

# BORDERCROSSINGS

## PAINTING

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Marcel Dzama

Francis Picabia

Barry Schwabsky

Élise Lafontaine

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Rain Cabana-Boucher

Sky Glabush

Louis Fratino, Salman

Toor, Anthony Cudahy

Ian August

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Jack Bush

Jay Isaac

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# BACK TO THE PAST INTO THE FUTURE

## Louis Fratino, Salman Toor, Anthony Cudahy

by Joseph R Wolin



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1. Louis Fratino, *Wheel throwing*, 2024, oil on canvas, 76.2 × 68.6 centimetres. Photo: Jason Wyche. © Louis Fratino. Courtesy the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co, New York.

2. Anthony Cudahy, *Death instinct (for Bergman, for Tarkovsky)*, 2024, oil on linen, 121.9 × 304.8 centimetres. Photo: GC Photography. Courtesy the artist and GRIMM, Amsterdam | New York | London.

3. Salman Toor, *The Latecomer*, 2021, oil on panel, 121.9 × 152.4 centimetres. Photo: Farzad Dwrang. © Salman Toor. Courtesy the artist, Luhning Augustine, New York, and Thomas Dane Gallery, London.



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Ascendant for the umpteenth time since the introduction of abstraction at the beginning of the 20th century, figurative painting once again fills the programs of our museums and galleries. This time around, much of the attention has centred on canvases by members of previously marginalized groups, canvases that explore and affirm formerly overlooked identities, queer identities not least among them. Queer painters who emerged in the last half-decade or so as champions of this latter-day *retour à l'ordre* have garnered institutional support, commercial success and a growing body of critical literature. Among the best of them, Louis Fratino, Salman Toor and Anthony Cudahy, all working in New York, have distinguished their work from that of their peers and predecessors with a winning combination of shared traits that include an abundance of painterly skill and ambition; an open, matter-of-fact, yet largely unpolemical queerness; a deep engagement with art history; and a sidestepping of realist styles based on observation or photography in favour of far more pictorial models. The three also share with many other colleagues an interest in the representation of everyday experience, psychological



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1. Louis Fratino, *I keep my treasure in my ass*, 2019, oil on canvas, 217.8 × 165.1 centimetres. Photo: Jason Wyche. © Louis Fratino. Courtesy the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co, New York.

2. Louis Fratino, *Metropolitan*, 2019, oil on canvas, 152.4 × 240.7 centimetres. Photo: Jason Wyche. © Louis Fratino. Courtesy the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co, New York.

3. Louis Fratino, *Kids*, 2023, oil on canvas, 198.1 × 144.8 centimetres. Photo: Jason Wyche. © Louis Fratino. Courtesy the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co, New York.

interiority and personal subjectivity—an approach that led the writer Tyler Malone in 2019 to dub the prevailing mode of this generation the “New Queer Intimism.”

Fratino was the first to break the ice. By the time of his initial exhibition with the prominent New York gallery Sikkema Jenkins & Co in 2019, the artist (b. 1993) had moved beyond the smallish paintings with which he had begun his career, depicting scenes of male figures, often nude, engaging in quotidian activities or lolling about, rendered in a bright, cartoonish manner indebted to older artists such as Dana Schutz and Nicole Eisenman. His newer works asserted an entirely different claim upon the canon (and the marketplace). Large, deftly rendered portraits, self-portraits, nudes and still lifes competed with the Masters on their own terms, as did images of explicit gay sex, all pictured in an assured exuberant hand with plenty of sly nods to modernism, particularly the proto-cubist Picasso circa 1906–07, the time of *Les Femmes d'Alger*, when hieratic faces with big, strongly outlined Byzantine eyes

collided with faceted, prismatic bodies. The nearly eight-foot-wide *Metropolitan*, 2019, a multfigured composition ostensibly set inside the Brooklyn gay bar of the same name, seemed to collapse a louche, nocturnal, neo-expressionist nightclub scene by the likes of Robert Yarber with the rhythmic energy of Jackson Pollock's 1943 *Mural*. Its frieze-like array of variously single and coupled men on a dance floor, picked out in lurid primaries, practically emanates sweaty desire. You can almost smell the poppers.

