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These L.A. Artists are Exploring the Culture of Cults

Galerie spoke with artist Scott Benzel and curator Michael Slenske about #followme, now on view at the newly opened Desert Center

A portrait by Paul Verdell shows Kanye West donning a "Make America Great Again" hat

Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Desert Center/Los Angeles

September 11, 2018 By Colleen Curry

When *Galerie* asked artist Scott Benzel to describe “#followme,” a newly opened group show at [Desert Center Los Angeles](#), his response was “pop cult.” The phrase isn’t a flimsy attempt by Benzel, one of the exhibit’s 15 participating artists, to abbreviate “pop culture.” He’s describing the popular cults and other cases of devout, often ill-fated, followership, that the works in this show explore. The exhibition, curated by Michael Slenske, an arts writer and editor who opened Desert Center earlier this year, centers on themes of truth and deceit in an age

when social media has turned the concept of following and gaining followers into a daily ritual.

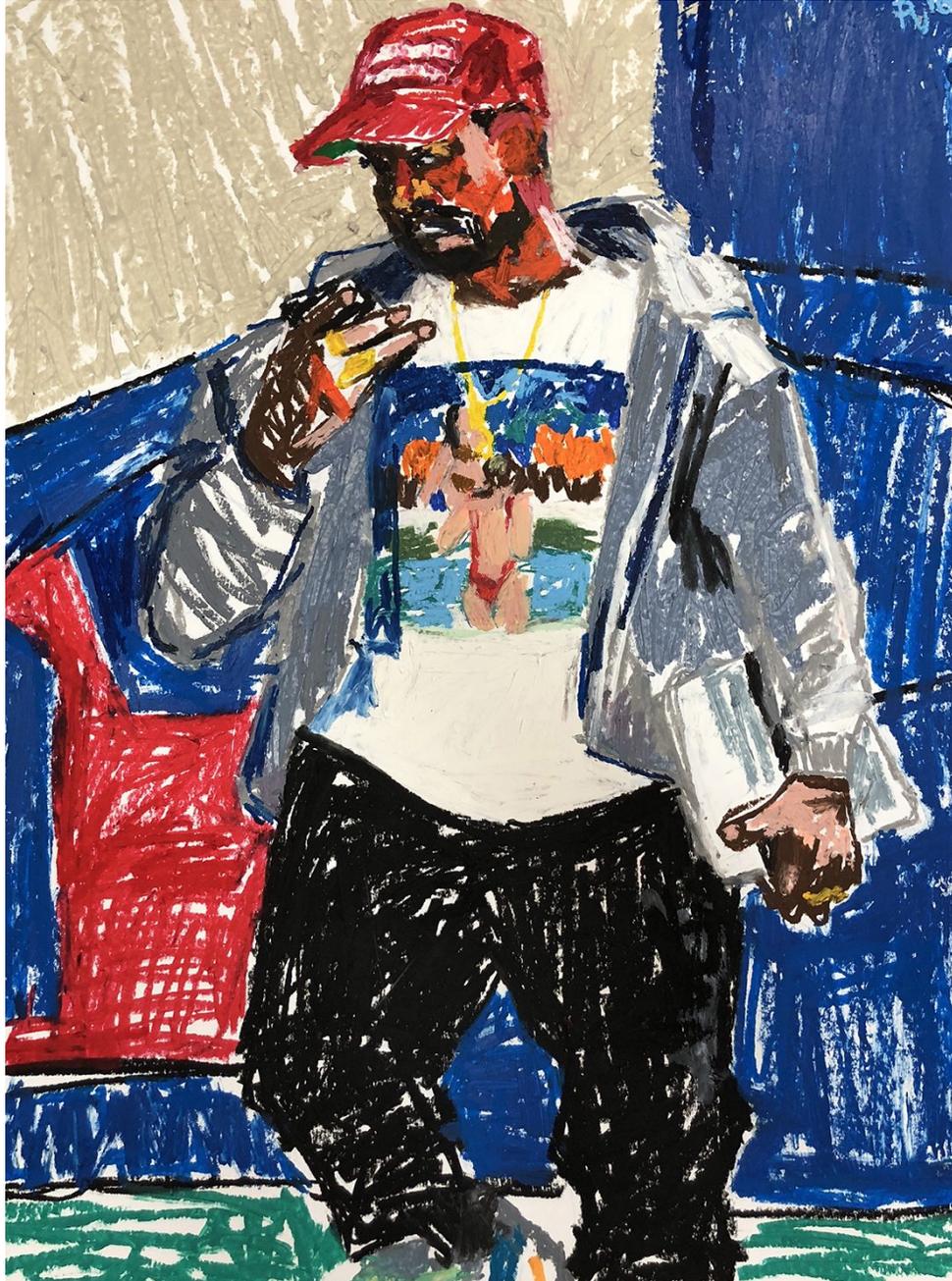
Enter [Benzel](#), whose work has always orbited cults, mythology, and collective identities. For “#followme,” Benzel presents a pair of counterfeit Nike sneakers that he acquired one day while poking around on Chinese knockoff websites. The sneakers, which were apparent replicas of Nike’s SB Dunks, had instant appeal to him. They harked back to a 39-person cult suicide that occurred in San Diego in the late ’90s, when all participants wore matching outfits, Nikes included.

“I had to have them immediately,” the artist said.



Objects from “V.I.T.R.I.O.L.,” a series by Benzel Photo: Scott Benzel

Also on display will be objects from Benzel's ongoing *V.I.T.R.I.O.L.* series, which celebrates the apocrypha surrounding the California Institute of the Arts, where he teaches. "There's a longstanding myth that the cryogenically frozen head of Walt Disney is kept in the sub-level of Cal Arts," Benzel explained, and an eerie three-dimensional interpretation of this has indeed made its way into "#followme" alongside vintage prints of John the Baptist, Orpheus, and other mythological victims of decapitation.



Oil pastel of rapper Kanye West by Paul Verdell Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Desert Center/Los Angeles

The one-dozen-plus artists who are joining Benzel at the Desert Center present all manner of cult interpretations. Sculptor **Steve Hash** is showing sculptures inspired by his childhood in rural Pentecostal community in Mississippi. **Paul Verdell** has created pastel paintings of Kanye West in a *Make America Great Again* hat, and **Robert Lazzarini** presents a painting of a pregnant Sharon Tate. The exhibit wraps up on October 6 at the Desert Center, located at 7466 Beverly Boulevard in Los Angeles.