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From "All Walks of Life: Seven Artists on Painting Today"



Installation view, All Walks of Life, Dec 15, 2023 – Jan 18, 2024, Pace Gallery, Hong Kong. Photo: Cow Lau.

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HONG KONG. - On the occasion of our presentation of All Walks of Life, a vibrant group exhibition on view at [Pace](#) Hong Kong gallery through January 18, 2024, we spoke with each of the seven artists featured in the show: Anthony Cudahy, Katja Farin, Aubrey Levinthal, Laurent Proux, Daisy Sheff, Sarah Slappey, and Fabian Treiber. In these new interviews, the artists discuss their formal and conceptual interests as well as their new and recent paintings on view in the show. Meditating on the nuances and subjectivities of everyday life, this ongoing exhibition, organized by independent curator independent curator William Zhao, offers a focused look at contemporary painting while also exploring what it means to be an individual, both bodily and spiritually, in the present moment.

Anthony Cudahy: I like to play with notions of portraiture and figurative work, and the figures in my paintings are often allegorical or narrative, like a puzzle. Sometimes I've painted certain people several times each—like my husband and some friends, like Alex, who's in the painting in the Pace show in Hong Kong—and that multiplicity is interesting to me. Those different iterations become sort of like meta portraits, so that one single painting doesn't have to carry the burden of revealing the person's soul. This process about creating iterations of memories, too. My practice, in general, is very referential, so poses from photographs I've found or from other paintings might be reenacted or recreated across these different portraits.

Painting is a very self-referential medium, and I think that's what a lot of painters are interested in. We communicate with and are inflected by the work of past artists, and those works, which carry their own cultural and historical associations, can also be changed when you reference or work through them. It becomes a very active process.

Part of my practice involves collecting and alluding to images—specific painters or paintings that I'm thinking about a lot, or other times it's just images that catch my eye. They could be news images, Instagram posts, or images from specific photography archives, which I've worked with a lot. I have file folders everywhere and my computer drives are full of collected images. The painting of Alex on view in All Walks of Life is a good example of how this process works. I had inklings of an idea for a painting based on a photograph by Samuel Fosso in which the figures' hands are perfectly touching the bottom of the image. I felt that that moment of contact had a lot of narrative potential, so that's where the seed of this painting began. It's a loose reference or association, and that's usually how I think about other images.

So, as I mentioned, the position of the hands in my painting in Pace's exhibition—which is of my boyfriend Alex—is important to the composition, and I also wanted there to be this branch of a tree that's arching over Alex. I think that branch creates this very stable, protective environment. Everything is kind of nestled in and held, I think, in a very tender way.

I'm interested in having an open-endedness to my work. I'm thinking through really specific life events or ideas or concepts and trying to find a way to narrate them. There's this sort of tightrope walk between not want to be so specific that there's only one reading of a work, but also wanting a distinct feeling or effect or mood to come through. I explore the edges of narrative in subtle ways like playing with composition or the way paint is applied—those muddled spaces that have so much potential for meaning.

Katja Farin: A lot of my work investigates the unconscious mind and the way it works, and I try to depict that through the figures in my paintings. My two works on view at Pace in Hong Kong are both investigations of trauma responses, of how we protect ourselves and harm ourselves in that process. My work is really about emotions—how we deal with them and how other people affect us.

I really enjoy the ways we can look at paintings and put ourselves into the scenarios we see, and there's definitely an ambiguous quality to my work. It plays into the nihilism of our culture at the moment—this simultaneous care and nonchalance that we experience because everything going on around us is so overwhelming.

There's also ambiguity with gender in my paintings. As a trans person, that's very important to me, and, in my work, gender is an open-ended experience. It doesn't have to be so tight and closed. There's a lot of ambiguity and anxiety within the figures themselves—their poses and faces can be sort of dissociative. It's like they're all kind of lost within their own selfhood, or their selfhood is moving around them and they're not connecting to it. There's always an anticipatory feeling in the work, like the other shoe could drop at any moment. I don't think of my work as depicting reality—I'm depicting feelings, and my use of color really plays into those depictions of emotions and a sense of un-reality in the scenes.

