

Matthew Benedict
"Cuaderno de bitácora"

We would like to thank the MAI36 Galerie for collaborating with us on this exhibition.

Madrid, September 2025

MATTHEW BENEDICT: CUADERNO DE BITÁCORA

'Cuaderno de bitácora', the new exhibition by New York artist Matthew Benedict in Madrid, addresses a series of stories with nautical and coastal themes, as its title indicates. But beyond its obvious maritime connotations, the title also suggests a personal notebook, akin to a diary, into which the artist pours his memories, interests and fondness for history, mythology and literature. Ultimately, it is a pictorial diary.

Benedict 'writes' with his paintings, presenting us with fragments of an incomplete story that the viewer must reconstruct. It is the narrative drive that motivates him. His graphic, deliberately flat pictorial style supports this idea, with compositions reminiscent of 19th-century illustration or didactic painting. His gouache paintings on wood or paper are conceived as visual stories. In terms of documentation, Benedict works with archives, old photographs, testimonies and elements of American popular iconography, although his approach is far from purely documentary.

Provincetown is both the main setting and the conceptual axis that structures most of the works in the exhibition. This coastal enclave may not be familiar to the viewer due to its small size. Situated at the tip of Cape Cod, a long peninsula extending into the Atlantic from the New England coast, Provincetown is closely tied to Benedict's origins, as his ancestry is from that region.

However, Provincetown occupies a prominent place within both American history and the country's collective imagination, as we shall see. Today, it is renowned not only for its past as a fishing village and artists' colony, but also for embodying a convergence of eras and meanings.

In the 19th century, it began to attract painters and writers, and it eventually became the oldest artists' colony in America. In the 20th century, it welcomed playwrights and actors, and it is considered the birthplace of modern American theatre. Today, tourism is its main industry, and it is also a landmark for LGBTQ+ communities around the world, who find in this place natural beauty and social freedom. (Continues...)



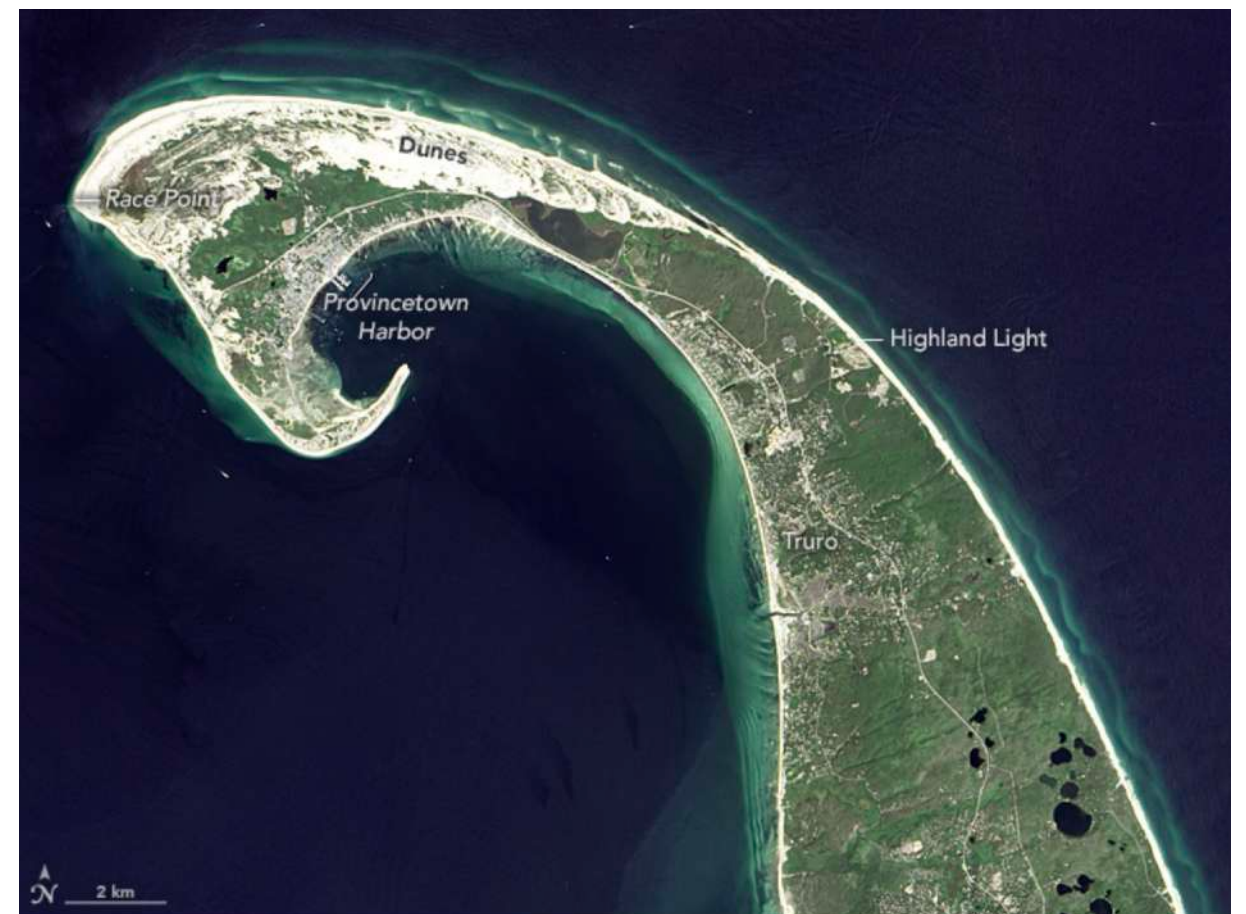
Throughout this exhibition, which comprises nine works, the history of America, familiar maritime landscapes, 19th-century legends, mythological beings, the ruins of coastal architecture and personal experiences intertwine. Mostly executed during the 2010s, some pieces are painted on wood, while others are sketches on paper for larger-scale projects that the artist never completed.

