

ARTFORUM

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Caleb Considine

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In Gustave Flaubert's novel *Salammbô* (1862), the cannonballs that fall on Carthage have been engraved with insults ("swine," "vermin") or else bitchy witticisms ("catch!"), and the victims they strike down have the abuses imprinted on their flesh. Hence the jagged backward writing carved on a cannonball in Caleb Considine's small but riveting *Painting for Salammbô*, 2015, reads "I have thoroughly earned it." The work depicts the piece of artillery in his Brooklyn studio next to a ratty sofa and a crumpled winter jacket. The couch, a Craigslist hand-me-down of woven brown and beige, seems undisturbed by the armament that sits upon it. If the cannonball had fallen from the sky, surely the sofa would have been smashed. Is Considine then, in his studio, the victim of the assault? Or could it be Considine who is preparing to catapult the ball upon those of us who still can't think through painting, us who "have thoroughly earned it"?



Caleb Considine, *Painting for Salammbô*, 2015, oil on canvas, 20 x 24".

Madame Bovary and *Sentimental Education* may seem like easier parallels to the naturalistic precision of Considine's paintings. Yet more than any of Flaubert's novels, the grandly camp *Salammbô* offers a model of artistic creation—a naturalism with no documentary aim, a proudly useless perfection—that Considine, with his catapult in the corner of the studio, understands as nothing less than an act of war. And if naturalism were at its core a pessimistic, deterministic style, then perhaps for young artists today it may have new use. History is not fiction, it turns out. History is fate, and to make sense of that dreadful downturn we need art that's not an umpteenth bloodless critique, but an act of creation as forceful as a cannonball to the chest.

— *Jason Farago*