

ART SY

Why Young Queer Artists Are Trading Anguish for Joy

By Stephen Truax Nov 7, 2017 2:12 pm



Louis Fratino, *Beach at Night*, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Thierry Goldberg Gallery.

Young queer artists today do not face the same kind of social and health crisis as their predecessors in the '80s and '90s—when Felix Gonzalez-Torres commemorated the loss of his lover, Ross, to AIDS, and Robert Gober made his sink sculptures in the wake of the epidemic. Many young artists are now free to focus on the joys of life, rather than lamentations of death.

To be sure, LGBTQ-identified people—for brevity, this article will name them “queer”—still face violence and systematic discrimination, particularly in transgender and communities of color. HIV remains an ongoing battle, despite advancements in antiretroviral treatment (which the CDC recently stated effectively prevents transmission) and pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP). It hits especially hard in rural areas, and in the American South, where both class and race are deadly factors. That said, we are living in an unprecedented time of acceptance and openness of queer lifestyles, and a HIV-positive diagnosis is not the death sentence it once was in progressive cities.



Michael Stamm, *Forgive me, kitty, they don't call me a bundle of contradictions for nothing!*, 2015. © Michael Stamm. Courtesy of DC Moore Gallery, New York.

So, how do you situate your experience as a white, gay artist within today's politics "You turn inward toward your own interiority, your own desire," offers the painter Michael Stamm. That inward turn necessarily indicates a certain solipsism. But in what way can it be politically important to paint your same-sex partner lounging in your bedroom.

A group of gay and lesbian artists are turning to figurative painting, focusing their work on personal experiences and intimate domestic environments. Their work has a direct relationship to their own queer lives, which they present without fear of cultural, social, or legal repercussions. All born between 1979 and 1993, these artists came of age after the AIDS crisis. They include Stamm, as well as Louis Fratino, Sholem Krishtalka, Doron Langberg, Celeste Dupuy-Spencer, TM Davy, and Sam McLinniss. While representing a mere sliver of queer art being made today—this group is mainly cisgendered and white—their work has important political implications. They are lucky to be able to train their gaze on anything other than a widespread crisis which their predecessors in the '80s and '90s could not ignore.



Nicole Eisenman, *It Is So*, 2014. Courtesy of Anton Kern Gallery, New York and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects.

Francis Bacon, one of the first publicly gay artists to rise to international prominence—and one whose figurative paintings dealt with his life, his lovers, and erotica—is a clear precedent for this work. But this new guard's bright canvases are absent any of Bacon's violence, anguish, and despair. Instead of the overtly political sculpture, installation, text-based works, and paintings of the likes of Paul Thek, David Wojnarowicz, or General Idea, their work has more in common with that of Paul Cadmus, Tom of Finland, David Hockney, and Andy Warhol (particularly his erotic ballpoint pen drawings). Unlike the photographers who defined and documented the traumatic experience of being queer three decades ago—Nan Goldin, Catherine Opie, Peter Hujar, Mark Morrisroe, Jack Pierson, Alvin Baltrop—these queer painters are more liable to focus on images of stable relationships, the leisure time to watch old movies and practice yoga. They do not shy away from sentimentality, nostalgia, and sincerity.

Perhaps we can trace some of this new figuration to the legacy of Patrick Angus and Hugh Steers, two underrecognized painters who succumbed to AIDS in the early '90s. They celebrated gay lives lived together, despite the deep undercurrent of tragedy inherent to their time. Angus made haunting paintings of men gathering together in the cruising hotspot of gay porn theaters. Steers's paintings ruminate on caring for a lover dying of AIDS; in *Bath Curtain* (1992), we see a naked man washing his lover in the bathtub of a tiny apartment. Both artists pulled directly from their own queer experiences. The frankness and earnestness of these works is shocking, even now.

