escaping from and connecting with what lies behind the facade."

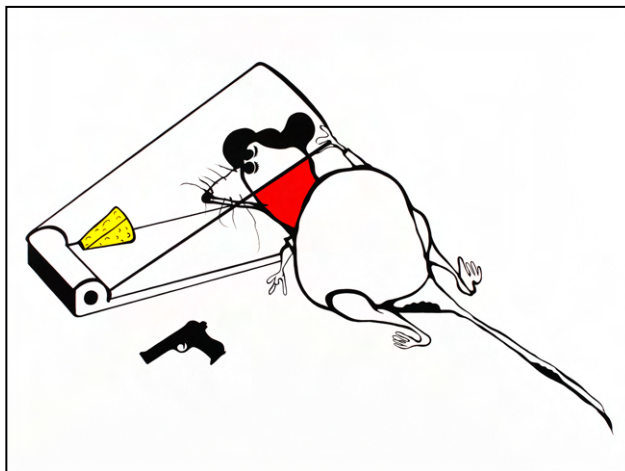
**“Vulnerability is far more interesting and endearing than well tailored bravado and swagger. Painting is my way of deconstructing the facade in order to get closer to the truth.**



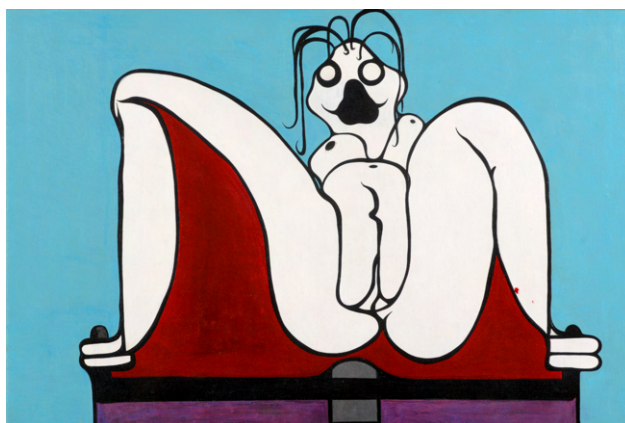
## | 2008 - 2010 | Early Work & Satire

Mark Michael's early compositions were satirical, cartoon-like examinations of human nature. Heavily influenced by his transition from sculpture to painting they are characterised by black outlines, an emphasis on structure, a tentative use of colour, simple iconography and the importance of titles to afford the imagery an extra layer of meaning.

Present in his early compositions are many of the elements and conceptual constructs that he would cultivate and enrich through the course of his career - the use of solid blocks of colour for backgrounds, dark humour, the importance of the written word, the recurring themes of taboo desires, religious confusion and the effect of the passing of time on relationships and ourselves.



*"Darn this predisposition"*



*"Take a look around"*

When compared to his later compositions, a significant feature of Mark Michael's early work is his dispassionate emotional positioning to his subject matter. In the artists own words, "At that time, lampooning the darker side of human nature from a distance and through the lens of a social agitator and satirist was the easiest way I could reveal my own demons without feeling overwhelmed by them."

## | 2010 | Word Art & Punch Poetry

The *word art* that Mark Michael employed as titles for his early work, and which would later become a defining characteristic of the compositions themselves, first found expression as a collection of short, sharp phrases in a body of *punch poetry* entitled **LAUGH....OR YOU'LL CRY** - the spontaneous literary equivalent to his early imagery described by the artist as "cathartic light relief for kindred wayward souls whose quest for perfection hasn't quite gone to plan."

Butter smeared on a wedding ring

gOD

Those with low self-esteem, please  
form an orderly queue and anticipate a long wait.



It' heavier than it looks



# Word Art and Imagery

The incorporation of *word art* into Mark Michael's first 'psychological portraits' began with the inclusion of single words or repeated statements to form rhythm and pattern, with an emphasis on the placement of the text. This use of word art as a device to interact with and entice the viewer closer signalled the increasing importance Mark Michael gave to the person standing in front of his paintings. The development of 'text as image' signalled a more in depth examination of the facades we build around ourselves for protection, using his compositions to deconstruct the persona in order to reveal what lies behind it.