With this exhibition, Matthew Benedict returns to Madrid, fourteen years after his previous successful show with our gallery.

Madrid, September, 2025



Map of Cape Cod and detail of Provincetown Bay





PILGRIMAGE

2012

Gouache on wood

152 x 122 cm

This work refers to the history of the United States. It is a 'painting of another painting': it depicts a sign in Provincetown, Massachusetts, directing tourists towards the museum and monument dedicated to the 'Pilgrims'.

Built between 1907 and 1910, the 77-metre-tall Pilgrims Monument commemorates the arrival of the Pilgrim Fathers aboard the Mayflower in 1620. This religious group from England came to the New World in search of freedom of worship, which was denied to them in their homeland. By chance, they landed on these shores, where they found refuge.

The historical significance of the Pilgrims lies in the signing of the Mayflower Compact, a document widely considered to be the foundation of self-government in the United States. This episode has been elevated to mythical status within the American collective imagination and occupies a central place in the national narrative.

Through an image that appears trivial at first glance, and by playing on the double meaning of the title, Benedict alludes to one of the key milestones in the symbolic construction of American identity.



Current view of the sign



Historic photograph of the Billingsgate Lighthouse. 1822, U.S. Coast Survey photo.

The following panel depicts the lighthouse on Billingsgate Island, whose fate became inextricably linked to that of the island itself, which is now submerged and erased from maps.

Originally part of the Cape Cod Peninsula, Billingsgate gradually became separated from the mainland due to the action of the sea, eventually turning into an island. At its largest, in the mid-19th century, the island covered nearly 25 hectares and featured a lighthouse, built in 1822, to guide local sailors. However, the shifting sands and currents of Cape Cod set in motion a process that steadily undermined the island's stability. By the early 20th century, only six families remained, and the lighthouse, weakened by storms and unstable ground, began to lean until it finally collapsed in 1915. In 1942, the tides completely engulfed the island, officially marking its disappearance.

Yet, as its title suggests, this work reveals many other notable iconographic elements beyond the depiction of the lighthouse itself: The Ghost and the Serpent.

The Ghost refers to the solitary figure standing on the tower, whom the artist drew from an old photograph. This character, wearing a 19th-century top hat, was photographed fifty years earlier and has now returned as a ghost to witness the final moments of the lighthouse.



THE GHOST AND THE SERPENT
(BILLINGSGATE LIGHT, 1906)

2014

Gouache and latex on wood

122 x 152 cm



Historic photograph of the Billingsgate Lighthouse. U.S. Coast Survey photo.

The serpent is a recurring element in Benedict's work. Here, it refers to the legendary New England Sea Serpent, depicted slithering alongside the lighthouse. During the 19th century, this creature, reportedly measuring over 90 metres in length, was sighted multiple times by fishermen, sailors, whalers and scientists in the region, particularly in Provincetown in 1886, which attracted national attention. The mystery endured for many years, fuelled by imagination and legend, though it was never confirmed by scientific evidence.

Prominently inscribed in the upper area of the canvas are the Roman numerals XVI—a reference by the artist to the 'Tower' card from the Major Arcana of the Tarot. This card shows a tower on the verge of collapse and symbolises sudden rupture and the destruction necessary for transformation.

