

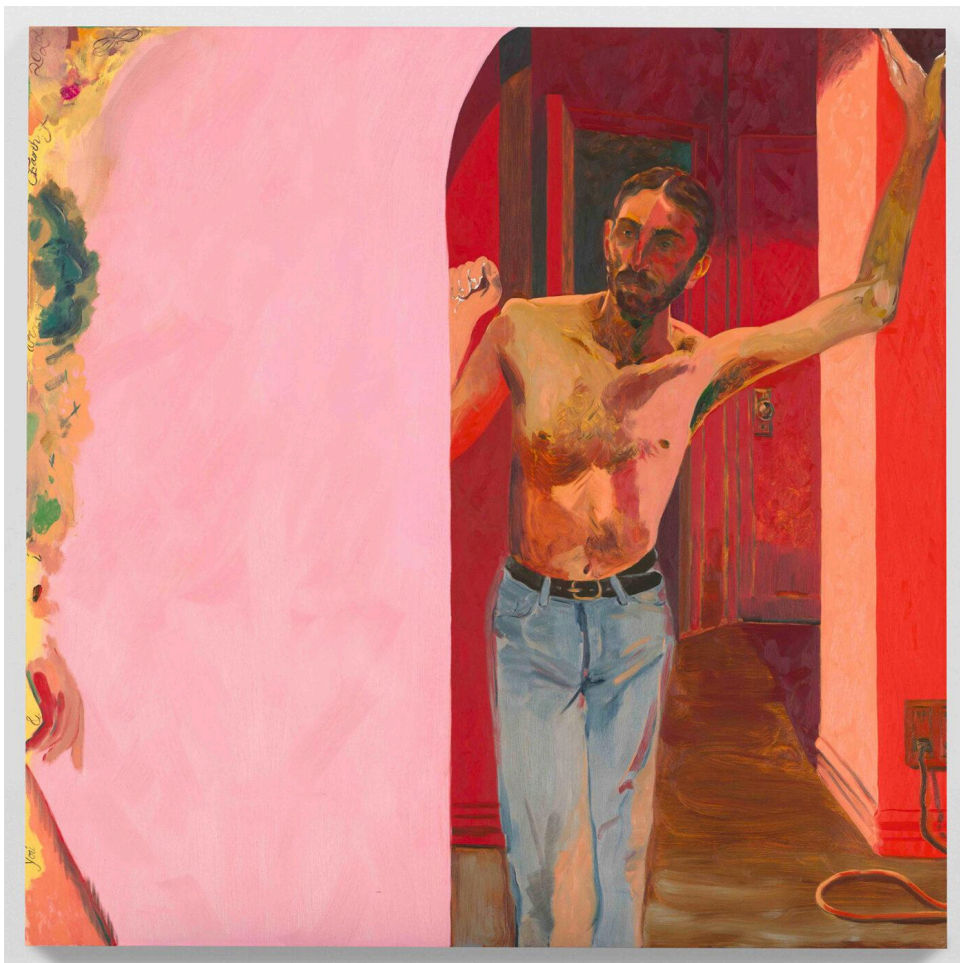
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INTERVIEW

Anthony Cudahy by Sarah Moroz

Painting that thinks through other images.

AUGUST 30, 2023



The New York City–based artist Anthony Cudahy is currently unfurling an exchange between his own paintings and those of a small French museum’s collections in [Conversation](#) at the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dole in eastern France. Creating an homage to European painting and decorative-art pieces, Cudahy’s fragile bodies and multiple planes echo carefully selected works from the past. Given his desire to lend greater visibility to neglected histories, his interest in the archives plays out harmoniously in this cadre as he champions small, delicate, and often unattributed French artists from centuries ago alongside his own vibrant canvases.

—Sarah Moroz

Sarah Moroz

As we’re presently standing in your studio, tell me about your inspiration wall.

Anthony Cudahy

There are certain studio superstitions—like this inspiration wall—that I bring from studio to studio. I rearrange it, but it’s kind of a good luck charm. On the bottom right is this beautiful Albrecht Dürer still life; I’ve probably painted that plant into ten to fifteen paintings. Other wall pieces are more utilitarian, and some are just, like, good studio feelings. Some are from when I was a teenager that I’ve always kept with me. I’m very drawn to medieval and Byzantine imagery. Some are from *Butt* magazine; they did a

calendar in 2014. It kind of runs the gamut. I love Pieter Bruegel so much. He's always here.