But the real showstopper arrived in the form of *I keep my treasure in my ass*, 2019, a vertical canvas with a bird's-eye view of a naked young man on a blue and periwinkle ground, holding his ankles as a smaller version of himself emerges from his anus. A remarkably earthy vision of queer birth, at once gross and erotic, the painting stands in retrospect as an audacious challenge, a gauntlet thrown down in its announcement of the artist's self-creation. Its immediate shock, however, was tempered by a quality common to all of Fratino's works, a winsome sweetness that makes his images, no matter how graphic, feel as if they could have illustrated a particularly freewheeling storybook for children.

In the exhibitions that followed, Fratino built upon this initial triumph, mixing the male nudes, gay couples, domestic still lifes and genre scenes with landscapes and images related to European travels. He continued to juxtapose the tenderly ordinary with the provocatively queer, so that, in his 2023 New York gallery show, *Kids*, 2023, a painting of four little boys around a laden picnic table in the late afternoon sun, hung not far away from *Kiss*, 2023, depicting two scruffy lovers in bed, rimming. The artist's love affair with early modernism continued unabated, with multiple references to the styles and subjects of Picasso, Matisse, even late Georges Braque in the monumental flying bird of *Swift and mosquito*, 2020. Further afield, an olive-green picture of a couple skinny-dipping in a wooded pond, *The beautiful summer*, 2023, seemed to channel Frédéric Bazille's proto-impressionist *Summer Scene (Bathers)* of 1869, David Hockney's swimming pools and some sort of tonalistic expressionism à la Franz Marc all at once. Yet for all of Fratino's wide-ranging art-historical erudition and his evocations of the greats of the 20th century, their radical formal innovations at this distance read as merely stylistic choice (in our current moment, formal innovation in painting finds little traction) in the service of the artist's project of creating a charmed personal universe, an



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1. Louis Fratino, *The beautiful summer*, 2023, oil on canvas, 182.9 × 162.6 centimetres. Photo: Jason Wyche. © Louis Fratino. Courtesy the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co, New York.
2. Louis Fratino, *The beach at Noli*, 2023, oil on canvas, 191.1 × 267 centimetres. Photo: Jason Wyche. © Louis Fratino. Courtesy the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co, New York.
3. Salman Toor, *Back Lawn*, 2021, oil on panel, 127 × 121.9 centimetres. Photo: Farzad Owrang. © Salman Toor. Courtesy the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, and Thomas Dane Gallery, London.
4. Salman Toor, *The New Jacket*, 2021, oil on canvas, 61 × 76.2 centimetres. Photo: Farzad Owrang. © Salman Toor. Courtesy the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, and Thomas Dane Gallery, London.



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enchanted realm with no ostensible dark side. In this, his real model seems less Picasso than Marc Chagall, whose colourized cubism always took a back seat to fantastical narrative. Fratino's figures, like Chagall's, often seem to float weightlessly, even when putatively grounded in pedestrian activities. Fratino limns an idyll. It is comfortable, bourgeois, White and somewhat privileged, to be sure, but it remains—for this comfortable, bourgeois, White, somewhat privileged viewer, at least—deeply satisfying.

