

Artseen

Emmanuel Louisnord Desir: Ashes of Zion

By [Andrew Paul Woolbright](#)



Installation view: Emmanuel Louisnord Desir: *Ashes of Zion*, 47 Canal, New York, 2023. Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York. Photo: Joerg Lohse.

In Emmanuel Louisnord Desir's *Ashes of Zion*, painting and sculpture employ a skeuomorphic glitching of material to address biblical stories and collective histories. The work is remarkably attuned to the American vernacular, but the energy of it builds out of the artist's ability to produce softness in the material resistance of wood. Desir gives us an allegorical metanarrative that begins with the garden and ends with the fall of Babylon.

In Desir's record, Biblical suffering produces grotesques of survival, as figuration morphs between objecthood and subjecthood. In sculptures such as *A Stiff Necked People* (2023) wood boils with biomorphic tensions and abject erotics. The bodies of Desir are often segmented in ways that Linda Nochlin would characterize as responses to authoritarianism. However, in Desir's case, each body suggests an open ended process. They become systems that refuse to be closed off. Instead they act as trees with different roots that sprout at their own rates, producing bodies of abbreviation and extension, asymmetric and arriving at new ways to balance and stand. Each figure produces an idea of self-engineering or physical mitosis. In *Grandpa's Infirmary Couch* (2022) we have a bulbous excess. The body becomes the couch that is accompanied by the loose change in its recess, which alludes to an internal richness. Depicted here is a world before a Messiah, a world of physical suffering awaiting spiritual transcendence.



Emmanuel Louisnord Desir, *A Stiff Necked People*, 2023. Wood, 52 × 22 × 27 inches. Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York. Photo: Joerg Lohse.

The paintings become soft through the wood panel's resistance. The absorbency of the ground receives the paint slowly—producing a complicated act of ceremony and presence that evokes egg tempera icons. Desir is inspired by the Old and New Testament for their most dramatic images and numerology, entangling political critique within its phrasing of allegory. The works channel the best of Jim Shaw, while replacing his humor and paranoid caricature with meditation and prophetic annunciation. Desir's figures and scenes are simply rendered to impose themselves as eidetic, but together form complex groupings in the way that recalls how Blake and other Swedenborgians were able to invent mirror realities to our own.

In works like *Transformation of the Meek Hearted* (2022) the idea of the skeuomorph is present, which has become a larger dominant strategy within sculpture. Augusta Savage, Martin Puryear, and Simone Leigh have all similarly worked with sculpture that conjoins disparate objects and realities, an act that can imply material glitching and multivalent possibilities. While it is possible to both signal an uncanny reality of objects and the experience of 3D models overlapping, it also maps a political language—one that is active and unsettled as a hybrid reality of people of color. Desir's form applies the skeuomorph, the glitch, and a body of refusal and

introduces it into ancient lore, to engage as bodily acts of sympathy, survival, and diasporic experience.

Desir draws the parallel between the Biblical narrative and that of the Black diaspora to find moments that intertwine both. In his complex language imbrication, what has been kept at the periphery is foregrounded, revealing the heroism of endurance and survival. It is an important dismantling. Through phase-shifting bodies and their processing of bursts of time the figural and affective formations that spread across the deep past extend into the distant future. Desir gives us a new and deep reservoir of access and modes of being.



Emmanuel Louisnord Desir, *Transformation of the Meek Hearted*, 2022. Wood, nails and 3-D aqua resin print, 40 × 30 × 15 inches. Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York. Photo: Joerg Lohse.