

# TIBOR DE NAGY

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## ARTFORUM

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### Cary Leibowitz

At New Discretions and Tibor De Nagy

By David Colman



Cary Leibowitz, *Cry Me A Pineapple*, 2024, latex on wood panel, 57 × 31 × 1 1/2".

Art writing is a terrible way to make money. By and large, so is artmaking. Anyone who's good at math would tell you to at least apply some basic max-min logic to either process: Maximize your income while minimizing your output.

Of course, that's the kind of shortsighted cynicism people come to the art world to escape—or is it? You could argue it's one of our basic instincts. We have so many expressions in praise of winnowing—of separating the wheat from the chaff, skimming the cream off the top, filtering out the noise. And from these clichés we've distilled even more words: *sorting, screening, refining, purifying, condensing*, et al. The word *critic* comes to us from an ancient root that means “to sift,” and the word *tabloid* began life as a trademark for pills and soon became a synonym for newspapers with short, condensed, easy-to-digest articles—encapsulations, if you will (and you will).

Damien Hirst might have cornered the market on pharma-aesthetics, but for my money Cary Leibowitz has refined the skill of encapsulating art and meaning right down to the picogram. In a pair of shows at New Discretions and Tibor de Nagy, Leibowitz did what he does best by splicing together the simplest of shapes, the prettiest of colors, and the pithiest of aphorisms to create a kind of super-condensed pictographic language, an idiolectal lingua franca as fun and easy to read as a child's ABC.

In fact, aspiring art writers could do worse than study Leibowitz's cheeky, punchy, and mordant style, exemplified by the complementary (though not complimentary) titles of the two solo exhibitions, his first since Covid-19: at Tibor de Nagy “You Haven't Changed at All” and at New Discretions “You Really Let Yourself Go.” The shows were thronged with epithets and epigrams, mostly wistful and bemused. We saw plenty of tart flagellations, too—of Leibowitz himself as well as other artists and their audiences, or, more abstractly, of me, us, you, and them. They were like high-concept epitomes of Paul Lynde's epic zingers from *Hollywood Squares* (Q: “Paul, the great writer George Bernard Shaw wrote, ‘It's such a wonderful thing—what a crime to waste it on children.’ What was it?” A: “A whipping.”)

For the most part, the shows' forty-two pieces (twenty-eight at ND and fourteen at TDN) were executed in Leibowitz's trademark format: precision-cut wood panels in familiar shapes, emblazoned with the artist's *Laugh-In*-esque handwriting. They were all done in monochrome latex “straight out of the can,” according to the artist, the method a visual analogue of the playful candor that echoed throughout every work. Each piece was inscribed with its title: A baby-blue cutout banana from 2024 read CRY ME A PINEAPPLE. A two-tone half-capsule shape, also from 2024, read I'VE GOT SOMETHING VERY IMPORTANT TO SAY / SAY IT ALREADY. Complications were slight, as in the tweaked-out grade-school diptych *Coward/Chicken*, 2024: One red cutout of a cow featured the word CHICKEN in yellow, while a lemon-hued silhouette of a chicken read COWARD in green.

No doubt the very existence of such punctuated persiflages skipping colorfully and blithely around gallery walls might have seemed tone blind. Should Leibowitz be exercising his

wrists, wits, and wits in his familiar navel-gazing way, fiddling while home burns? For all their irreverence of politics—evidenced, for example by a 2022–23 sheepdog cutout that read VOTE FOR CAROL CHANNING—many of these deceptively “lite” works were subversive and deep, carrying coded, tragicomic, and contradictory messages. The artist had his first solo exhibition at Stux Gallery in New York thirty-five years ago—he was queer *avant la lettre* and cartoony *avant l’emoji*, making his extended-release formulations timeless. Laughter isn’t the best drug for everything, but we’re going to need a lot of it during this next phase of the apocalypse. Despite claims to the contrary, art doesn’t always have the best sense of humor. Thank god Leibowitz does.