

# M+B

## WORK IN PROGRESS

### Louis Fratino

June 2017

Louis Fratino's paintings are mesmerizing in their tactile use of paint and color and his vivid abstraction of figurative forms. His works are deeply emotive, and one of his many obvious strengths as a painter is his ability to clearly and effortlessly create works that are able to resonate happiness, melancholy, joy, or humor. Drawing inspiration from his own life, memories, or surroundings, Fratino's works evoke a familiar and identifiable nostalgia. His visible brushstroke and loose figuration conjure images that reflect a reality, but are imbued with something more -- feelings, memories, dreams, and desires. Gazing at a work is almost like looking at a visual representation of a memory. They show fragmented narrative moments that hint at larger stories and contexts, but also ground the viewer in a particular time and place. Sexuality is a prominent theme within the subject matter, but it is tackled honestly and beautifully, evoking tenderness and intimacy. Painting loving and erotic scenes between men, Fratino pushes the viewer to gaze beyond the immediate homosexual subject, challenging the limits of social understandings of homosexuality and emphasizing the relationships, lives, and narratives that underscore the gay experience.



Long Distance Runners, 2017

Louis Fratino is currently lives and works in Brooklyn, NY and received his BFA in Painting with Concentration in Illustration from Maryland Institute College of Art. He completed the Yale Norfolk Painting Fellowship at Yale Summer School of Art and Music and most recently a Fulbright Research Fellowship in Painting in Berlin, Germany. Fratino is represented by Thierry Goldberg Gallery, included recently in a three person show Chase / Fratino / Lee earlier this year, following a solo exhibition at the gallery in 2016.

#### **How have your paintings developed until now? What was the process arriving at your current body of work?**

I was always drawing when I was younger, scaring my high school professors by drawing creepy things on my homework. I always knew I wanted to go to art school, and I also knew that I wanted to major in painting and didn't change my mind about that. I minored in Illustration which is something I look at a lot.

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Illustrators are always rethinking how to abstract or invent a hand or a tree, people hugging. Children's books offer so much, and one of my earliest memories is getting excited about those images which have stayed with me. I still collect children's books and have them around. I love Maurice Sendak, Ben Shahn, Dahlov Ipcar. But I don't necessarily know why painting. Part of me feels like it's accessible, and relatively inexpensive. I love it.



Clump, 2016

pictures of men. I'm imagining the color and the feelings of these photos, which are photographed in black and white. It helps me think about different ways of seeing the body by using these photos as models instead of working only from memory. Also, by re-using these images I can feel a part of myself into this history of gay men. To me, the images are very sweet and intimate, though they were considered erotica at the time.

**Your work blends intimacy and graphic sexuality in an interesting way. How do you approach those subjects?**

My best work takes a graphic sexual image and puts it in a different place. It has to become more than the sex, or the painting isn't sexy anymore. People don't want to be labelled or pigeon-holed and become about one thing. The real experience of being gay is larger than your sexuality – it's just a part of your life that relates to all other parts of your life. I think a lot of the art world doesn't necessarily have work like that, so I want to make paintings that fill that void.

I think the climate is different now than in the 1980s, where gay artists were carving out a space in the world and had to demand to be noticed. Now I think I have a greater opportunity to empathize with people and show that there is human and complicated world around gay sex or gay relationships.

**Where do your images come from and how do you develop the compositions?**

A lot of the works are from memory, so I'm trying to remember the atmosphere or the feelings from a particular time. I like that in painting we can perceive the memories from our life differently than how we see or photograph it. I want to take advantage of that. For instance, how do we see and understand how light hits the skin? Maybe it's a gradient or maybe it's a whole range of colors.

Some of my recent paintings are from this book called Male, which is Vince Alletti's collection of photography. It's photos of his boy friends, found photos, and photos by other artists. It's a collection of sexy and tender

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## **When did sexuality as a theme enter into your work, or has it always been a part of it?**

