

Nicholas Nauman

How Queer artists paint male intimacy today

What to show, and how to show it, is being recontextualized by a new generation of creatives

Intimacy is vital, precious, and elusive. Artworks that attempt to fix it in image can only reach for signs of its lived experience, with references to interacting bodies and shared feeling that can, when skillfully and sensitively executed, involve the viewer. Figurative painting is especially potent in this regard, and its history is full of pictures of lovers staged for passion or betrayal, their quiet gazes conveying the fine lines that bind satisfaction and longing.

Art history has greatly influenced the way young painters depict Queer intimacy today. Precedents are abundant here. It's been nearly a century since Paul Cadmus raised hackles, eyebrows, and temperatures with coded ribaldry that amounted, in the eyes of the initiated, to a celebration of the sensuous details of queer life. In subsequent decades, as mainstream culture has convulsed with periods of nominal inclusion and little structural change, representations of Queer intimacy have become more direct.



David Wojnarowicz, *Untitled*, 1985-87. Copyright David Wojnarowicz Estate. Courtesy of the David Wojnarowicz Estate and P-P-O-W.

This means not only that we see more pictures of Queer people being themselves, but that the ever-evolving ways in which Queer communities are made vulnerable become intrinsic to forms of intimacy and their portrayal. In the 1980s, during the early days of the AIDS crisis, increasingly visible Queer artists made work rife with signs of dire threat, from **David Wojnarowicz's** brutally pained portraits and hellscape, to the playful but nightmarish scenes of **Martin Wong** or Frank C. Moore. These days, while treatment and reliable information are more effective and widely available than during the AIDS

epidemic's first decades, the virus has not gone anywhere, and HIV status remains a persistent point of negotiation for millions of people the world over. Meanwhile, politicians the world over persistently introduce laws that explicitly endanger Queer lives.

Younger painters contextualize this history in new ways. They draw from homoerotic codes such as Cadmus's while pointing towards the suffering and resilience of the AIDS legacy and the ongoing, looming threats Queer communities continue to face. As a result, they make works teeming with the joys and melancholies of contemporary Queer intimacy, subtly hinting at its carnal and psychological implications.

The phantasmic realism of Esaí Alfredo (b. 1997, Puerto Rico) yields rich scenes of young people in vast expanses of shadow and darkness. Alfredo is fascinated by the fundamental alteration of human experience brought on by widespread light pollution, from cityscapes to the glow of cinema and phone screens; his paintings incorporate these flickers, but are they guiding or confusing his figures?

References to film appear throughout Alfredo's work, as in *La Ciudad Carmesí* (The Crimson City, 2023). Viewed from behind, two figures link arms and walk onto a red road that leads to the distant skyscrapers of the title. The evocation of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) both renders the film's significance to queer living and shifts it, Alfredo's night hues hinting at new worlds of promise and danger. *El Secreto* (The Secret, 2023)

features yet more obscured faces, as one boy cups a hand to whisper to another, their eyes outside the frame but their bare midribs realized in meticulous green and blue oils that place the implication of the moment in the far broader mystery of its suggested context.



Esaí Alfredo, 2023. La Ciudad Carmesí, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Spinello Projects.



Esaí Alfredo, *El Secreto*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Spinello Projects.

The collage works of Devin N. Morris (b. 1986, Maryland, US) – comprised of found objects, wood, pastel, paint, and much more – show people in dense tableaux that blur the lines between domestic interiors and the natural world. Full of vibrant colors and a vast array of personal references, Morris’s practice explores the gifts and struggles of Black and queer living, as well as the boundary between the inherited and the created.

Caught the Bug (2022), for instance, shows two figures in a bedroom: One, shirtless, crouches in proposition toward the other, draped in a white shawl. Surrounding them, collapsing steadfast distinction between inside and out, are elements of the room’s exterior: bricks and columns, sidewalk and sky. Scattered throughout are small yet significant details, including a birthday cake for Morris and his late mother, bits of his home state’s license plate, HIV meds spilling out of their bottle, feathers and hair mixed in with pigment.

