

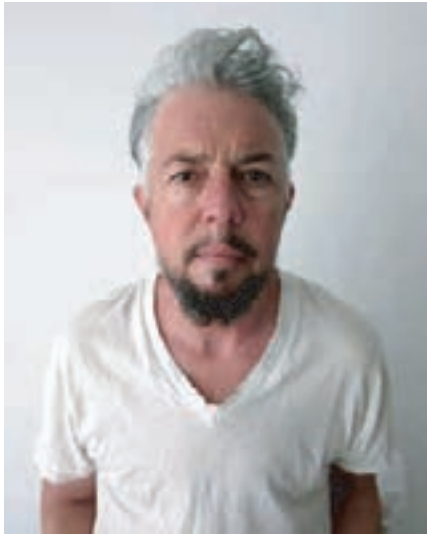


The Last 10 Percent: A Conversation with Grey James

John McIntyre interviews Grey James

MAY 31, 2019

GREY JAMES can — perhaps unintentionally — sound visionary in talking about his art, as though he's driven forward by an almost compulsive, open-ended project. Ten years ago, he said, “I have no idea why I paint. I have no idea why I paint what I do. I've been painting the same thing, the same set of ideas and by the same means for over twenty years.” A lot can happen in 10 years, and while he's still circling the same themes (“the male nude, lemons, the sky, the sea, the horizon”), using the same means, his circumstances have



changed substantially on the personal level. His new work reflects those changes. The year before his comments, he'd come out as trans to the people in his life. By 2015, he'd begun testosterone therapy, a development that figures heavily into his new show at Bert Green Fine Arts in Chicago, fittingly entitled Testosterone. The nudes return, this time in more assertive postures. James has said that "painting for me is about occupying space," and the figures in his work seem newly emboldened to occupy the space around them. And while he calls himself "some slob nobody artist," there's every reason to see his work as

deeply relevant to this cultural moment. And cultural relevance aside, there's an accumulative power to the work James makes, a gradual acclimation to his color palette, a realization that he's quietly arguing for reflectiveness and attention to detail. The subtleties underpinning his series work, the gradations and nuances in color, scale and form, are worth regarding at length. And his faith in and commitment to the creative process — to maximizing what he can get out of the last 10 percent of the time and effort he devotes to a piece — should endear him to makers of all stripes.

□

JOHN MCINTYRE: Can we start with how you came to this moment as an artist and a person? Your emergence as Grey James, so to speak? And I realize "emergence" isn't the preferred term here, but I use that word for a couple of reasons with you. One, I'm thinking your comments in *The New York Times*, when you said that transitioning, among other things, is for the privileged, and that standard framework can feel like an additional obstacle or judgment. And two, because it kind of tracks with the nudes in your work — shadowy, sometimes almost fog-shrouded figures that, over the span of a handful of images, seem to emerge clearly.

GREY JAMES: It was like the world's longest emergence, too! Maybe all that shadow stuff is the foggy morass from which I slowly — *seeped*.

In general, painting for me is about occupying space. Or the space I *get* to occupy while working. We occupy space together. We step into each other and out of, sometimes we're connected, sometimes I'm the observer.

But I've always been very adamant the paintings be not about *me*. I'm some slob nobody artist, who gives a rat's ass? I look in it for the moment it is *our* story, moving it from my ghetto into the greater realm. Archetypes, collective unconscious, like that. What is the moment of this thing that makes it this

thing? The better I find that connecting moment, the more successful the painting.

Though I did spend a lot of years looking for myself in my paintings, like Dr. Frankenstein looking for his monster. Or a much older and tired Narcissus seeking his reflection. Mostly it was the many, many years of emergence that really drove the arc. Time.

And a lot played into the timeline. It's 2019, I'm 58 years old right now. Transgender didn't exist when I was a kid, and I wasn't creative enough or bright enough to fill in that blank. It came in bits and pieces, each unconnected to the next. Like being 15 and wanting a hysterectomy because I knew I would never have a baby. Like the despise I had for my breasts at 17. Like watching *Casablanca* and wanting to be Rick, not Ilsa. I was too dull to put it together.

At first blush, that sounds self-critical to me, "I wasn't creative or bright enough to fill in that blank." But it's not quite that simple, is it?