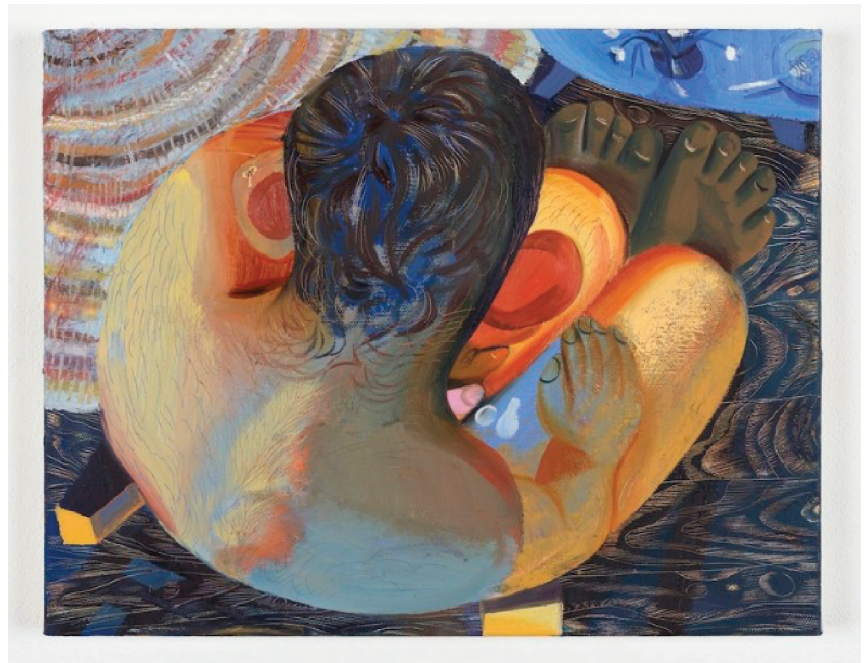
Gay relationships came into my work after I came out in 2015. But before that I was always making paintings about my relationships with people and was interested in sex or intimacy. I don't know how much of that has to do with the fact that I'm 23, but that's a lot of what I think about. It's about pleasure, and it's very much about senses -- I'm interested in how you can make a painting that tastes or smell good. But then it's also about being vulnerable or scared or ugly. Sex has all of those things.

## **How do you approach representing the body and the figuration in your works? It often seems like you're abstracting the form.**

My approach comes from an interest in modernist painting -- Picasso, Matisse, Leger. I riff off of them, I enjoy doing it. A lot of my paintings follow my drawings as well. I didn't always make figures that were so stretched or pulled apart, but I've been trying to have my paintings look more like my drawings. My drawings are less inhibited or less self-conscious in a way. While I want my paintings to be taken seriously, I also want them to be kind of stupid -- just a very natural thing that comes out of me.

## **How does humor enter into your work?**

Humor definitely enters the work. I would think it was so unfortunate if my paintings weren't funny. I'm very self-conscious about that, and I have trouble with work that takes itself very seriously. I think humor is a way to be more genuine, to make fun of yourself or your life a little bit. Not that life is all pathetic or something to be laughed at, but life is funny and beautiful at the same time and that should be represented.



Wet Lonely Morning, 2017

## **Do you usually work from drawings when making your paintings?**

Yes, I keep sketchbooks and I have a lot. I'm always keeping them and testing out ideas that just occur to me when I'm walking about. It's a way for me to think about ideas and then I can map them or test their limits in the sketchbook.

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## **What is your work process?**

Sometimes I just start painting and put down color and try to find something. Other times I will see another painting and I appropriate the subject matter. Then I'll draw it a few times in the sketchbook until it feels like it becomes mine. I create my visual language in sketchbooks, and then I pick from them and translate them into my paintings. It's part of my practice to revisit my sketches, which is why I keep them. Sometimes I'll draw things and then don't want to make them at all, but a year later I'll think that they're really great ideas and I'll have a different approach to making them. The drawings are super helpful for me when I have a blank canvas in front of me and I'm just thinking, "What do I do?". So it's good to have this backlog of ideas and things that I can pull from, that I've been interested in that I can pick from.

## **Are you largely thinking about autobiographical images or things that are close to you?**

Yes because I don't feel qualified to talk about something that's beyond what I've experienced. I feel like the only way I can try to make interesting work is to be close to my life. But I feel like that can be kind of cowardly too because it's hard and brave of people to tackle issues outside of yourself. I might have the personality where I always want to talk about myself and talk about my feelings.

## **How do you think about scale in your paintings, both in terms of actual size and also compositional proportions?**

I started making smaller paintings at the end of my time in Berlin, so that was last spring. I thought of the pieces as supporting cast members to my larger works, but I was having studio visits and people were noticing that the smaller work was actually stronger, and I started to take them more seriously. Now I focus on the small work. I think that there's a correlation between that and my interest in art history. I really love Persian and Indian miniature painting. I think my tendency to want to make small patterned things just works better in a small scale because I have trouble scaling that up. I also think about the figure in small paintings differently because they are occupying space in a different way. In large paintings (which I think are harder to make) I don't play with the figure as much and the compositions are harder for me to accomplish. I think I'd like to eventually make paintings that feel like my small paintings but are actually larger in scale. I'm at a point where I'm working up to that.