Ultimately, Billingsgate Island, and consequently the painting itself, is enriched by the popular legends and myths surrounding it. One of these tells of a condemned man who, at the moment of his hanging in Wellfleet, cursed the island, declaring: 'If you hang me, Billingsgate will be swallowed by the sea.' And so it happened.

Furthermore, the name 'Billingsgate' has an even older, more symbolic resonance, as it is associated with the myth of Atlantis. This sunken island thus becomes an emblem of lost territories, laden with history, memory and mystery. Evidence of the island can still be found today in old photographs, in houses that were once located there and were later moved to Wellfleet and the surrounding area, and in writings about the island, including Henry David Thoreau's book Cape Cod. Through his painting, Benedict too unconsciously contributes to preserving the memory of the island.

The work 'Razorfish Gang at the Central Wharf, 1912' is inspired by a historical photograph from the early 20th century. 'Razorfish' refers to razor clams, an abundant species in the region, whose elongated shells resemble old-fashioned straight razors. In Benedict's painting, a group of men can be seen extracting the meat from the clams, while piles of empty shells accumulate at their feet. These men were coopers, or barrel makers, who earned extra income during the winter months by harvesting these clams.



Property of the Mattapoiset Historical Society





RAZORFISH GANG AT CENTRAL WHARF, 1912

2014

Gouache on wood

122 x 214 cm





STRANDED BRIG

2013

Crayon on paper

49,5 x 65 cm

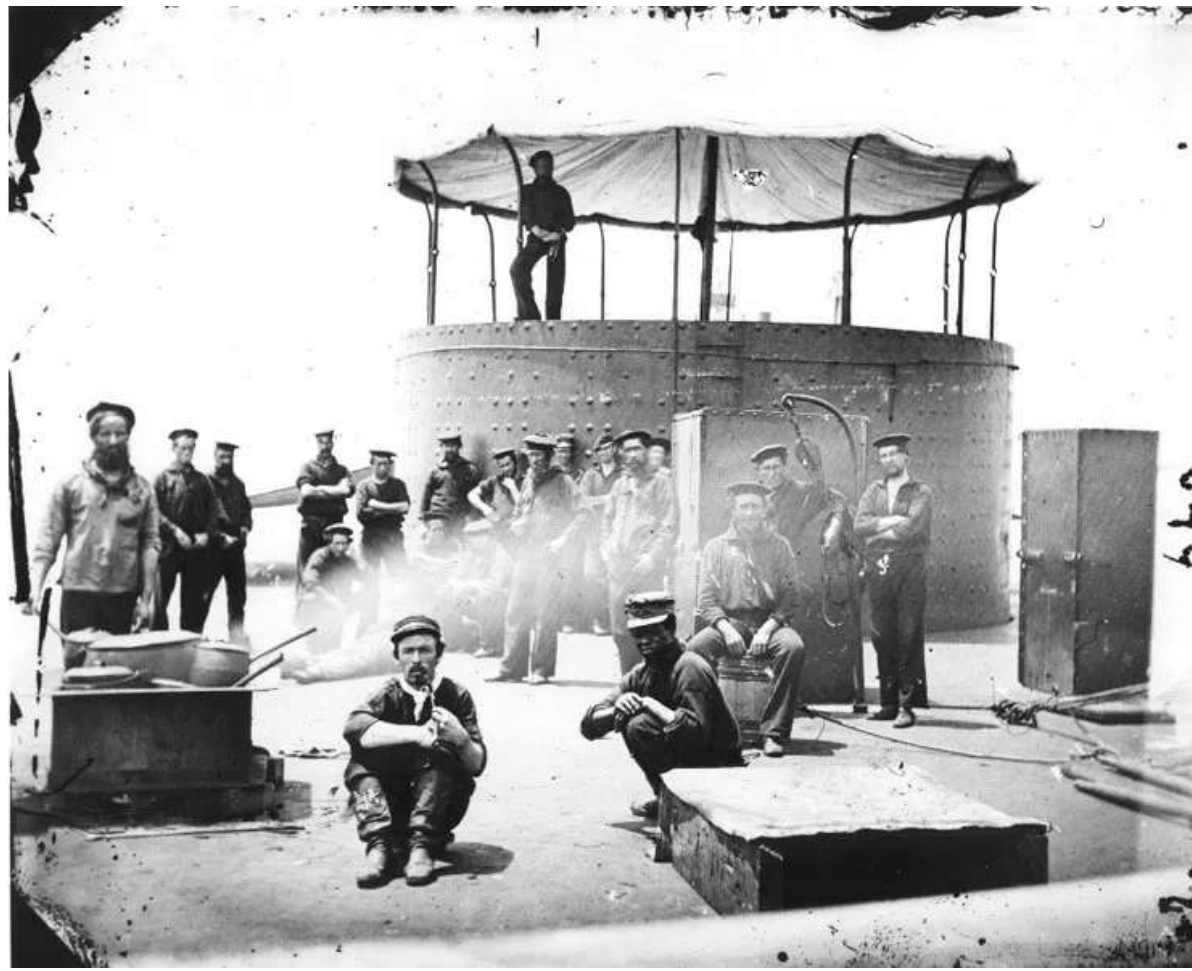


THE WHEEL OF FORTUNE

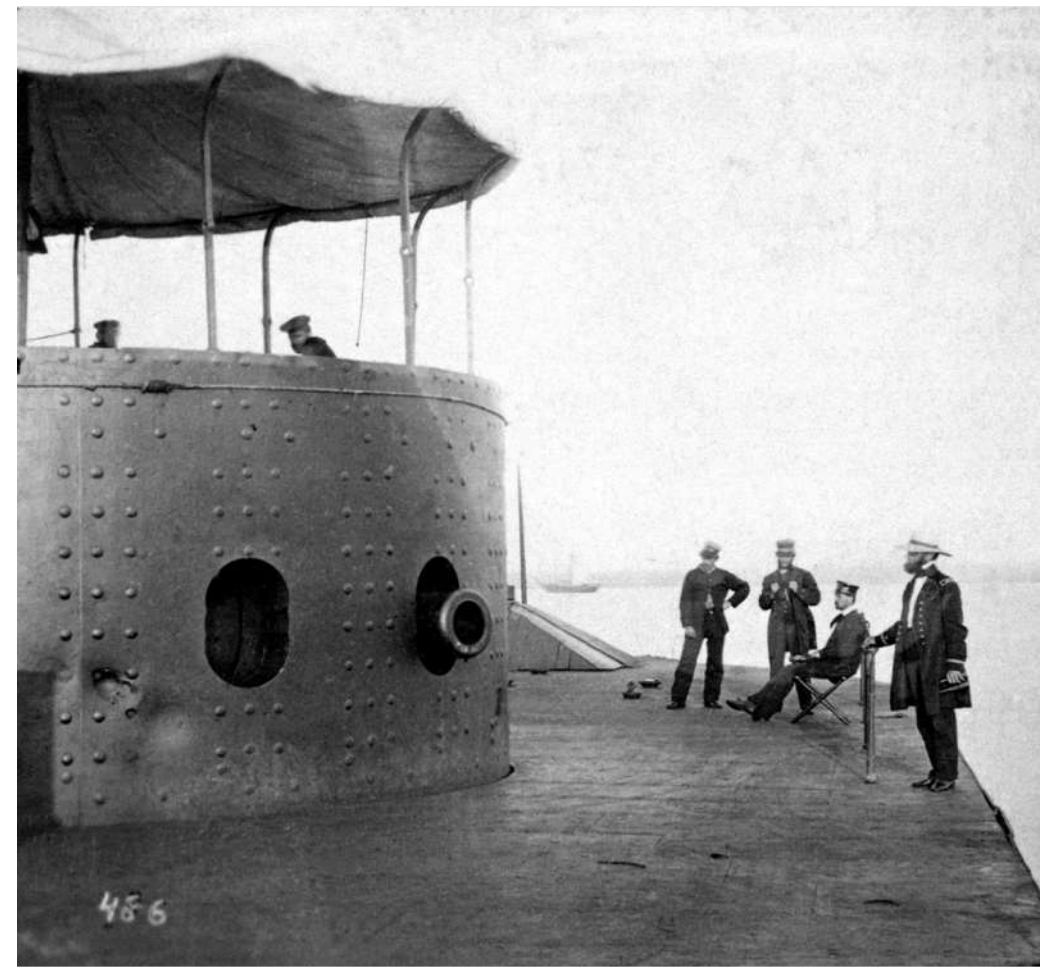
1995

Gouache on paper

54,5 x 74,3 cm



USS Monitor crewmen cooking
U.S. Naval Historical Center Photograph, Courtesy of Library of Congress)



