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Interview

“It’s All America, Baby”: Sam McKinniss and Rob Thom on Art of the Heartland

Sam McKinniss | January 15, 2021

Public pools, marathons, and crowds, oh my! Upon first glance, the paintings of Rob Thom reflect a bygone era of mask-less comingling, of anxiety-free revelry and free-flowing germs. But a closer look at his work—which were shown at the Anna Zorina Gallery as part of “Viscera Americana,” the artist’s first solo exhibition, in the fall of 2020—reveals the creeping presence of a global pandemic: distanced, chalk-drawn circles on a lawn adjacent to an overcrowded pool; 12 distinct backyard pools—pods, if you will—that bump up against one another. The paintings, almost all of which Thom completed in quarantine, depict the joys, anxieties, and sheer viscera of being one among many. Parks and pools become the sites of the American id at play. Dogs swim amok; pot-bellied men wrestle on mattresses. Thom’s work offers the type of humor and empathy that many are currently seeking in art—not excluding Thom’s peers, which include the painter Sam McKinniss. While McKinniss’s work consists of high-contrast portraits of celebrities and American icons, as he tells Thom, he definitely misses a good crowd. It may be a while before we’re able to sweat on one another without fear, but in the meantime, at least we have the paintings of Rob Thom.

—SARAH NECHAMKIN

SAM MCKINNISS: Rob, hi.

ROB THOM: Hi. It’s been a long time.

MCKINNISS: Where are you now?

THOM: I live on Bainbridge Island off Seattle and I’ve lived here for six or seven years. I had a couple of kids and we’re living in L.A. My wife and I decided to move up here to get away from the riffraff. So we’ve been here and it feels really safe here, a lot of trails to walk. I’m not religious, but we feel really blessed. I haven’t been on an airplane. I’ve stayed in a bunch of hotels. I don’t have COVID.

MCKINNISS: I don’t have it either.

THOM: Did you leave the city?

MCKINNISS: Briefly, and it was all very strange. I had to go to L.A. once and then I visited my parents a couple of times, but they’re just in Connecticut, so it’s not very far away. Touching doors doesn’t really bother me so much because I wash my hands constantly, but LAX seems really busy, whereas JFK is like a ghost town. So, I was like, “What the hell’s going on over here?” But it’s okay, I survived. I don’t have COVID. I never got it, so hopefully that just remains the way it will be.

THOM: I hope so.



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MCKINNISS: What was it like making an art show during 2020? I assume you made it all during the pandemic?

THOM: Pretty much, except for that wrestling painting that you had posted [called] "House of Tarnation." That one was sort of painted beforehand. I didn't get to go to the show. I saw it online. It's hard for me to know how the paintings are perceived by people. I mean, I guess that's every artist's dilemma. I can't get inside their heads, so that was missing from not being able to go to an opening and see what the reception is and the responses to the work. I was actually able to adjust a couple of the paintings to be a little bit COVID-specific. Have you made any COVID-related paintings?

MCKINNISS: Yeah. I made a whole body of work that's still in limbo and I'm not really at liberty to talk about it, but at some point, I have a whole show ready to go as soon as the coast is clear. It will see the light of day.

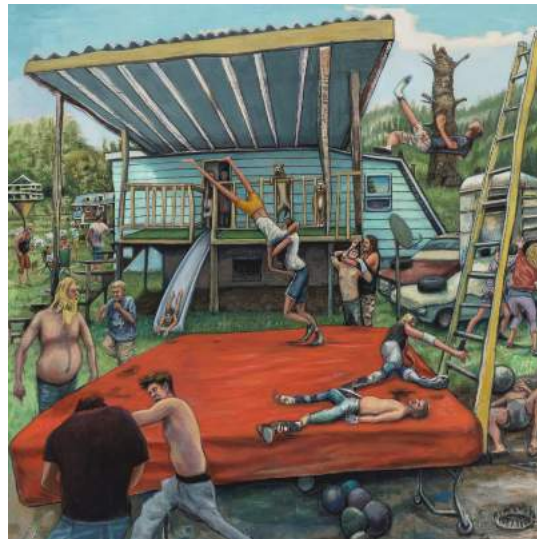
THOM: Did it get postponed?

MCKINNISS: Yeah, which is fine. I mean, we take it in strides. I'm safe, I'm healthy. I had a show that opened a couple of days around Valentine's Day in February 2020.

THOM: Wow. It was right at the door.

MCKINNISS: Exactly. I'm really glad that you didn't back out of your New York show, even though I know it's heartbreaking to not get to, but I got to see it. I was just in the neighborhood and walked past the Anna Zorina Gallery and saw your name in the window and had a flash like, "Shit. I've met that guy. I love that guy's work. We got to go look at this." I was with my friend Borna Sammak. We walked in and I was just very moved. I found the comedy in your paintings very moving. I found it very refreshing. Life is so tragic lately, so I'm glad you didn't cancel your show.

THOM: Well, I'm glad, too because it seems like it had a little bit of an effect. I'm glad that it affected you in that way because that's sort of what it's about. I like it when other painters and artists enjoy it. A lot of it's me trying to amuse myself, and if no one's laughing, then that's no good. But yeah, there's the whole comedy-tragedy element to all of it. I mean, I think that was a feeling, especially in this space of sort of watching the administration bungle it up. Living in South Los Angeles, people would always say, "You got to laugh to keep from crying." That's always stuck with me to make something out of whatever's happening, but also don't fall into the depths of despair and make sad paintings. I don't think I made a sad painting. I tried to bring it up with the all dogs swimming pool [in "Faux Hokusai Cooldown"] with the fake focus on the mural in the back. That's the difference between having a dog and a cat. The cat looks the other way when you walk in the door, but the dog is always happy. So I was trying to bring a little bit of happiness to the world. I'll admit it. It's a little basic.



