

"Modern Love" Illustrator Brian Rea Doesn't Take Death Seriously

[SHANA NYS DAMBROT](#) | MARCH 5, 2019 | 6:00AM

[Brian Rea](#)'s paintings are built from words, hundreds of them, maybe thousands, nestled and nested and jostling against one another like oblong jigsaw puzzle pieces that click into place to form stream-of-consciousness cloud formations, like lists of therapy topics run through a perceptual shredder. Perhaps, as the illustrator of *The New York Times* "Modern Love" column, it's unsurprising that his personal visual art would tend toward a word-based drawing technique. And it's even more appropriate that Rea has, in addition to a robust studio practice, just published an original book of his own.

In *Death Wins a Goldfish: Reflections From a Grim Reaper's Yearlong Sabbatical* (Chronicle Books), Rea illustrates his own story, a cheeky and charming and secretly profound variation on the "Death Takes a Holiday" motif. It is revealed that Death is not a singular being but a role in a corporate job, like at an office, complete with a human resources department that enforces this particular Death's mandatory vacation days. Begrudgingly at first, Death soon warms over, as he engages in the charms of surfing, nature walks, beachcombing, dating... He runs with the bulls, he sings karaoke, he literally stops and smells flowers, he wins a goldfish at the carnival, he takes up painting.

Through it all, Death keeps a journal, and the reader enjoys his increasingly existential musings on the meaning of life, the preciousness of personal time and the fact that this sweet dark comedy is actually a cautionary tale for any human who falls into the rat-race pressure trap of working too hard.

While not at all a case of making the paintings Death might have made, in Rea's new exhibition of large-scale paintings and expressive preparatory drawings

opening this week, there is a sense that the works are the artist's corollary to the transformative self-examination his book's main character undertook. "[Islands](#)" inaugurates CMay Gallery's new Wilshire Boulevard location on Friday night, with paintings that tell their stories even without pictures. The works go beyond the hand-lettered words and phrases that form the fractal vignettes of Rea's micro-narratives, to also serve as physical exercises in mark-making. As such, the paintings communicate both with and beyond their words.