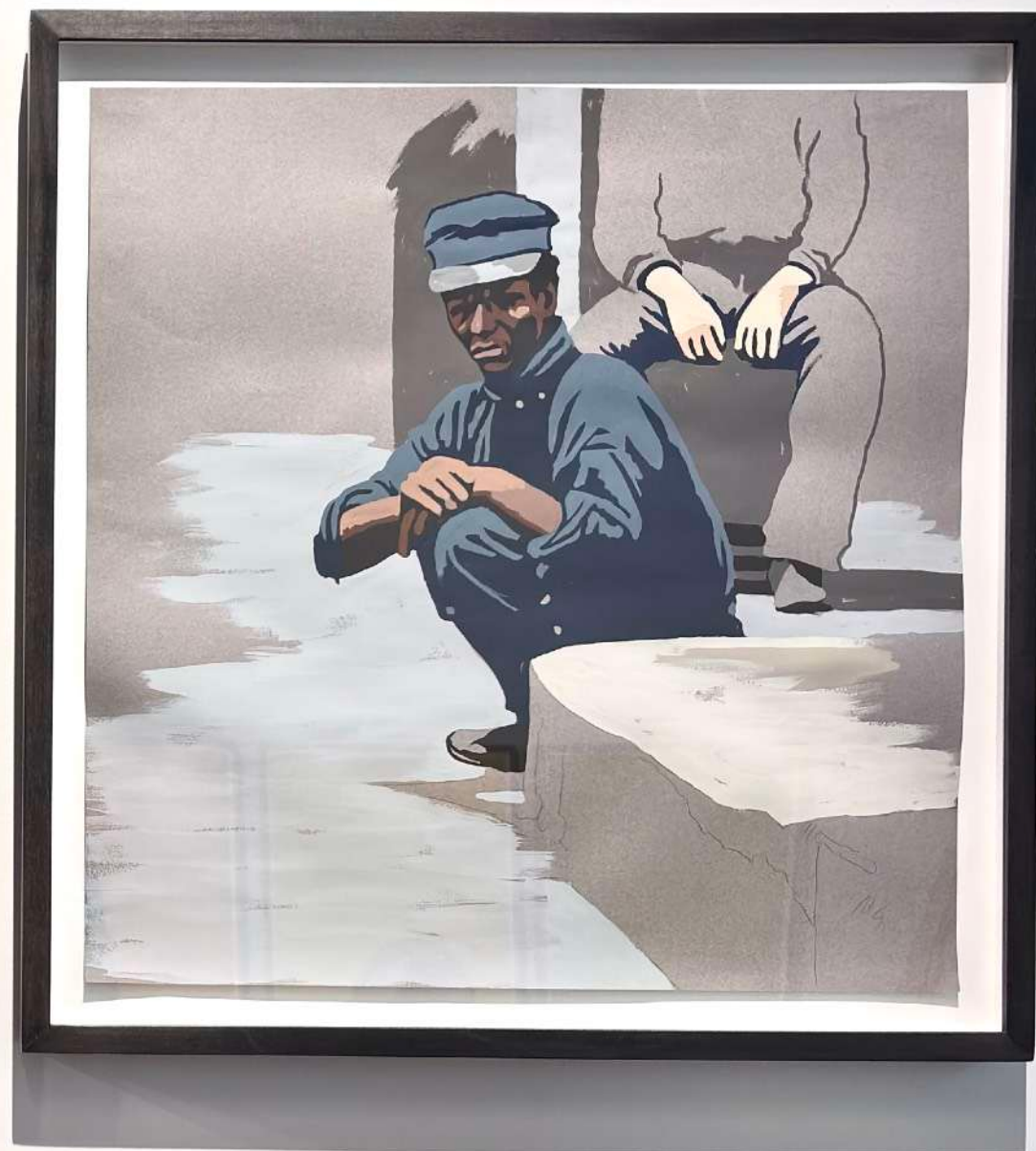
USS Monitor
U.S. Naval Historical Center Photograph, Courtesy of Library of Congress)

Both *The Lookout* and *Sailor* are studies for a large-format painting titled *The Sea Cook*, which Benedict completed in 2017. This piece is based on archival photographs of the ironclad warship USS Monitor and its crew. In this case, the reference is a photograph taken in July 1862 on the James River in Virginia (see left-hand image). The painting takes its title from the ship's cook, who is depicted on the left-hand side of the composition alongside several members of the crew.

The USS Monitor was a revolutionary ironclad warship – the first of its kind – distinguished by its innovative rotating turret. This design was quickly adopted, giving rise to the “Monitor class”: a type of armoured warship that the US Navy continued to build in the following decades. The ship occupies a significant place in naval history due to its involvement in the Battle of Hampton Roads in March 1862 during the American Civil War. During this engagement, the Monitor faced off against the Confederate ironclad CSS Virginia, marking the first battle in history between two ironclad vessels.

Tragically, in December of the same year, the USS Monitor sank during a storm, with sixteen crew members lost. The wreck was not discovered until 1974, and parts of the vessel have since been recovered and are now on display at the Mariners' Museum in Newport News, Virginia.

