

*Arcadia Missa* ï

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# FRIEZE

## Ismael Nery and Lewis Hammond's Transatlantic Phantasmagoria

At Mendes Wood DM's Casa Iramaia, São Paulo, two artists, separated by a century, are engaged in a nocturnal dialogue

BY MATEUS NUNES IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS | 18 JAN 24



At Casa Iramaia in São Paulo – an early modernist house that appears to float on piloti supports – spirits dance on the threshold of life and death. ‘Evocações’ (Evocations) – an exhibition presented by Mendes Wood DM at this architecturally significant off-site venue – features works by the late Brazilian artist Ismael Nery and contemporary British painter Lewis Hammond. The building’s usually sun-drenched, white interior has been metamorphosed into a labyrinth of partition walls, painted moss green and deep blue.



Ismael Nery, *Retrato de mulher*, 1929, oil on cardboard, 38 x 46 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Mendes Wood DM

Although Hammond was not familiar with Nery’s work before the show – the pairing was proposed by exhibition curator Germano Dushá – the two artists find common ground in their allegorical portrait paintings that, dense with mystery and symbolism, irradiate the broad possibilities of our complex existence. Nery’s *Retrato de mulher* (Portrait of a Woman, 1929), for instance, draws the viewer’s eye to the background where, beyond a pulled-aside curtain, a hilly horizon mimics the curves of a human torso. A similar formal play can be found in both Hammond’s *The Sun Also Rises in Hell III* (2023) and his uncanny *Entrückt* (Enthralled, 2023). In the latter, Hammond conveys the potency of human fertility through the swollen naked belly of a slumped and sombre-looking pregnant subject. In these images, ethereal physicality and substantiated spirit coalesce.

Nery and Hammond likewise use similar techniques for depicting light, adding drama to their compositions through pronounced *chiaroscuro*. From these intensely illuminated environments – whether evoked by candlelight or spotlight – emerges a multiplicity of soul- and shape-shifting bodies. Compounding this effect, both artists often leave their subjects’ eyes undefined: for Nery, per Denise Mattar’s 2004 monograph, this phenomenon resembles deification; for Hammond, the effect echoes the evanescence of the soul. In the latter’s *Jujá* (2023), for instance, a boy with hollow eyes appears in a trance state as his spirit ascends leaving behind his body, as open and empty as the skull tossed on the ground beside him.



Lewis Hammond, *Jujá*, 2023, oil on linen, 18 × 13 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Mendes Wood DM

Hammond's depiction of his subject as a mere vestige of corporeal existence acts as a counterpoint to the unyielding materiality of Nery's *Autorretrato* (Self-Portrait, 1924), in which the artist's face is illuminated to resemble a quarter moon, bisected by a mountain range formed from his own facial bones. Despite Nery having studied in Rio de Janeiro and travelled abroad to Paris, his work always retained the dense warmth and equatorial metaphysics of his birthplace: Belém, gateway to the Amazon rainforest. In *Retrato de mulher com olhos verdes* (Portrait of a Woman with Green Eyes, 1924), for instance, the subject – a figure combining features of the artist and his wife – calls to mind the Indigenous mythical beings from this region.



Ismael Nery, *Autorretrato*, c.193, watercolour on paper, 18 × 11 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Mendes Wood DM

Tragically, Nery contracted tuberculosis at the age of 30, fulfilling a prediction he had made multiple times: that he would die at the age of 33, just as had both his father before him and – according to Biblical tradition – Jesus Christ. Nery specified on his deathbed that he wished to be buried in the habit of a lay brother of the Third Order Regular of Saint Francis of Penitence, a realization of his longing for mystic and bohemian delights. Standing before Hammond's *Absence of Change* (*St. Sebastian*) (2023) at Casa Iramaia, it's hard not to relate the image of the two catholic saints – symbols of contrition and martyrdom – and imagine Nery's own sorrowful interment and the hopeful realization of his longing for transcendence.

*Main image: Lewis Hammond, Study For Never & Always (das Meer), 2023, oil on linen, 130 × 180 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Mendes Wood DM*

# BOMB

Lewis Hammond Interviewed by [Olivia Parkes](#)

*Painting dark portraits.*



Lewis Hammond, *the pull of this world*, 2022, oil on wood panel, 19.75 × 15.75 inches. Photo by Gunter Lepowski. Courtesy of the artist and Arcadia Missa.

Lewis Hammond's paintings are dark, intimate, and disquieting. His figures are poised between individual and archetype and conjure states of stasis, longing, or despair. The work captures the unease of our present moment while plumbing a line through myth and the long history of the image in a way that makes all this trouble seem timeless. The circumstances matter, but the body persists in dire conditions as its gestures of connection and disconnection, desire and aversion, go on. Lewis is looking hard at what's closest to him, but the story he shows us is old. The world harms, and still we hold each other.

—Olivia Parkes

## **Olivia Parkes**

The light sources in your paintings are often ambiguous. In some cases, the figures themselves seem like a light source or appear to be lit from within. It can feel like the figures have been pulled out of darkness or are being submerged in it. Where does that quality come from?

## **Lewis Hammond**

I often have to catch myself that I'm not burying the pictures too much. I'm invested in atmosphere building, and I often want for things to be at the very edge of legibility. I'm interested in what that can mean for a picture and what having visibility can mean for some of the subject matter that I'm working with. I'm interested in capturing the emotional spectrum my figures are facing as well as developing a visual language that deals with the realities of a hyper-capitalized, hyper-racialized world.

From a technical standpoint, it comes out of the work I was doing as an undergraduate. I was making large photo-collages using analog photographs I'd taken myself along with a photocopier and using paint to cover the image. There were lots of layers of different mixed media and varnish, and some of the image would be partially obscured, some of it really clear. You would still see the image, but you would see it emerging from darkness. The limitations of that process led me to start painting in a more traditional way and exploring the possibilities of oil on canvas.

**OP**

You often refer to images of friends and family, but the figures don't read like portraits. Some of them seem to be smoldering or turning to flame. Others have a ghostlike quality or blank eyes. How are you thinking about the figure and transformation?

**LH**

If I take photos of friends or family that I might use in a painting, I have to prefix that with, "You know, this isn't about you." Painting them is a process of transformation. Often the bodies become more satyr-like or "less human." What you were saying about light is something I want to play with. In some of the newer works, I want to build the image up in different glaze layers instead, and for there to be a different kind of slippage between the physicality of the objects and the architecture of the room and the body. To really emphasize that ghostlike quality and temporal instability.