No, there were a lot of layers. I didn't grow up in an LGBT-friendly household. My born-again Christian mother saw it as an abomination, and my father saw it as an affliction to be kept secret. Eventually my mother would dismiss me all together. My father, I think, loved me; I wasn't beaten, I was fed and cared for, but I also didn't exist.

[By the] mid-'80s, I'm not part of my family. I'm a lesbian except I'm not connecting to that, or to the LGB-(eventually-T-et cetera) community, and I don't know what is happening to me, why I feel this way. I'm ashamed by it. I can't tell anyone.

I did that for a lot of years. We were into the 2000s before I heard the word transgender. And then: Oprah. I'm publicly owning this, it is *much worse* than being trans: admitting to watching Oprah. But she was doing trans-themed shows and I was *glued* to them. I'm watching these amazing kids own themselves where I could not, I'm listening to Chaz Bono talk about how he thought what he was feeling was what lesbians were, it's right there and I know it, and I'm *still* not declaring myself.

But around this time, I did declare art. I'd been making art all this time. It was in the early 2000s that I decided to endeavor to show. To make it as an artist. It was through this process that Bert Green Fine Art and I would connect. The first painting of mine he showed sold. Big painting. I was less practical in those days. And more colorful. But I'm not very good with color. My paintings look[ed] like Easter eggs. I muted the palette.

How long after Oprah was it before you thought of yourself as trans, or talked about yourself that way to other people?

Around 2008 I started telling people near me I was trans, that I was a guy. Running parallel with this I was also cluing into the fact I wasn't sure I actually liked women too much. It wasn't until post-transition that I realized it wasn't that I didn't like guys, it was that the dynamic was all wrong.

[In] February 2012, my oldest brother, one of three, died from cancer. A magnificent human being. We were by this time scattered, each of us living private lives. I shopped for a dress to wear to the funeral. I knew who I was, but I didn't want to make waves. I didn't want to cause trouble. I don't know if the gulf between me and all things female was too broad by this time, or if I really couldn't find a dress I could stomach, but I would wear a suit. There were no comments.

We made the mistake of regarding a family tragedy as a defining moment; we would reunite at my father's house in six months to rekindle lost years, lost familial love. I played my role, now no longer that occupant of it. I flew home [in August 2012] miserable and no longer wanting to sustain the corpse — mine and the extinct family narrative.

[In] May 2013, I start living as Grey James. Locally. I convinced myself it would be enough, that I wouldn't need to transition. I identified as "genderqueer."

So this was all very incremental, even once you'd declared yourself to people close to you?

Right. One year later, July 2013, again reuniting at my father's, is the visit where occurs a miraculous identifying moment. It is over breakfast, over a single conversation and behaviors. I sit on the plane home thinking, "*These* are the people I'm protecting? I'm transitioning!"

[It isn't until] November 30, 2015 [that I get] my first shot of testosterone. My father is still alive. I decide to never tell him; we were beyond proving things, and he doesn't want to know. On our weekly phone calls, I blamed my deeper voice on being tired. In the end, I shaved when I'd go see him. Every few months I erased myself for him, sat by his bed, and let him have his need. He was no longer a parent at this point, he was just an old, dying man.

[Finally, in] August 2017, the legal paperwork is finalized. I am fully, legally, male.

[Less than a year later, in] June 2018, my father dies. His service is on Father's Day. I come, for the first time, the whole family present, unshaved. I come out as a transitioned trans-man. Because it's over. Now it is what it is. Also, I explain to *many* senior citizens who I am. I am deep in Trump country, but I am also in the South and at a funeral; everyone is polite. The entire weekend, no one gets the name or gender correct.

You've made the male nude a centerpiece of your work. That's not the most common choice, but it does raise a couple of questions related to your career and the current cultural moment. You've made this fixation with the male nude sound almost visionary in the past, when you said you weren't sure what it was about, but you'd been painting naked guys on a gray background for something like 20 years. But a lot has changed in your life since then — that was 2009, I believe — and it makes me think something the British novelist Nicholas Mosley believed about his work as a writer. He would write about an event in a fictional context, and it would later come to pass in his actual life. He called it "forward memory." Looking back, was there maybe a sense in which you were either performing a kind of wish fulfillment in your work or fortifying yourself to take a big step?

