

ANTHONY CUDAHY

Jorge S. Arango, Review: Anthony Cudahy's solo show encourages both dissection and delight, Portland Press Herald, 12 May 2024



Anthony Cudahy, *open window (blue, blue room)*, 2022. Photo by JSP Art Photography

There is a painting in the Ogunquit Museum of American Art's solo show "Anthony Cudahy: Spinneret" (through July 21) that elicited a puzzling jumble of contradictory emotions: awe colliding with suspicion, sweetness invaded by wary skepticism, hopefulness penetrated by dread.

"What is happening?" I asked myself as I stood before the 60-by-96-inch "open window (blue, blue room)." Why could I not just lose myself in its intoxicating intensity of indigo, cobalt, turquoise and phosphorescent green?

The picture portrays two men – one lying on the floor on his stomach with feet in the air and head in his hand; the other resting his head on his partner's buttocks, his body sprawling languorously in the opposite direction with one knee crooked upward. Both stare straight at the viewer. The titular window is above them, draped in a diaphanous sheer, and to the left is a mirror where we glimpse Cudahy at work trying to capture the scene.

It is unabashedly beautiful, a picture of queer intimacy that is tender and restful at the same time that it is unapologetic in its demand that the viewer accept this relationship as every bit as natural, manifestly valid and loving as more conventional ones. That realization is what helped me understand what was going on in my body and mind.

In his essay for the gorgeous exhibition catalog, Ricardo Montez writes: "Cudahy produces bodies as abstractions and situates them within queer spaces that are themselves abstract renderings of the world. Queerness here does not simply mean that Cudahy's queer identity or desires are represented in the social scenes of contact that he paints. Rather, queer affects emerge in the constant tension between intimate spaces of care and safety and the rupturing of these inviting landscapes."

I could see that my unease was at least partially due to an ever-present condition for nonbinary people of all stripes: that they must accept the conditionality of their freedom. While nothing is permanent and the nature of the universe is innately dynamic, for LGBTQ+ people – or any marginalized group for that matter – the sense of not allowing themselves the luxury of believing others will be tolerant and accepting is still an omnipresent caution.

Other paintings, such as "Violent echo/rumination" and "Sebastian, before or after," embody this tension, presenting figures who are both inside and outside, sometimes simultaneously in one image.

Outside is not always inviting. At times, as in "Violent

echo/rumination,” which portrays the smoke from Canada’s wildfires that polluted skies in New York, the outside is literally toxic. On the left panel of the diptych, we see a man’s face surveying the exterior scene, which looks stained and veiled in soot, some demonic creatures (perhaps symbols of an impending environmental apocalypse) at the center. On the other side, we see the man, the front half of his face out of the frame as if left outside, sitting at a table with his cellphone. He has retreated indoors to safety but remains connected to the horror outdoors through technology.

The abstracted figuration of Cudahy’s paintings also contributes to the instability I felt while looking at “open window.” There is something tumultuous and perpetually evolving about abstraction, which, unlike straight figuration, does not logically fix an image or reality in place. On a purely painterly level, it’s not easy to abide in the turbulence of techniques that roil and agitate Cudahy’s surfaces. Paint can be applied as pure, opaque pigment or nearly transparent from heavy dilution. It can bleed and travel like dye, become coarsely layered like the canvases of Clyfford Still, or buzz and vibrate like those of Van Gogh. Areas are washed and scumbled, appear like finger-painting or hashmarks. In their physical perception, nothing offers a respite of stillness and stasis.

The soul wants stability and calm. Yet, though there is restfulness in the poses of his subjects and a constancy in their affection, there’s a way we feel concern for the men in “open window.” How long will it last? When will this idyll inevitably be shattered, the intimacy of this room violated? Our perception of this image is necessarily tainted by current events, which offer ample evidence that hard-won rights are not insoluble, that prejudice and hatred still lurk around the corner, that we must remain vigilant and keep trust in check.

In this light, the frank beauty of this painting can feel quixotic. Cudahy himself is complicit in undermining its sense of serenity in both the way he paints and through the symbols he adopts. Parts of the men’s bodies are precisely articulated, while others – specifically the cerulean-colored hand of the man in the foreground and the phosphorescent green hand propping up his partner’s head – are barely modulated shapes. Areas of brighter colors outlining parts of their bodies feel like haloes or auras. The combined effect is to convey a sense of these figures being here, but also in the process of leaving, like ghosts between worlds.

And in the foreground are flowers, notably a narcissus, which appears in many of Cudahy’s paintings. This blossom has a complex, often contradictory symbology. In the West, it represents vanity, while in Eastern cultures it can symbolize good fortune and prosperity, but also,

rather creepily, eyes (this association may take literal shape in “with st. lacy eyes,” where the blossom stands like a lorgnette before eye sockets that were gouged out prior to the martyr’s execution). In other cosmologies, narcissi can indicate inner reflection, creativity and inspiration. But it is also true that they’re poisonous.

Devon Zimmerman, the museum’s curator of modern and contemporary art, points to Cudahy’s use of allegory in his own catalog essay. “Allegories are elusive,” Zimmerman writes. “They are devices that tell one story, while suggesting another.” So what, exactly, does the narcissus stand for in Cudahy’s paintings? Does it suggest the accusation that homosexuality is innately vain (the theory alleging that it parallels Narcissus’ act of eroticizing his own beauty)? Or is it, more likely, a symbol of self-referencing that permeates Cudahy’s oeuvre?

The show’s title, after all, alludes to the organ from which spiders, silkworms and other insects produce their delicate threads. Cudahy’s work unquestionably spins its own very personal web, each memory or experience linked to other memories and experiences through an autobiographical network of gossamer threads. His subjects are his partner, his friends, his uncle and himself. Childhood exposure to Christian iconography accounts for religious allusions like St. Lucy, the Annunciation, devils and demons.

Cudahy’s deeply personal narratives also take shape in many art historical references, which can include medieval illuminated manuscripts, Caravaggio, Friedrich, Giorgione, Titian and many more. But he draws from his Instagram feed too, as in “Crowd (day and night),” where he assembled images of people who defied COVID-19 social distancing regulations and crowded his figures into a park scene, flooding those at the bottom with sunlight, then gradually changing the light as our gaze moves upward so that the figures at the top are seen at night.

Cudahy’s art historical “quotations” include narrative devices that hark back to the Renaissance, but he uses them, again, self-referentially, as in “Against Gardening!,” where he appears both inside and outside. Many Renaissance painters employed this device to visually relate a story: Masaccio, for example, in his fresco “Payment of the Tribute Money,” depicted the characters of the parable in multiple environments within the same work.

There is also, notes Zimmerman, a recurrent sense of melancholy in many scenes. Certainly this is incipient in “open window” and contributes to the subtle unease of what on the surface appears as a harmlessly loving scene. But it also manifests in works that deal with friends or people Cudahy admired who died of AIDS, such as “Jarman in Dungeness” (a tribute to Derek Jarman).

It arises in paintings that deal more expansively with meditations on universal themes, such as the inevitability of death. “Three ages,” for instance, features skulls and a male figure with one shoe on while the other is barefoot. The latter was a common method of depicting death or the passing of innocence.

There is so much content and innuendo in every single Cudahy painting on display in Ogunquit that you can return again and again (and should) to discover their endless subtleties. Yet even if you don’t want to spend your time dissecting the works’ semiotics – it is, admittedly, an endless journey – you can just revel in Cudahy’s resplendent sense of color and the sheer surplus of his talent as a painter.