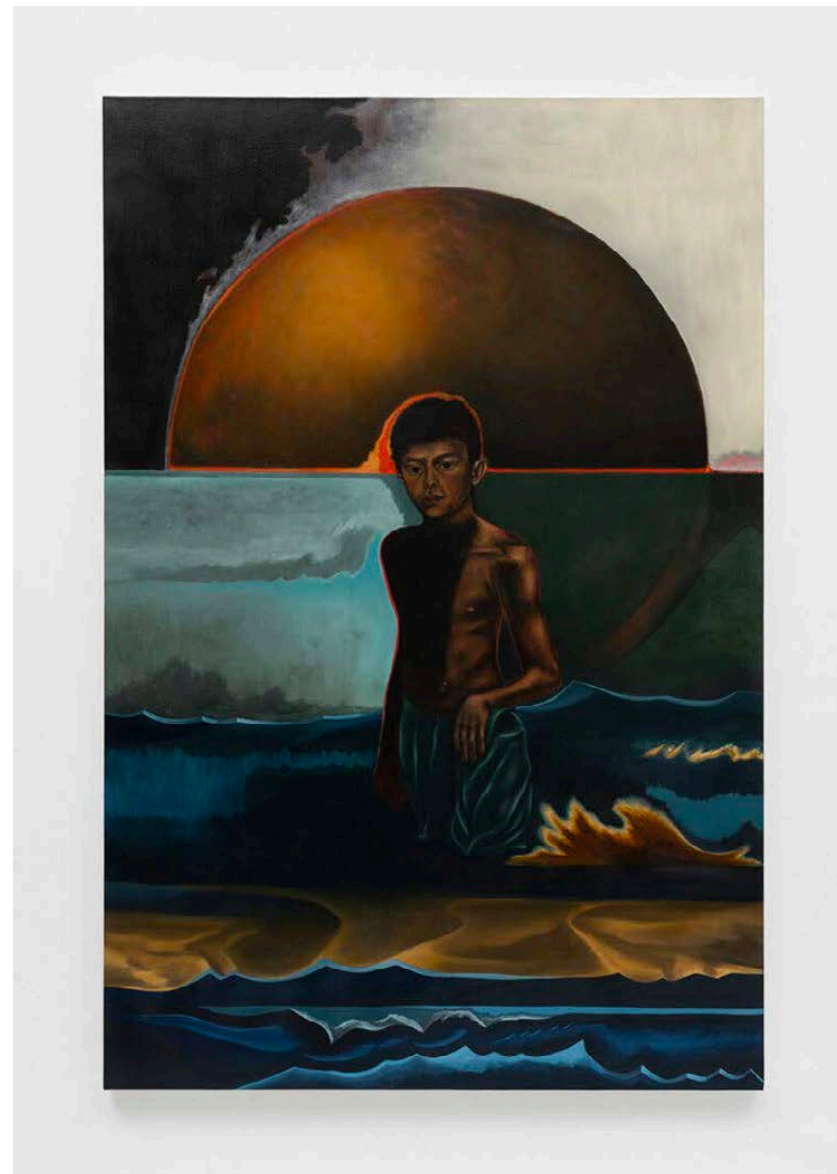
**OP**

Along with this feeling of being submerged, the figures are often contained in tight spaces, either by the framing or the architectures you build. Where are they? What can you tell me about this world?

**LH**

Well, somehow, I feel like they're in our world, even though there's this kind of fantastical, or sci-fi, or mythological staging. The conventions of those worlds are a way to grasp the real, like how sci-fi will use the story of aliens landing to have a conversation about xenophobia. The paintings go into these odd, uncomfortable settings or darker imagined spaces in order to cast light on the individuals that are portrayed. Not the individuals as I know them, but broader archetypes. They become stand-ins for people often marginalized within society.

For example, a new painting I've done of my sister and nephew might appear quite classical, as a mother and child. The image has a line throughout history, which I'm interested in bringing into the work, as well as asking what it means to have children now, given the state of the world. I see it as quite hopeful. If you're bringing children into the world, you believe in the future.



Lewis Hammond, *early attrition*, 2023, oil on canvas, 71 × 47.25 inches. Photo by Joerg Lohse. Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal.

And that's interesting, given the systemic failure and economic breakdowns that our generation has lived and continues to live through. Austerity politics and the growing island mentality of England.

**OP**

That island mentality occurs on the national level in discussions about borders and immigration, but also at the individual level. You see it everywhere in London: private wealth, public poverty. People have gotten poorer, but some people have gotten much, much richer.

**LH**

It's very sharp, isn't it? You can be in one of the most poverty-stricken parts of England and then twenty-five minutes later in Mayfair, and you can walk into a shop that will sell you a yacht. And that to me is absolutely absurd. I think the figures in my paintings feel somewhat blitzed by the world with an endless torrent of "Fuck! We're in the end times," but the following year, things get worse. You can see this in *moth eaten silk* (2022).

**OP**

The relationship between figure and ground is very unstable in that painting. But this instability occurs across the work in other ways. There's often a tension between intimacy and alienation; there are also hints of eroticism as well as violence. Some of that comes through the imagery—we get knives, and we get flowers—and through the composition, the attention to scale, or the relation of the image to the frame. Is painting a formal means to organize these tensions or emotions?

**LH**

How do you paint a feeling? That's a question I often return to. How do you paint this state of mind or experience that doesn't fully translate into verbal language? Certain images or compositions go straight to the gut. In *Returnal* (2022), the chest is kind of concave; it looks like it's been dipped in, and it's held against a stark, black background. I think people really responded to that painting. You can see the fragility of the body. There's some sense of mortality perhaps.



Lewis Hammond, *Returnal*, 2022, oil on canvas, 31.75 × 23.5 inches.  
Photo by Gunter Lepowski. Courtesy of the artist and Arcadia Missa.

**OP**

It's intensely vulnerable. But in some ways it also feels protected by being held by the frame.

**LH**

Maybe that's because some of my source images were medical photos. I'm interested in how it becomes like a piece of classic figuration; in its total objectification, it could look like a Christ's body or maybe a Saint Sebastian. There's a kind of unconscious link to various paintings and art history that I'm bringing back into the conversation, but there remains a trace of the source imagery as well.

**OP**

But it's very tender. And a medical photograph is not tender; it's clinical.

**LH**

Yes, the medical gaze is clinical. The body appears like an object. The image tries to document, in the most neutral way possible, what we're seeing, whereas painting pushes the image into a different state. And maybe that's my belief in the painting process—that by working with that image I can push it into a different space.

**OP**

Yeah, a painting is a lived image. It's like the solidified form of a process of seeing, and that makes it available to a different kind of looking.

**LH**

Yeah. And paintings can be quite confrontational, can't they? Or they can ignore you.

**OP**

Totally. And many of your figures seem almost eyeless or unseeing. They do ignore us.

**LH**

Even though they're eyeless, I wouldn't say that they're devoid of soul. Or that they're hollow.

**OP**

No, but they're in a suspended state.

**LH**

Painting is a suspension of time. And it's able to meditate on our relationship to it. Hopefully, the paintings will outlive us. I'd like to make paintings that can speak beyond the immediate circumstances they find themselves in or that I find myself in. I'm trying to get to something that could be, maybe not timeless, but that has different levels of accessibility.



Lewis Hammond, *false flag*, 2023, oil on linen, 11.75 × 10 inches. Photo by Joerg Lohse. Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal.

**OP**

You look at a lot of paintings from the past. Has that always been the case?

**LH**

I think that when I began painting with a brush, then I really started looking at the history of painting. I still find it a fascinating proposition to go into the studio and play with stuff from earth mixed with oil on a 2D plane to try to describe the body and all of its liquidity, flesh, or solidity. To try to move through that with pigment.

**OP**

Yeah. The conditions of painting are in some ways quite unchanged. It's an old technology.