The USS Monitor holds personal significance for Benedict, as it was built in his neighbourhood of Greenpoint, Brooklyn, just a five-minute walk from his home and studio. It is the most famous ship ever constructed in Greenpoint, a neighbourhood that was once a major shipbuilding hub.



THE LOOKOUT
(Study for "THE SEA COOK")
2017
Pencil, gouache and spray paint
on paper
50 x 52 cm





SAILOR
(STUDY FOR "THE SEA COOK")

2016

Gouache on paper

64,8 x 49,8 cm

The town of Provincetown boasts a vast natural harbour with space for up to a thousand boats. It is also an excellent area for fishing. Dried cod was once one of the town's main industries. As depicted in the painting, large wooden fishing vessels would come right up to the sands of the urban beaches to unload tons of cod. Men would clean the fish in that same shallow-water area and then dry them in the sun on wooden racks set up throughout the town.



WASHING COD ON THE TOWN BEACH

2013

Gouache sobre madera

122 x 152,5

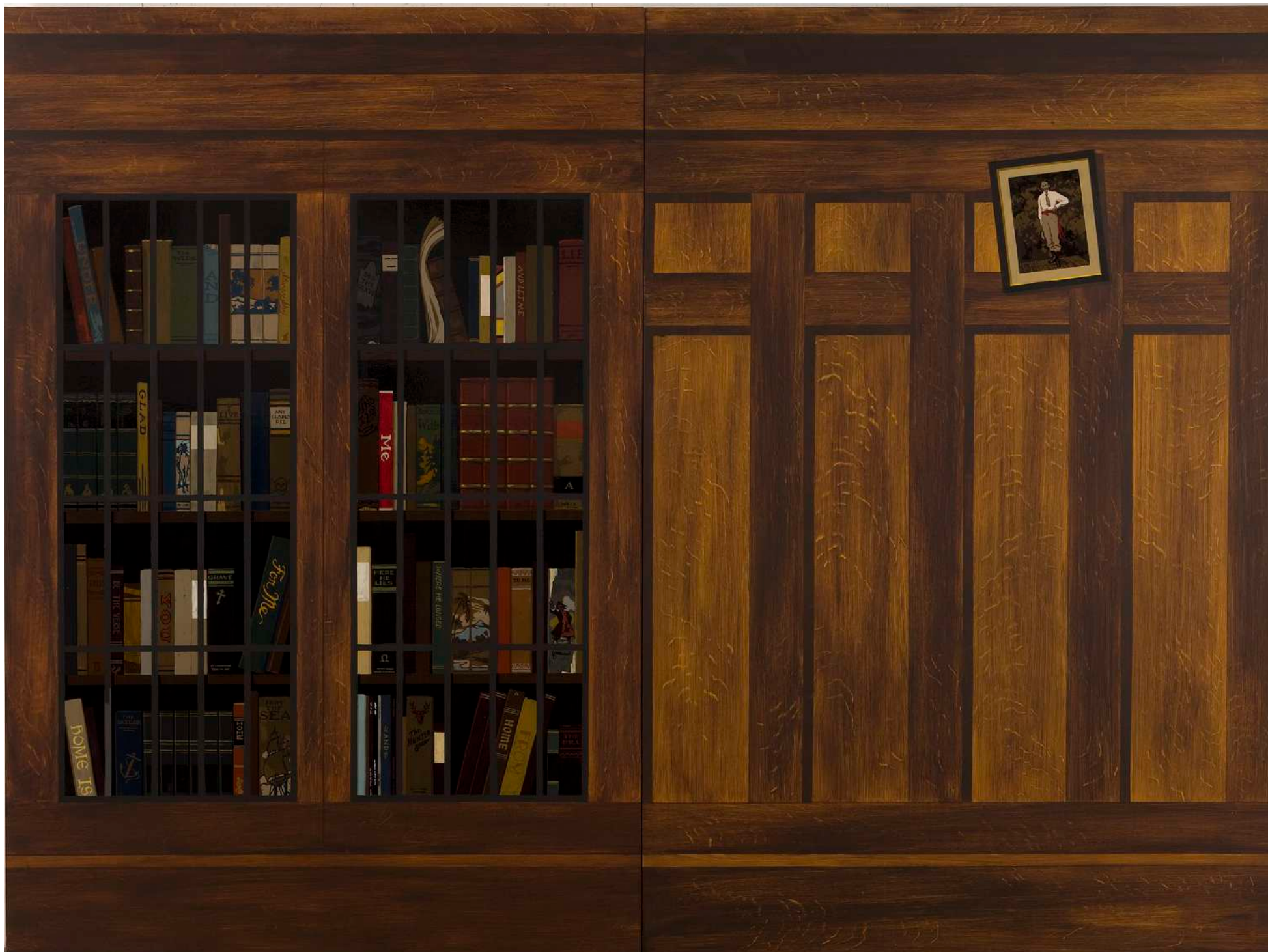




Photograph of cod drying racks on Commercial St. and Province St. in the 1890s. Photo courtesy of the Pilgrims Monument and Museum.