The past year found Fratino recognized with his first museum survey, at the Centro per l'arte

contemporanea Luigi Pecci in Prato, Italy, on the heels of a star turn in the recent Venice Biennale. In a large gallery in the biennale's flagship exhibition, "Stranieri Ovunque—Foreigners Everywhere," curated by Adriano Pedrosa, Fratino's paintings shared the walls with works by Filippo De Pisis (1896–1956), a gay, Italian, aristocratic eccentric and one of Fratino's heroes. During the first half of the 20th century, De Pisis essayed portraits, still lifes—especially flower pictures—and male nudes in a nervous, brushy manner using a muted palette. The comparison was telling. One senses in De Pisis's works something

Salman Toor, *Night Grove*, 2024, oil on canvas, 195.6 × 267 centimetres. Photo: Farzad Owrang. © Salman Toor. Courtesy the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, and Thomas Dane Gallery, London. Presented at the 60th International Art Exhibition—La Biennale di Venezia, "Stranieri Ovunque—Foreigners Everywhere."





furtive, decadent, even slightly sinister (he cast his figures and nudes mostly from the ranks of hired models and male prostitutes). Fratino's works completely lack any of those qualities. The confident frankness of his canvases, even their sheer size in relation to De Pisis's small, more tentative works, speaks to a very different historical moment in terms of the place of gay men in the world. Fratino's constant mix of domestic interiors and objects with joyful images of gay sex may queer the normative, but his real achievement lies in making the queer absolutely normal.

Also included in the 2024 biennale, Salman Toor (b. 1983) had flown under the radar for some time before bursting upon New York's consciousness in 2020 with a small solo show at the Whitney Museum of American Art. That exhibition, as I have written in these pages previously, with its masterful scenes of a queer Brown Everyman toggling between a South Asian world of clandestine gay encounters, social and familial disapprobation and violence implied or enacted and a North American life of gay camaraderie, domesticity and an app-fuelled eroticized self-regard, established Toor as a painter to reckon with. For a diasporic transplant (the artist was born in Pakistan), his affecting images of the simultaneous community and alienation of a queer New York demimonde touched a nerve with all of us who came from other (othered) places, be it the Southwest or South Asia. And his sophisticated borrowings from the Old Masters, and a few of the modern ones as well, gave the impression of inserting a subject position—queer, South Asian, subaltern—into Western art history, where it had previously found little purchase.

"No Ordinary Love," a 2022 exhibition organized by the Baltimore Museum of Art, travelled to three other US museums and saw the artist expanding upon established themes to forge an entire cosmos of interconnected scenes and narratives. *The Women*, 2021, pictures an adolescent boy in midnight blue t-shirt and shorts reflected in the mirror of the dressing table that engrosses him as three adult women dressed in shalwar kameez (the tunic and loose pants traditionally worn in Pakistan and northwestern India) lounge on a bed behind him, drinking tea. The boy's tacit assimilation in the female space might describe a nearly timeless moment in the experience of growing up gay, but the blank flat-screen TV blending seamlessly into the greenish khaki sea of horizontal brush strokes that compose

the walls, curtain, floor and bedspread locates it quite adjacent to the present.

That same boy, grown up, could lie under another man as they passionately make out in a small tent behind a tree next to the driveway of an illuminated, curvilinear Art Deco house in *Back Lawn*, 2021. A small dinner party takes place obliviously on the other side of the house, under a starry sky. And our protagonist might also be sprawled helpless on the ground in the scrubby wasteland, all browns and tans, of *Night Capture*, 2021, socks and a single lavender Cuban-heeled boot asunder, as another man kneels by his head and two more stand at his feet, bricks at the ready. Is this preternaturally still incident, shot through with beams from a car's headlights like the celestial light of religious revelation, an image of a gay bashing's imminence or the immanence of something else entirely? That the prone figure's posture echoes that of the man in the tent makes the painting's position within Toor's recursive structure clear—if not definitive in its meaning.

Other paintings show Toor's semi-comic, rubber-limbed, narrow-shouldered, long-nosed stand-in on the other side of the world, diffidently entering a bar in *The Latecomer*, 2021, spotlighted by his pale pastel outfit in the otherwise murky emerald atmosphere and noticed only by a waiter in navy with a pink headband who is serving cocktails. He poses foppishly for friends in a small apartment in *The New Jacket*, 2021, other clothes spilling onto the floor from the closet behind him.