*“Entertaining the Impossible”*



*“Cougar smoking a cigarette”*



*"If you love me you must learn to love my black dog"*



*“About a Son”*



# | 2012 - 13 |

## Narrative and Imagery

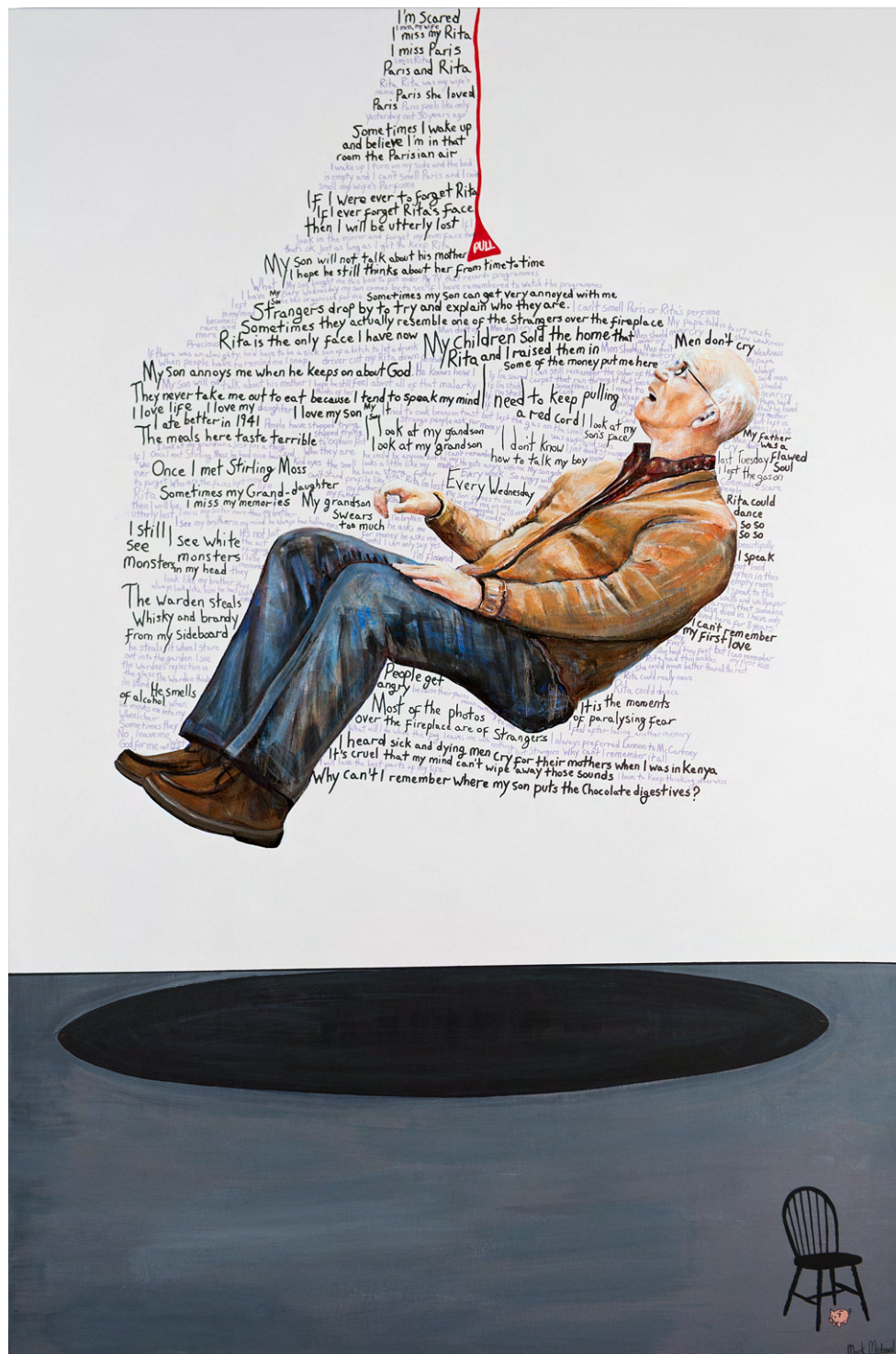
In a collection of larger scale work produced between 2012 and 2013, Mark Michael progressed from incorporating single words and repeated statements into his compositions to incorporating more complex hand written narratives. This progression coincided with a move away from the satirical stance of his early work towards a deeper, more honest and vulnerable relationship with his subject matter and with himself. The narrative-style text acts both as open-ended dialogue with the viewer and, through the use of surrogate characters, as visceral confessions about Mark Michael's own conflicting truths and internal conflicts.