I create narratives in my paintings that aren't bound to a real storyline or timeline—they're suspended in space a bit. The works are kind of like narrative puzzles, and the viewer is tasked with figuring things out and putting all the different details together. They're kind of like stage sets with scenes forming and unfolding in real time through the actions of these flattened figures. That idea of external performance versus internal life is a central concern of my figurations.

When I'm painting, I start with a basic idea or basic drawing, and then I go from there. Over time, I realize there's even more meaning in that initial idea—it builds throughout the process of making the work. In Lost Keys, which is in the Pace exhibition, the figure is running away from a fire, but it's unclear if they started the blaze or if they're escaping it. It's this activated fight or flight response in which the figure is maybe thinking, "I'm burning bridges and I'm not even going to look back. I don't even care anymore. I'm moving on." When I was making Missed Shot, my other painting in the show, I was thinking about this idea of self-medicating and leaving your physical body as a result. There's a sense of euphoria but also of looming danger before the dart is thrown by the blindfolded figure. The dynamics between the figures in that painting are also really interesting to me—who's paying attention to what's going on around them and who isn't.

Aubrey Levinthal: For me, making paintings is about responding to my visual world. What I'm seeing out there becomes shapes and colors in my paintings. The meaning and the more poetic content of my work comes from that experience. So, I don't know if my focus on these everyday, intimate moments is a choice so much as where I just constantly find myself arriving at again.

I'm interested in allowing real and imagined scenes to mix together. Meal Cart, one of the paintings I'm showing in All Walks of Life, is pretty referential and direct—I was on a plane and thought it would be an interesting scene to paint, and so wrote the idea down in my sketchbook and then went back to the studio to try to make the painting. Campus (Snow), on the other hand, didn't stem from a visceral, one-off experience. It's more of an accumulation of memories of being on college campuses at different times, along with books that I love, like The Secret History by Donna Tartt, that take place in those settings. I've been thinking a lot about those kinds of public spaces as subjects for paintings lately.

Living in Philadelphia, industrial grays and silvery shimmers are the backdrops for the experiences I have, so those colors have really made their way into my palette. I always gravitate towards these kinds of grounding neutrals, and I think that helps make small moments of brightness sing—like in Campus (Snow), there's a bright pink moment that emerges within this composition of mostly neutrals. That's something that I continue to find interesting and challenging in making a painting.

I do feel like my paintings often have something that feels a little off. Generally, they all tend to be about a person who lives in their own head a lot and who has to reconcile that tendency with also existing in the physical world. I've been trying to make paintings about solitude as opposed to loneliness—about the different ways that being a person can feel in both interior and exterior worlds.

I don't set out to make narrative paintings at all, but I've always been drawn to figuration because it lets you wonder about those pictured and their surroundings. I like that curiosity, though I don't want to tell one story. I want the works to be open and not so linear, without closing off the possibility for links between different compositions.

I like that there's some variety in the temperatures and moods of the three paintings I'm exhibiting at Pace in Hong Kong, and this group of works also kind of exemplifies that idea of living in your own head. I've made a lot of work about my own spaces and my experiences in my house, and Night TV, which shows a woman at the edge of a bed, is sort of representative of that. The other two paintings reflect my more recent interest in depicting shared but still intimate spaces, like schools or airplanes. You're more aware of yourself, in a certain way, in those kinds of places. You can almost invent a different, very controlled version of yourself for a few hours.

Laurent Proux: I create my large-format paintings using traditional techniques, and my works depict bodies or fragments of bodies in natural surroundings or social spaces. I often start by thinking about embodied or bodily experiences at work—in factories, offices, or even art studios. I'm also concerned with what happens to the body outside or after work, when we're in different settings and perhaps more at ease. The idea of the human body as a machine-generated entity has emerged from these lines of thinking in my work. The body forms the architecture of my paintings—it's the body of a giant, the body of a fallen colossus.

Figures in my paintings are desperately seeking to re-establish and renew their relationship with the ground after having been torn from it and subjected to acts of violence. Often, their eyes are half-closed, as if they're trying, in a kind of somatic way, to pull themselves together and regain their strength. Or perhaps they find themselves in an embrace, as if they're experiencing an emotional reunion after a war, for example. Obviously, these scenes are fictitious, and the figures are, of course, simply marks on the surface of the canvases. The real "body" is that of the viewer, and what really interests me is their experience of the work. I'm always pushing towards the surface of my canvases and trying to cultivate some kind of bond or empathy between the figures and the viewer.