Still other images lie outside of Toor's implied episodic narrative, existing in a quasi-allegorical space. *Dad and Son*, 2020, for example, depicts a bearded man cradling a much smaller naked boy in his lap. Tinted in shades of green and reddish brown, save for the white fringed cloth with blue stripes on the man's lap, and rendered in short, slashing parallel strokes that evoke Van Gogh, the panel seems part *Pietà*, part *Sacrifice of Isaac*. Yet the Old Master drama and emotional tenor belie the casual double entendre of the title—"dad," after all, stands much closer to a gay-tinged "daddy" than it does to a Biblical "father" with the painting's understated, unnerving, yet undeniable sexual charge. The enigmatic scene appears illuminated by rays of light that emanate from the boy's crotch.

*Museum Boys*, 2021, envisions an even stranger scenario. On a carpet in front of pedestals bearing statuary, a Muslim-style tombstone and a featureless phallic object, two young men approach a vitrine on

a wooden table. One of them, Brown, our familiar leading man, wears a clown nose and a single white sneaker and holds a wide-brimmed Pilgrim hat. The other, blond, sports a pearl earring and a red Phrygian cap. Neither figure wears pants. Another man—or is it two, curled up, eyes closed, one flopped over and melting into the other?—lies within the vitrine, a bottle of poppers at his feet. A single pale satin pump, like Cinderella’s slipper, sits on one head, while on the shoulders of his fellow rests Duchamp’s urinal, now filled with urine, which overflows, a limp condom hanging over the edge. The deliquescing jumble of art, bodies and other detritus in the vitrine recalls not only the heaps of things in Philip Guston’s late paintings but also, more distantly, Roman tropaea, those piles of arms and armour from a defeated foe set up to commemorate a military victory and now seen most often in the form of ornamental reliefs on neo-classical architecture. Toor has designated similar arrangements in other pictures as “fag puddles.” The tableau of intermingled queer bodies and an icon of modern art—once removed from, and now brought back to, the vile baseness of bodies and their fluids—exudes abjection, exhaustion, that breakdown of categories called the *informe*, the formless, by Georges Bataille, here gravely contemplated by two likewise exhausted and abject queer spectators. The equation of queerness and abjection, intimated in many other of Toor’s pictures, finds full flower. Yet, despite its absurd tragicomedy, *Museum Boys* has an air of solemnity, a sacral oneirism that recalls that of the Belgian surrealist Paul Delvaux, whose nocturnal scenes echo in the phthalo gloom into which Toor’s museum recedes.

Much has been made, including by the artist, of Toor’s use of green, which dominates his recent oeuvre. It suggests something both verdant and poisonous, corrupt, something off. It seems to recall the gaslit, absinthe-soaked glamour and dejection of the *fin de siècle*, as well as aged paintings obscured under layers of yellowed varnish. While the colour does not read as specifically queer, it may be worth noting a precedent in Keith Mayerson’s work of the early 2000s, which employed a similar pea-soup palette in the service of a gay sensibility. The art-historical intimations of Toor’s greens certainly lend themselves to encounters such as “Living Histories: Queer Views and Old Masters,” a series at the Frick Collection in New York in which *Museum Boys* hung in a gallery with two of the museum’s three

Vermeers, an unexpected pairing that saw Toor’s painting persuasively at home.