This one is tricky. We've already talked about how the work at its best finds a place greater than my personal story, but I can't also pretend the guys along the years haven't been, in some way-manner-form-idea, surrogates. It took me a long time to know this. I didn't start this knowing it.

I've been painting these guys for like 25 years. I was doing non-figurative work, something called me into the figure — it was only ever guys. I distinctly remember thinking I preferred them as the idea — versus women — because men wore their vulnerability on the outside (versus women's vulnerability being internal). Men are physically constructed to convey the array of ideas I was interested in examining. But I didn't see them, for a long time, as anything beyond a means to a way. They remain that, they are architecture and design; it is my vantage point that has shifted.

There's been a discussion in recent years about the primacy of the female nude in art, and whether its time has — or should have — passed. As someone dedicated to the male nude, what's your take on this development? And what would it mean to you if a transgender artist was part of a vanguard of male nudes as the female nude recedes from that place of prominence?

Old heterosexual white guys like painting naked ladies, it's been the singular story of art history fed us. Great artists, great paintings, some landscapes and food and other ideas, not the only game in town. Just the one we know, the one taught to us as The Official Art History. Anyone else was relegated to the cheap

seats, the sub-artists: African-American Artists. Female Artists. Never just Artists. We all knew who the *real* Artists were. Outside the decided aesthetic or the riding narrative, forget about it. The cultural shift that is happening, and based in current politics, is that all of us who took this narrative for granted minus any challenge whatsoever to have to examine who got left behind because it wasn't us are now getting our first glimpses of our own privilege. Tarana Burke launches "Me Too" 10 years before Alyssa Milano gets it into the public conversation with just one tweet? Who are our storytellers, and what is the narrative, and how many have we left behind?

So naked ladies, *great*, but I look forward to more people at the table. More stories that are as legit as any other. A redefining of valid, a broader eye toward the definition of art. And no more sub-artists.

The lemon paintings that are part of your new work were striking to me for their intense color. You're usually pretty restrained and judicious with the use of color, so they feel a little different to me, a little more exuberant. When did you start with the lemons as a recurring theme?

Go figure, people love lemons. Every show I'll do a handful of lemon paintings and maybe you don't want the penis, but those lemons are pretty. So the lemons pay for the penis. I can recover my costs with the lemons.

The lemons I first did while living in New York, in my first studio. I decided they were traditional and I should do that. I'm perpetually broke, so I gave them to family members for Christmas. In recent years, revisiting some of these people's houses, I'm seeing those lemons on people's walls from 25 years ago and I'm like — why did I stop doing lemons? They're entirely enjoyable to paint. Very relaxing, very zen. So the lemons were revived. We're stuck with the lemons for a while.

So you've entered this new phase personally and as an artist, but the lemons are a constant. Aside from them, what feels different about the new work, about making it?

The other shift is much more subtle, and I'm impressed you could even notice it. So I begin injecting testosterone late 2015 and painting *Testosterone* early 2017. I am physically coming into myself and also thinking about moving my work forward and what it needs for that to happen. One of my college professors would always talk about the last 10 percent, how the first 90 is busy work, anyone can do the first 90; it's in the last 10 where it happens. Over the years, I might have let a weaker moment go because I was afraid if I went in to fix it, I would lose the good 90 percent around it and *still* not get it, and then I'd have nothing. So I'm looking at my weaknesses, my doubts, my insecurities, and no longer accepting their presence in the work.

You've said your work, its repeated themes, might seem banal and monotonous. The nudes in particular, though, seem to me anything but monotonous at times. A number of them appear in assertive, or even aggressive poses. They command the eye, it seems to me. Is it a stretch to think of these nudes as a kind of imperative, an insistence on being looked at, broadly speaking?

I don't intend for the guys to challenge in the way of, say, the woman at the center of the Manet painting *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*. The rebellion or assertiveness is that they exist at all.

When Bert and I started out, he would say, "Penises don't sell." But they are an essential component. I'm not painting veins, they're not throbbing. It's just another motif that communicates. Lemon, penis. A lot of people will only ever see them as penis paintings. Men have been painting female nudes since forever, but the penis is verboten? Too queer? Too ugly? Too pornographic? Challenging? By whose terms and rules?

