

PAPER®

The Still Life: NYC's Hottest Art Openings This Month

Welcome to The Still Life, PAPER's monthly roundup of gallery openings in NYC and beyond. Art editor-at-large Harry Tafoya checks in on the hottest shows to let you know what's compulsive viewing and what's not worth the trip on the L.

Harry Tafoya | Mar 01, 2024

Jimmy Wright & Christopher Culver - "Jimmy and Christopher" - Diana



Photo courtesy of Christopher Culver and Chapter NY

I started becoming interested in art in the late 2010s, in a period that roughly coincided with the rise of a style of painting no one had a very good name for. Tyler Malone came up with the term "New Queer Intimism," Alex Greenberger identified it under the umbrella of "Zombie Figuration," but almost everyone I know refers to this particular wave of LGBTQ art by the far more basic "queer figuration." Its innovation was conceptual, though it wasn't really much of a reach: artists depicting gay and trans subjects in private moments, without the burden of politics weighing down upon them. The twist was that this work was almost immediately recast as being implicitly political, pioneering a weepy new frontier of representation that GLAAD miraculously overlooked, but that the global art market certainly didn't. Even if one swoons at Louis Fratino's overwhelming romance or Nicole Eisenman's

cartoon friendtopia's (as I absolutely did), much of this work to me now has the feeling of being trapped at an over-crowded and never-ending Pride parade, leaving little space to do anything but cheer.

The duo of Jimmy Wright and Christopher Culver represent fascinating generational bookends to this trend of contemporary art and their show of drawings at Diana is a small but excellent example of where gay sensibility has been and might still go. When I first heard about this pairing it didn't initially make sense to me. There's a 40-year age gap between Wright and Culver, and for the greater part of Wright's career, he has primarily worked as a painter (his sunflowers are masterpieces of art made in the shadow of AIDS). But what unites both artists is an approach to sexuality that doesn't shy away from what's most funny and abject and all-around nasty about the act of hooking up.

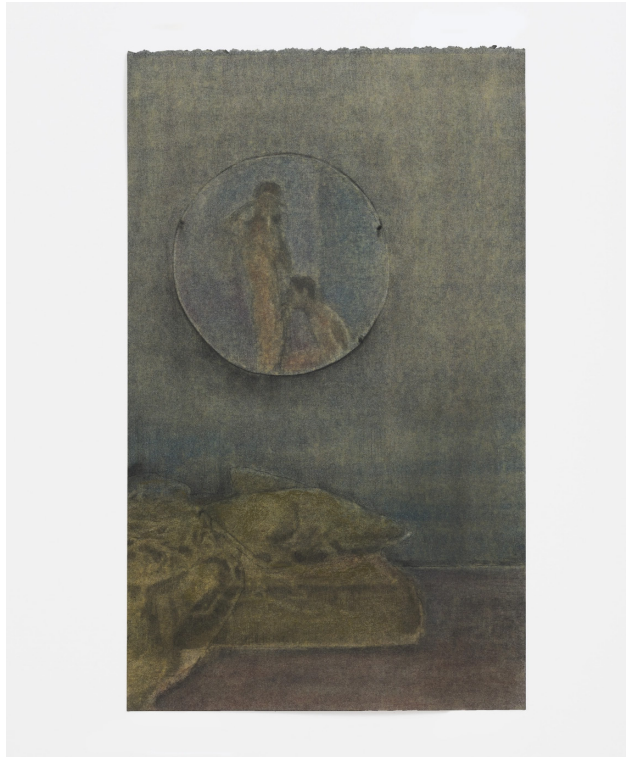
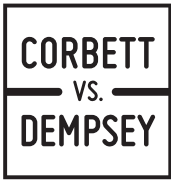


Photo courtesy of Christopher Culver and Chapter NY

Wright's contribution to the show is an aesthetic time capsule, offering work that dates all the way back to the 1970s. His drawings feature the kind of hairy, no-bones (or rather, all bones) promiscuity that you only encounter in vintage pornography, depicting the Golden Age of Cruising in all of its dank glory. Scenes of polymorphous perversity spill out of stalls and into orgies of pulled hair, fucked faces and soiled clothes. Wright's work depicts these all-out bathroom royales with the kind of craggy, Richter-scale jumping lines and seedy/sensual detailing that one usually associates with Expressionists like Egon Schiele and George Grosz.

Like Weimar Germany, New York's near-bankruptcy meant that gay cruising could not only thrive but be attractive to men from vastly different class backgrounds and Wright nods to this democratic spirit by mixing hairy hippies, 9-to-5 suits, street queens and platform-shoe'd pimps. These scenes still play out today (I'm told the bathrooms at the Oculus are particularly busy), but as lifestyle choices rather than any kind of unified counterculture. What's most striking about Wright's work is the utter brazenness on display, the completely hysterical and unsentimental pursuit of desire. These are genuinely



decadent works of art, presenting shamelessness as its own end without qualification, and in their face-melting depravity you can imagine them absolutely triggering Wright's more romantic contemporaries like Larry Kramer, Andrew Holleran, and David Hockney. Wright's drawings have a fair amount of brotherly love to them, but very little to do with actual intimacy, although in fairness, it probably isn't easy to come by on your knees in a subway restroom.

Christopher Culver by contrast works from the remove of almost half a century, from the other side of a historical chasm that spans the AIDS epidemic, gay marriage and the death by gentrification of Wright's old New York. His layered pastel and charcoal drawings are drab and bleakly beautiful, honing in on scenes of urban alienation and private despair, split between the city's grimy interstitial zones and domestic scenes where the walls seem to be closing in in real time. Culver is spiritually connected to Wright through the transience of his work, although both men adopt radically different attitudes toward it. Where Wright's drawings are lit up by a silly, slapstick joy, Culver's in comparison, are deeply wounded. In pieces like the brutal throat-fucking of "Two Farmers" (2024) sex is depicted as a quick and desperate fix rather than a full body high. His technique gives the piece a gnarly tactility, with the blotchy plains of discolored flesh offset by the chain-link texture of the cocksucker's necklace.

Unlike the "queer intimacy" crowd, which made a rallying cry out of "friends and lovers," part of the pathos in Culver's work is that the subjects are actually his exes; the love on display is dead on arrival, and the ambience between them is of emotional drift. If this all makes his work sound like a bottomless bummer, it really isn't. What's refreshing about Culver's perspective and of fellow-minded artists like Catherine Mulligan, Sam Lipp, Ser Serpas, Kevin Tobin and Shelley Uckotter is that it provides a wholeness to the experience of intimacy, by reminding us that bodies aren't always beautiful for coming together, and that human connection is richer for knowing it can be lost.