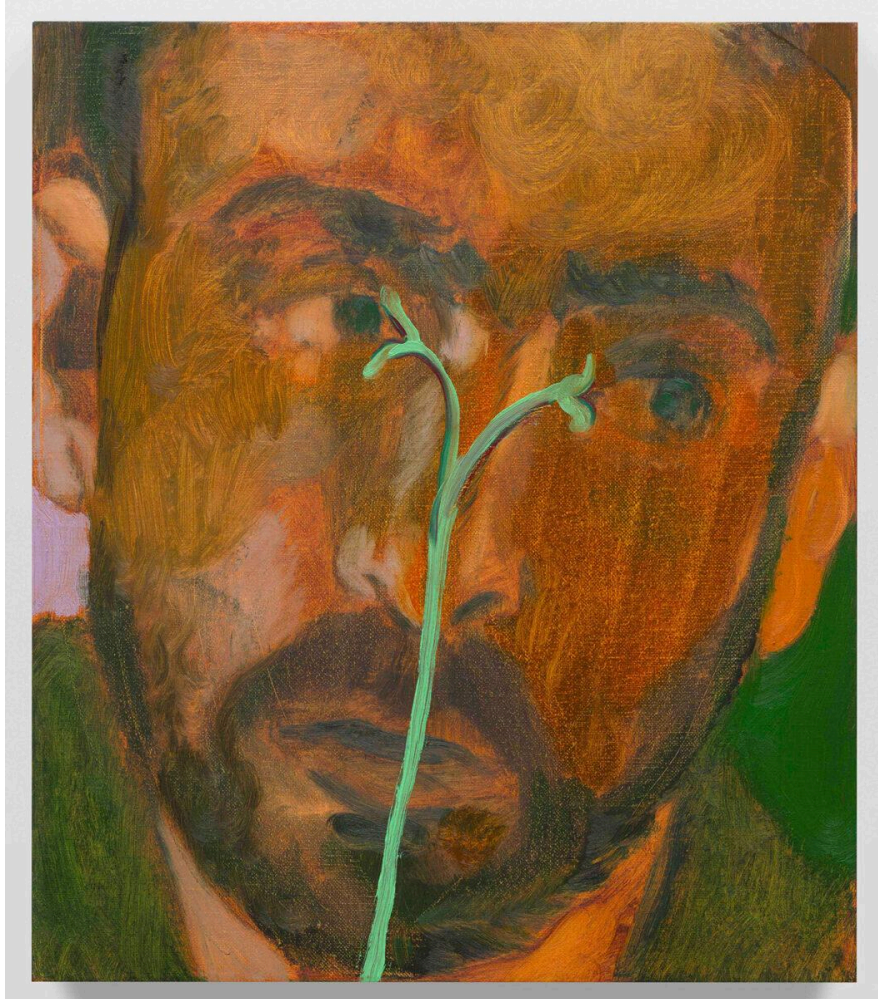
SM

What are your studio habits? When you're conceiving of a work, are you a planner or spontaneous?

AD

The way I paint ends up being in multiple layers, but I really like the kind of mark that I can make when it's "wet on wet" in that first layer. But that means that I have to be strategic in a way. Usually, I work in longer sessions, like eight to twelve hours, and try to get it as close to final as I can in the first layer so that the energy is there, and the lightness that comes in from the substrate is there because by the time you're painting over oil paint, you can never get that luminosity again.

I've always been super interested in that tension between marks and letting the paint sort of do its thing. I need that challenge or stress to keep it interesting. If I render something too accurately or it just becomes about the likeness, I'll wipe it or distress it and then start over. My process with painting a face, for example, is that usually during that session I'll have wiped away the face maybe two or three times.



SM

How has your process evolved over the years?

AC

I went to Pratt, here in Brooklyn, for undergrad from 2007 to 2011. I originally went there for painting, and then I got sort of freaked out about having a job. (*laughter*) So I switched into the communications design department. But especially in undergrad, it's very easy to bend every

assignment to what you actually want to do, which is not realistic in a job way. So I was still painting a lot of my projects, and I would end up making an art zine.

I found the most ideal day job as a graphic designer, which I worked at for almost a decade. And that actually really kept me painting. It was a level of stability. Right when I graduated, I already had all this baggage; I felt I wasn't a serious painter because I didn't actually study painting. I was trying to make work more serious or somber—deadening the colors a little bit—so that it was more like Luc Tuymans. Eventually, I found my way to the Hunter College grad program, and I did my MFA in painting. It really loosened up a lot of my inhibitions, and I became a lot less afraid to be romantic with the colors and images. That also lined up with the art world being interested in figurative work again.

SM

Was that “not a serious painter” self-consciousness tied to certain art-world expectations?

AC

I internalized a lot of these hierarchies—for instance, that illustration is lower or unserious. So over time it's a matter of developing more confidence: These are the kinds of images I make. But also trying to push myself to get a more nuanced, complicated relationship with color. Also, looking at a lot of painting and trying to figure out how, for example, was

Paul Cézanne making his painting space? How does that differ from a space that's more photographic or more digital? There's this line between not having confidence in the way that you make things and then also wanting to push yourself along with trying to figure out where you want to direct the work. As long as you're a good looker and thinker, you can trust your own ideas.

