

# THE LEBOWSKI CYCLE

Joe Forkan



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**Flecker Gallery**

Suffolk County Community College, Selden, NY

*October 17 - December 2, 2013*

*Curated by Matthew Neil Gehring*

*Essay by Caleb De Jong*

cover:

*Oath of the Horatii*, 2006 - 2010

Oil on linen, 72 x 40 inches

*Oath of the Horatii*

Jacques-Louis David, 1784

Oil on canvas, 128 x 170 inches

Musée du Louvre, Paris



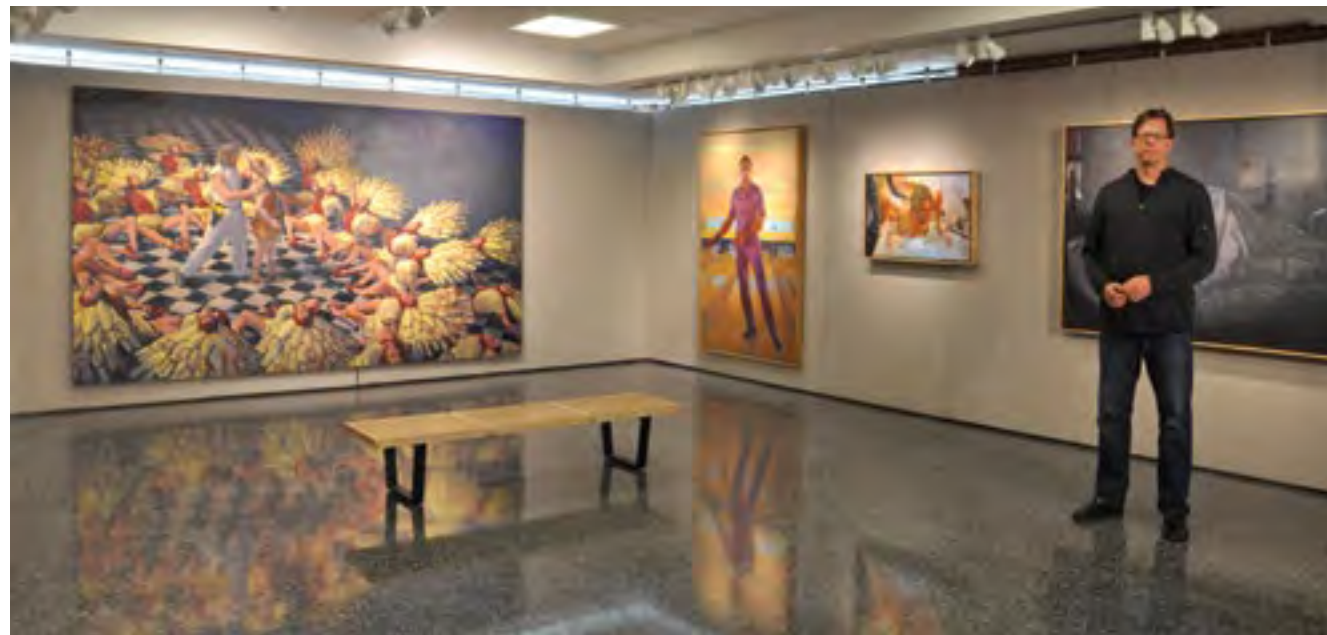
## THE LEBOWSKI CYCLE

The Lebowski Cycle is a series of paintings and drawings exploring layered narratives, using masterpieces of European art and the 1998 Coen Brothers' film *The Big Lebowski* as a starting point. The series is the result of a longstanding interest in narrative painting, particularly paintings from the Baroque and Neoclassical eras; complex figurative works that depict grand story arcs, compressing a multitude of thoughts, ideas and emotions into a singular image. However, it is the human interactions and conflicts, formal qualities, and modes of depiction that were as interesting to me as the specific stories.

I wanted to explore these ideas, but was looking for a way to mitigate the grand seriousness that historical and religious paintings often contain. I started thinking about *The Big Lebowski*, (a favorite film, obviously) trying to imagine how the characters, humor, and preposterous story arc of the film might be enlisted to explore multiple points of view, moods, and intentions if combined with themes and titles from well-known works of European art.

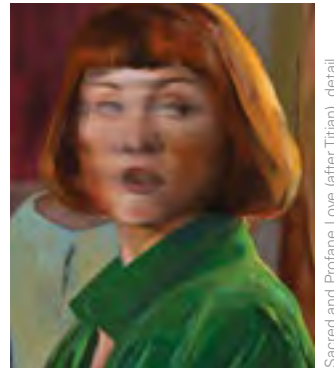
The combination led to hybrid images that reference art history, film, and contemporary art, from sources that inform, overlap and may even contradict each other, all run back through the imprecise language of painting.