"Mourning for one, eating for two"



Mark Michael describes the process of creating the monologues as a “spontaneous, uncensored and instinctive reaction to the imagery, at once forming part of a balanced image when seen from a distance, and on closer inspection, revealing the subject’s personal chaos.” He wanted “the internal monologues to physically engulf the subjects, squeezing and testing their fragile personas.”



“Mervin”

“ I wanted the internal monologues to physically engulf the subjects, squeezing and testing their fragile personas.



| 2013 - 2015 |

## Colour, Spontaneity & the Gold Series

Mark Michael's *Gold Series*, completed between 2013 and 2015, marked a move towards a more organic creative process, characterised by a more vigorous and freer use of colour and texture to create atmospheric backgrounds. In Mark Michael's own words, he "applied the paint with abandon, with no preconceived composition in mind". Mark Michael also began to more deeply explore the use of totems, cyphers and more cryptic visual clues as an alternative to the written word.

Many of Mark Michael's *Gold Series* compositions deal with the dualities of destruction and regeneration, war and peace, hope and despair. These dualities are physically expressed in the compositions through the counterbalancing of the organic, spontaneous, chaotic backgrounds and the monochromatic, controlled, structured foregrounds.



*"From a Great Height"*

“There is seldom a pre-determined route to a finished picture, but with the creation of these canvasses I was finally able to embrace a feeling of spontaneity.



## | 2015 - 2018 | Balancing of the Theatrical Stage

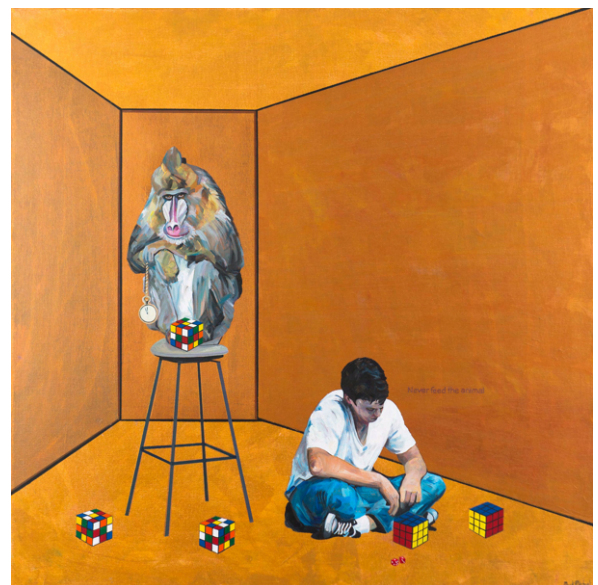
<sup>A</sup> From 2015 onwards, present in Mark Michael's compositions are all the major elements that would define Mark Michael as an artist: the spontaneous, vigorous use of colour for backgrounds coupled with the employment of sharp angles to delineate space; a looser application of paint for the subjects that inhabit the space; word art to entice the reader in and to relay an extra layer of meaning; the use of symbols, totems and ciphers; 'Inner life' story-telling and themes relating to the human facade and to what lies behind it.



*"The Conclusion of Cupboard Love"*



*"Saturday Night Soliloquy"*



*"The Folly of Youth"*



## | 2019 - 2022 | Texture and Depth

During and immediately after the pandemic, Mark Michael completed a collection of 44 larger scale compositions entitled *Confessions, Truth & Revelation*. The body of work was a response to a combination of the enforced physical isolation of lockdown, the passing of his grandparents and the desire to emerge anew into an uncertain future. Characteristic of this body of work is a much more expressive use of brush stroke, colour and texture. The compositions contain a strong figurative and surrealist element, which explore themes of death and renewal, self-denial and self-acceptance, the erosion of the persona over time and the act of self-regeneration..