In *Use Meeeeeee (Table)* (2023), two figures are in an outdoors traced by a multicolored brick wall. Kneeling, with their pants at their knees and their backsides to the viewer, the pair is rapt in sexual encounter with a couple of trees. The piece is mounted on a wooden table to which are affixed two toy cars and a few dice; large, sappy drips of a semen-like substance fall off leaves, trickle down the trunks, and pool on the ground under a phantasmagorical red sky.

Anthony Cudahy (b. 1989, Florida, US) creates immersive, dream-like scenes of quotidian life with expert use of color and perspective. In *Eroded beach* (2023), a bearded figure shades their face while lounging at a shoreline that drops, vertiginously, below the painting's frame. In the background, amidst a swath of dark maroons that unsettle the beach's sandy taupes, a nearly identical figure lies in the same posture as the first.



Devin N. Morris, Use Meeeeeee (Table), 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Deli Gallery.



Anthony Cudahy, Eroded beach, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Hales.

Three enmeshed (2023) is filled with red-gold grasses, leaves, and earthen ground that stretches up to a remarkably direct, thin, pink horizon line. The human forms lolling in the underbrush are more tangled than the plant life, knees and hands and heads holding each other in a semblance of respite.

Cudahy's recent scenes of people in natural settings – historically used as spaces for encounters, exchanges, and seduction by Queer people – are suffused with fiery hues now readily associated with the skies of a climate in crisis, situating bodies at rest in an encompassing precarity that also shows up in a domestic scene like *Yrs* (2023). Here, the swirled contours of a naked back and shoulders dominate the canvas, the figure seated amidst openings and reflections: an open door, a closed door, a mirror that shows windows outside a window, the subject's face doubled on surfaces shining with the all-too-pink sunset.

Inventive, attentive deployment of lighting effects gives vivid realism to figures in the enigmatic interiors of **Kyle Dunn** (b. 1990, US). The subjects are posed upon thresholds between inside and out, anticipation and disenchantment, waking and sleeping, before and after. *Sawn Man* (2023), for instance, shows the upper body of a man fallen asleep while penciling in a notebook, its blank pages open, his left hand at an angle unavailable to the awake. Behind him, at the foot of a bed, a pair of legs (naked save for socks) stands in the green shadows that make up the room. The legs' stillness suggests the sleeping man's own lower half as much as a lover's – rendering him at once the sawyer and the sawn.

The Hunt (2022) is a striking coalescence of Dunn's technique and themes, brimming with an unplaceable sense of eventful potential that has no assurance of being realized: A masculine nude dresses or undresses before a large round mirror, turned so the viewer barely sees his face; nightlife detritus – a half-drunk cocktail, scent, makeup – litters a small adjacent table, while the subject rests a foot on a pile of books and clothes spill out of a dresser; a smaller looking-glass mirrors the subject's genitalia; a window shows trees outside that echo a painting, lain against the dresser, that looks an awful lot like Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *The Hunters in the Snow* (1565).



Works by Kyle Dunn. Left: Sawn Man, 2023. Right: The Hunt, 2022. Courtesy of the artist and P·P·O·W.

These artists approach figuration with notably contemporary insight, bringing technical expertise and personal intensity to images that maintain the radical possibility of a livable, unknowable future that is part and parcel of Queer intimacy. Queer art history will continue to move – through the latest iterations of targeted vulnerabilization, through the freshest vanguards of selfhood and community – with unbridled feeling, creative vigor, and, as with these artists, painterly brilliance.

