

Justin Liam O'Brien

Physical Education

Exhibition dates: October 25 – December 9, 2023
Reception for the artist: Wednesday, October 25, 6-8 pm

Marinero is pleased to announce *Physical Education*, Justin Liam O'Brien's first solo exhibition with the gallery, inhabiting Gallery One.

There's no telling where the Internet will lead you. For some unknown reason I recently swerved away from my usual grimy corners of social media and found myself watching an animated series for kids with embarrassing open-heartedness. The show followed the exploits of a little girl with two fathers - one a knight, the other a prince - as she strived to become a warrior in her own right. On paper, this was the kind of programming that I've been conditioned to disdain as a well-read, irony-poisoned young adult, but watching it made me feel hopeful and despairing in ways that I hadn't anticipated. There was the bittersweet, horizon-opening representation I'd never gotten the chance to enjoy but felt glad for young people to have - maybe I could've been a knight... More familiar was the deflated feeling of squaring my own recent life experience with the basic but heartfelt lessons the show offered, the trite but true realization that children's stories hardly prepare you for how overwhelming adult entanglements can be.

It's not exactly a groundbreaking observation to note that fairytales re-inscribe gender roles and have served to make the script of heterosexuality legible to young people for generations. It's not particularly radical either to note that being left out of that contract has been an overwhelming freedom for queers. You could imagine whole new futures in that vacuum and just as easily be floored by the cruelty and flightiness of people who wanted (and could have) their love every single way. We've reached an odd interregnum, where marriage has given the gays a ground floor without the clear direction and mandate that it provides for straights (who are already bucking against those constraints themselves). We've arrived together hand-in-hand, but where on Earth are we left to go?

The subjects of Justin Liam O'Brien's paintings in *Physical Education* inhabit this flux with all of their bodies, locked in an uncomfortable emotional pas de deux with their partners. Mixed messages and covert symbols abound, with subtle clues and unreadable signs both lined across their faces and projected into the scenery. O'Brien has made estrangement a central theme throughout his work but has often approached it from the perspective of a young man being told to lighten up and enjoy the freedom that being gay has afforded to him. In *Physical Education* the stakes are more personal and much higher, as his subjects skirt across emotional trip wires at risk of losing their intimate connections altogether.

Rather than reverting to the readymade language of fairy tales (unlike.. well..), O'Brien situates his subjects amid art history, both syncing up with the drama and latent weirdness of Old Masters while leaving a distinctly jagged modern impression. "Concupiscence" is the archaic word for lust and the human tendency to sin and in O'Brien's painting of the same name it's the unspoken cancer gnawing at the bonds between his three characters. Set against a looming de Chirico tower and stormy El Greco sky, O'Brien captures a building, murderous lull among the trio before the calm finally breaks into all-out violence. In "Rite of

Passage,” O’Brien depicts a suede-headed twunk as a kind of emissary with fruit and knife in hand, although it’s unclear with his shadow-streaked face and unblinking stare whether he bears an offering or a threat. In “Crossing the Frame,” which I personally think is the funniest work in the show, O’Brien toys with the conventions of Ascension painting by depicting a heavenly descension: our hero falling out of the clouds and straight on top of the viewer.

“In Bocca Lupo” transposes a Renaissance scene with a mid-day rave, casting the artist alongside his friends, fellow painters - Anthony Cudahy, Ian Lewandowski, Lily Wong, and Miguel Martinez - in a sweaty, non-stop St. Vitus Dance. Capturing their disheveled, sweaty appearances, alongside his slightly more cool one, is a sly flex of his prowess and comment on the rat race of being a working artist. Friends and lovers make up all the characters on display in Physical Education but they almost never appear in contexts that scan as remotely loving or easy. Rather than using them as a shorthand for intimacy, O’Brien casts them in a claustrophobic theater of cruelty, helping him act out deep seated fears and anxieties.

These are works that roil with unspoken emotion, screaming between the lines with their tense physicality. O’Brien’s characters are bound up in the same painting but only relate to one another across a vast emotional distance, dwelling on truths that are either too naggingly elusive or too volcanic to speak out loud. In “Lost Highway” a couple are locked in an interminable car-ride, with the driver staring off into the distance, while the other feigns a nap to cast a subtle but brutal side-eye his way. With the sun glaring through the windshield, O’Brien’s light depicts the driver in profile as both more handsome and severe than he normally would look and it’s the kind of hard-edge visualization that I associate with any ex of mine I’ve had a brutal fight with. The title is suggestive of the David Lynch movie but the body language is straight out of Wong Kar-wai’s 1997 masterpiece break-up film Happy Together, and suggests that wherever they’re headed it’s nowhere good.

“Physical Education” could very well be a description of O’Brien’s personal arc as an artist. After specializing in subjects with distended cartoon forms, blurred into a dynamic haze, the painter has gradually come to sharpen his approach to figuration, arriving at a high definition style that wields his command of form to tap deep into his subject’s psychology. Like his hero, George Tooker, Justin Liam O’Brien’s work captures the human body as it grapples for a steady way to plant itself in the tumult of heartache and an overwhelming world.

—Harry Tafoya

Justin Liam O'Brien (b. 1991, Flushing, NY) received a BFA from Pratt Institute. Exhibitions include solo presentations at Monya Rowe Gallery, New York; Richard Heller Gallery, Los Angeles; and GNYP Gallery, Berlin, Germany. O'Brien's work has been included in group exhibitions at Newchild Gallery, Antwerp, Belgium; Bradley Ertaskiran, Montreal, Canada; Grimm Gallery, Amsterdam, the Netherlands; CHART, New York; Galerie LJ, Paris, France; Public Gallery, London, UK; Kapp Kapp, Philadelphia, PA; and Galerie Tanja Wagner, Berlin, Germany, amongst others. The artist lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.