

Adam Hennessey

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NEW
ART
PROJECTS

Fred Mann

Foreword

This book celebrates Adam Hennessey's third solo show at New Art Projects. In 'Adam and Steve' he looks back to his awkward teenage years growing up gay in the 1990's. Hennessey describes his new paintings as "memory fantasies". He uses a reduced palette of greens, to create an artificial light that helps to set the scenes in them, in the past. Like watching an old film or discoloured home movie the figures move through a distorted green haze acting out his teenage dreams and desires.

In his autobiographical comic 'Tank' he makes light of having crushes on his then school friends and navigating a house party where the aim was to lose his virginity.

As with his comics, each painting seems to be one frame that informs the next, making a kind of comic strip of dreamscapes around the gallery that hark back to the days before online dating and the mobile phones to the days of loud dial up modems and phone boxes.

We are grateful to Phil King for his insightful essay, to Christian Trippe for his installation photography and to CHK Design for their beautiful work.

Phil King

Adam and Steve

The pure present is an ungraspable advance of the past devouring the future. In truth all sensation is already memory.

— Henri-Louis Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 1896

Once upon a time, the rule of formal intelligence with its offer of objective perceptual analysis was rejected first by post-modernist and then contemporary painters in favour of a certain unarguable subjective universalism in which opposition to narrow artistic criteria is sold as some kind of important personal triumph.

Today such oppositional posturing, rather than acting as anything useful, can become mere virtue signalling and ends up imposing a sort of subjective absolutist overview. Facile manifestos copyright ‘freedom’ and sell patronising self-commodification as master narratives.

Adam Hennessey deftly side steps such blinkered inanities, his paintings demonstrate how a rigorous combination of rediscovered formal focus and deeply personal storytelling compels us to pay full attention not simply to painting but to life – and how we relate to it – itself.

This sidestep is a form of escape from rhetorical declarations of solo self-importance, relying instead on approaching personal intensity as a form of secrecy. Personal secrecy is empowered in these paintings rather than personal heroics. Fighting ancient formalist dragons and windmills with paintbrush sword in hand like some throwback bores just seems irrelevant and unambitious in comparison to the involuted explorations of Hennessey’s reflective paintings that use all the available machinery of how pictures can be designed and laid out to create powerful personal content.

Rather than any kind of absolutism, formal or subjective, Hennessey offers relations, his new show is called *Adam and Steve* and immediately we are aware that this is a painter in relation to someone else, and then that Adam might not straightforwardly be a representation of the artist anyway. We are in the realm of a kind of comic novel, and fantasy is part of the deal. The manifold nature of the action of these works makes Adam just one of the heroes involved – the painter himself is simply a part of things rather than, as with normal contemporary practice – the main protagonist as an exemplary hero. As with a novel or a film we are drawn into the action. Empathy is triggered.

His painterly involution is at one with a personal entanglement back into past dramas – old fashioned formal painting insights are linked with a sense of solitary reminiscence, a sense of buried private revelation surfacing in the language of another time. With this collection of works, this part of a body of work, the story that they indicate, we have the sensation of going back. Back in time certainly. There is a sense of confession. This is an intimate, somewhat dark set of paintings that invoke a shared world. In fact, everything about these paintings feels shared – from their formal power to the memories of coming of age that they create.

This sense of involuted ‘going back’ is linked to a sense of manifold fantasy, and it is on this linkage that the strange realism of the paintings sits uncomfortably. An uncanny realm in which remembrance and fantasy unite as a singular horizon, a sort of tightrope wormhole that looks back to look forward.

Approaching this realm – and its paintings – means unavoidably resorting to figures of speech, means turning to a sort of arcane topological understanding of what is going on, of how these pictures work. How the twists and turns of a ‘going back’ archaeological storytelling both fits and doesn’t fit into representational demands. Sensation and feeling rule, and like so much of classic modernist painting, this is an art of touch and touching, and there is, along with the sense of confession, an equal sense of celebration.

We feel our way around in an uncanny hallucinatory topology, aware that within its shifting horizons all bodies are shared. Different times and different places are unified in Hennessey's paintings.

There is a sense that these sensations are contained and indeed one of the recent paintings *Erotic Stories* is a picture of a good old fashioned floppy disk, a relic from another age.