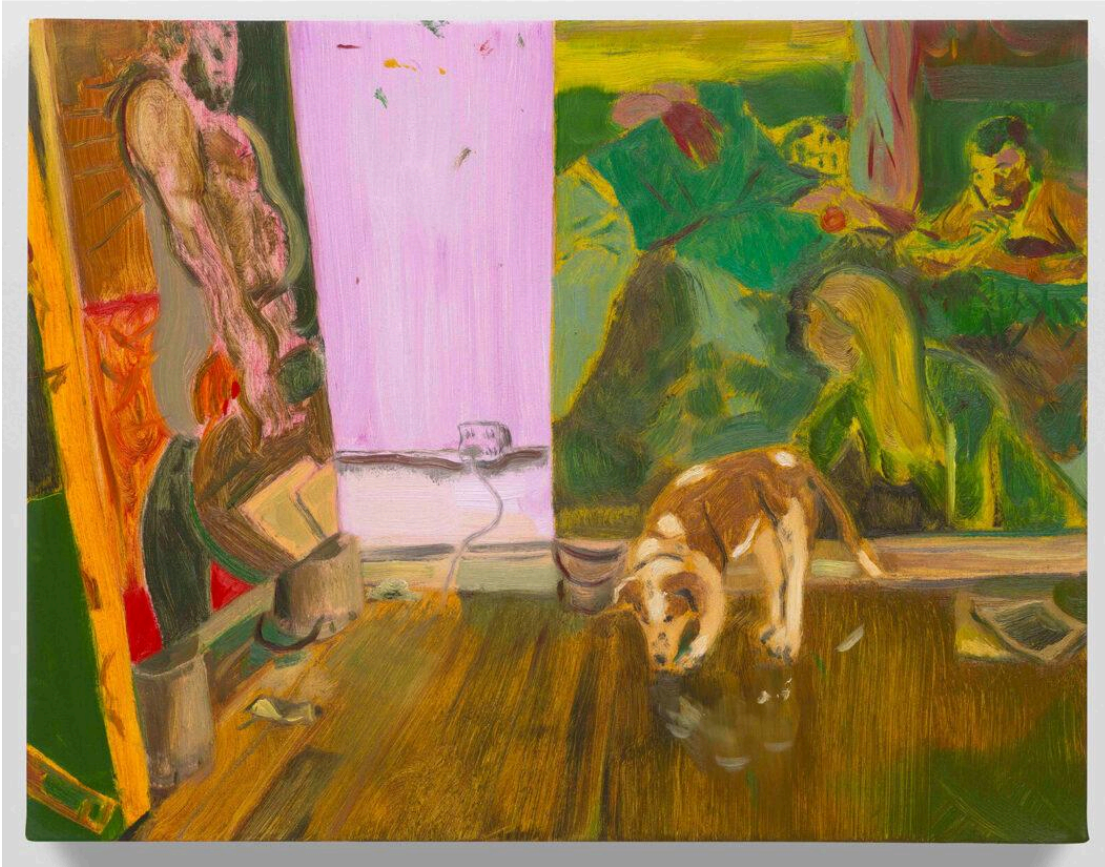
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For the *Conversation* exhibition in France, how is the selected work dialoguing with your own?

AC

The museum invited me with the idea that I would respond to pieces in their collection. That was ideal for me because painting allows you to be influenced by past work, and then you change past works by context. It's this very flexible, moving thing; and I love how self-referential painting is to other painting. It feels as if the way painters think is through other images.

We went to visit the museum a year ago and got the chance to go through all their storage units and look at the work that was hanging up in the permanent collection at that time. I went through thousands of images and whittled it down to a manageable amount. I then really quickly realized that almost all the images I picked were unattributed. I was just drawn to a lot of these strange allegorical paintings, a lot of landscape painting.



SM

Can you talk about the queer themes in your work?