The works of Anthony Cudahy (b. 1989) also conjure a dreamlike world but one less premised on bizarre juxtapositions than on atmosphere and reverie. He, too, engages in a long conversation with art history, even as his paintings often derive from a brand of academic figuration that can remind one of artists like Fairfield Porter or RB Kitaj. But Cudahy often mitigates this academicism by breaking naturalistic space with jumps in scale and perspective, and almost always by an intense use of colour to delineate forms and volume while simultaneously dissolving them into semi-abstract fields. In the six-foot-tall *Sebastian, before or after*, 2023, for instance, a man in a tank top and black trousers stands, back to us, arm crossed behind him, in front of a pink pole that rises from the bottom edge to the top of the picture, neatly dividing it into two unequal halves. On the left, in greens, browns and yellows, a modernist building seen frontally, a receding, depopulated de Chirico-esque street and a small plot of ground—or possibly a landscape painting fallen over—growing dandelions each seem to exist in their own pockets of spacetime. A hank of loose rope floats in front of it all. On the right side of the pink pole, however, the modernist building becomes a flat expanse of vivid fuchsia, inflected by some perpendicular lines of fenestration in blue and orange. The ground becomes a blank field of pewter. The man’s bent right arm takes on a darker tone than the rest of his body and his left hand curls around the pole, an unfinished ghostly white. The inscrutable scene resists any ready interpretation as time, space and representation appear to pivot existentially around the vertical pole, which comes to recall one of Barnett Newman’s “zips.” Yet, the canvas also feels close to Matisse’s *The Moroccans* of 1915–16 at MoMA, with its similar vertical division of line and colour, separate vignette-like incidents, primary figure facing away from the viewer and sophisticated play between representation and abstraction.

Cudahy began exhibiting even before he finished his MFA at Hunter College in 2020, but the past year saw his first American museum survey at the Ogunquit Museum of American Art in Maine, and double gallery shows in New York at GRIMM and Hales. All three exhibitions featured a number of portraits, self-portraits and double portraits, particularly of the artist and his husband, photographer Ian Lewandowski—convenient and quite significant

1. Salman Toor, *Museum Boys*, 2021, oil on panel, 76.2 × 101.6 centimetres. Photo: Farzad Owrang. © Salman Toor. Courtesy the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, and Thomas Dane Gallery, London.

2. Salman Toor, *The Women*, 2021, oil on panel, 40.6 × 50.8 centimetres. Photo: Farzad Owrang. © Salman Toor. Courtesy the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, and Thomas Dane Gallery, London.



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models. Far less culturally and psychologically fraught than Toor's, and rather less aggressively wholesome than Fratino's, gay identity in Cudahy's work comes across as both a commonplace of the artist's life and a driving force behind his art and its quietly meditative explorations of beauty and meaning, both pictorial and human. *Pissing on the moon*, 2024, portrays a man standing at the side of a house at night, urinating into a puddle in the grass. The arc of the bright yellow stream passing in front of diagonal forms in red and green—possibly the side of the steps leading into the house—finds counterparts in the weeds growing over and around the rungs of a ladder resting on its side against the house, in the wavering shadows of trees cast on the clapboards and in the slight, tenderly observed curve of the man's belly beneath his blue striped shirt, the whole a subtly repeating consideration of the organic and the geometric, the natural and the manmade.

*Ian and Alex*, 2024, gives us the artist's husband and another, much burlier man on a sofa, Lewandowski leaning against a crocheted afghan, his legs over Alex's lap. The artist himself appears reflected in a mirror on the wall behind, painting the image we see. One of Cudahy's more realist ventures, the canvas might have come from decades past, save for the fact that Alex wears no pants, his bare bear dick suggesting a progressive sexual arrangement that someone like Porter would probably not have



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1. Anthony Cudahy, *Dusk and Dawn (with Perspective Machine)*, 2024, oil on linen, 121.9 × 304.8 × 2.7 centimetres. Photo: JSP Art Photography. Courtesy the artist and Hales, London and New York.
2. Anthony Cudahy, *Pissing on the moon*, 2024, oil on linen, 182.9 × 152.4 × 3.2 centimetres. Photo: JSP Art Photography. Courtesy the artist and Hales, London and New York.
3. Anthony Cudahy, *Dowsing (studio)*, 2024, oil on linen, 243.8 × 182.9 centimetres. Photo: GC Photography. Courtesy the artist and GRIMM, Amsterdam | New York | London.
4. Anthony Cudahy, *Sebastian, before or after*, 2023, oil on linen, 182.9 × 152.4 centimetres. Photo: JSP Art Photography. Courtesy the artist and GRIMM, Amsterdam | New York | London.