Personal secrets and inaccessibility are beautifully embodied in the device and the link with long lost computer information is kept up in other paintings too by the use of crude renditions of old Bitmap digital artefacts. But as in classic storytelling the clarity of the information, in this case, the organisation of coordinated geometrical bits into pictures according to inexorable cartography – is rendered fluid and reversible, swept up into a topological sweep. Rayner Banhan of the proto-pop independent group in London wrote in the 1950s of how topology encompasses *qualities of penetration, circulation and inside and out*.

Another quality of topological understanding is its in-betweenness, its play between bodies and it is this play within a contained moment that Hennessey's work contains so movingly.

Everything feels real, and it is a reality whose immediacy is guaranteed by the formal decisiveness of the paintings, their absolute economy. The paintings become the figures and vice versa.

The 'between bodies' nature that is both created and invoked (the show's title speaks to a tension between two bodies: Adam and Steve) is of a kind that acts both immediately on us and as a memory/fantasy. Present, past, future are embroiled 'here', invented together by formidable form... not only between depicted bodies though... the action, the movement, of each painting; mimicking comic book or filmic storyboards, occurs between frames, between the bodies of the paintings.

The craftiness of these works 'looking like' the kind of paintings in circulation in the 1950s is one that brings with that 'look' a degree of unapologetic formal intensity, the kind of intensity that defined that era of painting. Hennessey is able to bring that intensity back from the past just as his imagery seems to well up from a personal past dated by the floppy disk technology of a now redundant era.

Outdated formalism, a sense of 'old modern art', returns entwined with the birth of the personal computer age, the dated and the redundant are made to return together caught in the same net they come with a sensation of 'surfacing' and bring with them a whole sense of deep psychological and even physiological content.

Everything conspires into a sense of the past and yet everything relates to a sense of old futurism. 1950s modernism and technological invention and memory and fantasy entwined in arcane unity.

Fantasy looks forward and Adam and Steve feels a very forward-looking series of paintings. Hennessey has made little comic books and the paintings might be seen as frames, like a storyboard for a film.

But here we come upon a contradiction because each painting, each individual picture, feels absolute. Absolute and relational co-exist.

There is a life after death aspect to his discovery and it is here that we experience the afterlife quality, the surprise aspect of Hennessey's pictures. *Double biology* is a painting that has a skeleton in it as one of the protagonists and a relationship with death is made surprisingly apparent.

It is with this painting that the particular thanatic-quality of the green atmosphere, the green paint that is used, becomes an unnatural light; noticeable, compelling and uncanny. I could help drawing associations with my own 1970s boyhood and a joint playground obsession with Dr Who. We shared appalled insights with each other on the nature of Dr Who and the green death. It isn't that this association is in itself true, maybe it is not even wholly relevant and I should edit it out, but that Hennessey has been able to create paintings able to connect with and stage our own forgotten experiences, our own memories and fantasies.

Everything is partial here. Dated anti-anecdotal formalism coexists with bits of personal storytelling. Private Eroticism with public scale, lost youth regained.

Hand in hand with formalism comes utopian promise and here I find art historical rewind occurring. Adam Hennessey's paintings take me back to Cézanne's awkward Bathers. We find ourselves not at the end of something in painting but at the beginning. Fantasies or Memories? Rephrases of classical idylls or delayed realism?

Hennessey's paintings ask many of the same questions. From either end of a supposedly defined formalist history, unexpected content lurks to embroil us.

Along with a form of paradisiacal longing, topological intensity rolls out moebius strip-like involving us between frames, between bodies. Cézanne would reportedly mist up remembering his boyhood romps through Provencal backwoods with Emille Zola and friends. Paradise lost but a pretty awkward one. He lived the classical dream and, just as Hennessey resurrects a sallow green-tinged modernist dream, Cézanne painted Poussin from nature.

For all their celebrated iconic modernist status I don't think Cézanne's bathers really properly exist in discourse... they don't really fit. For all the quasi-scientifico muttering about Cézanne's objective looking the clearly made upness of the paintings is beyond some kind of pale... similarly, speculations that he was uncomfortable around actual naked

people fall short in the light that the point of memories and fantasies is that they aren't actually there.

Cézanne, like Hennessey, inhabits his machines. The art historian TJ Clark memorably felt that the bathers were like fairground hurdy-gurdies queerly vulgar and machinic-Puppet like and artificial. Something of the same might be said of Adam and Steve. The link with relatively primitive computer tech brings to my mind the grinding of old hard drives, but these old machines are full of longing and discomfort, they are stilted animations that work through awkwardness and breakdown and herein, in both cases, lies a sense of truth.