**LH**

I think Cecily Brown said that when you've got four sides and a flat plane, whatever you make has infinite, infinite, infinite possibilities.

**OP**

I have the same feeling. And sometimes when people ask, Why are you doing this? I'll say, I love rectangles. You draw a line in the middle, and you have the world. It's inexhaustible.

**LH**

But sometimes it's fun to start with a completely abstract space and build forward from that place. Because all the rules and systems that we have in place in the studio to make whatever we make have developed as habit. I like to trip that process up. Recently, I painted a portrait of my mother which is also a portrait of my grandmother that combines the memory of my grandmother and source imagery of my mom. There's this intergenerational link. It's almost like a devotional painting.

**OP**

That fusing of faces seems like another way to instill a timeless quality. That's part of what I meant when I said that they don't quite feel like portraits.

**LH**

It's funny because I've made paintings that are directly taken from myself. And when they've gone into shows people say, This doesn't look like you at all. I think that maybe on a subconscious level they all operate as self-portraits, or I'm just painting my own state of mind in different bodies, different bodies in different circumstances. Again, and again, and again. Because I'm trying to make sense of it all. Of what is here.

Lewis Hammond: *Bludgeoned Sky* is on view at 47 Canal in New York City until March 25.

*Olivia Parkes is a painter and writer based in Berlin.*



# MOUSSE

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## Lewis Hammond "Turbulent Drift" at Arcadia Missa, London

15.10.2022

READING TIME: 2'

SHARE



This exhibition was selected as part of London Oomph, a roundup of the best shows in town during October 2022.

The works in this show depict the act of witnessing, of enduring, of carrying a mark or trace, indelible physically and psychologically. From the figure of Arrortino, bound as perpetrator through his oppression—a non-consenting observer to both the action he is forced to perform and the systemic action of his own enslavement—to the non-human figures such as animals and totems, looking back onto the viewer, reminding us that our own act of witnessing can never be a neutral one.

That non-neutral experiencing of the world, particularly of recent years—lurching from one disaster to the next, with an increasingly amplified stream of information through which to consume each brutality and anxiety—continues to reinforce a collective state of being upon which Hammond gives compositional narrativization for. How can we make sense of our contemporary moment when our understanding is enveloped with emotion, agency is engulfed by circumstance, rendering states of both catatonia and stasis? To see what we feel proposes a means to process. Hammond parses visions of the contemporary through an amalgamation of myth, present-day image references and art historical influences. So that by plotting stories onto emotions, we may attempt to find renewed courses of action.

at Arcadia Missa, London  
until December 17, 2022

# FRIEZE

## Frieze Tate Fund acquires works for the National Collection at Frieze London and Frieze Masters 2022

Supported by Endeavor, Tate acquires pieces by Romany Eveleigh, Leonor Fini, Lewis Hammond, Rita Keegan, Sandra Vásquez de la Horra and Frida Orupabo at this year's fairs

IN FRIEZE LONDON & FRIEZE MASTERS | 14 OCT 22

*Each year the Frieze Tate Fund helps us bring great works of contemporary art into the national collection – as demonstrated by this year's fantastic selection. Thanks to the ongoing support of Endeavor and Frieze, we can ensure these works are available to the public for generations to come. – Maria Balshaw, Director, Tate*

The following works have been acquired for Tate's collection thanks to the Frieze Tate Fund 2022 supported by Endeavor:

This is the seventh year that Endeavor has made available £150,000 for the Fund, set aside exclusively for the acquisition of works at Frieze for Tate's collection. To date more than 150 works by over 90 artists have been acquired, contributing to displays and exhibitions across Tate's four galleries. These include recently acquired works by Larry Achiampong and Claudette Johnson now on display at Tate Britain and a video by Buhlebezwe Siwani currently showing in the Tanks at Tate Modern.

**Lewis Hammond (b. 1987)**

*The Link / Ivy May Forever, 2022*

Oil on canvas

44 x 36 cm

Acquired from Arcadia Missa



Lewis Hammond (b. 1987), *The Link / Ivy May Forever, 2022*. Acquired from Arcadia Missa Photo © Tate Photography / Matt Greenwood

This year's Frieze Tate Fund selection panel includes artist Carolyn Lazard and curator Habda Rashid, alongside Tate's Polly Staple (Director of Collection, British Art), Gregor Muir (Director of Collection, International Art), Dominique Heyse-Moore (Senior Curator, Contemporary British Art), Valentine Umansky (Curator, International Art), Nathan Ladd (Assistant Curator, Contemporary British Art) and Tamsin Hong (Assistant Curator, International Art).

# FRIEZE

## Lewis Hammond's Postcards from Purgatory

At Casa Masaccio, San Giovanni, the artist's solo show, 'While We Were Sleeping' leans on religious allegories to depict the nihilist nature of modern anxieties

OLAMIJU FAJEMISIN IN EU REVIEWS, EXHIBITION REVIEWS | 03 AUG 21



Entering 'While We Were Sleeping' – Lewis Hammond's solo exhibition at Casa Masaccio, San Giovanni Valdarno – feels like a transgression. It's first necessary to bypass a heavy wooden door before continuing down an unlit corridor, guided only by a woman's languid recitation of 'Death by Water', the fourth part of T. S. Eliot's epic poem, 'The Waste Land' (1922). We are soon faced by *Drowner* (2020), a smaller work by the artist's usual standards, whose desperate subject, as the title makes clear, is sinking below the surface of murky waters. The positioning of this work implies the viewer's descent, or rather ascent (the rest of the exhibition is installed over the first and second floors of Casa Masaccio), into Hammond's perditious, painted realm.



Lewis Hammond, 'While We Were Sleeping', 2021, exhibition view, Casa Masaccio, San Giovanni Valdarno. Courtesy: the Artist, Casa Masaccio, San Giovanni Valdarno and Arcadia Missa, London; photography: Ela Bialkowska, OKNO Studio

Eliot's words follow us upstairs where the artist's conflation of the Dantean and the ordinary extend across works of masterfully applied oil on canvas, linen and wooden board. A graduate of London's Royal Academy of Arts, Hammond's deft tendency toward tenebrism and frontal perspective complements the pervading, disquieting sensuality of his works. In one such brooding portrait, *Chimezie (rising and falling with the current)* (2021) – typical of Hammond's predilection for a muted, earthen palette and glossy patina – a lone man, bearing an obvious resemblance to the artist himself, sits cross-legged in a bare room. His penetrating, bewildered expression suggests a level of anxiety – he seems to be staring out at some ostensible threat – nevertheless his posture remains relaxed, his hands resting in his lap. Whatever he may be facing, he appears to have already resigned himself to it. Though deep contours trace the creases of his white t-shirt, the depiction of the source of light is, disorientingly, refused.

In two other large-scale paintings, *Hurricane* (2021) and *Beached* (2021), Hammond extends and abstracts his original suggestion that an unwanted refusal to depict light in a naturalistic sense, when coupled with the hostility of such confrontational perspectives, can generate productive moments of friction. In the first work, a jaundiced-looking woman, lit so that the shadows shaping her face reveal the form of her skull, casts an offensive gaze out from under her brow, while the second painting depicts an onerous scene, in which another man stares outward with intent as a dolphin bizarrely languishes in the image's foreground, a sanguine glow emanating from its belly. There is a moral and spatial element to Hammond's technique for, in the artist's paintings, light, gesture and lines of sight are wielded not as sources of nourishment, illumination or veracity, but as ominous ambiguities, neither to be trusted nor believed.