*Joe Forkan*



## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

The paintings in this exhibition by Los Angeles painter Joe Forkan operate as a bridge between pop culture and art history and between comedy and tragedy. Mark Rothko's notion that all great art exhibits a clear preoccupation with death is resonant here. The film that these works are drawn from, *The Big Lebowski*, positions its characters, led by the protagonist – the Dude, within an absurd story arc in which the imminent threat of death, the promise of small, momentary fortune, and a fresh rug propel the decisions and actions that build the plot. Forkan selects scenes of the film and combines and adjusts them compositionally to create allusions to distinct and iconic sources within art history, which also position death, or its eminence as central. This is tragic and heroic subject matter; the plight of humanity. Unlike the art historical precedents, however, the tone of the film positions death less as a real tragedy and more as a mildly unfortunate, possibly benign end to a comically absurd circumstance.



Secured and Profane Love (after Titian), detail

Forkan's ambitious and impressive undertaking, *The Lebowski Cycle*, seems to align naturally with Cezanne's statement that he painted because he wished to speak the language of Manet. In an art world that has opened up enough to have room for further exploration of the forms of the last 100 years, Forkan's assertion and his risk is to ask that we look further, to the whole past, and that indeed all forms are available at this moment in time and that there may be enough room for both heroic ambition and the anti-hero-as-subject in the same viscous plane.

One of the many triumphs of the film is its masterful working of the formal elements of cinema. The cinematography is both breathtaking and subtle. The Coen Brother's use of sound and soundtrack to propel the narrative is brilliant. Non-diegetic music in one scene carries to the next to become diegetic, creating a bridge between the imagined and the real, the felt and the experienced. In a film where fact and fiction are often blurred for *The Dude*, the result is a picture, which is far greater than the sum of its parts. While certainly entertaining and hilarious, *The Big Lebowski* is much more than that to the sensitive and educated viewer; an existential inquiry that begs questions also central to all art, and painting in particular. What is meaning? What is beauty? What is truth? What is reality? These are the same formal sensibilities and the parallel inquiry of Forkan's *Lebowski Cycle*.

This body of work connects traditions and elicits exuberant responses. This is in part because these paintings also share with the film an uncanny and compelling point of view. The viewer is positioned as voyeur, witness to the strangest of conversations and circumstances. But more than this, *The Lebowski Cycle* comprises a grand gesture that is a nuanced and intellectually layered look at the plight of contemporary humanity. Joe Forkan's *Lebowski Cycle* is an evocative, beautiful, and ambitious undertaking; a high achievement. Flecker Gallery is most delighted to host this show.

*Matthew Neil Gehring, Director*

## 'THE LEBOWSKI CYCLE' BY JOE FORKAN

Essay by Caleb De Jong

Can there be a future for history painting? Painting has strict rules regarding planes, shapes, colors, and stillness. Cinema, a medium of story, collaboration, and movement relates to painting distantly. Contemporary painting is often stern and humorless; narrowly concerned with its own ontology, making little allowance for humor. Popular cinema, while often funny, rarely asks questions of its own medium specificity. Taken together, the two mediums appear to be incompatible grounds for cross-fertilization. Joe Forkan in his 'Lebowski Cycle' makes a successful hybrid of these sources. Eschewing both retrograde academic realism and cool pop formalism, Forkan has made a rarity; a serious group of paintings that is also a tender homage to pop culture. Forkan's cycle, painted warmly with a vibrant palette, contains the spirit and humanism of a certain type of contemporary cinema while also underscoring the relevance of classical painting.



The Taking of Christ (after Caravaggio), detail

Forkan's painting is a distant, genetically mutated heir to a certain type of documentary painting that at one time dominated European art. History painting, as it was known, was perceived as the zenith of artistic accomplishment in academic painting. Painters, French, Prussian, Flemish, Norwegian, or English, wanting to leave their mark in the annual Salon, Royal Academy, or Kunsthalle, would paint massive cycles depicting the national struggles of la Gloire de France, Teutonic might or the agony of Homeric exploits. Existing below history painting in the artistic hierarchy were smaller genres, the portrait, the contemporary group scene, then landscape and at the lowest level was the lowly still-life. The lesser genres were felt to be fractured, and only allowed one skill at a time for the painter to show off. The history painter, however, combined all the skills needed in genre painting; the ability to paint group scenes, individual portraits, landscapes and the depiction of individual objects, as well as the glorification of what was essential and ennobling in art and mankind. For a period history painting encapsulated every national character, every defining trait and used the most advanced pictorial technology available; oil paint.