Rather grandly this is a form of prophetic history painting built from erotic old bits and pieces. Old school ties and lost bones. That inaccessible floppy disk at the bottom of the drawer. And yet fantasy is about something that we look forward to. Cézanne might have been painting his own personal visions of heaven and there is a sense, notwithstanding the skeletons, that Hennessey's memories are also fantasies. Everything goes both ways, comes back and forth.

What is created then is deeply unsettling and in its very nature twisted and questionable. Unapologetically we find ourselves at the heart of actual 'modern art', in the 'inbetweeners' of its topological form, at its best something that overturns any consoling normalisations and tidy art self-validating historical scripts.

Instead of unquestionable painterly (and sexual) authority, we find the truth of an uncomfortable coming of age laid out. In so doing the whole nature of modern art, now that it is mere art historical memory, feels up for grabs as a kind of exploratory fantasy in itself.

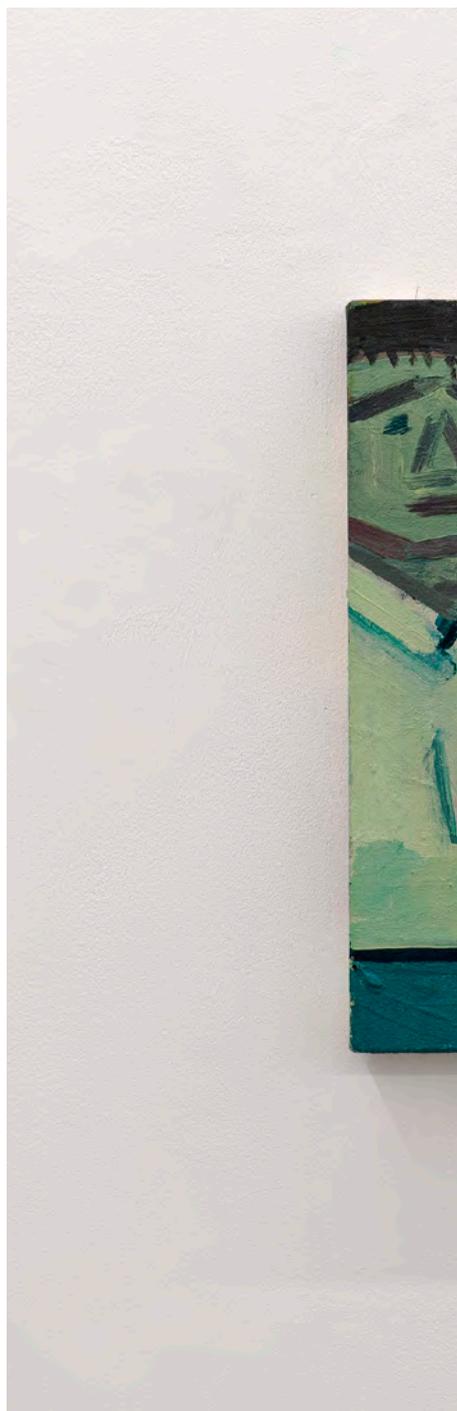
If these school days have a lesson, it is that here everything can come back to take things forward.