Lewis Hammond, 'While We Were Sleeping', 2021, exhibition view, Casa Masaccio, San Giovanni Valdarno. Courtesy: the Artist, Casa Masaccio, San Giovanni Valdarno and Arcadia Missa, London; photography: Ela Bialkowska, OKNO Studio

Conceived following a residency during which the artist explored the history of Tuscan art, 'While We Were Sleeping' culminates as a conjectural depiction of nihilism via the exploitation of present-day anxieties through canonical painterly modes. Hammond prefers to work in a smaller format when considering individual symbols and codes, combining them to make grander allegories of moral transgression. The artist sometimes loans from the Biblical – in *Annunciation (a change will come)* (2021), painted on a slim wooden panel, a tall ivory lily, typically a symbol of virtue in Christian semiotics, is desecrated by the imposition of a lurking satanic, horned figure – but mostly, as in *Hard Food* (2021), which depicts a woman in a moment of apparent exorcism (in spite of her vacant expression, her neck juts out at an impossible angle, while her feet are rendered as sore-looking, toeless stumps) the artist lends from his own painterly vocabulary to create a singular vision of a contemporary purgatory.

Head image: Lewis Hammond, *Drowner*, 2020, installation view. Courtesy: the Artist, Casa Masaccio, San Giovanni Valdarno and Arcadia Missa, London; Photography: Ela Bialkowska, OKNO Studio

Thumbnail: Lewis Hammond, *Annunciation (a change will come)*, 2021, installation view. Courtesy: the Artist, Casa Masaccio, San Giovanni Valdarno and Arcadia Missa, London; Photography: Ela Bialkowska, OKNO Studio

## OLAMIJU FAJEMISIN

Olamiju Fajemisin is a writer based in London, UK.

## Satyr Plays: Lewis Hammond Moritz Scheper

Are we really living in an Age of Darkness, as Lewis Hammond's apocalyptically charged paintings suggest? The wider world remains locked out in his works; the cosmos depicted is reduced to narrow, safe retreats where bodies surrender to one another and indulge in tender, sometimes ambivalently violent intimacy.

Looking at Hammond's *Kyur* (2020), which shows an intertwined couple on a couch, dreaming beneath a dramatically sidelong lit fetish object on the wall above, I'm reminded of Barry Schwabsky's 2008 essay on Peter Doig. It asked why Doig is perceived as a British painter when his painting is so profoundly "un-British." Of course Schwabsky doesn't view artists primarily as representatives (or not) of some mythically unified national character; rather, his question expressed his astonishment at the alien, outlandish quality of Doig's painted spaces given the cultural context of their making. In front of *Kyur* I felt a similar amazement about Hammond (also British), whose pictures open up spaces that are alternately somber and dramatic, containing figures whose skin seems almost to fluoresce—pictures that are not necessarily foreign per se, but far removed from all that is commonly associated with Britain's pictorial culture.

*Safe Haus* (2019) exerts the same effect. Again we see two lovers in bed. Their bronze skin shimmers in an otherwise dark, bare room that encloses the couple in a strangely threatening way, recalling Giorgio de Chirico. Almost the entire canvas is occupied by a window whose bars are thorny branches. Thorns, we realize, protect against a hostile outside, but also highlight the vulnerability of the embracing bodies inside. But what makes this heavily symbolic blend of fear, fragility, and withdrawal especially peculiar is the baroque execution—*à la manière espagnole*. As in an early seventeenth-century painting by Jusepe de Ribera, all of what we can see appears to have been wrested with great effort from a profoundly hostile darkness. This impression is stronger still in *Study for a Threshold / Longing and Impermanence* (2019), whose varnished surface, dark and apparently impenetrable, again conjures an Old Master.

Why on earth would a young British person with Afro-Caribbean roots paint in the style of a Spanish artist like Ribera? To my mind, the most probable explanation is that Hammond chooses a style that creates the greatest possible difference. Indirectly, he alludes to his black heritage and the exclusion and violence that sadly still go together with black skin (standing here for all forms of nonwhiteness). The reference to a pre-Enlightenment visual program mirrors our society's blatant lack of "enlightenment" in its treatment of certain people. Yet with a twist that strikes me as somehow very Catholic, Hammond crosses this traumatic fear of physical harm with a celebration of the body—as in *Safe Haus*, where the bodies are the sole source of light in the profound darkness. The manner in which he does so leaves no doubt that this light comes from the fire of passion. Hammond also returns again and again to satyrs as subjects; these queer, forever horny creatures appear as a lusty seducer of a white woman in the small-format painting *What is this desire?* (2018), elsewhere as a crying (or laughing?) Afro-satyr in *That time, when things were okay* (2019), which superimposes

two kinds of othering, representing both fear of the foreign and exotic desire simultaneously.

One might say that Hammond's painting describes the point where the fortress of the body is stormed—be it with hostile intent, as an act of passion, or anywhere in between. Every gradation, from horror to pleasure and back again, manifests in his constantly ambiguous work. *Der Rücken* (The Back, 2019), for example, offers a hazy rendering of a bare back being massaged by two hands. Yet the hands are painted such that the flesh of the thumb merges with that of the back. Is this a tender, caring gesture, or more a hostile incursion into an unprotected body? The pictures murmur more than they speak, as if some threat is lurking in the background—as in Ribera's black spaces.

Recently, however, Hammond's baroque *tenebrismo* has been sliding into a browner visual idiom whose earthy tones and soft curves nod to Latin American modernism. At least that is what I perceive in *Sorro* (2020), perhaps his most striking work to date. It shows at least four hands of subtly different skin colors, and a blue metallic face possibly being pushed into or pulled out of a brown body. In any case, this act generates flames that simultaneously resemble falling autumn leaves. Once again, it remains unclear whether the physical ordeal we are witnessing is born of aggression or of kindness. But the blue face and the gently graded colors of the hands suggest that the construction of identity via skin color and the body is the subject—and that for the painter, this is the field of the greatest friction and the hardest struggles. *Sorro* exudes a peculiar pathos that seems to me so at odds with the cooled-down, subtly coded way art is predominantly made today in London or Berlin, where Hammond now works. And there it is again: difference.