*"Turned Out Nice Again"*



A new development in this body of work was the emphasis Mark Michael gave to the human figure and to how the distortion of his figure's proportions in relation to one another both afford and take away importance of certain aspects of the self, as well as invigorating the imagination of the viewer.



*"Modern Momento Mori with Twister"*



# | Commissioned Portraits |

In 2014, a commissioned collection of portraits for *Portraits 14* in conjunction with the National Portrait Gallery, Mark Michael drew on his roots as a sculptor to create a unique and unconventional series of three-dimensional and interactive portraits. They included a spinning mandala, a sliding triptych and a panelled cabinet. Subjects included one of the only still living British judges to pass the death penalty, an archbishop and a city Mayor. The process of creating this body of work deviated from his 'psychological portraits' in that he began with an idea formulated in conjunction with the sitter, rather than allowing the portrait to reveal itself organically. It further increased the importance Mark Michael gave to the viewer when creating his own 'psychological portraits'.



*"Margherita Piliero"*



*"Hitesh Barot"*



*"Elizabeth Stuart "*



# | Political Portraits |

To herald the 2015 Pre-Brexit election, Mark Michael created a collection of satirical political portraits of those in power or vying for power. Common to all the portraits was the inclusion of a butterfly in its various stages of metamorphosis, the positioning and development of which symbolise a specific aspect of the subject. The subjects include Boris Johnson, Theresa May, Nigel Farage, Nick Clegg, Ed Miliband, Jeremy Corbyn, Nicola Sturgeon, David Cameron and Barak Obama.



*“Jeremy”*



*“Would the Real Mr Johnson Please Stand Up”*



*“Nicola”*



*“Theresa ”*



## | Commissioned Cover Art for SMUG |

Under the pseudonym SIMON, Mark Michael was commissioned as front cover artist and content illustrator for the satire magazine SMUG (2015-2020). Under the same pseudonym, he also contributed a column entitled *What Simon Said*.



# International Confederation of Art critics



ICIC Art Critics

## Critique by Karen Lappen ICIC Art Critic



Mark Michael is an extraordinary person besides being an exceptionally talented artist. He has the rare ability to clearly understand and pinpoint the true inner emotional conflict that afflicts men, and portray it through the totality of his artworks: from the title of his pieces, to the hand painted words, to the actual paintings. Mark studies human nature and the psyche in all its most discordant aspects and portrays the many superstructures and facades it creates.



His compositions are a melange of styles. Surrealism, Symbolism, Pop Art, Pittura Metafisica are all palpable in his works. Troubled solitary figures perturbed by their dual ambivalent layers; overpowering symbolic figures representing the true nature of their inner feelings; other smaller, lingering figures representing the complexity of the human soul, all set in still, uniform backgrounds, to represent the importance of the subjects' emotional state in a precise moment in time and life.

Incorporating hand painted texts into his artworks only emphasises and completes the multilevel sensory message. Words are a complement to the meaning of his paintings in addition to being an integral part of the aesthetic, visual expression of his art. Very in vogue in the 80s, this kind of graphic art was extremely utilised by Barbara Kruger, Sophie Kalle and Christopher Wool, among others, to convey a stronger, more comprehensive significance to their expressive means of communication.

Strong, unblended contrasting colours identify the different moments and aspects of Mark's creations. Complementary and analogous hues skilfully utilised to stop time, versus the loose, gestural brushwork reminiscent of Kokoshka, that highlight action, movement and life. His colours are alive and vibrant and at the same time still and deep. Again colour underlines duality and conflict in an explicitly comprehensive manner, enabling the viewer to immediately empathise with the protagonist of Mark's paintings.

Time is another important feature in Mark's paintings. He represents time as physical objects or as motion, as the ever-present change. But what fascinates the artist most is the way in which "time influences the facades and personas we establish around us". As Heraclitus said: "There is nothing permanent except change".

A true artist in the best and most complete sense of the term. The Basquiat of the twenty-first century.

**Karen Lappon**