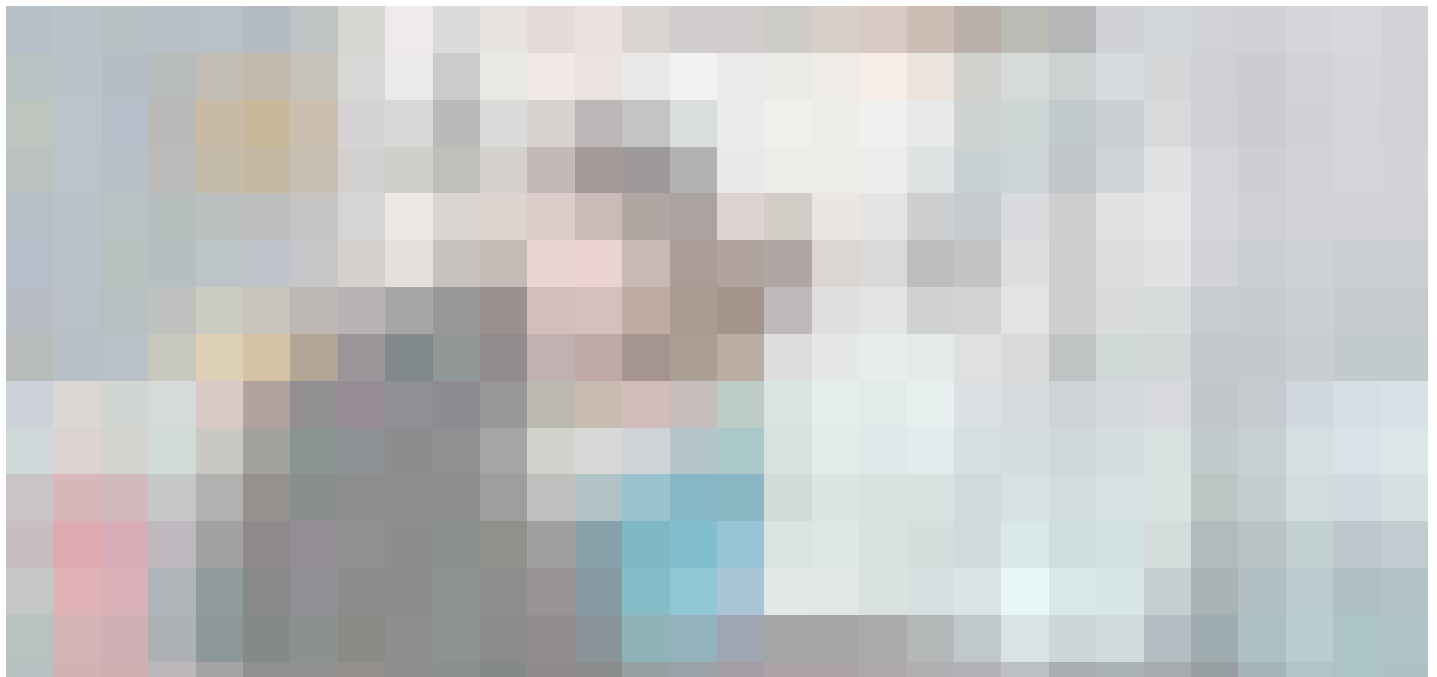
Esaí Alfredo is represented by **Spinello Projects** (Miami), who will present work by the artist in the Positions sector at Art Basel Miami Beach 2023. Devin N. Morris is represented by Deli Gallery (New York, Mexico City), who will also dedicate a solo booth to the artist in the Positions sector of the fair. Anthony Cudahy is represented by **Hales Gallery** (London, New York), who will show work by the artist in the Galleries sector at the fair as well. Kyle Dunn is represented by **P.P.O.W** (New York).

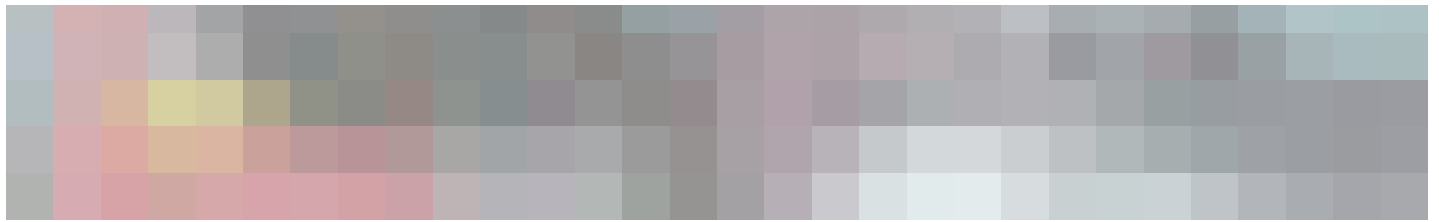
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Captions for full-bleed images (from top to bottom): 1. A work by Anthony Cudahy, shown at Art Basel Miami Beach 2022 by Hales Gallery. 2. **Devin N. Morris**, *Caught the Bug (detail)*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist and Deli Gallery. 3. Anthony Cudahy, *Three enmeshed (detail)*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Hales Gallery. 4. A work by Kyle Dunn, shown at Art Basel Miami Beach 2022 by P.P.O.W.