AC

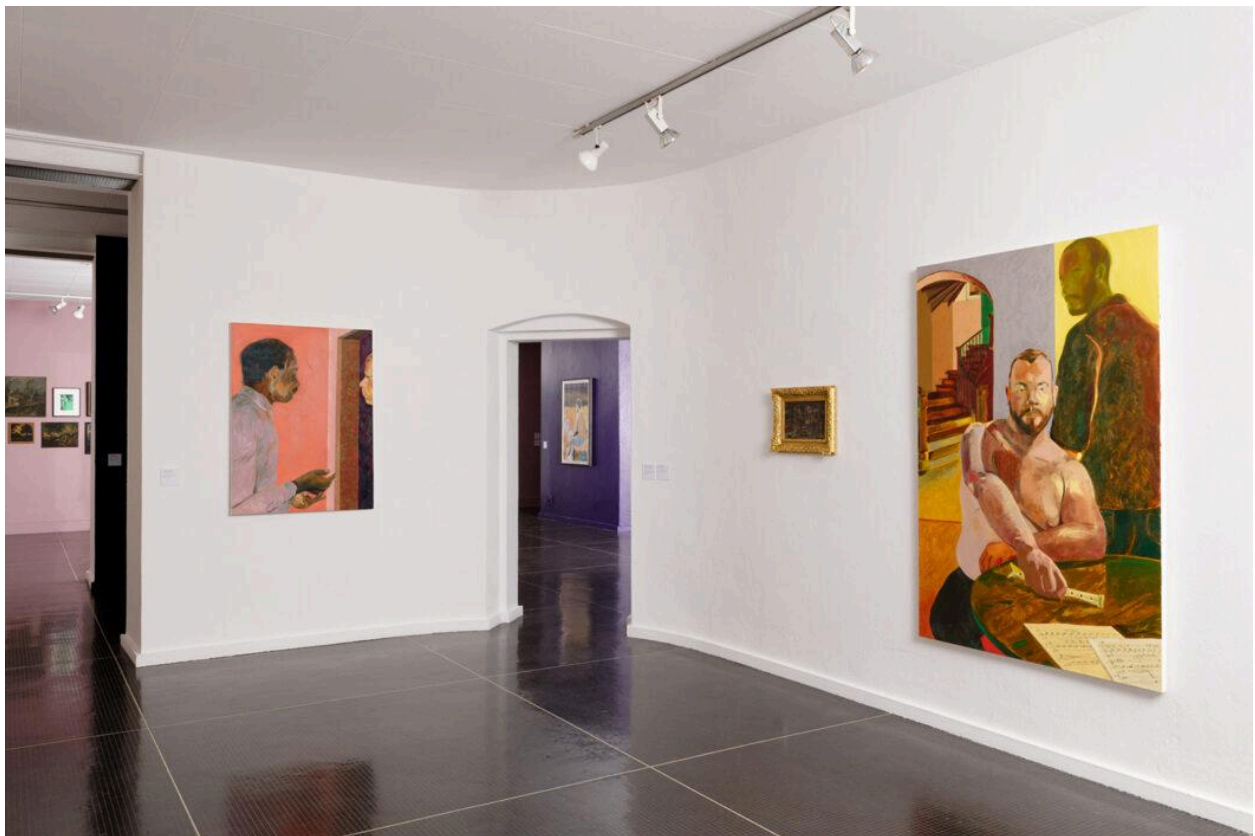
Because of everything that's going on in this country right now, I was thinking a lot about projections onto gay people. I mean everywhere; but I'm from Florida, so. . . . I read this really good but not perfect book by Ian Young called *The Stone Wall Experiment: A Gay Psychohistory*. I love the first half of the book; it's trying to present the history of the gay person as an archetypal figure across the past two hundred years. And then the second part of the book—it was published in the mid-'90s—veers into some conspiracies about the origins of AIDS and then is a little anti-medical help. But it was of its time.

SM

With this pairing exercise in Conversation, is a queer lens inextricable from putting these works together?

AC

I think inextricable is a good word for it because it's not necessarily that I'm illustrating queerness or actively trying to flip things onto a queer lens. But I also feel like it's so intrinsic that it doesn't have to be explicitly about it to be inflected by it; it inflects everything, even if you're not necessarily directly talking about it because a lot of the things I'm talking about are human fears and experiences. I mean, I have my positionality. But when I get to a shorthand of imagery, such as a lot of those genre paintings of the hunt and stuff, I feel like they have to do with the sort of violence that's simmering, and then the figures are usually in a precarious position within that. Sometimes I'm talking about that within a queer body in society. I want the work to be open in that way.



SM

Is there a new piece of yours that feels especially significant?

AC

There's this one that I made that's called *The Only Tune* (2023). Do you know the composer Nico Muhly? I've always loved that early album from him, *Mothertongue*; and there's a song suite at the end called "The Only Tune" taken from this really intense, morbid folk song. Muhly talked a lot about it being this musical necromancy.

So much of the work in the show is about these layers with work building on past work and painting being this kind of cannibalistic medium where it's constantly using itself as material to make another thing. And so I made this painting referencing Caravaggio musicians where it's these two figures and sheet music on a table, and I was desperate to actually make the sheet music from that Muhly song.

You can buy his music online, but I couldn't find it for this. As a last-ditch effort, I asked on my private Instagram stories: "Does anyone know Nico Muhly or someone who does?" I found someone who knows him, and he got to Nico, and the reason there was no sheet music was because it was a studio album. Generously, he said: "I could probably fake it." And he did, and I got to paint into the work a really detailed musical score to that song.

Anthony Cudahy: Conversation is on view at the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dole in Dole, France, until September 10.