pictured. Curiously, a small, luminous pink cross hovers in the upper left, possibly a chance reflection in another mirror, hanging above a still life array of pale objects on the mantel. *Dowsing (studio)*, 2024, shows the artist lying naked and prone on some sort of ledge, drooling or puking into a washy terracotta void. Behind him, two stacked paintings lean against the wall, a pink monochrome facing us and a long vertical canvas facing away, its stapled edges and screwed brackets inevitably summoning the shade of Guston. We recognize a third painting, propped up on an overturned pail, that shows a man sitting next to a bookcase, as *Sammy*, 2024, a canvas hanging nearby in the exhibition at GRIMM, in a lovely bit of self-referentiality. In front of Cudahy, blocking his midsection from view, stands Lewandowski, impressively life-sized and holding a dowsing rod with both hands. Oranges rest on the floor near his feet. Among other things, *Dowsing* suggests a personal allegory of artistic creation and anxiety—distant memories of Courbet's 1855 *The Painter's Studio* lurk somewhere in the background—but its precise meaning remains obscure. For me, the real event in the picture is the way that the bubble-gum pink dowsing rod glows against Lewandowski's shamrock-green trousers.

Equally esoteric, *Dusk and Dawn (with Perspective Machine)*, 2024, images the couple reclining on either side of a gridded screen, the sort seen in Dürer's woodcut of a *Draughtsman Making a Perspective Drawing of a Reclining Woman*, circa 1600. Dürer's print has become famous for its revealing vision of the gendered nature of art and representation—the male artist, supposedly studying foreshortening, appears to look up the female model's barely there modesty drape as he draws—but, in Cudahy's revision, male models occupy both subject and object positions, intimating a kind of utopian parity afforded by homosexual couplings. Their poses invoke an entire history of reclining figures, from Classical Greek river gods to Robert Henri's lounging portrait of *Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney*, 1916. On the left-hand portion of the painting, Lewandowski gazes across at his partner in a symphony of purples and greens with hints of foliage; a lavender rectangle on the far end shines as if magically backlit. On the right side, where Cudahy looks down glumly, saturated yellows and tangerines threaten to dissolve his form in a coruscating effulgence, a gorgeous radiance that carries hints of religiosity in its allusions to the heavenly light of the Western painting tradition. Cryptic

numerals—3, 6, 9, 12—float in the air between them. Here, in one of Cudahy's most memorable images, a literally glowing commentary on domestic and artistic relationships, colour carries at least as much weight as form.

Cudahy, like Fratino and Toor, engages in the queer intimism of making domestic scenes, personal relationships and uneventful existence the focus of his art. All three artists also venture far afield from quotidian life to limn private, often hermetic, universes of the fantastical, the mythic and the allegorical. Yet, these, too, centre queerness as a theme—or an organizing principle, or an ethos—as if queerness structures not only personal lives but shared imaginaries as well, which, of course, it does. All three picture themselves—Cudahy fairly directly, Fratino in the stylized manner of early 20th-century modernism, Toor through his fey proxy—as the frequent heroes of their stories, emphatically demonstrating the intimate connection their art makes between lived and painted experience. Queerness in their work feels less an identity than a subjectivity, a world view.

These artists share a profound love—sometimes respectful, sometimes not—of art history, slyly deploying quotations and references when it suits them, masterfully turning artistic lineage into a usable past, which enables them to seamlessly enter the museum, the canon, and into art history themselves. Crucially, they keep their antiquarian leanings from veering into mere appropriation but engage the art of painting in an old-fashioned way, through a continual studio practice of pictorial invention and creation. In this, we might see them as conservative, yet their images seldom fail to surprise, to delight, to discover beauty where we might least expect it. At a cultural and political moment when queer life in the United States has achieved unprecedented integration into the mainstream, the art world's embrace of Fratino, Toor and Cudahy feels correct. As we watch the cultural and political winds change to portend a reversal of gains and the return of more oppressive regimes, their intimate queerness becomes ever more precious to us. ■

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