What happened to displace history painting from its perch of supremacy? First, photography. Second, cinema. For a few decades painters paced next to the exquisite precision of the photograph. Gerome used it to render detail upon detail of a staged Sultan or reclining odalisque in his opulent Parisian studio and Eakins labored extensively over his rowers and wrestlers using photographic sources. But painting was no match. Further, painting, as a totem for a civilization's collective imagining, using detailed depictions of people and places and things, was doomed when placed next to the kinetic hilarity of the cinema. No painter could equal the temporal zeitgeist of Harold Lloyd hanging from a clock or the worker's alienation as Charlie Chaplin is ground through the gears in 'Modern Times'. Painting largely surrendered its narrative potential to cinema and embraced a newer potential, one of form and color and the largesse of Modernism.

Fast forward about a century. All mediums are scrambled; cinema is in the doldrums with its own academy and rules, while television is the new medium for narrative supremacy. Painting, meanwhile, is resurgent, awash in new (and old) possibilities, painters now open to bold exploration and sharper focus. Such new openness explains the place for a painter like Joe Forkan and his ambitious and surprising 'Lebowski Cycle' of paintings. Forkan's paintings are based on two sources, old master paintings and the Coen Brother's cult movie, 'The Big Lebowski'. 'The Big Lebowski' (if you have not had the pleasure of viewing the movie) stars Jeff Bridges as The Dude. The story revolves around a stoner bum and his no-good hippie friends hanging out in decrepit bowling alleys in Los Angeles during the first Gulf War who get themselves involved in a series of faux mysteries that in the end don't add up to much and don't seem to really matter to any of the characters. Instead, the Dude (or Duderino if you're not into the whole brevity thing) mainly fails at solving anything, including understanding his own predicament. Forkan's large paintings are not direct quotations from either this movie or from specific old master paintings. Instead of freezing a still from the movie, Forkan arranges the characters from the movie into new scenes that are inspired loosely from classical sources such as Manet's painting 'Olympia' or Caravaggio's 'Supper at Emmaus'.

Seen straight away, these two sources appear to have little to do with one another other. Forkan imbues his paintings with the heroic (mock?) of classical painting and the open-hearted bounty only recently associated with Modernist seriousness. Forkan's bright palette is a departure from both the noirish lighting of 'The Big Lebowski' and the grim intensity of David and Gericault. Using light and color and touch, Forkan opens a place for narrative in contemporary painting. Dramatic and deft, these paintings make good on the promise of a future for history painting. Transcending their sources, Forkan's 'Lebowski Cycle' is a testament to an old fashioned story; painting that is well made and visually rapt.

*Caleb De Jong is an independent critic in New York City and author of Thoughts That Cure Radically*