1 Barry Schwabsky, "Glimpses Beyond the Edge: Peter Doig," *Art in America*, May 2008, 168.

85 Lewis Hammond, *That time, when things were okay* (detail), 2019.

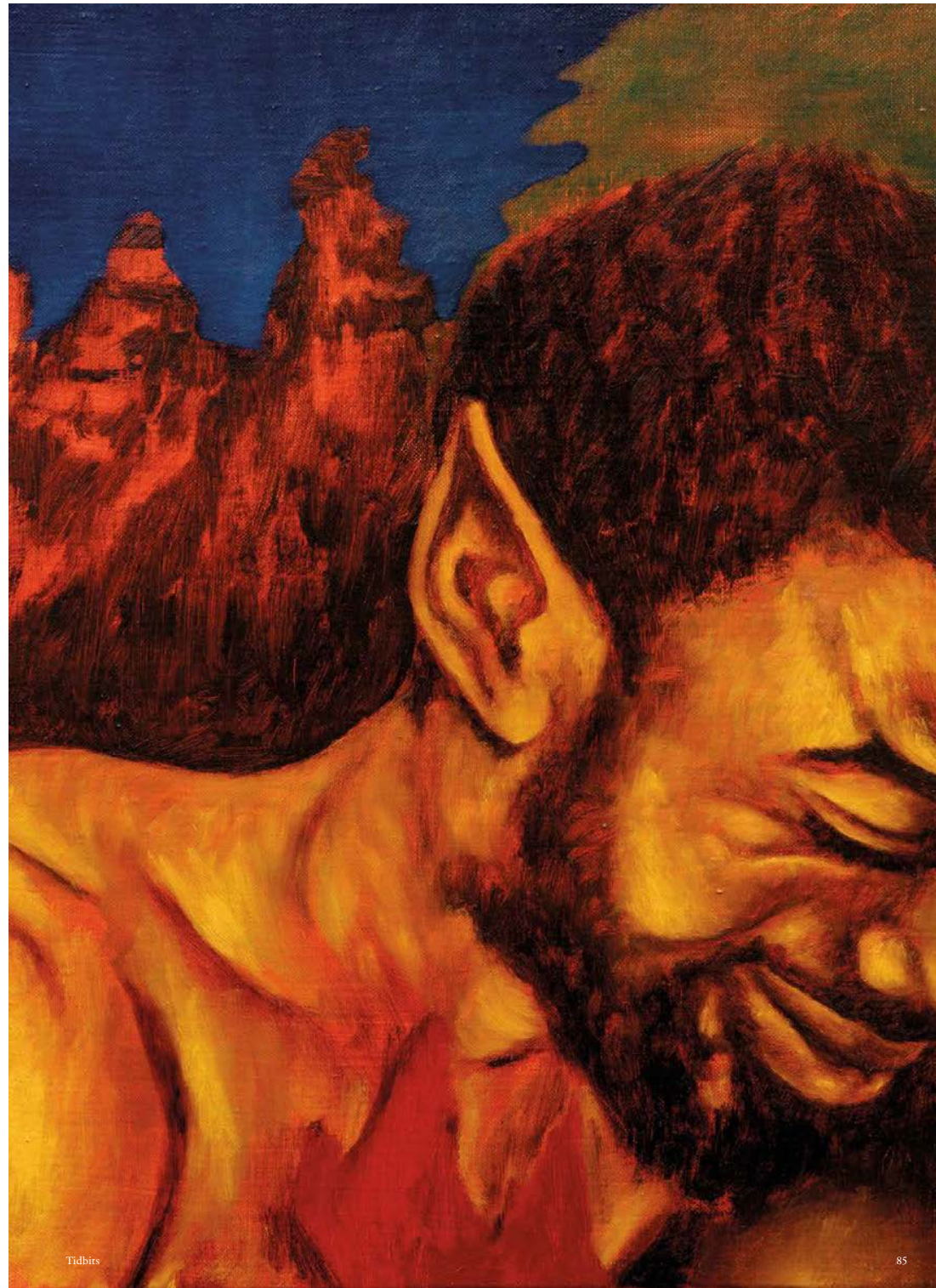
Courtesy: the artist and Arcadia Missa, London. Photo: Tim Bowditch

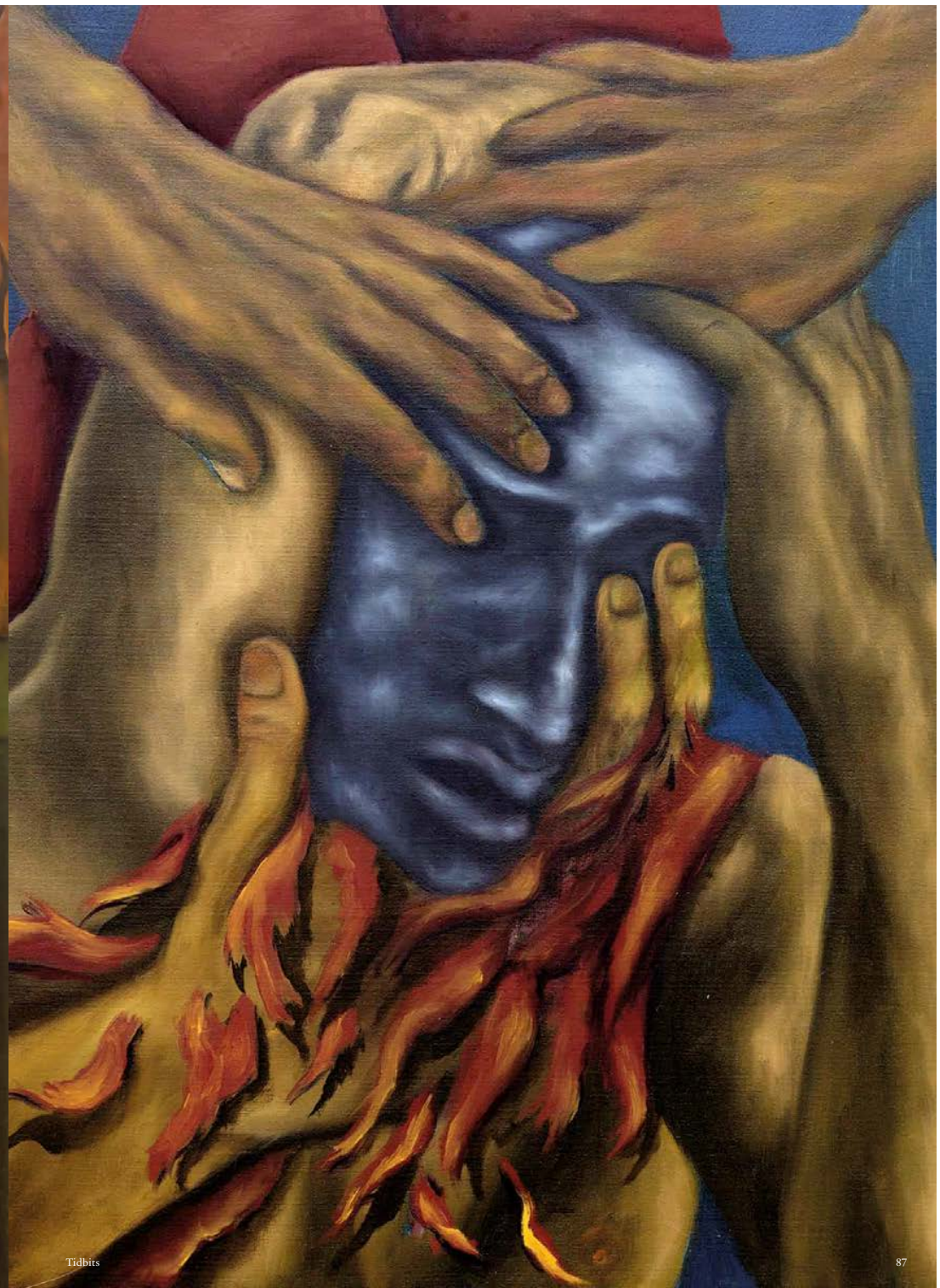
86 Lewis Hammond, *Kyur*, 2020.