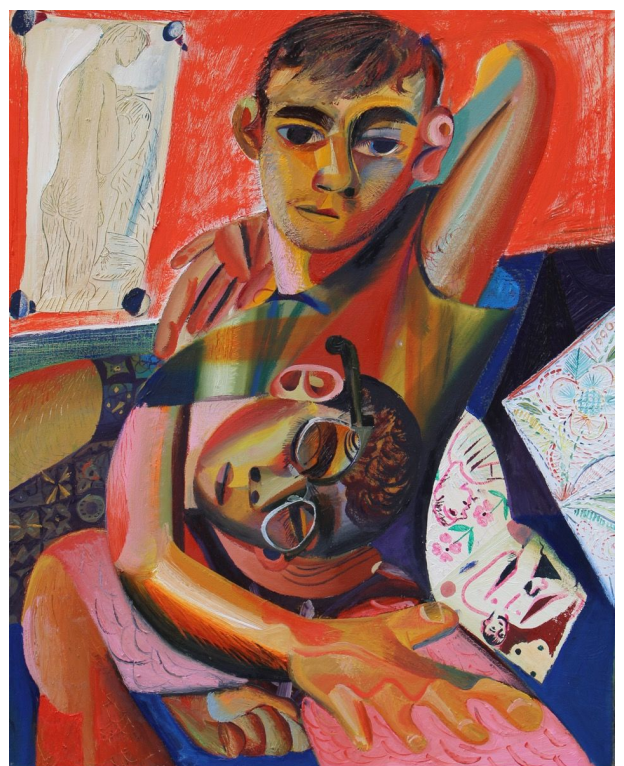
However, it is undoubtedly Nicole Eisenman, born in 1965, who further paved the way for this new wave of intimate, figurative queer painting. Compositions like *It is So* (2014) or *Night Studio* (2009) are both tributes to romantic love, and private views into the artist's life. As Lisa Phillips writes in the catalogue for a 2016 New Museum retrospective, the artist “has established herself as an important reference point for a younger generation of artists. . . who continue to look at her work for its profound ability to depict human nature and experience.”

Consider Fratino, whose paintings show men embracing joyously in love. *Grapefruit Breakfast* (2017) is an exaltation of a young gay couple who have recently moved in together, their apartment replete with warm quilts and wooden furniture. Fratino told me that his project is an effort to “talk about my life honestly. You have to make yourself vulnerable.” Fratino’s visions of domesticity, intimacy, and sex, are rendered in the visual language of early 20th-century modernists, like Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, and Marsden Hartley. His images are affectionate: Two naked men lay across one canvas, *A Breeze* (2017), one gently resting his hand on the other’s penis. Others happily sixty-nine. These images of uncomplicated partnership and anxiety-free sexual expression make a profound statement about Fratino’s generation: There’s not much to be afraid of.

Krishtalka, born in Montreal and based in Berlin, meditates on the quotidian details of his life in the latter city: his apartment, his friends, the sauna, and the sex club. “*A Berlin Diary*” (2016–ongoing)—a series of artist books, which are also viewable online—are rendered with gouache and colored pencil. Each image is annotated with the same brevity: “This is the view from my balcony; this is my toilet.” Krishtalka’s books explore the isolation and sadness underneath the superficial exuberance of living abroad. “Seeing [Nan Goldin’s] photographs made me understand the value of being that emotionally naked,” he said. When I asked him if he felt his work was political, as Goldin’s was, he told me that “the clearest politics of my work is very simply displaying a queer life in all its simple, tiny melodrama.”

