

Safety Propagandist #7: Kevin Tobin

Adam Lehrer corresponds with our 7th Safety Propagandist, the artist Kevin Tobin, about bats, genre painting, extinction, and being Isabella Rossellini in 'Blue Velvet'



Adam Lehrer
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I recently discovered the artist Kevin Tobin at his exhibition at Lubov Gallery, [All by Myself](#), and was blown away. Ghastly figures — humanoids, skeletons, bats, apparitions — stretched up and down massive canvases and washed in deliriously acidic colors. They are haunting, mysterious, mesmeric, and demanding.



To avoid boring you, I will just let you get to the interview below. It's a real fucking doozy. Kev Tobin, welcome to the Counter-Agency of the Avant-Garde, salute the new recruit and welcome him to our anti-ideological army.

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Adam Lehrer: You talked about having contempt for both the gallery structure and art school, and yet you've now "made it," in a sense. You've had a solo show in New York. Do you still feel this contempt or mistrust? Is that antagonism something that propels you?

Key Tobin: I have more contempt for art school than the gallery world. Art schools cost a fortune and indoctrinate students into regressive or fashionable ideologies that kneecap their talent. Art school has a way of neutering originality, even more so now with the constant threat of cancellation for being "problematic." Young people are impressionable enough without the threat of being virtually annihilated in perpetuity for failing a liberal moral purity test; how can that possibly be a fruitful environment for any kind of creative growth? Mistakes and failures are important. The fact that so many controversial public figures and comedians are afraid to even speak at colleges is a testament to how intellectually bankrupt they have become as institutions.

At least if one works at a serious gallery (I worked for Elizabeth Dee in 2011-2012) one can learn "how the sausage is made," work with some major artists and be paid a meager salary to do it. Working at a gallery demystifies the career aspect of being an artist – it can be a semi-traumatic primal scene to witness but I learned more working for Elizabeth in a year than I did in four years at College for Creative Studies in Detroit. I was particularly inspired by Adrian Piper, Miriam Cahn, Alex Bag and Ryan Trecartin who are all tremendous and wildly different artists.

The gallery world is honest, an ironic and ludicrous statement I know, about being in bed with collectors and financial interests. Art schools are beholden to arbitrary financial, political and ideological interests while operating as racketeering schemes. Both systems are broken to an extent; but art school is broken to a degree I believe is beyond repair and churning out hordes of obviously middlebrow artists designed for easy absorption in academia and the

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market. The gallery world is a mess and at many times disheartening or outright abhorrent; but the potential for great art to be exhibited and recognized is always there and gives reason for hope.

AL: The paintings are quite striking, when did you first start painting like this? Do you use source material?

KT: I didn't start using source material in a way that felt genuine until I started making paintings from X-rays of human teeth. I tend to paint as much through processes of removing paint as I do additively, so the negative process felt true to the image I was making. Medical imaging has a way of abstracting the figure, kind of like the Rorschach test. The way various tissue and cartilage show up around the bones becomes a quasi mystical phenomenon or rather a surrealist puzzle for the luddite transcribing it – like seeing the face of Jesus in a burnt tortilla. Of course, the same image has clinical uses for an actual doctor to diagnose how a living organism is deteriorating through trauma or senescence.

Now I'm using found images in a more holistic way; I have piles of low quality black and white images strewn about on the floor and pinned up on the walls. I negotiate between the invented and the observed until the painting has enough information for me to keep making moves until I surprise myself enough to consider it done.

AL: You made the paintings shown at Lubov during the pandemic, and it seems that these strange figures set against grids washed in bright and neon colors evoke a strong sense of alienation, but perhaps a, how do I say this, a giddy alienation? So, what were you feeling during the lockdowns and how did you get through it?

KT: I got through it by having a very dark sense of humor and sheer luck.

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Francisco contacted me out of nowhere through Instagram in July when the first lockdown ended – he saw one of my “Teeth paintings” in a group show called *Blood Clots* curated by Kayode Ojo in 2018 apparently had me in the back of his mind ever since. He offered me a show right away.

I would attribute the alienation you sense to my choice of painting singular figures in optical spaces that seem to entomb the figures. There is often a lack of movement, it is a pictorial space that is more taxonomical or related to hieroglyphs or primitivism than a Western conception of the figure.

The giddiness probably comes from my high keyed palette, which is entirely invented and where I am most experimental and pleasure seeking. On the surface of things; my recent subject matter seems to be death or fantastic creatures of the juvenile or goth variety; but my palette brings it to an ecstatic or possibly hysterical place. I was thinking of Jasper Johns’ most recent show with his paintings of skeletons with top hats and also of Josh Smith’s “Reaper” paintings. They were both such deadpan treatments of death and the figure; something I could not get out of my head during the first few months of the pandemic. Accepting the absurdity and randomness of death with humor is deeply un-American and a sensibility with which I greatly identify.

AL: There is a trend for figurative painting again, but so much of it is just kids painting things on the internet. People trying to sell their identity proscriptions as formal content. But you seem to have a strong sense of mystery in the work. Is mystery something you find to be missing in contemporary art?