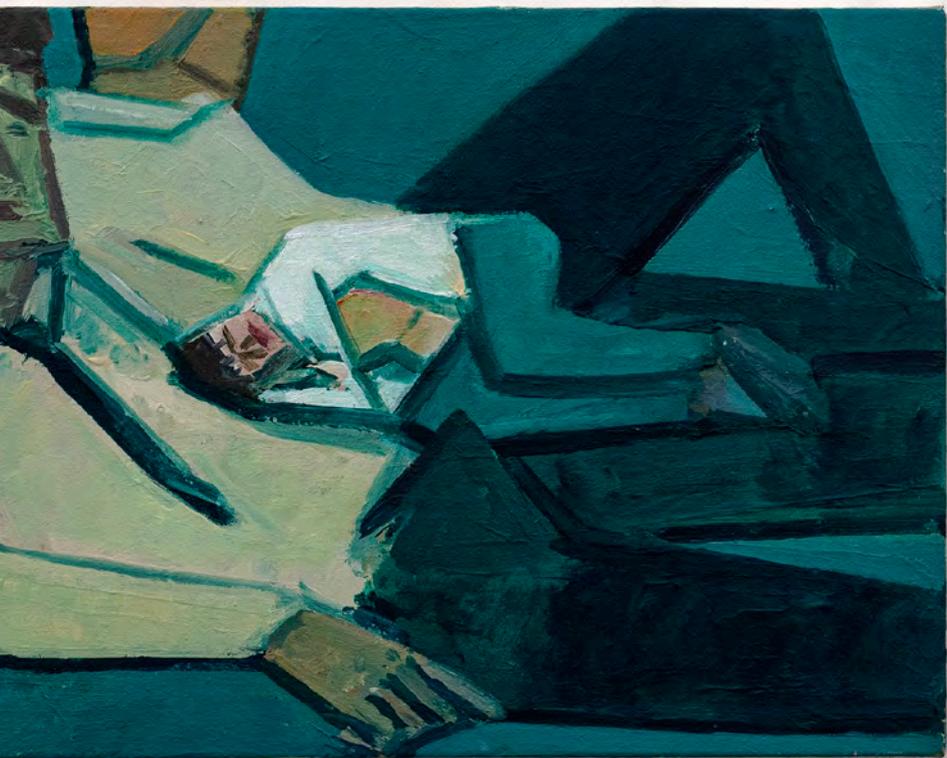
Work





65% Steve, 25% Dan, 5% Pete, 5% Paul
2020
Acrylic on canvas
50x35 cm







1998
2021
Acrylic on canvas
50x35cm



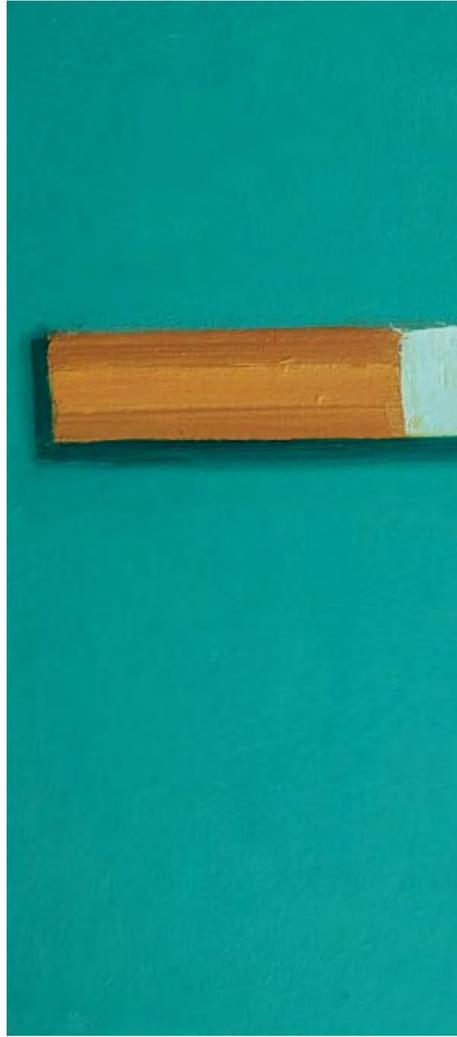
Millennium
2021
Acrylic on canvas
114x87cm





