

# M + B

## ARTFORUM

### Josh Mannis

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The rather beguiling title of Josh Mannis's exhibition "Zeal for the Law" interconnects what might otherwise seem to be a rather disparate body of work. Such an emphatic allusion to authority also invites appraisal of the artist's drawing, collage, and video work as successful citations of art-historical styles and provocative explorations of genre. His compilation of procedures, which hits all the right contemporary signifiers, emits a distinct whiff of le bon ton; yet, with equal aplomb, Mannis transgresses these very same aesthetic regulations.

For example, *The Law*, 2011, is a hanging tartan textile adorned with two safety pins, each fastening a gold-plated brass nipple from which an ample golden chain dangles to the floor. As this work cleverly explores the hybrid possibilities of painting, it is difficult to fathom whether Mannis is also evoking the symbol of Scottish nationalism, if not steampunk sexual fetishism. Across the room, the eight ink drawings of *Nadia Comaneci Generation*, 2011, partially incorporate the color palette of the Romanian flag in lines resembling the nation's 1976 Olympic leotard.



Josh Mannis  
*Zeal for the Law*, 2012  
still from a color HD video  
7 minutes 56 seconds.

Yet yellow and red, in Mannis's drawings, are joined by green rather than blue, and the exceptional gymnast named in the title—noted for scoring the first ever "perfect ten" in an Olympic event—here appears as a stout-legged creature with arms resembling crustacean claws. In a related work, *Nadia Comaneci*, 2011 (an ink portrait of the gymnast in wild abandon), the athlete's likeness has been punctuated by a newspaper image in which she appears an elegant waif.

In both tributes, Mannis has transformed perfection into the grotesque, a declassifying and degrading gesture continued in *Zeal for the Law*, 2012, a hypnotic video showing the artist barefoot, repeating a sequence of ritualistic movements to a sound track of industrial bass and a backdrop of streaming dark clouds. Wearing scruffy tartan pants (matching the tartan painting), a sleeveless white shirt that barely covers his paunch and the edges of his farmer's tan, an abundant blond wig, and a rubber mask painted white around the nose and mouth, Mannis manipulates the same golden chain that he subsequently worked into *The Law*, repurposing the "erect nipple" baubles as potentially sadistic knuckle rings. The artist whose corpulent body is a far cry from the fourteen-year-old Comaneci's lithe physique, follows the music's downbeat and, with each forceful stomp, makes hand signs to the camera, alternatively holding up one, two, three, or four fingers. In this performance, which scrambles codes of masculinity and femininity, Mannis animates the fiend that inhabits the law; it's Comaneci's inner drag queen if only she had been allowed to take a day off from training, go to art school, and wolf down a few hamburgers.

The exhibition's cumulative effect suggests that there is only a tiny difference between a passion for the law and bondage to it, or between earnest adherence to the rules and their perversion. Mannis suggests that, whether regarding the conventions of art or competitive sports, identity of the nation-state or constructs of gender, the law is fundamentally unstable. Paradoxically, of course, he also exploits an arsenal of well-honed contemporary strategies to communicate these ideals of misbehavior, as, for example, by transforming the surface of painting into kinky assemblage or using video as a space for the queering of identity. The frisson of transgression here treads carefully along the periphery of normativity though, pointing to the difficulty of ever truly operating beyond the rules. Given these limits, Mannis is most impressive in his video work, through which he embraces the simulacral as the very condition of the creative act. In ways that recall the work of artists such as Ryan Trecartin and Brian Bress, Mannis uses irreverent pastiche to reprocess the ciphers of contemporary experience and carve out an original image zone where new rules might yet be formulated. Yet he is also acutely aware that in an era when "acting out" is a democratic prerogative facilitated by such distribution platforms as YouTube and Tumblr, the gallery still functions as "the law" by sanctioning the name of art.