For centuries, commercial fishing has been the economic driving force behind the town of Provincetown. A number of parallel industries emerged around the cod fishing industry, turning Provincetown into a prosperous town. This included a large number of cold storage facilities, wharves, piers, shipyards, cooperages, sailmakers, fish oil processing plants and hardware stores. The salt industry also grew significantly, developing alongside the cod trade.





Courtesy of Mai 36 Galerie, Zurich

REQUIEM

2008-09

Gouache, acrylic, latex, dammar varnish on wood

Diptych 183 x 122 cm each part

Total: 183 x 244 cm

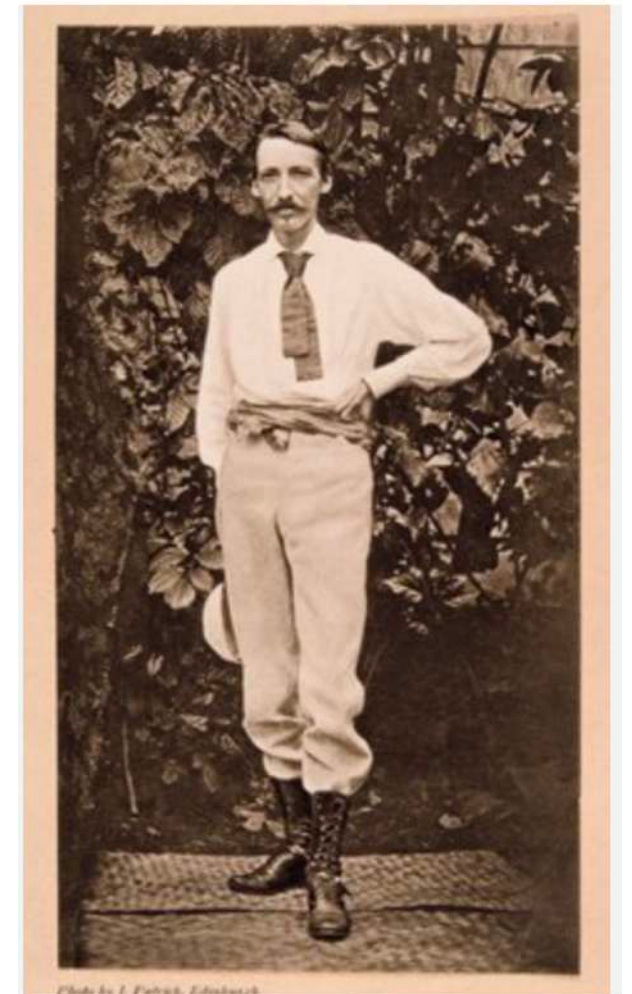
Under the wide and starry sky,
Dig the grave and let me lie.
Glad did I live and gladly die,
And I laid me down with a will.

This be the verse you grave for me:
Here he lies where he longed to be;
Home is the sailor, home from sea,
And the hunter home from the hill.

The Requiem diptych reveals a different facet of Benedict's interests, showing that he is interested in more than just history. In this case, it alludes to literature. An avid reader, Benedict counts Melville (*Moby Dick*) and Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–1894) among his favourite authors. This work is dedicated to the latter, who is renowned internationally for novels such as *Treasure Island* and *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.

Benedict takes the title from a famous poem that Stevenson wrote as his own epitaph. The piece is a trompe l'œil diptych depicting a wooden, glass-fronted bookshelf revealing the books arranged inside. Through the spines of the stacked volumes, Benedict reproduces the text of the poem 'Requiem', thus evoking the figure of the post-Romantic author.

On the right panel, Benedict incorporates a portrait of Stevenson based on a photograph taken in Samoa in 1890, just a few years before his death. This adds a more intimate and personal dimension to the work.



Robert Louis Stevendon, ca.1890, Samoa.