Courtesy: the artist and Lulu, Mexico City. Photo: Ramiro Chaves

87 Lewis Hammond, *Sorro* (detail), 2020.

Courtesy: the artist and Lulu, Mexico City. Photo: Ramiro Chaves





# ARTFORUM



Lewis Hammond, *Attachment*, 2020, oil on linen, 32 × 51".

## Lewis Hammond

LULU BY X MUSEUM

Looking at Lewis Hammond's deeply introverted works online before I ventured out of the house earlier this summer to see his show "Still Life," I could imagine the oil paint recoiling from the overhead fluorescent lights, suspecting their glare would cover entire sections of the canvas with a flat, pale sheen. In the flesh, however, the paintings are fleshy, or flesh-threatening: cuddles, thorns, knives, bites, and spikes. The British artist's works are big, their depictions intense. His images looked out of place in a tiny gallery that mostly specializes in small-format works.

In *Kyur* (all works cited, 2020), a couple lies hugging at the bottom of the canvas, surrounded by a sturdy wall as well as by the shade and golden hue of an afternoon. But the sense of restfulness was complicated by what one saw in the surrounding canvases: prickly white acacia branches in the diptych *The Alcove I and II* and a panoply of knives in *Talisman*. The branches in the former stand like prison bars on green concrete windowsills, their shadows falling onto an impassive background of deep purple. The blades in *Talisman* rest flat on a forest-green surface, their jagged edges and uneven surfaces adumbrated in shark grays and deep blacks. The paintings were so dense they were opaque; they made you want to turn the brightness higher on your phone-trained eyes. Writing after the earthquake that shook Mexico City in late June, I felt anxious for the *Kyur* painting's couple, more than half naked and not even thinking of the likelihood of a temblor forcing them out of their coziness.

Hammond started work on these pictures in Mexico City before the pandemic and finished them in London when it was full-blown. No wonder everything seemed so ominous. The cute smiley critter in *Nachtjäger / Only Knowing Hunger* was, on closer inspection, revealed to be an otter-like mammal with fangs, chewing on a faceless fish or reptile while looking straight at the viewer with almost human eyes. *Attachment* offered similar deceptions. Were the two naked bodies, one restraining the other, engaged in playful sex or the horrible opposite of that? These figures, like the prey in *Nachtjäger*, were faceless, and their claustrophobic backdrop reminded me of the dungeons in the sea-facing colonial fortresses I toured as a child: cold, wet, evil. Spikes on the floor, on which the bodies appeared to roll so dangerously, recalled the hostile architecture of contemporary cities, intended to make the lives of homeless and transient people more unlivable.

Hammond's palette and willful depictions can bring to mind the forcefulness of Mexican *muralismo*, but updated with today's nervous ambience of fear and trembling. The show invited us to inhabit a purgatory state, in the sense of a place for the patient endurance of suffering. It was unsettling, filled with reminders of primordial fears—damnation, torture, imprisonment, intimate violence, the self—and it mirrored the disrupted states of mind in which we found ourselves after more than a hundred days of shutdown, wondering when we'd be allowed out, our patient endurance rewarded. Isolation and paranoia about falling ill have wrecked my attention span—among other things—yet Hammond's show, seen firsthand, managed to hold it, maybe even abduct it, and has not quite let go of it yet.

— *Gaby Cepeda*

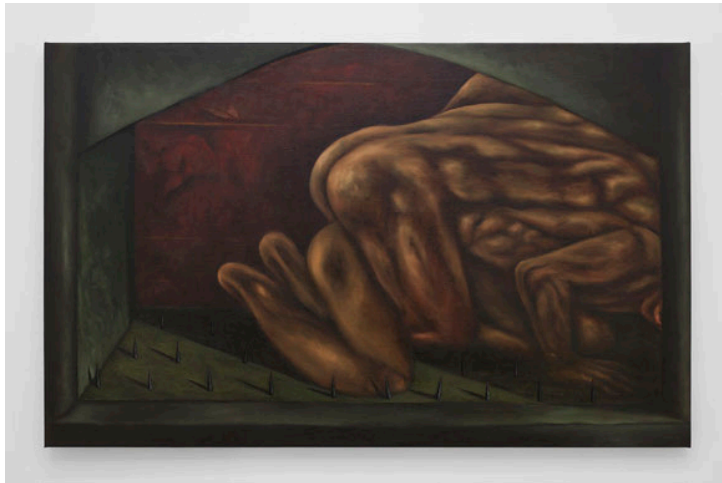
25 May  
2020

5 QUESTIONS

## Anxiety and Intimacy Come Together in Lewis Hammond's Paintings

The artist creates surreal and sensual scenes that feel indicative of our current circumstances and precarious inner psyches.

Words by Holly Black



Lewis Hammond's paintings tread a thin line between existential dread and human comfort. The London-based painter, who graduated from the Royal Academy Schools in 2017, builds images that are filled with skewed perspectives and long, foreboding shadows, which point to the unsettling ambiguity of an angst-ridden dream. He often extends this sense of agitation by including banal objects infused with surreal symbolism, such as a collection of knives hanging on a wall, or austere thorned branches that could double as barbed wire.

Figures often appear in his work too, but they are usually somewhat obscured, either extending beyond the picture plane or hidden in tight embraces. In other instances, their likeness appears stretched and distorted, much like a corrupted photograph, making it seem as if they could slip away from view at any moment. There is often a sense of erotically charged, cloistered activity that many of us might relate to at this current moment, whether that be safe in the arms of a loved one, or pining for connection beyond our own four walls.



*You spent time in Mexico City, working towards your current exhibition Lulu, before being forced to return London due to the pandemic. Has your time abroad, not to mention this significant rupture, directly informed your work?*

Suddenly having to leave Mexico at very short notice was bound to have an effect, not to mention returning to London and needing to finish the show. With everything going on, making art did not feel as immediately urgent as it usually does for me. Perhaps somewhere in the paintings this fragmentation is present. Alienation, isolation and representations of primal states seem to be locatable in this body of work. The paintings could probably be diagnosed as a physical representation of my own, or a collective, neurosis.

*It is hard not to read everything through the lens of our current crisis, but it is impossible to ignore the inherent threat often visible in your paintings, whether that be a collection of hanging knives or thorny branches as bars. Where does this sense of danger come from?*

We live in a highly globalised world with a shared consciousness, yet very different material experiences exist between one person and another. I often feel my paintings are an attempt to find a language or figurative depiction of what a collective sense of anxiety might look like, or could be represented as.



The work sometimes references the shared global panic of our times. We live knowing our natural resources are finite; feeling the impact of climate change; seeing how small events can cause a devastating reverberation across the planet. This is something that has always been in my work, but of course is possibly more pronounced at times like these, when the whole world is acutely aware of the precarious state we are in (which many people don't normally find themselves in, or notice or acknowledge).