Are you conscious of echoing or nodding to other artists? In the case of images like the underwear paintings, I think of Jim Dine, right off, his robes. The impression your series makes, though, is more contemplative. Certain ones of the male nudes bring to mind Schiele, and the indistinct faces can bring to mind things by Max Neumann. But this could just be me picking at threads that seem to link artists whose work I consistently like. Whose work do you seek out when you're working? Or do you avoid certain work altogether? Who do you turn to when you feel stale and unmotivated as a way to quicken your pulse, to get started back working, or wanting to work?

I like Jim Dine and he was high on the list in college, but it was Andy Warhol that had the biggest influence on my approach — working in series and multiples. Jim Dine and tools, robes. But with Warhol, he was so smart about it, running these multiple images and hanging them together, and you'd have some in there that were pure garbage, or that didn't read, but their neighbors carry them and fill in the blanks. I love that.

The artists I dig I paint nothing like. Cy Twombly, Franz Kline, Basquiat — from whom, yes, I lifted the crown. He had a solo show in Los Angeles and it just clicked, and I kept it and I try not to mimic but to make it my own. I don't know what the rules are about that stuff. Sargent and Matisse and a lot of the really old guys. I love lowbrow art.

I've had to learn who I am versus what I like and am attracted to. For years, I wouldn't look at other people's art because I was too afraid of going down their rabbit hole. My own thing is strong enough now. Now I want the input.

I'm only ever really stuck when I don't know where to take it next or if I think what's there is too precious. If too much time passes and the work-fairies haven't shown up to paint for me, the best thing to do is to go in there and fuck it up. It'll either be better or it will be so much worse it becomes a much more obvious fix.

I've made work without joy. I've made work I don't like. My great fortune is it never stayed that way. I've always found my way back into the work, or maybe it's always found me. Right now, I have maybe half a dozen paintings in my head, waiting their turn. Patiently. It's a nice place to be.

□

John McIntyre has written for The American Scholar, The Economist, Brick: A Literary Journal, and the Los Angeles Review of Books, among other publications.

Grey James | The Beings

原创：Yuyao Hou THEMPI 昨天

Grey James | The Beings



「Tighty Whitey 6」 · Mixed Media on Paper · 2018

Grey James

1986

C.W. Post College, Long Island University, Greenvale, NY, BFA, Painting/Printmaking

1990

School of Visual Arts, New York, NY

Art Students League, New York, NY

Grey James' paintings and mixed media works are concerned with the examination of specific motifs. Many of his core subjects are repeatedly and rigorously selected. At the center of the work is the idea of "Nothing." As the artist observes: "there's a lot going on in Nothing."

More Works from Grey James

on Instagram

@ queerot

<https://bgfa.us/artists/james/index.html>

[See Ongoing Exhibition Information at the bottom](#)

Interviewer: H, short for Hou Yuyao

Artist: GJ, short for Grey James

Updated at ZHI HU : The MPI 对话艺术

H : Could you please tell us something about yourself ? Why telling through painting?

GJ : I am a 58-year-old trans man, three-plus years transitioned. Took me a while to get here. I hope I live long enough to enjoy it.

I've been painting forever. I have a BFA. I got serious about showing around 2002 or so. The process of finding a gallery eventually connected me with Bert Green Fine Art, first in LA and now in Chicago, and he's been showing me since. About 16 years now.

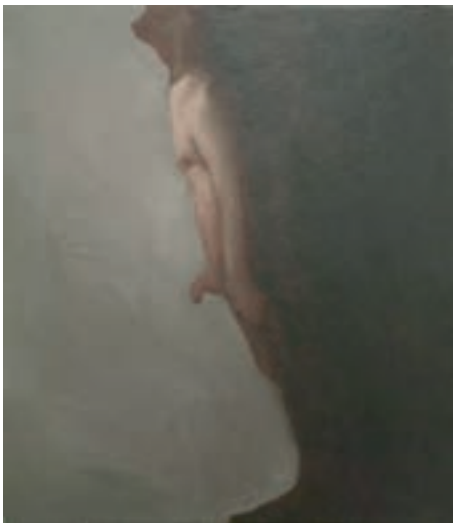
The work is absolutely story-based. It took me until recently to realize I might be a visual storyteller. It was not a conscious effort; In whatever place I'm living, or maybe the space I'm occupying, is the thing I want to examine. [The thing in itself has the story, I'm only trying to](#)

