

SVA MFA Thesis Portfolio 2023

Simon Cooper

Artist Statement

My work balances the classical and modern world, the figurative and the abstract. The work is a collaboration with the past, bringing historic ideas and imagery into a contemporary lens through paintings, collage and works on paper. Blending elements from across Western art history, I draw inspiration from Medieval illuminated manuscripts, Renaissance tapestries, classical antiquity, and Flemish genre painting. I use the compositional structure within these references as a framework for abstraction. Bacchanalia, feasts and gatherings are themes I regularly revisit within my practice.

Through abstraction, I seek to find the essence and movement within these scenes such as the hand gestures of an intense conversation or the chaotic scene of a spilled glass of wine. This focus on social gatherings and human interaction comes as a response to a rising antisocial presence within the world today that is fueled by social media, ecommerce, and remote work. Inspired by artists such as Pieter Bruegel the Elder and Jan Steen, I recognize the importance of community and society visible in their work and I aim to promote those same values in my work today.

Project Statement

“Convivium” is a series of paintings that focuses on the nature of celebration and the importance of human interaction through the use of art history and abstraction. Modern America has been plagued by this feeling of isolation and a lost sense of community, much of which was caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, but primarily from the inescapable advent of the internet, ecommerce, and social media. I consider these developments to be tools, tools which society has truly benefited from, but are by no means substitutes for the real world. It is then that my effort in this series highlights the importance of gatherings, feasts, the physical world, and the very essence of what defines us humans as “social creatures”.

The paintings presented capture these moments of togetherness, the act of eating and drinking with one another, sharing stories and laughing at the dinner table. These moments are important to me in my own life and they are fleeting. I do not depict these scenes as a single moment in time, but as a culmination of the moments. The chaotic energy of celebration; the spattering of food, the spilling of wine, the gestural hands of an engaging conversation. I take inspiration from the cubist sensibility of painting and movement, while also referencing artwork from Medieval and Renaissance Europe such as tapestries, illuminated manuscripts, and paintings. My process involves the deconstruction and abstraction of said artworks in order to revive and reimagine the Western art history canon.



Luxury Pipe

2023

Acrylic, latex paint, wax pencil on canvas

60" x 80"

This work is inspired by the paintings of 17th century Dutch artist Jan Steen. By referencing multiple works by Steen, this work combines all of them into one scene and shows that chaotic, playful nature of a feast. Existing between both figurative and abstract approaches, this work aims to capture the essence and movement of a gathering. The centrally placed dinner table invites viewers into the feast and promotes the importance of social interaction.



What hath night to do with sleep?

2023

Acrylic on canvas

72" x 90"

"What hath night to do with sleep?" is quoted from the English poet, John Milton. This painting celebrates the beauty of nighttime and represents this through a restricted color palette of blacks and earth tones. Figures and forms are shown in complete darkness and evokes the late night feast, the after party. In this work, I aim to represent optics of night, where objects and forms morph under the absence of light.



Spinning Plates

2023

Acrylic, latex paint on canvas

72" x 48"

Similar to my painting "What hath night to do with sleep?", this work is placed in a nighttime setting, yet the dinner scene is illuminated as if by snapshot, revealing a chaotic, disordered feast. The title refers to both the juggling of many shapes and forms as well as to the plates upon a dinner table.



Jubilee

2023

Acrylic, latex paint, wax pencil on canvas

72" x 100"

This painting is the final work in the "Convivium" series and is the largest of all the works. A more vibrant color palette and its large scale invites the viewer to look closer and feel a part of the feast. Through abstraction and deconstruction I depict the movement of hands in a passionate conversation, the spilling of wine and food, animals and pets hunting for scraps, all of the elements within a wild, raucous feast.