I draw inspiration for these figurations from my everyday experiences, very often from encountering people on public transportation. I always have my sketchbook on hand, or sometimes I use my phone to take pictures of various scenes. I seek out small gestures, languid attitudes, and moments of anger or abandon, which I quickly draw in my sketchbooks. I love to adopt the role of storyteller through painting, evoking history painting through the scale of both my figures and the canvases themselves. Many of the scenes I paint are absurd, and they often feature accidental and erotic elements. I never set out with a specific idea in the beginning of my process—instead, my arrangements of figures and materials evolve in a more organic way.

The two paintings I'm showing at Pace in Hong Kong—Constantine's Dream II and The Storm II—are very different sizes and they were made in different ways, but they share the same subject: the nuances and ambiguities of human relationships. The landscapes in both are simple and sparse, a kind of desert environment. We see the figures in each of the works from ground level, and it's implied that there's a lot going on beyond the edges of the canvases.

These works are inspired by the colossal remains of a statue of the emperor Constantine in the courtyard of the Palazzo dei Conservatori in Rome, next to which Philip Guston poses in a well-known photograph, and Piero della Francesca's fresco The Dream of Constantine in the Tuscan city of Arezzo. With The Storm II, I was also interested in interplays of lovers' hands, attracting and repelling each other, that I observed on the subway.

In both works, there's a domineering and disquieting figure whose face is unknown to the viewer. As viewers of these paintings, we find ourselves looking from a child's point of view. The figures on the ground may seem vanquished, yet, in each of the works, there is contact between hands, feet, and calves. This silent, ambivalent gesture raises several questions: Are the hands pleading for mercy? Are they accepting their fate? Or is this an expression of love?

Daisy Sheff: I'm someone who's always making stuff. I make paintings and sculptures—a lot of my paintings have a sculptural quality, and the sculptures have painterly details. There are also a lot of handmade, craft elements to my work. Exploring and mistake-making are central to the process—that freedom is really important.

I read a lot and I watch a lot of movies, so a lot of the things that inspire me have characters and narratives. Movement between figuration and abstraction is important in my work. I also really lean into color blocking, patterning, and other decorative and design aspects.

I'm definitely attracted to mythological and fantastical characters, and I always like when the world becomes magical through human eyes. I love the freedom to make connections between shapes and colors, which leads me to find faces and other recognizable forms in unlikely places.

My works are both fictional and personal. My dog sometimes appears in my paintings and, living between LA and the Northern California, I've also been inspired by scenes I encounter in nature. The imagery in my work isn't hyper-specific to my life, but it is informed by my experiences and my surroundings to some degree. My paintings really unravel and reveal themselves over time, and you can spend a lot of time looking at different details and clues. Something that looks like a face to me might look abstract to someone else.

I made the four paintings I'm showing at Pace in Hong Kong at different times. There's a lot of mixed media in these works and I see oil, exploration going on, so those formal connections between them that I think there's a consciousness naturally. You'll lot like oil, glitter, embroidery, chains, and other materials in these pieces, so I just kind of happened of the fabric-ness of painting that cuts across all four of my works in the exhibition.

Sarah Slappey: Growing up in the American South, I had experiences of imposed gender norms—of bows, of bobby pins, and other instruments—and I remember feeling like, "I know that this is how it goes." But I also felt a separateness to it, wondering as an adult, when I reflected on it, how these rules function and create this undercurrent in our society. For me, the things that are really ingrained in our culture—the quiet, sacred, furtive things—are the most interesting areas to explore. When I was making the paintings I'm showing in All Walks of Life, I was thinking, without projecting too much, that there could be some kind of sisterhood in that experience across geographic borders.

I don't think of my work as portraiture because I feel portraits are so personal—they're about the subject, not the viewer. I think that my fragmentary figurations of limbs and other body parts can make the viewer feel much more like they're looking at their own body. When they're looking at my paintings they see pieces of a body, and there's that sense of looking at pieces of yourself as you move through the world. I think that fragmentation also takes my work into a world of the abstract that I find more emotionally resonant than portraiture.