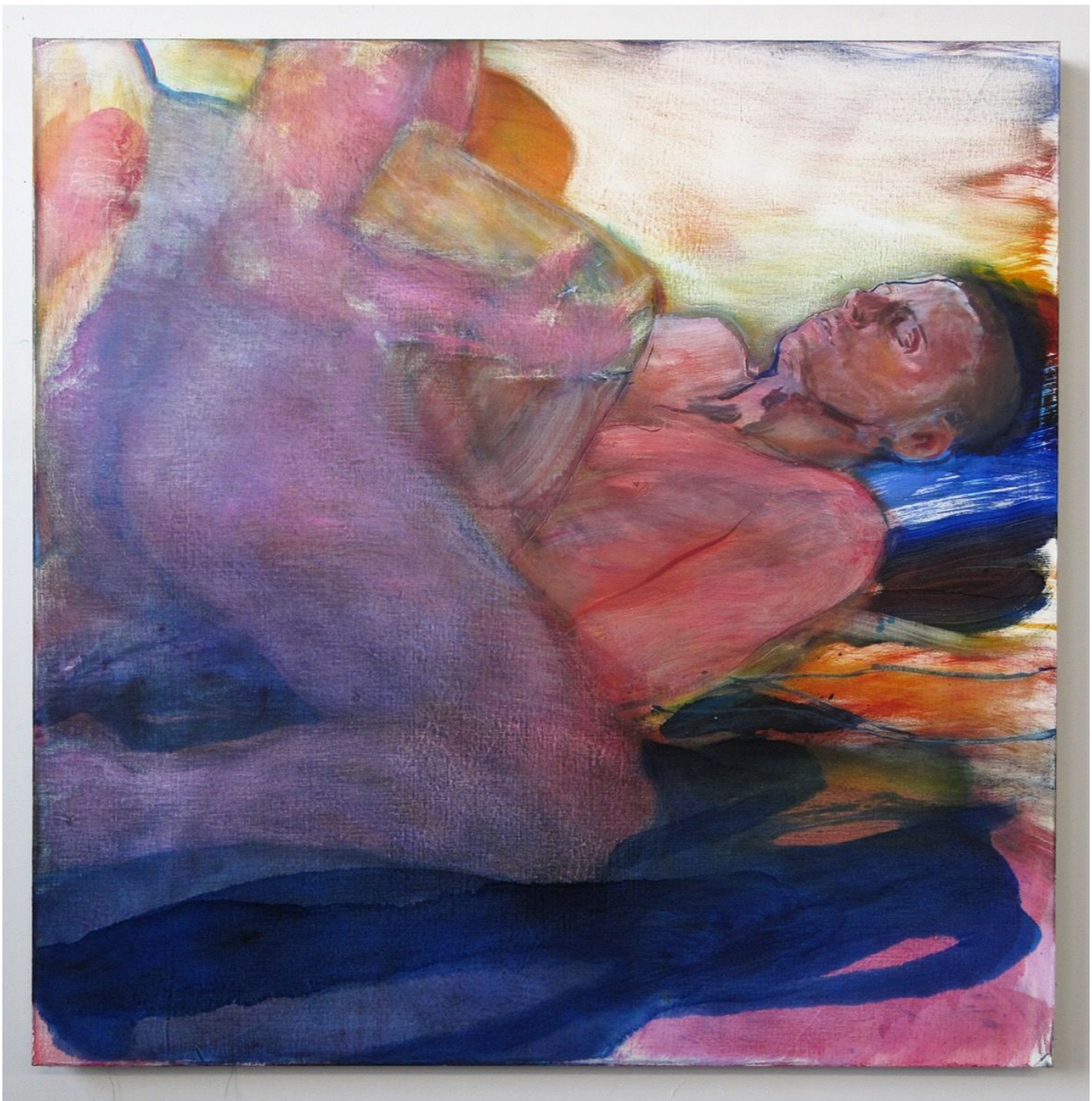


Louis Fratino, *A Breeze*, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Thierry Goldberg Gallery.



Louis Fratino, *Dolphin Street*, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Thierry Goldberg Gallery.

“As queer people, or people of color, or women, when you let someone else tell your story, you give them a terrible control over your life,” Krishtalka continued, nodding to the philosophy of poet Audre Lorde: “The declaration of ‘This is who I am, this is who we are now,’ becomes a political act.”



Doron Langberg, *Self-Portrait*, 2017. Courtesy of the artist.

Can the right to make this declaration, and to narrate it, become the nexus of a new queer aesthetic? Wolfgang Tillmans, for instance, does not seek to "speak for an entire subculture," says Langberg. Instead, "Tillmans's images of queer desire are exquisitely specific about him, and his desire." So too are these painters' imagery and style are specific to their experience. In this way, the personal becomes political.

Langberg paints in a style reminiscent of Larry Rivers (particularly a work like *O'Hara Nude with Boots*, 1954). He paints people close to him from observation; Fratino appears, lounging with his boyfriend and the painter Sarah Faux, in *Louis, Tristan and Sarah* (2017). While he has the sweetest palette of the artists we're discussing here, Langberg is also the most graphic: In *Fucking* (2013), a nude male figure seen from behind looms over a boy in shadow, his legs up over his head; *Self-Portrait* (2017) finds the artist being fucked in the ass. "I want the paintings to humanize the queer experience even at its most 'affronting' presentation," he says. Langberg told me that queer artists today have "the luxury of presenting more subtle images of gay life and politics

The small intimacies of queer domestic relationships also figure in the work of Los Angeles-based Dupuy-Spencer. In *Sarah* (2017), a woman, nude save for a pair of men's white briefs, leans back away from the open window which frames the painting. She affectionately rests on her partner, who gently massages her neck and runs her fingers through her hair while a cat nuzzles her hand. Their apartment is furnished with potted flowers and art on the walls. The painting is partner to a graphite drawing, *Come Here, Comrade* (January 20, 2017) (2017), which shows two women in an erotic embrace, and again, accompanied by their feline companion. Dupuy-Spencer's figures are not idealized; there is a realness to her images that make them immediately believable.