Ankleiden, 2015

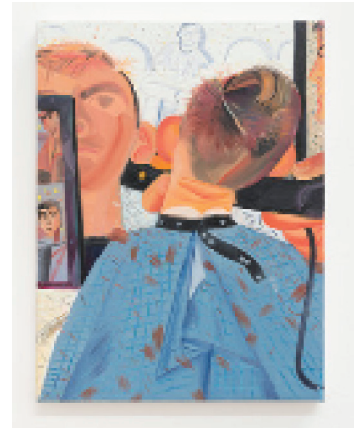
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The smaller scale definitely lends itself to those feelings of intimacy or privacy.

People definitely have that reaction, and I agree. I like that people feel close to it because of that, or that you have to get actually get close to the surface to see everything.

**Your work definitely has a lot of layers -- I'm thinking of the ones I saw in your show at Thierry Goldberg Gallery, which are very textured and evoke a density beneath the immediate surface.**

There are layers of paintings beneath them. Most of the paintings have one or two completely separate ideas living beneath them. I'm not satisfied with a surface until it's gone through that process and has been built up. I like that they are crowded as well. That's what I love about miniature painting -- that they have a whole super small and magic world.



Tristan at Isaac's, 2016

**Miniatures are also interesting because things are also presented in a different perspective in that they're very flattened and things are shown disparately in an almost nonlinear way.**

Exactly, I love that. I really enjoy warping perspectives or positioning the viewer in a strange or impossible way. I learn a lot from looking at those

**Are you thinking about the viewer when making your work a lot, or is your focus more interested in compositional perspective?**

I'm thinking about the viewer and letting the viewer be me. Often the paintings are not so much self-portraits as they are my own view on the subway or looking at my partner Tristan or my family. Or, if I'm painting myself, it's a view three-feet behind me of how I remember myself.



February, 2017

I like to include bits of people as well, so there are small parts of yourself that you can see as if in your periphery, which is an indication that you are that person. I want the viewer to feel what I'm feeling.

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## **I know that you make or have made ceramics in the past -- what other materials do you work with and why?**

I am interested in making ceramics, but I haven't really incorporated that into my regular practice yet. I really like Italian majolica- it's one of the most truly painted type of ceramic glaze techniques. I like them as objects that are similar to paintings. People are charmed by them and they're small and sweet, but they can also have a more graphic and erotic note. It's cute or funny, but then someone is also giving a blow job or spreading their butt cheeks. And I think ceramics kind of lends itself to that because it has this history of being merrily decorated with plants and birds, which is incredibly beautiful, but at this point in history we can do whatever we want. Now I can put gay sex on a vase instead of chrysanthemums, or maybe both. That's also why I'm interested in Italian majolica because they are practical ceramic objects for serving food, but they also have depictions of everyday life which is bizarre. I would also like to do figurative sculpture. I'm curious how that would look because my figures are already very sculptural or molded, or kind of chunky.

## **What do you think the most challenging part of painting or creating work is?**

I think probably the doubt I have, whether what I'm doing and making is worth seeing or sharing. Of course I love doing it and that is why I paint. But who knows if it means anything or has any relevance today. Especially when there are thousands of ways to work today that don't need or ask for painting. It is ridiculous because I have been so blessed and fortunate to have family affirm and support that I should do this, and friends who are there for me. I always rely on hearing from the world that people care about it.



Juni, 2016

## **What is your studio practice like?**

While I do have this side of complete doubt, I also have complete faith in myself where if I show up and I keep doing what I'm doing, then I know I'll achieve what I want. I think a lot of what you have to do as a young painter is be super confident, which is something that is really hard and that I struggle with. But you have to be determined that you belong. I moved to New York, I'm making new work, and I'm making it visible. Balancing a day job is a different thing. That, for me, is about being open to having everything influence your practice. I find it really rewarding to turn a doodle from work into a painting when I go home.

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## **Do you usually work on multiple pieces at once?**

Always. Otherwise I end up hating the painting. I have to put things away sometimes and let them marinate. If I've thought about it too much, I can't work on it. It's good to have other things to begin.

## **What do you think makes a painting successful?**

This is revealing a shitty part of myself, but this goes back to the doubts I have as a painter. Is this painting good? Does it look good? I answer those questions a lot by sharing my work with my peers or showing people. If I think a new painting is horrible or awful, sometimes people will have the complete opposite reaction, telling me that it's the best painting that I've made in six months. So that is about failure, or surprising yourself. I can definitely tell when I'm ready to show people my work -- it develops this texture where instead of seeing pieces of a painting, you instead see the image and then believe the world it is in and is constructed, and then can delve in and enjoy how it has been made. But first there is this suspension of disbelief, where you feel like you're looking at something that could exist or does actually exist. My paintings are not realistic at all, but I want them have the feeling of reality. But also, it is impossible to think about because of the extremes of paintings. On one hand there are paintings about failure which toe the line between disappearing or falling apart like Richard Tuttle, and then you have the Oath of the Horatii by David which is monumental and solid and immense and immortal.



Alarm, 2017