hear it. Visually presented because the language is subtler. Visual language is based more on collective conscience and archetypes. It allows for both interpretation and delineation in a single object based on the experience of the viewer. Also, every little shift, every subtle adjustment, communicates an entirely different idea. I notice this most with faces, shifting lines in minor ways that gives me a whole different person. All this fascinates me.

H : In a previous article you said that you have been painting male nudes, lemons, the sky, the sea and horizon for 20 plus years, how did that start and why stick on the same subject matter?

GJ : I have no idea why, it's just what showed up. And stayed. Whatever I need to say is satisfied by what has become a very succinct and efficient language.

But the language isn't necessarily the subject matter. The language is the means. The subject matter shifts and varies. The items portraying those shifts are enough.



「The Lean Into」 · Oil on Panel · 2017

H : Over these years working on the same concisely focus, were there any alter ego or inner changes in the flow?

GJ : There is no singular alter-ego. Whether or not I am, I never think I am painting myself. I always refer to the guys in the paintings in **third person**. They are also not entirely real. They are the **vessel for idea**, as **symbolic** as any other element in the painting. Any evolution over time I can only really put on getting older, honing things.

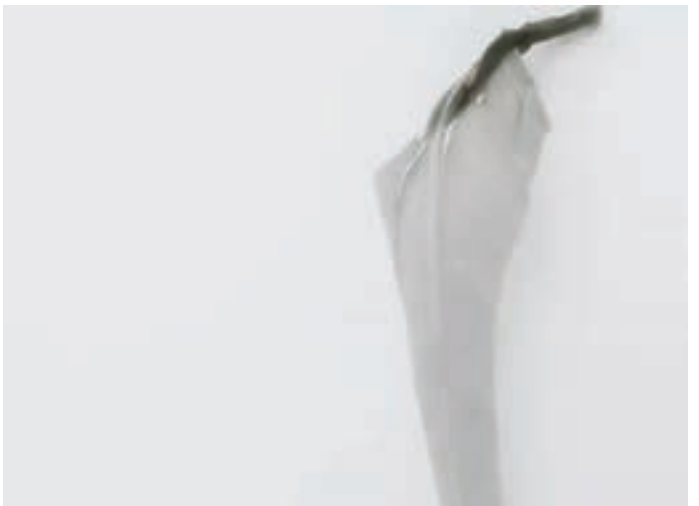


H : What's the persona of your characters in the painting?

GJ : I am not aware of any singular persona, but I also don't think too much about this stuff. The essence of every painting is probably a singular moment of a space occupied. How, by whom, and the relationship between the space and the occupant in that moment.

H : The paintings appear solitude, silent, and tremendously power of contemplation to me. But some details of the sketches, the crown and bright color touch-ups feel like adding some playful but rebellious aspects.

GJ : This is a really interesting idea to me. Wouldn't it be funny if everyone were all bothered about the naked guys when it's the lemons that are the rebellious thing? I like it!



H : “Nothing” is an important concept to you and your creation, within your open-ended paintings, it could be seen in two extremes between Nothing and Infinity.

GJ : They may very well be the same thing.

“Nothing” is so underrated. It’s glorious! EVERYTHING happens in Nothing. All the good stuff. A whole lot of nothing that belongs all to you - all that space, all that silence. No barriers, no furniture to trip over, no preconceived ideas. We should be running towards this, breakneck speed. But we don’t. I don’t know why.

H : The works can be read with “Gazing”, by exploring for years, as an individual, an artist, have you found your identity, your connection between who you are and who you paint?



GJ : I absolutely have not. Crazy, right? My connection all these years has never been with a particular figure in a painting. It's with the story - of which the figure has only ever been a component. Minus the figure the painting doesn't work, but minus any other component it also doesn't work. It's the totality of components with which I connect.