*The Death of Marat (after David), 2008*  
Oil on linen, 96 x 58 inches

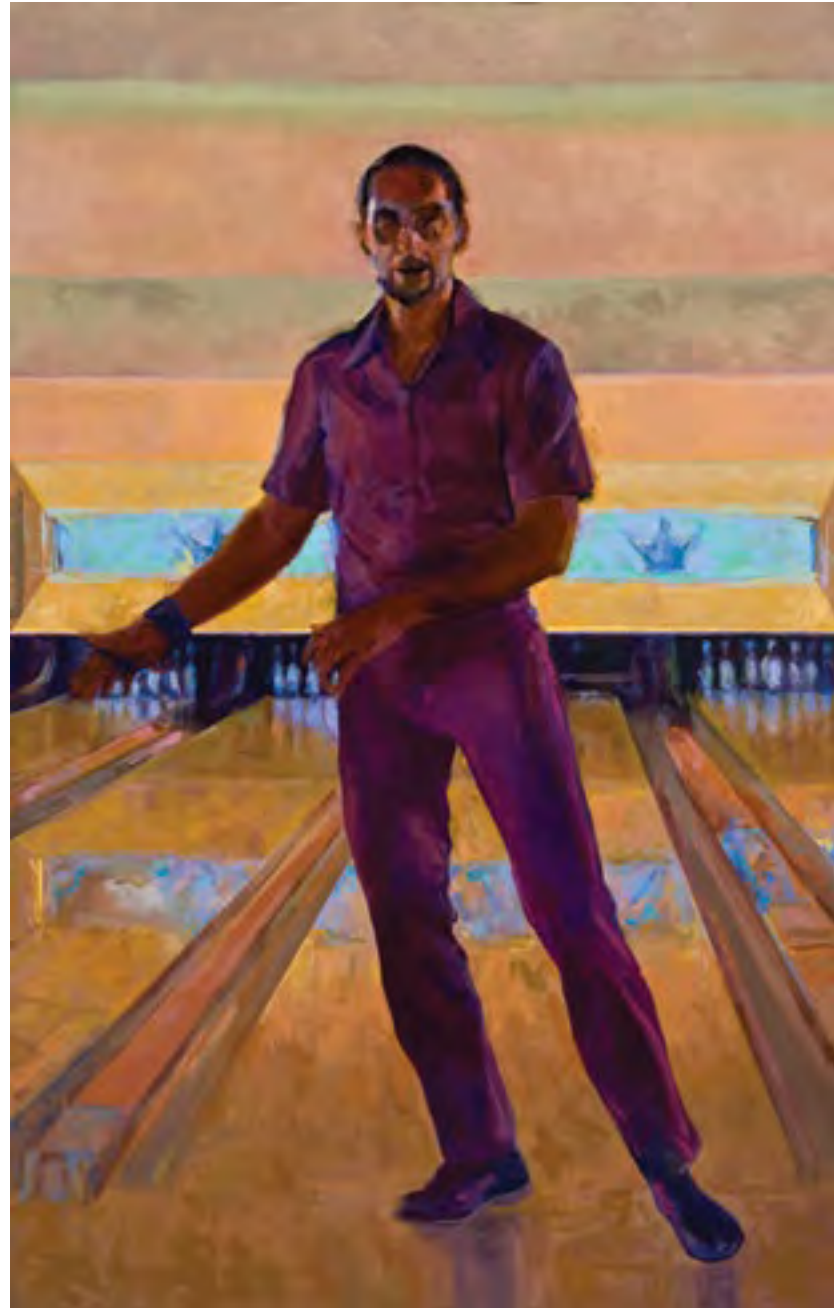


*The Death of Marat*  
Jacque-Louis David, 1793  
Oil on canvas, 64 x 50 inches  
Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels

*The Taking of Christ (after Caravaggio), 2009*  
Oil on linen, 72 x 40 inches



*The Taking of Christ*  
Caravaggio, 1602  
Oil on canvas, 52.6 x 66.7 inches  
National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin



*Jester*, 2011  
Oil on linen, 48 x 76 inches



*Portrait of Pablo de Valladolid*  
Diego Velázquez, 1636 - 1637  
Oil on canvas, 49.2 x 84 inches  
Museo del Prado, Madrid

*Sacred and Profane Love (after Titian), 2011*  
Oil on linen, 72 x 40 inches



*Sacred and Profane Love*  
Titian, c.1513 - 1514  
Oil on canvas, 46 x 110 inches  
Galleria Borghese, Rome





*Baptism of Christ (after Carracci), 2011*  
Oil on linen, 24 x 38 inches



*Baptism of Christ*  
Annibale Carracci, 1584  
Oil on canvas, 150.78 x 88.58 inches  
San Gregorio, Bologna



*Wanderer above the Sea of Fog (after Friedrich), 2009*  
Oil on linen, 80 x 48 inches



*Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*  
Casper David Friedrich, 1818  
Oil on canvas, 37.3 x 29.4 inches  
Kunsthalle Hamburg, Hamburg



*Supper at Emmaus (after Caravaggio)*, 2011  
Oil on linen, 96 x 38 inches



*Supper at Emmaus*  
Caravaggio, 1601  
Oil on canvas 55.5 x 77.25 inches  
National Gallery, London

*The Raft of the Medusa (after Géricault), 2011*  
Oil on linen, 84 x 144 inches



*The Raft of the Medusa*  
Théodore Géricault, 1818 -1819  
Oil on canvas, 193.3 x 282.3 inches  
Musée du Louvre, Paris

*Ecce Homo (after Guercino)* 2009  
Oil on linen, 72 x 40 inches



*Ecce Homo*  
Il Guercino, 1647  
Oil on canvas, 42.25 x 58.66 inches  
Alte Pinakothek, Munich



*Venus*, 2011  
Oil on linen, 72 x 50 inches



*Olympia*  
Édouard Manet, 1863  
Oil on canvas, 51.4 x 74.8 inches  
Musée d'Orsay, Paris



*The Agony in the Garden (after Carracci), 2011*  
Oil on linen, 76 x 48 inches



*The Agony in the Garden*  
Ludovico Carracci, c.1590  
Oil on canvas, 39.5 x 45 inches  
The National Gallery, London

*The Deposition, 2011*  
Oil on linen, 72 x 40 inches



*The Angels at Christ's Tomb*  
Édouard Manet, 1864  
Oil on canvas, 70.625 x 59 inches  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York





*The Lamentation (after Rubens)*, 2011  
Oil on linen, 72 x 40 inches



*The Lamentation*  
Peter Paul Rubens, 1614  
Oil on wood, 16 x 20.86 inches  
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

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**Flecker Gallery**  
Suffolk County Community College  
Ammerman Campus  
533 College Road  
Selden, NY 11784

[www.sunysuffolk.edu](http://www.sunysuffolk.edu)  
[www.fleckergallery.org](http://www.fleckergallery.org)

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