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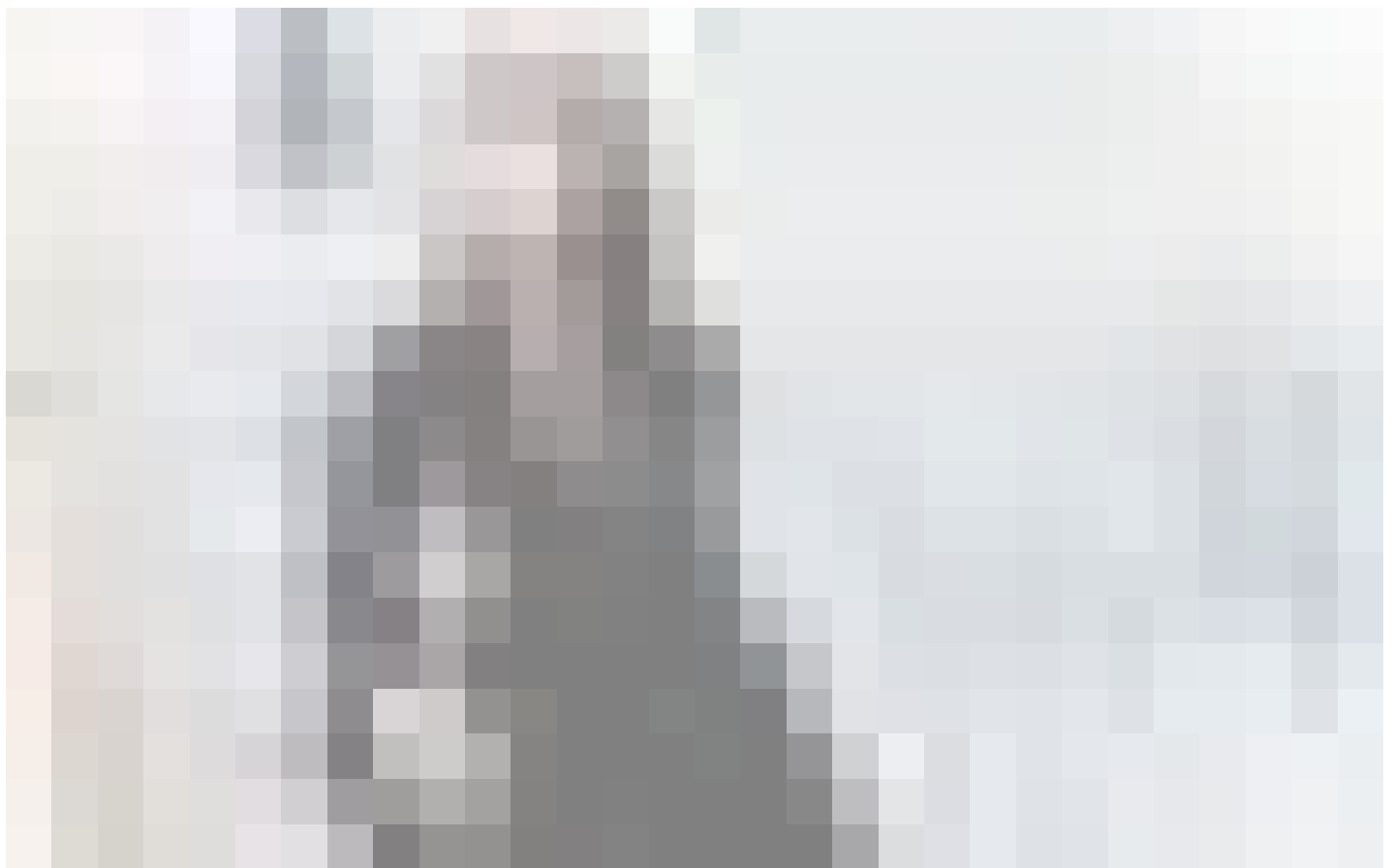


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