I am working on a painting right now, trying to find the guy. I'm looking at him thinking - I'm not connecting with this guy. So I have to keep ... fishing ... pushing paint around, shifting lines, until something clicks, until I see him. *I'll know it when I see it.*



「Untitled (T106)」 · Oil on Panel · 2018



「Crunchy Underwear」 · Oil on Panel · 2017

H : What's the next story for you to tell?

GJ : This is my favorite question because this: when I got serious about painting in the early 2000's, every show had a theme, and that theme was the space I was occupying at that given time. "Church" begun in 2001, "Night" begun in 2005, "Legs" begun in 2007, etc. I enter it, I live there, we are occupying this space together for that time period. Getting to know each other. Talking, listening.

This last show, "Testosterone," when I was coming towards the end of that body of work in 2018, it is the first time I realized that I'd been telling a singular story all this time, since the beginning, since "Church." And now that story was done. So now what? What comes after this thing that drove me forward for so long, this thing that I've lived with all those years?

I will tell you, the new show, it's in my head. I am working on it now. And I am very happy to be sharing space with it. Maybe I'll call it "Whole." ◦

(Here I would like to have a Chinese translation of this title as "凡 (Fan)")

2019.3

Grey James | Testosterone

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Editor | Yuyao
Images Credit to | Grey James

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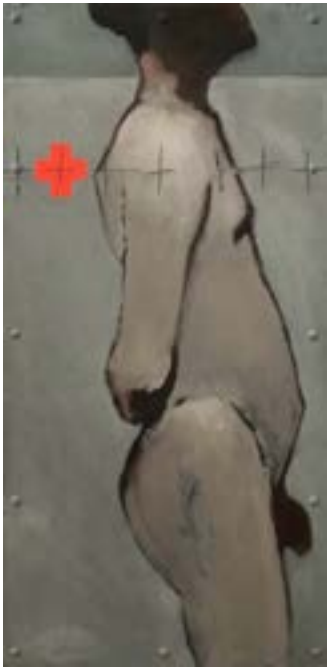
WHAT I'M READING: ARTIST GREY JAMES

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Grey James is making art that feels vital and forthright and timely, and he's doing it out of muted colors, heavy shadow and ambiguity. This sounds, I admit, a little improbable, or at least counterintuitive, in an age that's fascinated with installations like Yayoi Kusama's Infinity Mirrors (and taking selfies in front of said installations). And yet I can't look at his Redux series without taking the measure, each time, of the way his judicious use of color manages to shock the eye.



Grey James, *Redux 6*,
2017

Maybe more improbably still, this aesthetic, and this subject matter, have preoccupied James for years now. A 2016 show at Bert Green Fine Art in Chicago was titled “Next,” and represented new work from James in tandem with “a curated selection of works by Jen Heaslip titled ‘Before.’ Heaslip, as Grey James previous persona before his transition.” Certainly artists’ awareness of what they’re driving at varies, as does their honesty about that process. But at the close of a 2009 show at Edgar Varela Fine Arts in Los Angeles, James – then Heaslip – provided one of the most candid, mordant assessments I can recall reading from an artist: “I have no idea why I paint. I have no idea why I paint what I do. I’ve been painting the same thing, the same set of ideas and by the same means for over twenty years (you’d think after that amount of time I’d be a little better at it): Naked guys standing there doing nothing...I still have no idea why the ‘Nothing,’ but I assure you, there’s a lot going on in Nothing.”

The process of becoming is open-ended, or it can be if you refuse to let yourself calcify, if you keep acknowledging your weaknesses and shortcomings. None of that’s to say we’re perfectible. Just that self-satisfied is a dangerous and compromised state. Yet it’s not that James is demanding that he be allowed self-satisfaction as much as the right to wake in the morning and make a declarative statement of his identity, and not have it met with disagreement, disapproval or disgust. At times, James’s portraits seem like perfect studies in self-consciousness – the shadowy figure, aware he’s never quite viewed whole, over time wounded by the piecemeal appraisal that focuses so thoroughly on one facet of his identity, of his self. And so we get the almost wholly hidden figure out *Untitled(DO2)* on one hand.



Grey James, *Untitled (D02)*, 2015

On the other, we have nudes that carry the force of an imperative, as in *Untitled(E01)* or *Pink Jerk Off*, as if to both assert his identity and satisfy the eternally intrusive.



