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**MATRIX 178 Premieres Sam Messer’s Newly-Completed Animation “Denis the Pirate”
at Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art**

Hartford, Conn. (Sept. 28, 2017) – New York artist Sam Messer’s animation “Denis the Pirate” is the centerpiece of the 178th installment of the MATRIX contemporary art series at the Wadsworth Atheneum. The 11-minute film—made in stop-motion utilizing more than 1,700 of Messer’s etchings and drawings—recounts poet and novelist Denis Johnson’s (1949–2017) tale of the eponymous pirate’s epic adventures. Actor Liev Schreiber narrates the story, which is set to a score contributed by musicians Sarah Neufeld (from the band Arcade Fire) and Colin Stetson, and was edited by Russell Yaffe. In MATRIX 178 related sculptures, paintings and 140 of Messer’s etchings and copper plates that were used in the film complement the animated piece. MATRIX 178 opens Oct. 5, 2017 and is on view through Feb. 11, 2018.

Messer’s “Denis the Pirate” is rooted in the mid 1990s, when the artist and his longtime friend Denis Johnson participated in the Moonhole Artist Residency in Bequia, a little known Caribbean island in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Their families also attended. In response to the rustic island setting, Johnson wrote “Denis the Pirate” for his goddaughter, Messer’s daughter Josephine. About six years ago Messer decided to animate the story, a project that crossed numerous disciplines as it grew in scale and scope. Messer is best known as a portrait painter with a tendency toward the surreal—he was appointed senior critic at Yale in 1994 and associate dean and professor (adjunct) at the Yale Art School in 2005; he is also director of the Yale Norfolk School of Art. For this project, he turned to a wide variety of techniques including aquatint, hard and soft ground etching and his own open bite technique to erase history on the etching plate. The resulting body of prints gives the stop-motion film an old-fashioned, rough

quality. Imagery elaborating on Johnson's original words includes a dream sequence with a diverse selection of iconic figures of religion, literature and music in the form of Jesus Christ, Buddha, Moses, Walt Whitman, James Brown, William Shakespeare and Elvis Presley. "Denis the Pirate" will screen continuously in the MATRIX program's Bunce Gallery, behind a wall gridded with 140 of Messer's etchings and plates, reaching from floor to ceiling and wall to wall. The installation also includes four paintings and three sculptures depicting characters from the film, each titled with a line or key word from Johnson's poems.

"Denis the Pirate" is not Messer's first collaborative work—he has worked with writers Paul Auster and Jonathan Safran Foer in addition to other endeavors with Denis Johnson, primarily on publications combining his visual material with the words of those writers. He created art for Hollywood films, including Julie Taymor's "The Tempest" (2010), Kathryn Bigelow's "The Miraculous Year" (2011) and Darren Aronofsky's "Noah" (2014), and has collaborated with fellow visual artists including Kiki Smith and the famously reclusive Jon Serl. With Serl, Messer created approximately 50 paintings and a publication titled "One Man by Himself: Portraits of Jon Serl by Sam Messer" (1995); Messer's final painting in the series, a double portrait of the two artists titled "Next" (1994), is in the Wadsworth Atheneum's collection. "Sam's artmaking incorporates a social practice, which comes naturally to the artist. It lays the foundation for collaboration and rich, multidisciplinary projects like 'Denis the Pirate,' his most complex undertaking to date," says Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art Patricia Hickson.

Public Programs

Sam Messer will give a gallery talk Oct. 5 at 6 p.m. during the museum's "Art After Dark" event, and curator Patricia Hickson will give a MATRIX 178 gallery talk Oct. 20 at noon. Writer Jonathan Safran Foer will join Messer for a screening of "Denis the Pirate" on Nov. 15 at 6 p.m. followed by a discussion about artistic collaboration. For more information visit thewadsworth.org.

Exhibition Credit

Major support for MATRIX 178 has been provided by the National Endowment for the Arts. The MATRIX program is generously supported in part by Jeffrey G. Marsted and Marcia Reid Marsted and the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art's Contemporary Coalition. Support for the Wadsworth Atheneum is provided in part by the Greater Hartford Arts Council's United Arts Campaign.

About the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art

Founded in 1842, the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art is the oldest continuously operating public art museum in the United States. The museum's nearly 50,000 works of art span 5,000 years, from Greek and Roman antiquities to the first museum collection of American contemporary art. The Wadsworth Atheneum's five connected buildings—representing architectural styles from Gothic Revival to modern International Style—are located at 600 Main Street in Hartford, Conn. Hours: Wednesday – Friday: 11 a.m. – 5 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday: 10 a.m. – 5 p.m. Admission: \$5 – 15; discounts for members, students and seniors. Free admission for Hartford residents with Wadsworth Welcome registration. Free "happy hour" admission 4 – 5 p.m. Public phone: (860) 278-2670; website: thewadsworth.org.

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