Adam and Steve
2021
Acrylic on canvas
50x35cm





Fag
2021
Acrylic on canvas
50x35cm



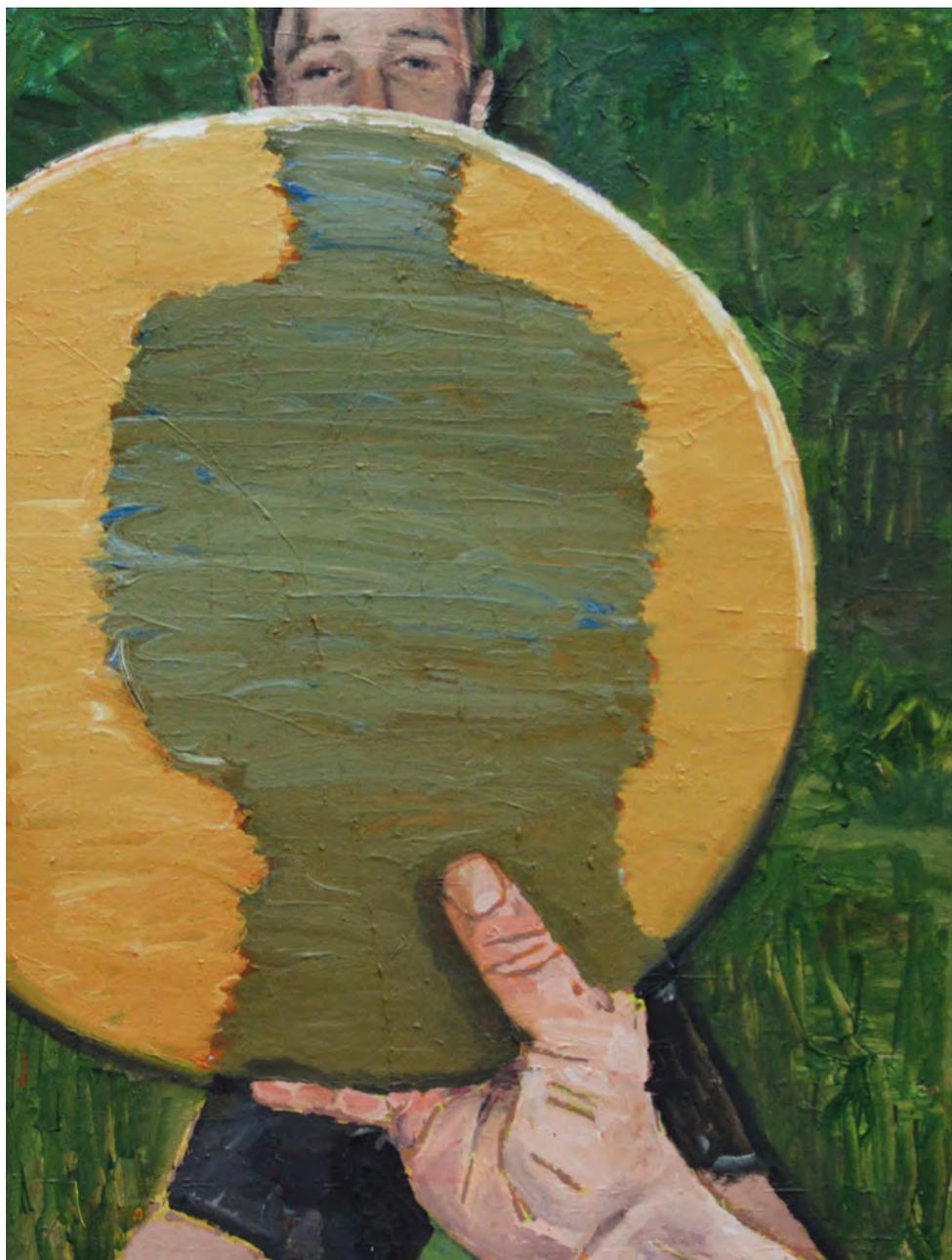




Fags
2021
Acrylic on canvas
50x35cm



Frisbee
2019
Acrylic on canvas
112x87cm



Gay until proven straight