Grey James, *Pink Jerk Off*, 2017

Untitled(D01) contains what looks like a nod to Basquiat, with the bold text overhead reading “BOY” and a crown above it making it hard to imagine a way of summing things up more concisely.



Grey James, **Untitled (D01)**, 2015

And those twenty-plus years of circling these themes, these images? That enduring fascination has an almost visionary aspect, and the humility- “you’d think after that amount of time I’d be a little better at it” – belies a substantial and complex body of work that might double as a visual diary of those years in James’s life. Earlier this year, he took part in a *New York Times* spread called **Transgender Lives: Your Stories**. In the space of about 300 words, James went from the personal – “25years ago my mother said to me, ‘I don’t feel as if I should have to look at you any longer.’ I thought, That can be arranged” – to the broader, cultural view, tackling everything from the obstacles to transitioning, to the harm done by strict standards of passing within the trans community. It doesn’t feel like a stretch to read those thoughts and locate, within James’s work, a response to living with the disconnect between who he is and who the people in his life have allowed him to be.

The more I look at James’s work, and the more I think about its roots and implications, the more I think of how the writer Aleksandar Hemon ends his essay, “The Lives of Others.” Hemon writes, that, when asked what he is,

I am often tempted to answer proudly, ‘I am a writer.’ Yet I seldom do, because it is not only pretentiously silly but also inaccurate –I feel I am a writer only at the time of writing. So I say I am complicated. I’d also like to add that I am nothing if not an entanglement of unanswerable questions, a cluster of others.

I'd like to say it may be too early to tell.

What would Grey James say to the question? Maybe instead of, "it may be too early to tell," something on the order of, "I've been trying to tell you all along." Then again, that's maybe too glib. He, too, might say it may be too early to tell, in the sense that there's still time yet for him to assume his full dimensions as an artist and a man. Looking at the energy in his new work certainly gives me that hope.

The great photographer Ernest C. Withers said, "[Pictures tell the story](#)," and it seems to me that Grey James is straining in that direction as well. I say straining in that direction, because there's still story left for James to tell, and talent and determination with which to tell it. He'll have new work out soon, at the [LA Art Show in late January](#) (23-27, at a booth hosted by Bert Green Fine Art) and in a solo show at [Bert Green Fine Art in Chicago](#), starting in March. [Make a point of heading to his site for a preview of that work](#). And take a look below at what he's been reading in 2018. Spoiler alert? He's not a bad book critic either. His thoughts on *The Middlesteins* were right on the mark, and my wife and I both read it since his recommendation:

I am currently reading *The Goldfinch* by Donna Tartt. I am reading it because there was some FB challenge making the rounds asking for a person's 7 favorite books and two people on my page had it on their list. So I gave it a shot. I've not historically been much into living writers and know nothing about what is being written these days, so I occasionally peruse things like "top 50 current novels" lists or "best new books" lists and see what repeats.

Of this system, this past year I've most enjoyed *The Middlesteins* by Jami Attenberg. Well presented, well-written, acute observations, honest and sad in an is-what-it-is sort of way – all good things.

Outside this system, my favorite book this past year has been *Calypso* by David Sedaris. I like all his books, but for some reason this one really resonated. Maybe because we are both getting old and beginning to deal with the bodily surprises that accompany this -none too swell, so far – maybe because of reading about the stories of his father soon after my own father died and really getting the accuracy of what you can and can't do or change or be. Either way, what I appreciate most about his writing is how unapologetic it is in its take on it all.

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Grey .James

Small business manager and artist from Los Angeles, Calif.

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When I was coming up, there was no “transgender.” There were drag queens, bull dykes, transvestites. All were deviant.

25 years ago my mother said to me, “I don’t feel as if I should have to look at you any longer.” I thought, That can be arranged.

It was.

A few weeks ago, my father said to me (re: Bruce Jenner) “What he really needs is a head person. I mean, be whatever you want in your own home, but why does he have to *talk* about it? He needs help.”