Other painters sublimate overt sexuality into metaphor, like Davy, who has devoted his career to the production of beautiful, sentimental images. His husband, Liam, is a frequent subject; Davy paints him tenderly, even when not in human form: for his most recent show, "Horses," held at 11R Gallery earlier this year, he painted a gray stallion that was surprisingly Liam-esque. Davy makes subtle but powerfully sexual images. Who knew a horse nosing at a salt lick could be erotic? He fearlessly plumbs romantic themes, and classical art history, making a vision that is at once anachronistic and deeply specific to his lived experience.



Celeste Dupuy-Spencer *St. Tammany Parish 2016*
NINO MIER GALLERY



Celeste Dupuy-Spencer, *Sarah*, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Marlborough Contemporary, New York and London.



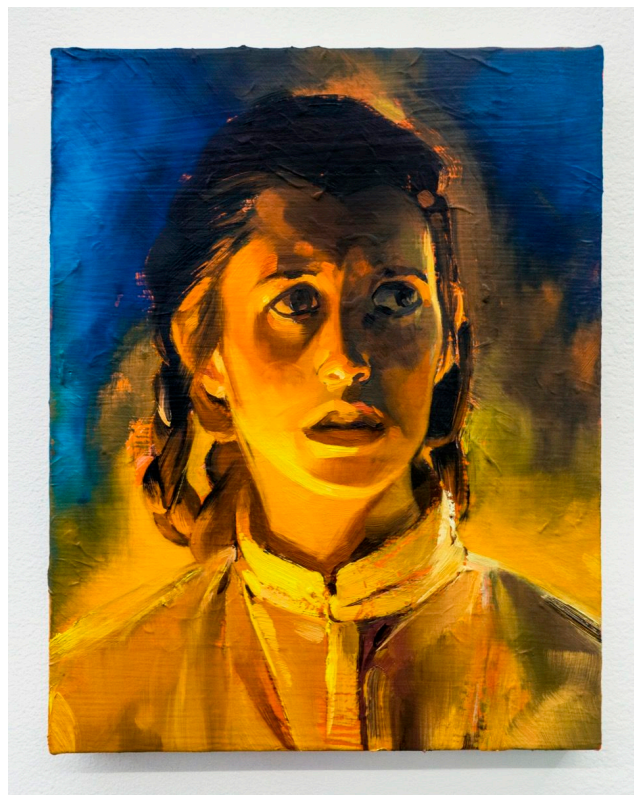
TM Davy, *horse (x)*, 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Van Doren Waxter, New York.

This new queer painting may have left tragedy and trauma behind, but it still has room for melancholy and solitude. In Stamm's *Just Like This Please* (2016), a young man bends backward against the wall on his knees. The full moon is visible over a bank of inverted trees, perfectly centered on the black lattice grid of the window, like a Japanese woodblock print. A text bubble hovers over the center of the painting, uttering its title. On the extreme left edge of the painting, you can make out a silhouette of the boy's organ in his black underpants. Stamm's surfaces are resolutely sexless and flat. A half-naked man (his flaccid penis visible under his black t-shirt) does "downward dog" over his cat and open Macbook laptop in *Forgive me, kitty, they don't call me a bundle of contradictions for nothing!* (2016). These images, both self-effacing and exposing, illustrate a lonely life, where Stamm explores aimlessness, boredom, autoerotic tension, and self-care in the comfort of his own home.

Other artists find a way to discuss the personal through the pop-cultural. McKinniss is a painter of contemporary camp, culling from an unlimited cache of shared moments, from Sinead O'Connor ripping up Pope John Paul II's image on live television in 1992, to Prince posed on a motorcycle in *Purple Rain*. In a 2016 exhibition, McKinniss samples a still from *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980): Carrie Fisher as Princess Leia, illuminated from below by the carbonite freezing facility. McKinniss told me that the film's set was reminiscent of a nightclub, complete with a fog machine and disco floor lighting. For the artist, it recalled his own experiences out in nightclubs; the uncertainty of death; and overwhelming feelings about his friends and lovers. "Paint enhances the drama and the emotional impact of what it's like to look at something," he told me. "Good art should pull at your heart strings, your brain strings, and your dick strings."



Sam McKinniss, *Prince*, 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Team Gallery.



Sam McKinniss, *Leia*, 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Team Gallery.

suggests the possibility that the queer community can overcome trauma, and move toward an age of freedom and safety, even in the face of ongoing struggle. However, in the past nine months, the U.S. has seen public displays of bigotry and violence reminiscent of an era many thought was long since passed. Considering recent developments under the current administration-including moves by its Attorney General, the Justice Department, and emboldened circuit courts-this comparatively rosy outlook on queer lives might well change in a political climate increasingly more brazen in its attempts to undermine human rights.

Stephen Truax