2020

Acrylic on canvas

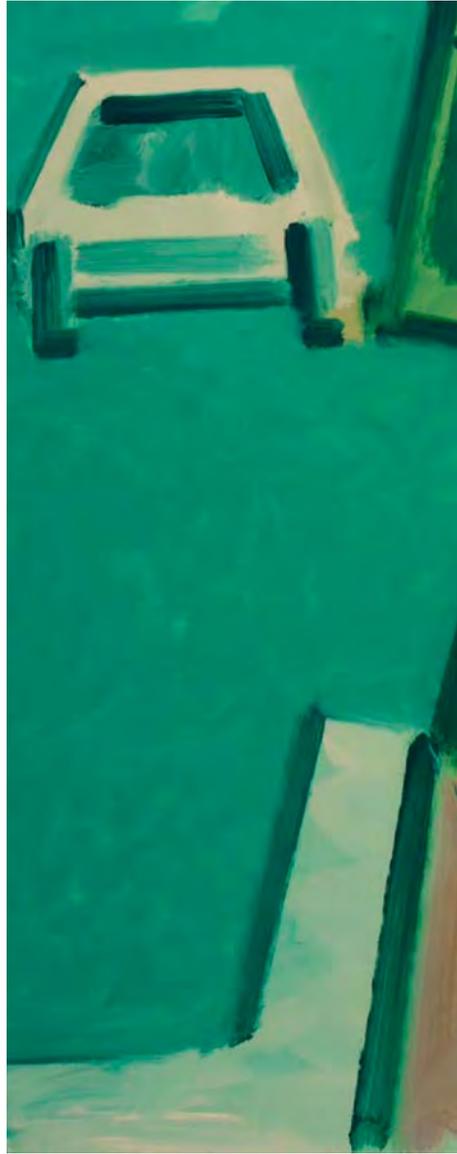
50x35cm



Erotic stories
2021
Acrylic on canvas
50x35cm







Golden Eye
2021
Acrylic on canvas
114x87cm

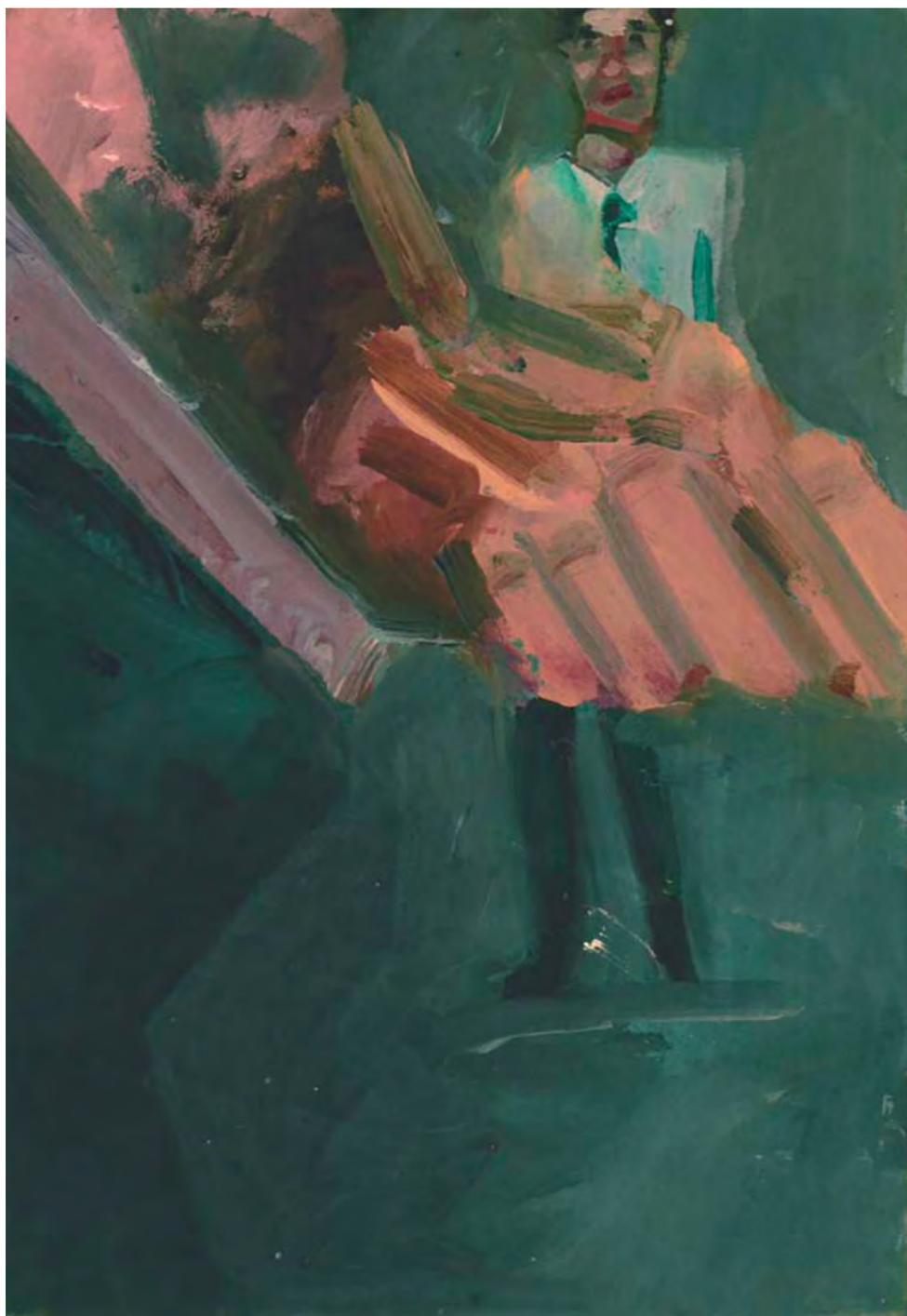