“Transitioning,” testosterone, top surgery and a hysterectomy, is for the privileged. The rest of us will finish this mess with the wrong assumptions and the wrong pronouns. Every time I am referred to as She and Her and Ma’am, I die a little inside. I am not militant. I understand the difficulty of language and appreciate polite intent. I understand the function of simplicity. But above all else, we are to be EASY.

Women like Laverne Cox talking about women being beautiful only echoes the problem, the already confining strictures. Hollywood (and, ergo, society) tells women they only matter if beautiful and thin. Legitimate men are masculine. So that even in the trans community, if you don’t “pass,” if you are not a beautiful women, if you are not recognized as a man, you are a second class citizen. Even in the trans community. While I appreciate what a Laverne Cox is doing, she is also setting the expectation, training society, that hers is the look of trans people. All over media beautiful trans women are being presented as magic tricks. See? You can’t even tell she’s REALLY a man! What a feat!

It is the rest of us minus the means and genes that will have to fight for it, even within our own community, all the men and women who lack the fortune of surgery, hormones, testosterone, and all the many procedures to be a successful magic trick, but who still ARE. When THAT becomes easy, then we’ve achieved something.



Review: Jen Heaslip/Bert Green Fine Art

Loop, Painting

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RECOMMENDED

Jen Heaslip’s oil paintings depict stark, lonely, haunting male figures rendered in soft, charcoal-like paint strokes. The predominately dark, monochrome hues are muted, yet exquisitely rich with ethereal backgrounds counterbalancing the lone figures. These are not nude figure studies—they are men stripped to their bare-naked, vulnerable essence. They are dispossessed of overt emotions and their features are nearly obliterated, evoking a discomforting existence. The men’s detached stares are striking and disturbing. In two works the figures face the viewer, nevertheless maintaining an overwhelming sense of disconnect. Painfully frail and plaintive, they could be Holocaust prisoners waiting to be steered toward heaven or hell. The man in “Four Day” already appears to have passed onto the next world, a vague halo hovering above the ethereal head beneath.



Two Day



2 Sky 1

“Two Day” is a particularly moving piece in which a man, adorned with a simple gold crown, turns away from the viewer as if to suggest an unworthiness and reluctance to don this symbol of strength and leadership. Accompanying the male portraits, very small and modest skyscape paintings feel like studies for larger compositions. While atmospheric, they lack the depth, bravura technique and contemplative power embodied in the impressive figure paintings. (Betsy van Die)

Through April 14 at Bert Green Fine Art, 8 South Michigan, Suite 1220.

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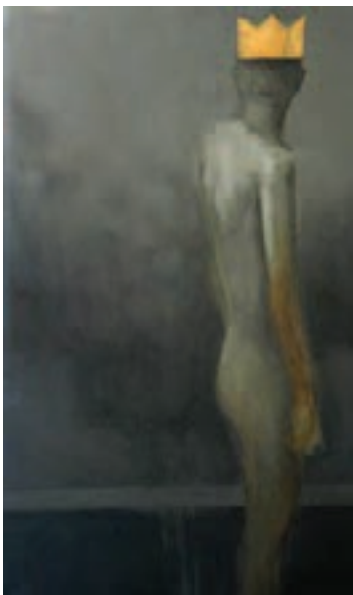
GALLERIES & MUSEUMS ART CRITIC'S CHOICE

March 20, 2012

Where to go to see paintings of male nudes and clouds?

Jen Heaslip's solo show at Bert Green Fine Art

By Sam Worley @samuel_worley



"Two Days," Jen Heaslip

Jen Heaslip's fourth solo show at Bert Green Fine Art features the male nudes that've long been her concern. She doesn't provide an artist's statement, which adds an element of mystery to the work; according to the gallery, the paintings are meant "entirely as a visual experience with no mediation, no explanation, no guides." The figures are represented in drab colors—near-silhouettes against a dusky background. Their faces aren't always visible, but when they are, the men are impassive or forlorn.

In *Two Day*, the canvas is shocked by the addition of a gold crown, but the painting remains ambiguous, with its subject's back to the viewer. Heaslip also paints clouds, which vacillate between realist and abstract—some share the same glum palette as her male nudes, but others are brighter, and maybe tenuously hopeful. Her cloud paintings *Nine*, *Ten*, and *Eleven*, for instance, look like portraits of an overcast dawn.