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MCKINNISS: It becomes a crowd experience and then it becomes an orgiastic experience. It's a moment of joy, but also complete abandon. That was a real moment of release to me, where all the paintings involved crowds. There's never a singular portrait moment. It's always a crowd moment. That's something that I miss about my previous life. We just simply haven't been able to enjoy crowds.

THOM: Yeah, I like that. I was already sort of on that trajectory, making crowd paintings before COVID hit and I think I have a separate experience. I really don't like crowds. Actually, I lived in New York for a year and I remember when I first visited, I was overwhelmed with anxiety. There was so much going on, and now, I live in this place. Living in L.A., you're always surrounded by people and chaos and unpredictability. I think those are the things that put me on edge a little bit, especially community pools. They always weirded me out, so I was trying to address some of that stuff. There's some measure of my personality going into the paintings.

MCKINNISS: The "12 Pool Party" reminded me of all these quarantine pods, but they're all bumped up next to each other and there's a lot of overflow between various pods. That's been my experience of a pandemic. Everyone says they're in a pod, but there's a lot of overflow between the various pods, either socially or sexually or you just bump into people at the drugstore or the grocery store or whatever. So, it was a very alarming painting, but I got a lot of pleasure out of it. Something about "12 Pool Party" brought me to like [Jean-Baptiste] Camille Corot. There was a wonderful landscape art inside of this thing that felt really absurd.

THOM: Yeah, I studied that. That's sort of how I got into the painting world in Santa Barbara. There's a whole landscape tradition here, so I was doing Plein air painting and that's where that came from. I sort of fancied myself a Plein air painter, but I was never very good at it for a while, with my eye on a studio practice more than anything. I hadn't thought of Camille Corot, but it's a really nice connection. I even have a really nice Camille Corot book in my library that I look at occasionally. I connect with art more viscerally and less academically, but I will look at incredible painters with great pallets hoping to do better.

I think I went through the background of that painting, not knowing, should this be a cliff's edge? How does this wind up? And just finding a painterly and easy solution to figure out a background. In all the paintings, you're looking at something staged and maybe that's just an unnatural environment, too. That's sort of what I was thinking about. I didn't know a lot of people with pools in their backyards, but that's typical. An above-ground pool was something I hadn't really seen before I moved here [to Washington].

MCKINNISS: I wanted to ask you about "Grotto Pool," which to me is very Greek. Beyond the comedy of it, it looked like a painting of the "Allegory of the Cave." It seems very Plato to me, and I really loved it for reinventing that allegory.

THOM: It's a big painting with the light burst in the middle and then that weird triangle shape. I thought about Plato's cave and I thought about Mike Kelly, and then I sort of dismissed it. Then I was having a back-and-forth with somebody about sports in artwork and if I could inject sports into something, and I was able to find this pool. The idea was to make this painting that could feel like you were in that space, so that's why I made it large. And then I added sports to the TVs. It became singularly about this cave pool sports experience. I mean, there are other elements to it, but it definitely stays on the surface in that way. The feeling of being in it with the scale is what I was interested in. It's hard to find pictures of crowded pools, but that's my game. I take a beautiful image of the sexy pool somewhere, but then I add a bunch of sort of like fear factor into it.

MCKINNISS: I love that. I respond to the painting on multiple levels. First of all, I think sports are divine. Sports are totally divine and thus, worthy of being the subject of good art. It's about the human body and triumph over adversity and it's about all these things that are very Greek and very wonderful. So that, I'm happy to hear you talk about the painting. It made me really curious. Which brings us back to "House of Tarnation" because wrestling is also technically a sport.

THOM: Yeah, that's a special painting. I had a couple of television pro-wrestling paintings that I had made and that one seemed like the next logical step. That painting is pre-COVID. The house in that painting reminded me, although I took it from the internet, of where we live. We live between the ferry boat and the rest of the island. So people would drive

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through in their commute in their Lexus or their Tesla. This is what I imagine people see as they drive by our shabby house. I had never before felt this sense of being part of a class system. My landlord's son is like 6 feet, only eats hard-boiled eggs, and you can hear him working out sometimes, lifting weights, a lot of grunting. This is what you imagine when you think "city boy moves into shabby old house."

MCKINNISS: I appreciated the painting. I understand that it's about blue-collar America, but there's a lot of entertainment about that right now. There's a lot of thinking and looking at that because Trump has been in power for four years—the idea that we should try and get in touch and empathize with human people.

THOM: There's humor in it. I added a bear trap and bowling balls and showed blood. I don't know if it's stage blood or real blood. It's paint, which takes on its own little kind of fun for me. But I deliberately edited that painting in a way. I was really not trying to make fun.

MCKINNISS: No, absolutely not. It's all America, baby. It all is. It all has to be. I really appreciated the comedy of this painting and the other paintings because it let me experience joy and happiness, in terms of milieu. The last work of art I saw that tried to dip into this milieu was *Hillbilly Elegy*.

THOM: Yeah, I watched about half.

MCKINNISS: It's so uncharitable. No silver lining. It was so in praise of "coastal elite lifestyle" as opposed to country life. "House of Tarnation" is something that brought that landscape to mind without passing judgment, and it allowed me to share in joy and happiness and spectacle in a way that wasn't mean.

THOM: That's really cool. Then I did my job.