He's bent, he's bent, his arse is up for rent
2021
Acrylic on canvas
114x87cm



PE
2020
Acrylic on canvas
50x35cm







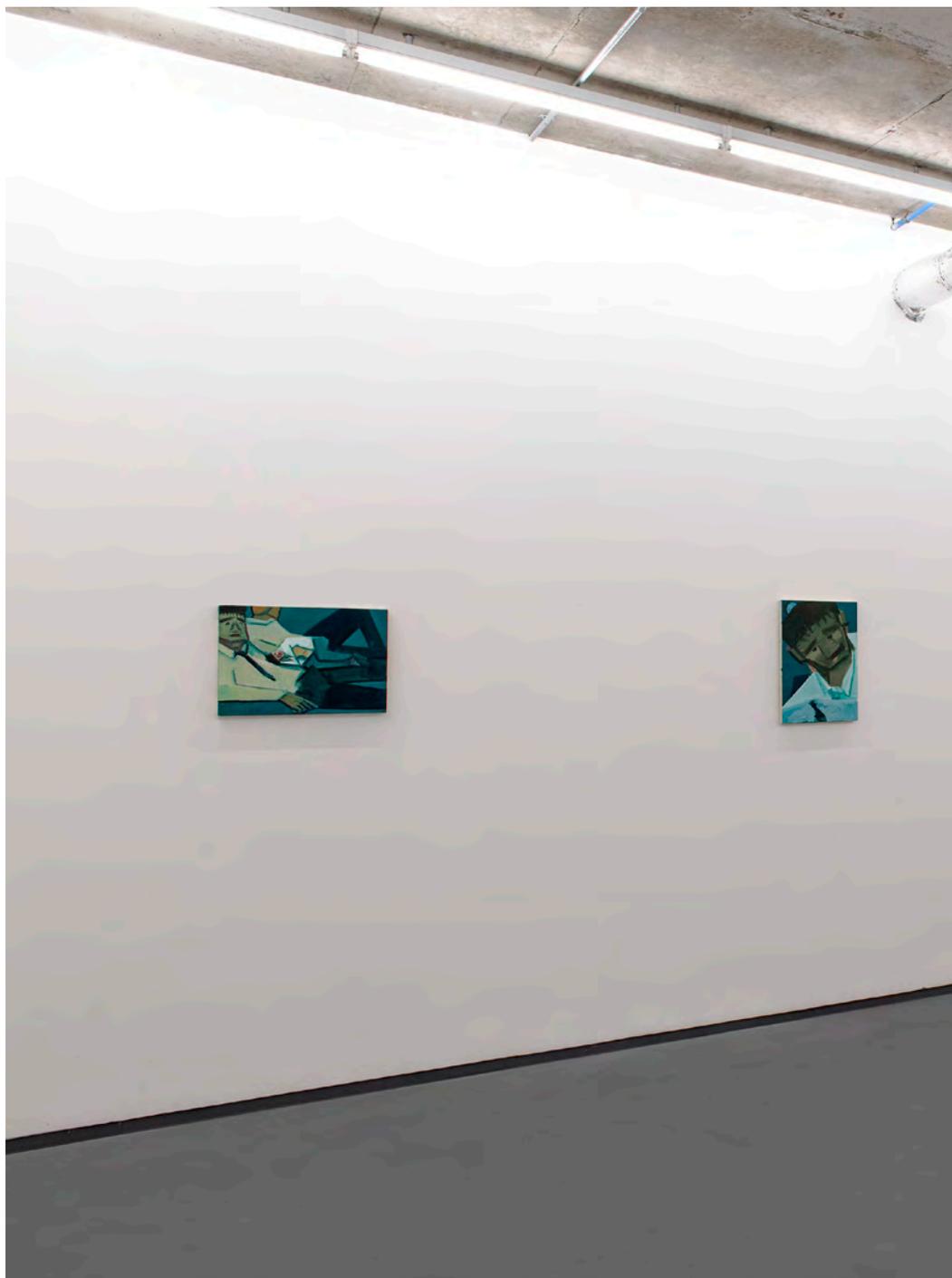
Snake
2021
Acrylic on canvas
114x87cm





Tight pants
2021
Acrylic on canvas
114x87cm