MATTHEW BENEDICT

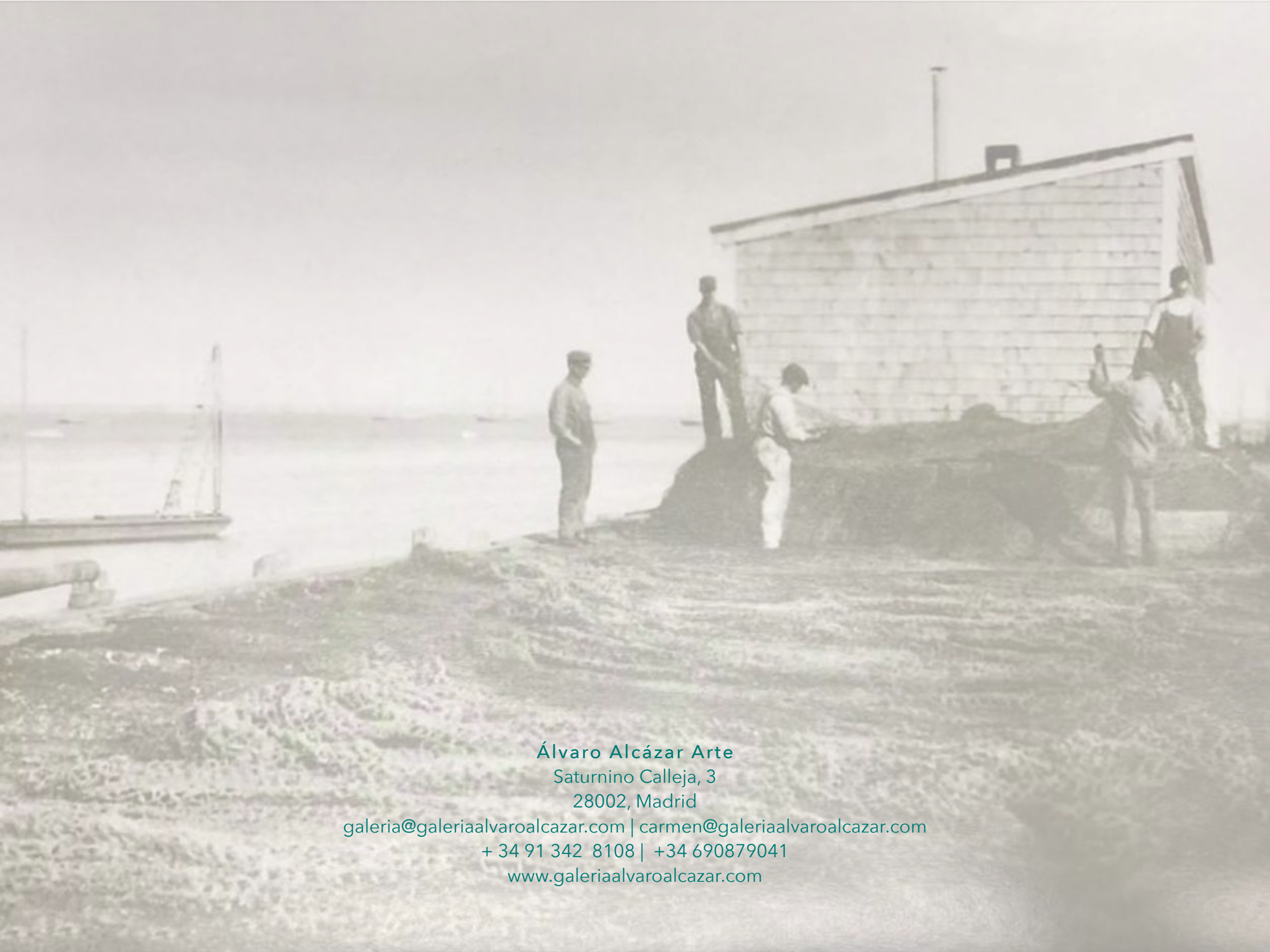
Rockville (EEUU), 1968

Matthew Benedict currently lives and works in Brooklyn, New York, a city where he has been exhibiting since 1993. He studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the New School for Social Research in New York.

Benedict is a multidisciplinary artist who works with a variety of media, including painting, illustration, photography, embroidery, and sculpture. This approach allows him to combine more conventional elements with those typical of the decorative arts, creating a unique aesthetic universe.

His work is situated within a tradition of realist figuration infused with touches of pop art. The characters in his works are strongly inspired by literature, mythology, and art history. The images Benedict creates gain new dimensions through contemporary portraits that invite us into a world full of mysteries and offer fresh interpretations of ancient myths and stories.

His works are held in permanent collections such as the Fonds Régional d'Art Contemporain de Picardie Hauts-de-France, the Dallas Museum of Art, the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), and the NASA Art Program in Washington, D.C.



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