

VENUS OVER MANHATTAN

Press Release

MICHAEL KAGAN: POLE POSITION

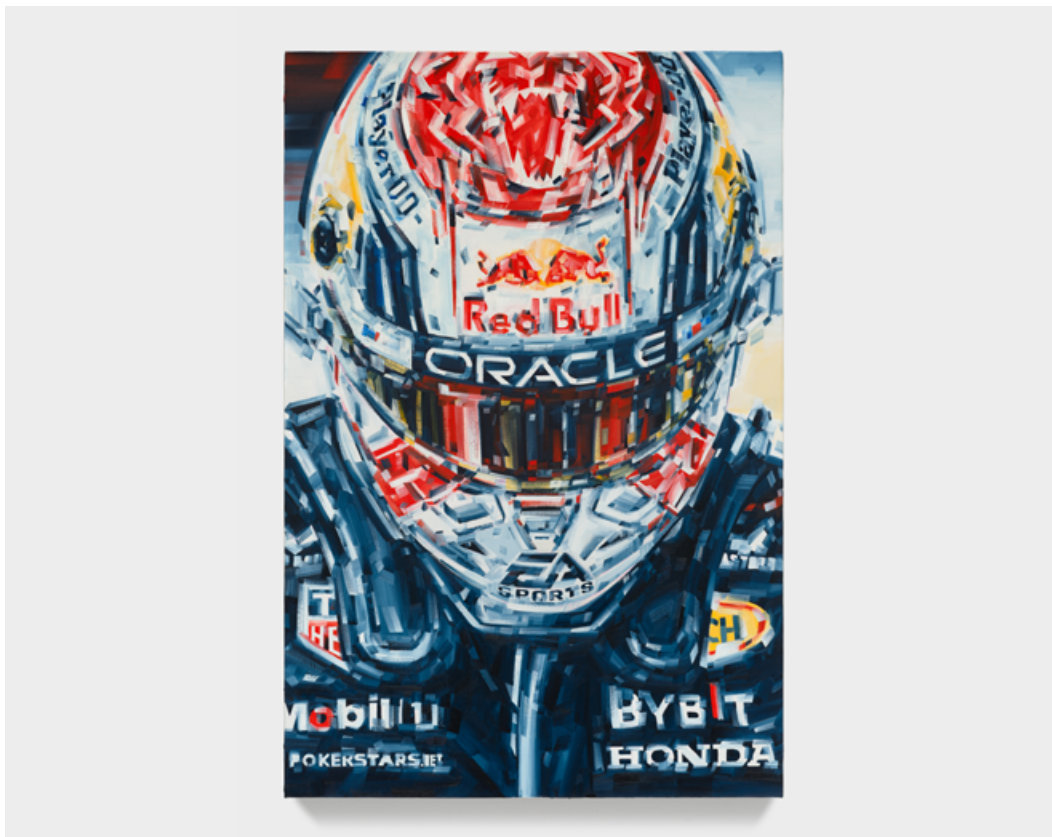
February 15 – March 9, 2024

Opening: Thursday, February 15th, 6:00 - 8:00 pm

Venus Over Manhattan

55 Great Jones Street

New York, NY 10012



(New York, NY) – **Venus Over Manhattan** is pleased to present ***Pole Position***, a solo exhibition of new paintings by artist **Michael Kagan**. *Pole Position* debuts Kagan's exhilarating Formula One portraits, a series which features racecar drivers and their machines. This work represents a significant shift for Kagan, diverging from the depictions of astronauts, spacecrafts, cockpits, and mountaintops which first brought him acclaim. The title, *Pole Position*, refers to the lead car on the starting grid, as determined by the fastest driver during qualifying races. Opening February 15, *Pole Position* will be on view at **55 Great Jones Street** through March 9, 2024.

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For a long time, the international world of F1 racing did not appeal to American audiences. They preferred motorsport events such as NASCAR and IMSA which are strictly domestic. In 2019, however, the release of the hit Netflix series *Drive to Survive* turned F1 racing into an American pop cultural hot spot. The television show explored the private lives and icy cool demeanors of F1 drivers, and audiences found their dauntless personalities magnetic. Now, alongside the major races in Abu Dhabi, Baku, and Istanbul, there are two new tracks in Miami and Las Vegas.