*"I see a world that is unstable and increasingly politically fractured. I think my paintings tap into that"*

By sheer luck I was born into the western world and have enjoyed, by comparison, a relatively comfortable life thus far. I think, in light of recent crises we are becoming distinctly aware that we're always just a few steps away from catastrophe. Perhaps we have always been in it, but it was just slowed down or less visible. Now it has come to the fore. I see a world that is unstable and increasingly politically fractured. I think my paintings tap into that. This particular group of works has a survivalist thread running through it, but that is not to say all is without hope.

*Can you tell me a little about the spaces that you create in your work? Your use of dramatic shadowing and skewed dimensionality can often feel surreal or indeed claustrophobic, and to my mind points more to a psychological space than a physical one.*

My reference points are a melding of first-and second-hand sourced material, both imagined and constructed environs. I build the spaces with quick sketches to further elaborate collaged imagery that guides me in the painting process.

I begin painting with a skeletal structure or composition in mind, with the work constantly revised and edited throughout. I am always adding or taking away elements, while keeping the door slightly ajar for new imagery to enter the work. This can be a painted detail or a palette shift, to encourage a particular reading.

I am generally less concerned with an accurate representation of a particular space than with capturing a specific feeling or mood. I think that constructing the images with the differed and distorted perspectives can encourage some form of embodiment for the viewer, some sense of lost footing or disruption so that one arrives back in one's body, even if that is through a sense of unease.

*Physical and sexual intimacy is also a recurring subject in your paintings, what are you hoping to unearth or convey when you create these images?*

I suppose these "moments" act as a counterweight, to balance the often-disquieting circumstances the figures that populate the paintings find themselves in. They are also stand-ins for potential forms of resistance and sheltering in the face of adversity. For example, in *Kyur*, the figures are bunkered down. I think the work has a calming aura to it, there is an uncanny feeling to the space. It is almost domestic, which depicts something as everyday as an afternoon nap, yet it comes off as ethereal and dreamy. I am interested in how I can push a potentially banal image to provide suggestions of various narratives or subtexts.

*What about the distorted flatness you employ? It reminds me of when a digital image gets stretched if you force an aspect ratio, or corrupted when it is uploading to the internet.*

That is perhaps an effect of my working process. I have a range of source material that I push through various media to form a preparatory image in particular ways. I like the feeling of a distorted lens—there is no empirical truth or vantage point. Everything bends and contorts to the will of and in service to the painting. There is a focus on psychological states throughout my work, for which there is no fixed visual representation in our dreams or our mind's eye. I hope my paintings are close to touching that idea in some way.



On View

## Painter Lewis Hammond Explores the Dark Side of Intimacy in a Moody New Show in Mexico City— See It Here

Take a sneak peek at a gallery that has just reopened to the public.

Caroline Goldstein, May 13, 2020



Lewis Hammond, *No Rest (The Flight)* (2020). Courtesy of the artist and Lulu, Mexico City.

*As galleries around the world begin to slowly reopen, we are focusing on exhibitions at spaces that are now open to public visitors. Check out this show at a newly reopened gallery below.*

### “Lewis Hammond: Still Life” Through June 27 at Lulu, Mexico City

**What the gallery says:** “The work of London-based painter Lewis Hammond seems to embody if not the macro aspect of the moment, then the micro, the personal, private experience of what many of us may currently be experiencing. Indeed, if Hammond’s tenebrous pictures felt relevant in a pre-pandemic world, their portrayal of extreme states of mind, such as fear, anxiety, desire and claustrophobia, feels more pertinent than ever now.

The work in this exhibition, which was made [before and during] the crisis in Mexico and then completed en pleine crise in London, is liable to bring to mind many things. The artist’s dark and moody palette, not to mention phantasmagoric subject matter, deliberately evokes a whole host of old masters, particularly Goya and the “Black Paintings,” as well as other examples of the Spanish baroque, like Ribera.”

**Why it’s worth a look:** The subjects of these moody, thick, chalky works seem at first to be relishing their closeness to one another. A couple spoons in bed; another two embrace, their heads almost fused together. Such pictures are interspersed with others that veer toward danger, though it’s never realized. In one painting, three thorny branches stand in domed interior frames; in another, there is an arrangement of knives and sharp tools; in a third, we see a scavenging animal with his fangs out.

The heavy colors can be more calming than aggressive though, and it seems as if the exhibition’s title, “Still Life,” refers not to the art-historical term, but to the artist’s vision of people and things existing in a still, unhurried life.

**What it looks like:**



# TANK

## In conversation with Lewis Hammond



Lewis Hammond, a graduate of London's Royal Academy of Art, presented *The Keep* (2019) at Arcadia Missa earlier this year. The show featured a series of large, ominous oil paintings - a discordant union of dark, earthy and reddish hues. Across the works, strange and statuesque figures inhabit a world of barbed growths and enclosed spaces suggestive of William Blake's etchings of hell or the fires of Mordor.

Everywhere there is coupling, in crevices and corners, behind metal bars. Some appear at home, others tortured by this twilight world of sexual congress, sharp points and metallic gates. Throughout, the line between love and violence is doubtful - forms huddle together, grasp at one another, while others crouch in postures of submission. If we are in hell, the line between devil and human victim is blurred - in their heroic musculature, all seem fallen angels.

TANK spoke to the artist about his recent show, and using oil paints in the age of the iPhone.

**Preparing for a show can be a long experience. When did this one start, and where did the ideas for the series come from?**

This was my first solo exhibition outside of an academic institution and therefore the first opportunity to orchestrate a conversation across several paintings in one space. Certain themes and pictorial devices have found recurrent ground in the paintings over the last year or so. The transmuting figures, hostile (or perhaps secure/homely) environments and a pervading sense of disquiet set the tone for the works. This was the feeling I wanted to seep throughout the show.

I often have mental images for how I want a painting to manifest, usually inspired or driven by a blend of biography, literature, cinema and artworks that have left an indelible mark on me. I encourage a sense of ritual and mythology within the paintings yet I see them as sideways reflections/representations of the complexities of lived experience -insecurity, anxiety, the alarming socio-political landscape, and so on. I think I could broadly cast the works as explorations of mental states.

**What does oil paint as a medium offer you (practically, conceptually)?**

The immediacy and relative flexibility of oil paint has always attracted me. I previously made large-scale collages and used various paint substances to obfuscate the image. The results were a sort of image burial with an atmospheric boost. I think I paint almost in the reverse now - by excavating or teasing the image out through the layers of painted surface.

I enjoy an engagement with the history of painting and how it can be utilised within my practice to talk about the time and place I exist in. I enjoy and appreciate the lineage and conversation through artworks, however vast the time between the artists' lives.

**Oil painting has a strong, some might even say burdensome, sense of aesthetic history and tradition. Does that affect you?**

It can sometimes feel overbearing, felt most acutely when starting a painting. It is a blend of excitement and self-doubt. I am forever unsure if I possess the tools to make the next thing I want to make. This usually resolves itself by diving into the work and finding a way to get close to that thing I envisage.

**Are there particular painters you would say you are in conversation with?**

I endlessly pour over artist books: Ribera, Rubens, Goya, Caravaggio and Titian are often in heavy rotation.

