

LUBOV

Totokaelo

Stefan Schwartzman: Bone Whites and Phlegm Yellows

Interview:
Nico Jacobsen
Photographer:
Thistle Brown



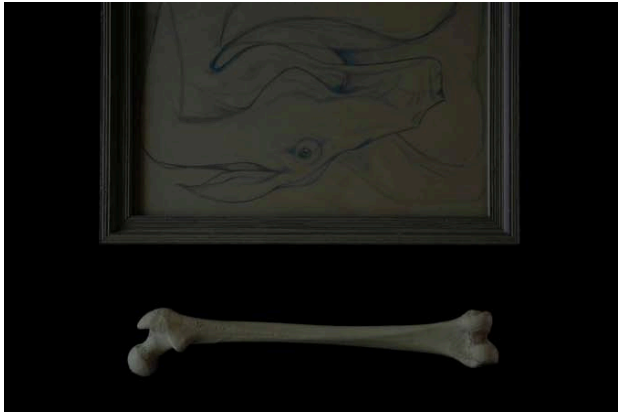
In Stefan's most recent piece on view at New York's Lubov Gallery, blue and grey colored pencil are used exclusively to bring striking energy to a scenario in which one figure slams another's face into the ground with a stiff boot. The plump buttocks of the offender sit above muscular legs that seem infected with some flesh-eating virus, exposing bone and rot. It's gruesome but sexy, filled with both humor and agony, and it's rendered with such sensitive precision that it immediately recalls some of history's most talented and evocative visual artists. The world that Stefan has created on paper seems to be an unforgiving one, but the emotions represented are so true, and the movements so real, that you can't help but be intoxicated by the depth of his creations.

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NICO JACOBSEN

Where did you learn to draw so beautifully?

STEFAN SCHWARTZMAN

I'm self-taught from childhood.

N:

You are a very competent photographer, but seem to be focusing more on the pencil than the camera recently. Can you tell us about why you made this shift in medium? Do you have a different conceptual approach between the two?

S:

I love the participatory effort the photograph requires from both sides of a camera, but drawing feels the most intimate. It stretches much farther back into my story than photography. That's where I feel my real power. Embracing that has drastically changed my life. I will always love photography, and even now continue to publish as a photographer, but at this point, until I fully integrate it into what I'm trying to build now, drawing is where I identify.

N:

The environments in your drawings remind me of that genre of anime where the universe feels simultaneously Victorian and Sci-Fi. Is there a defined world that these characters inhabit in your head? Is there anywhere on earth you think they might survive?

S:

You mean like steampunk? I can see what you mean. A backwards and forwards in time is relevant to what I'm trying to show. I don't often think of them as characters, though. There is a facsimile of feeling, the surface of a human expression, but frozen solid. They exist between animate and inanimate. Under glass seems like a good place for them.

N:

Your work is filled with dominance and restraint, with agony and glee. Are there victims and villains in these pieces, or do those roles not exist in this world?

S:

They do, but not in a very binary way.

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N:

There are also ghastly mutations taking place in your work, which have traditionally been the hallmark of artists like Otto Dix, Hans Bellmer, or Francis Bacon, who were reacting to the horrors of war or fascism. Is there any element of fear towards the current state of affairs that infects your characters with these bodily afflictions?

S:

Well, I've certainly been informed by aspects of Bacon's and Bellmer's relationships to the body. In regards to the part referencing current affairs, that feels a bit broad, whereas from my perspective what I'm doing is intensely personal. I will say that my areas of interest do encompass the present while spanning a much longer period. When drawing lately, I feel myself compulsively picking at my relationships to the idealized white masculine symbols I internalized growing up. Attempting to map them somehow, examine their contents, index where they've grafted to my own body. I'm particularly focused on how they appear inside the pornographic homosexual narratives I often ingested them through. Other times I'm looking at the ways they've been experienced outside of images, performed or projected in life. Violent homosocial power dynamics, value and disposability, shame, misogyny, pervasive objectification, they all produce their own monsters.

N:

You work almost exclusively in pale blue and red, can you tell us what these two colors represent to you?

S:

It's not so deep. Aside from being a reflection of my personal taste, I like the vascular feeling of the palette. It seems appropriate for my subject. The colors I use end up being shades found on the surface of and inside the human body; reds, pinks, browns, blues, moldy greys, bone whites and phlegm yellows.

N:

There are undulating bodies and ecstatic faces throughout a lot of work, to me they are undeniably sexy. Does it feel to you like a sexual act creating these?

S:

Not unlike sex, drawing, for me, is a necessary and informative release.

N:

You've made a body of work that somehow perfectly straddles the line between the elegance more easily achieved through classicism and the radical immediacy of more modern approaches to fine art. Do you find yourself frequently moved by artists of your generation, or do you tend to look a bit further back for inspiration?

S:

Yeah both, all the time. It's really fortifying to discover those connections.

N:

You've had shows at Ex.Directory in London and Lubov Gallery here in NYC. Can you tell us how you go about choosing which pieces will land in each show?

S:

I've had two solo shows so far, and curation has been pretty straightforward. I choose from my strongest work and try to best utilize the space provided. Unknown Subject, 2018 at Ex.Directory was my first and intended as a

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general survey. Golem, 2019 which opened this past March at Lubov, was intended to be an introduction as well but at home and a little more comprehensive. Alongside work I had previously shown at Ex.Directory, I included older and newer drawings.



In a time when irony reigns supreme in the art world, Stefan's work is a finely drawn breath of fresh air. His skills with a pencil are only matched by his skills in world-building, filling each page with beautifully rendered creatures that are both alien and highly relatable. Although his style of drawing makes it feel as if his medium is smoke, the faint compositions still convey an intense power, dripping with anger and lust. It feels like looking at the outlines of the artist's past life — memories of a different, more frightening subterranean universe.

Although Stefan Schwartzman's career is very young, his seeming overabundance of natural talent is gaining him a lot of praise very quickly. Some of that praise can be attributed to the team at Soho's

Lubov Gallery, who have tapped Stefan for his first solo show in New York. Lubov has been pushing some of the most evocative artists working today, making Stefan's disorienting color pencil compositions a perfect match for the space.

<https://totokaelo.com/editorials/interview-stefan-schwartzman>

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