Our own conceptions of our bodies are influenced by external forces, so my interest in distortion and contortion is kind of paying homage to the surrealness—or unreality—of what a human body actually is. It's more interesting to me to explore how a body feels than how it appears.

I also really like the way a work can transform as you look at it. You can think you're seeing one thing, and then, the closer you examine it, the painting becomes something totally different. You have that switch of emotion between desire and repulsion or vice versa, and that landscape of transition is so fascinating to me. I think that's also connected to how it feels to be a woman—being delighted by that experience or frustrated at other times. So, in my work, there's this soft, supple flesh that the viewer maybe wants to reach out and touch, but that flesh is often being pierced or disrupted by these instruments of femininity like pins, needles, and razors.

In the exhibition with Pace in Hong Kong, I'm showing two paintings: the smaller one, Emerald Strike, really meditates on body piercing. I have my ears pierced, so I'm a participant in this culture as much as a viewer. But if you extend that practice that we think of as decorative, you can see the violence in it, and that idea appears in my work over and over and again.

The other painting in the show, Carpet of Needles (如坐针毡), is a bathtub scene, and I made this work hoping that my experience growing up in the American South might resonate with audiences in Hong Kong. I did some research on Chinese proverbs and found one about sitting on a carpet of needles—these discomforts are small enough that you don't really notice them until you move. So, it's about this feeling of anger or relief but constant discomfort. I think that idea can relate to something physical—like a bobby pin going the wrong way or a bra that's a little too tight—or something less tangible, like a sense of danger or disquiet in everyday experiences of the world. I've depicted pins and needles in my works in the past, so I really understood the feeling and the message of that proverb. I've also been making these bathtub paintings for a little while, but never in this form. I wanted the hair to spell out "carpet of needles," and I wanted viewers in Hong Kong to know that I'm personally talking to them about this work.

Fabian Treiber: My work is painting about painting, and I like to explore the possibilities of the medium that extend all the way to the viewer's experience of it. What I do, broadly, is put raw materials and unprimed canvas into a dialogue that informs and shapes any composition I create. The paintings often begin with just a suggestion of something—of a certain time of day or night, for example—and I want to transform those suggestions or feelings into something that the viewer can connect with. The beginning of my process is more or less about color because, in many ways, color carries emotion. During the first 30 minutes of the process, when the paint is still wet, I can do so many things with it, and the hope is to create something unique that leads to the next step. Layer by layer, motifs emerge in the painting and the final result grows from there.

Conceptually, my interest lies in the intangible—time, feelings, memories, expectations, projections. I was trained as an abstract painter, but I find it more interesting to work within a larger, more liberating framework where I can think about what it means to paint the idea of a landscape or the idea of an interior or exterior. I don't really think about the poles of figuration or abstraction while I'm working. My formal decisions are based on what the painting asks me to do. Disrupting expectations of genre and style leads me closer to the specific feelings that I aim to communicate in my work.

I think there's a collision of the real and the unreal in my paintings, which is fed by speculation and memories. I try to be as open as I can when painting—I don't use any kind of fixed pre-image because I don't want to engage in some endless fight with what the painting wants to be and my expectations for it. I'm really interested in the idea of painting as a stage where exchange can happen between the viewer and the painting. That's also where my interest in typologies and modes of perception comes in—how we all individually see and interpret colors and images in nuanced, intimate ways.

Language is really important to my work on many levels, too. Instead of sketching, I make notes before I start working and constantly during the painting process. So, I have notes on certain moments or certain ideas that evoke images within me. These often-fragmentary notes also inform and help me distill the titles of my paintings.

The two paintings I'm showing with Pace in Hong Kong are part of a huge cycle of works that I started at the beginning of the year as part of an exploration of time—specifically, its ability to collapse and expand—through a static medium. The title of When You're Not Around sort of alludes to that larger group of works, but the individual paintings in the series can be experienced as Autonomous artworks on their own. All I Need Is Some Sunshine, my other painting in the exhibition, a little bit like a song. It's an odd one in that, looking at the painting, you're not sure if you're inside or outside of it, if you're looking inside or outside a window. And who is the one who needs some sunshine? Is it the viewer? Is it the painting? There are no figures in the painting, so the title leaves those questions unanswered.

Explore All Walks of Life, on view at Pace Gallery, Hong Kong from December 15, 2023 to January 18, 2024.

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