**There is one painting in your show - a man with pointed ears looks down in a close-up portrait - that reminded me of a cropped photo or a slightly skewed selfie. How would you say that owning a phone with a camera, engaging with various social media, has influenced your art?**

Owning a camera phone and so possessing the endless potential to create a "new" image at any given moment is both blessing and curse. I feel very fortunate to be able to

capture moments that can instantly be pulled into my practice, but it also adds to an already heavily mediated experience of the world - constantly updated news stories, online digital communities via Instagram and Facebook or whichever network you choose to log into. I'm not sure how healthy it is. A reliance on the ability of photography to reproduce a moment for me to reference while painting is perhaps not always the answer.

I try to strike a balance of making the best use of such a resource while still not being wholly committed to the image, painting something half-remembered and thereby creating a new image from a forever thinning idea of its essence is sometimes the more interesting path, preferring re-invention over certainty.

**The earthy reddish hues of the series create such a strong sense of atmosphere. What drew you to these particular colours?**

The earth-red underpainting was initially employed as a traditional painting technique, a method to unify the image and use the red ground as a mid-tone. I began to enjoy the sort of hellish feel it gives the paintings; a sense of heat or nightmare/apocalyptic landscape.

It is also the result of a gradually shifting palette over the past few years. Small changes in technique and material supports led me to that point. When painting I think about a surrounding physical and climatic sensibility – sources of heat, light or wind – their directionality and how they may affect the subject. Sometimes the figures seem to exist in a vacuum; neither hot nor cold, neither night nor day. That may be a proxy for a feeling of apathy or a condition the characters have been bludgeoned into.

**Do you think of your work as surreal?**

I think it would be fair to describe my work as slightly surreal or slightly fantastical. This is mostly owing to its symbolic potentiality – I am simultaneously mining and inventing, nothing is fixed.



Lewis Hammond, *Black Rain*, 2019

**How important to you is the act of naming a work of art? How did you arrive at *Fuckboy*?**

It refers to a painting (one of the most striking for me) showing a hand holding a rose. The importance of the title is completely dependent upon the painting itself. I enjoy the secondary opportunity to direct a viewer, sometimes to throw an initial feeling about the painting into a whole new realm, sometimes to find a more poetic moment that may not be so present in the work. The titles are often indicative of writing/music I have in heavy rotation at the time of making the work - a bastardisation of lyrics/literature/poetry I have read. I have no fixed rules with titling, I go with my gut.

**To zoom out a little - what's it like to grow up in Wolverhampton? Did growing up in the West Midlands affect your work?**

Wolverhampton is an odd city. It officially became a city in the millennium but of course didn't transform overnight and maintained its small-town mindset.

I grew up with a tight friendship circle of skaters and punks. I skated a lot and played in bands. All the weird shit we exposed ourselves to and situations we found ourselves in has been highly formative. I pretty much dropped out of school by my mid-teens and did a bunch of stuff before going to art school in London. My youth has definitely influenced me but it's hard to say exactly how.

**Now that the show has finished, has it left you with any questions?**

Yeah lots. Making the show was a steep learning curve as I made all the work in a condensed amount of time, consumed by the studio in a certain way. Now I'm in a period of "experimentation" and digesting the most recent works I made and thinking toward future projects.

**Lewis Hammond's debut solo show *The Keep* opened at Arcadia Missa in February, and he is currently in group shows with Antenna Space, Shanghai and Deborah Schamoni Galerie, Munich. Arcadia Missa will present his work at Frieze London later this year.**

# Frieze

Fan Letter /  
BY GABRIELLA POUNDS  
22 JAN 2019

## The Eerie, Enchanted Paintings of Lewis Hammond

'These works render the real, estranged personalities of our present perturbing, alluring; exquisite'



Lewis Hammond, *Fuckboy*, 2018  
Oil on board  
33 x 22 cm.  
Courtesy: the artist and Arcadia Missa, London

They'll creep you out, gaze at you through multiple eyes and ignore you completely, backs turned: bodies within hollowed bodies, fragmented faces and dislocated limbs. Lewis Hammond's work is teething with them.

His eerie, enchanting paintings are created from elegant, murky lashings of oil on canvas and linen. Large in scale, *Host* (2017) is emblematic of his virtuosity in the medium: it depicts a pained, kneeling man on a stage, shedding a thick layer of skin – along with excess 'fleshy innards' – in a sickly palette. Evocative of the eldritch souls who haunt the works of Francisco de Goya, Hammond skews and melts art-historical forms and motifs, human and non-human subjects, as fluidly as his brushstrokes.

In *Fuckboy* (2018), geometric lines and shading create a gentle illusion of a recess, inside which a dark hand clasps a faded red rose. References to 16th-century Venice abound in his series of 'triple portraits': Titian metamorphoses into the present in *I've Grown Used to You Somehow* (2018). A triad of severed, Alien-like facial features surface from burgundy, green and kohl shadows; mottled and smudged across the backdrop.

Seemingly otherworldly, his subjects, Hammond tells me, are actually the counterpoint. A collision of literary inspirations, the 1980s British punk-band ephemera he grew up with and even BDSM clothing render the real, estranged personalities of our present perturbing, alluring; exquisite.

# FLASH ART

•REVIEW

1 April 2019, 4:53 pm CET

## Lewis Hammond *Arcadia Missa / London*

by [Alex Bennett](#)

Used as the final shelter, the keep — a fortified tower common to castles of the Middle Ages — performs a last-ditch attempt at sanctuary. That this should exist in the center of a castle braces against the possibility of impending destruction. The keep had another historical usage: to incarcerate prisoners. A space reflective or representative as refuge, yet structurally binding or imprisoning, coalesces in Lewis Hammond's paintings.

Given late capitalism's reterritorialization of everyday life, the "outside" reads as antiquated. Hammond's vignettes reckon with such claustrophobic contexts: the insinuation of the segregated, disenfranchised individual into a totalizing whole. Drawing from his own experience and black history, Hammond lavishes the excluded with wounding focus. This does not reveal a clearer case of visibility. Rather, Hammond's attention to the body is fractious; it is splintery and nettlesome, yet tenebrous and nebular. In *Safe Haus* (2019), a sallow-toned couple lie naked together, the figures flattened and stretched as though meeting the ground, dead. "Safe Haus" is engraved above a window made with hawthorn branches. Some genuine reflection on material existence: the haus unmoored, the haus unheimlich.



This Sisyphean reeling tips Hammond's painting into a weltering fold of representation and affect. The internalization is rattling and otherworldly, yet the infliction is plain as day. A slow-motion implosion, the self is disturbed, malformed, slandered. In *Putting Myself Back Together* (2019), faces multiply in swarthy vermilion like an expanding concertina. The bulky, kneeling figure is a blackout in a cave, the lips and eye sockets mutilated in and out of existence. The central figure's torso and left arm — half offering, half shielding — appear to burn alive.

Hammond's potent palette and asphyxiated forms ventilate the struggle to let suffering assume space. It is thirstily duress stung into blunt realization. The intensity is so final in the simplest painting: two hands appear to massage a back, all skin pine-green, but the thumbs turn unearthly, melting deep against the spine, raising the oppressed shoulder blades. Masquerading as palliative, one swift motion bends into deliberate violence.



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