Reflecting on this burst of attention, Michael Kagan found inspiration in the racing giants and produced a set of heroic portraits, immortalizing these men into unforgettable and iconic imagery. He engages the spectacle of rapid celebrity, and his work interrogates the capricious nature of such fame. How, for example, could a sport have gained so much traction in the USA when there wasn't a single American driver? What does it mean for media giants like Netflix to hold so much power over public taste? Kagan's carefully rendered portraits—stylized with geometric brushstrokes and a mechanically cool palette—capture seven of the all-time greatest drivers: Lewis Hamilton (UK), Max Verstappen (NL), Fernando Alonso (ES), Sergio Pérez (MX), Charles Leclerc (MC), Kimi Räikkönen (FI), and Sebastian Vettel (DE); each work titled after the drivers' respective nickname (Mad Max for Verstappen, Billion Dollar Man for Hamilton). Kagan immortalizes these men at the peak of their celebrity, aligning himself with artists such as LeRoy Neiman, Paul Pfeiffer, Jonas Wood, Peter Doig, and Andy Warhol. Pfeiffer's recent MOCA retrospective centers on huge photographs of courts and stadiums; Wood's early career found obsession with basketball players and basketballs; Doig paints vast atmospheric tennis courts; and Warhol produced the famed series "The Athletes."

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To enter Kagan's exhibition is to be suddenly ensconced in the complex, and sometimes fiery, dynamics of F1 racing and rivalry. Hamilton's portrait sits mere feet from that of Alonso, his first racing partner and tense rival. Not far from that is the painting of Verstappen, whose title-breaking win in 2021 shattered Hamilton's previously held record. As an exceptionally specialized sport with only 20 drivers competing in 2023, Kagan is able to capture the scope of key players. The paintings dialogue across the space, reminding viewers of the charged and close-knit relationships between the drivers.

In all seven of Kagan's portraits, not one driver has their face showing; their visors are uniformly lowered. Instead, Kagan captures their identities through the branding, colors, and logos of their helmets. In the portrait of Hamilton, the distinctive "PETRONAS" logo stretches across the top of his visor—cut by shards of painted color. In the painting of Räikkönen, bright flashes of red, yellow, and blue triangulate to form the iconic patterns of his gear. In another, the abstracted growling tiger and Red Bull logo are clear insignias of Max Verstappen. Kagan's emphasis on the helmet is a reminder of the intense physical conditions that drivers endure, much like an astronaut's need for his suit. F1 engineers borrow technology from aviation, producing vehicles which—if they only had wings—accelerate fast enough to fly. Not only are Kagan's paintings a reminder of the technological brilliance behind racing but they are reminders of the immediate obsolescence that follows such rapid advancement. The second that a racecar crosses a finish line, its technology becomes obsolete. Kagan's subjects—space travel, racecars, aviation—are all fields which are constantly outdating themselves. In terms of both technology and celebrity, Kagan depicts a moment of glory before an eternity of nostalgia.

Kagan's technical prowess as a painter serves to augment the dynamism and high-octane nature of his subjects. He captures his images with rich, decisive, brushstrokes, maintaining an awareness of the paint while simultaneously creating the illusion of life. His paintings buzz with electric energy, evoking the adrenaline and emotion of a race. Pole Position speaks to a shift in cultural attention which is today enraptured by F1 racing, as it has previously been enthralled by the Space Race, the climb to the seven summits, and other valorous feats of mankind. Art has a legacy of reference to sport and spectacle that goes back as far as 450 BC, when Myron sculpted "Discobolus," an embodiment of the Greek veneration of the heroic human form. Kagan's portraits recall the sculptures of Ancient Greek Olympians, with discs and javelins swapped out for expertly crafted machines. Michael Kagan captures a seductive and adrenaline-fueled elixir of hypermasculinity, speed, and danger. His paintings are as dangerously captivating as the sport they immortalize.

ABOUT MICHAEL KAGAN

Michael Kagan (b. 1980, Virginia Beach) lives and works in Brooklyn, NY. He holds a BA from George Washington University and an MFA from the New York Academy of Art,

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where he completed an additional postgraduate fellowship in 2006. Kagan's work has been the subject of a great number of solo shows, including *Moonwalkers* at Almine Rech in Paris, France, and *I Was There When It Happened* at the Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art in Virginia Beach, VA. His work is held in many public collections, including Maki Collection in Tokyo, Japan; Hall Collection in Reading, VT, USA; Gemini Trust Company in New York, NY, USA; Founders Fund in San Francisco, CA, USA; and the Maezawa Collection, Chiba, Japan, among others. He has worked on a number of successful commercial projects, including a collaboration with Pharrell Williams, and an award-winning album cover for White Lies' album *Big TV*.

For further information about the exhibition and availability, please contact the gallery at info@venusovermanhattan.com

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39 Great Jones Street
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GALLERY HOURS

Tuesday – Saturday
11:00 am – 6:00 pm

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IMAGE CREDITS

Mad Max, 2023. Oil on canvas; 30 x 20 in (76.2 x 50.8 cm)

Billion Dollar Man I, 2023. Oil on canvas; 30 x 20 in (76.2 x 50.8 cm)

The Mexican Minister of Defense, 2023. Oil on canvas; 30 x 20 in (76.2 x 50.8 cm)

All images of works by Michael Kagn, courtesy the artist and Venus Over Manhattan, New York.