Double biology
2021
Acrylic on canvas
114x87cm





Camping
2021
Acrylic on canvas
114x87cm

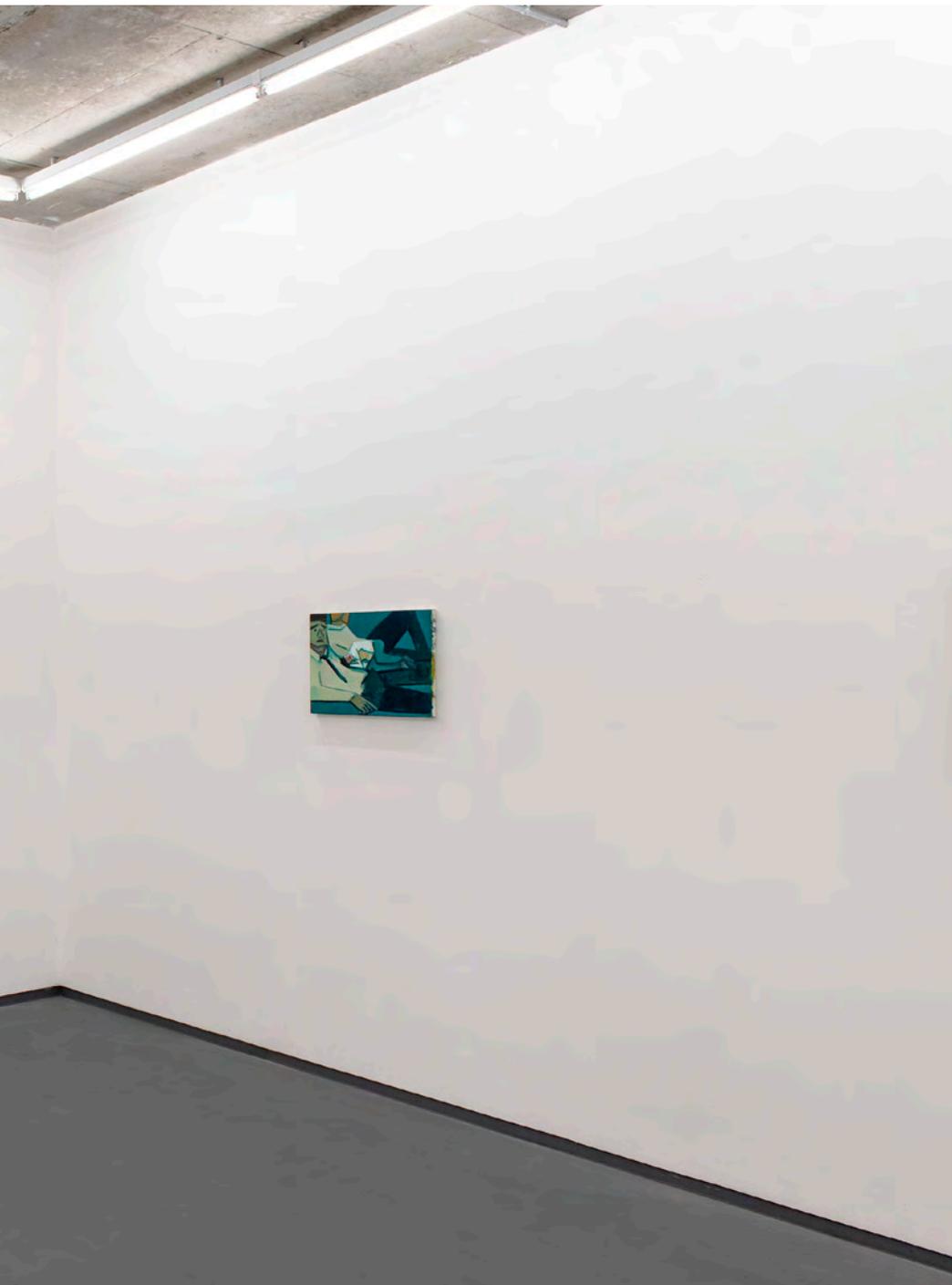




Weed
2021
Acrylic on canvas
114x87cm











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