KT: I don’t particularly care for the deluge of new genre painting flooding the art world right now, It’s still academic figurative painting no matter how you try to spin it. Not everyone is as talented as Alice Neel or Kerry James Marshall. In a pluralistic art world which has rightfully recognized the voices of many great artists over the last century who were left out of the “white male canon” the first time around, I’m very suspicious that so much recent figurative painting looks

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like a retardataire intersectional update on the 19th Century academy. This time around, figurative conservatism wears the guise of earnest left-wing identity politics to give gravitas to well-behaved paintings.

All cuntty attitude aside, I suppose there are hundreds of years of genre paintings from the cis-hetero-white-male privilege perspective which also bore me to death. The good thing about these trends is that they only last as long as the attention span of the collector class (about five years). At least 80 percent of the art world is literally just fashion; it's not that deep and if you approach it with that kind of joie de vivre you won't be entirely disillusioned. This kind of cognitive behavioral therapy also has the dual benefit of increasing one's delusions of grandeur.

As for painters mining the internet or found images for content; I believe there is far more potential there to create interesting work. The internet in its omnipresence has only really existed, in my mind, since the iPhone was created, so roughly 15 years. The ubiquity and detournement of recycled images and "the cloud" has become an absurd extension of the body. Dadaist collage has become a populist pastime in the form of memes. I think Jamian Juliano-Villani is a great painter perhaps addressing this condition; a kind of nightmare millennial David Salle meets Peter Saul with Kippenberger's panache. There is something poetic about the mania she sustains to try and frantically organize abject images with the serious painterly limitations she's self-imposed for the sake of speed. It's dirty and unsentimental, the paintings can objectively be a train wreck or an uncanny masterpiece. Recently she's made some quite excellent viciously funny Duchampian sculpture. As Dave Hickey once said, "Bad taste is real taste, of course, and good taste is the residue of someone else's privilege."

Mystery is very important in painting. If every aspect of one's painting can be neatly categorized in a sound bite or ascertained from outer space, one is

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definitely doing something wrong. Or one is a recent graduate of Yale's MFA painting program making middlebrow neoliberal content for the upper class to expunge the unwholesome reason for their wealth and spend their blood money for dubious investment while signifying status to their peers. Please buy me next, I'm a better artist and investment!

As a person prone to depression, the Quotidien horror of daily living is enough to drive me completely mad on a good day, so I take particular offense to paintings hellbent on representing a Catholic verisimilitude of daily life; so I will freely admit I am allergic to genre painting unless it's as sublime as 17th century Dutch painting: Hammershoi, Vuillard or Bonnard. I can watch Ingmar Bergman if I need genre.

As a Pisces; 70 percent of my waking life I'm in a state of dissociative interiority; I feel painting is the best outlet for my particular existential condition.

AL: Who are the artists that most enduringly intrigue you, and those who intrigue you now?

KT: I'm pretty omnivorous when it comes to painting; a list of most enduring would be too long and obvious. Anyone who follows my instagram can peek into what I'm looking at at any given time – oh I don't know...Lee Lozano, Philip Guston, Elizabeth Murray, and Susan Rothenberg right now. The Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne, Switzerland.

I think about Marlene Dumas and Miriam Cahn pretty much every day.

Post-attempted cancellation Dana Schutz is making the best most out-to-lunch paintings of her career right now; she's synthesizing Ensor, Picabia "Monsters", Late-Picasso, Magritte "Vache", late Guston, and Kippenberger. She's eating all

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the great men alive! Not to mention that she is making fantastic bronzes which are the updates on DeKooning's Clamdiggers. I never knew I needed.

I guess I should thank Hannah Black for inadvertently making Dana Schutz arguably the worlds greatest living painter. Hooray for cancel culture!

Louise Bourgeois, Bruce Nauman, David Hammons, Robert Gober, Mike Kelley, Ingmar Bergman, Andrei Tarkovsky, David Cronenberg and David Lynch are my all time favorites; I wish painting could be that good.

AL: What is it with you and bats? What do you love about that image so much?

KT: I started painting bats after becoming obsessed with them for the most obvious reason; it is still widely accepted that Covid-19 is a coronavirus native to bats in China which jumped to humans; either through wet markets or a lab leak in Wuhan.

My first encounter with a real bat is a childhood memory that has stuck with me. On a sunny day when I was wandering around my parents suburban front lawn, I found a dead bat in the grass, I was immediately disarmed by the reality of the creature. In the eyes of a 10-year-old, it appeared to be harmless, delicate and even cute. The disconnect between the objective truth and the images of bats in folklore made a large impression on my young mind. It was not entirely different for me than the scene in *Blue Velvet* where Jeffrey Beaumont finds the human ear in the grass.

After doing more research; I found out bats allegedly carry so many potentially deadly respiratory diseases because they have unnaturally powerful lungs for their size to compensate for their weak wings. A bat cannot fly from a grounded position like a bird which is also why bats hang upside down; dropping from a hanging position gives them the momentum to glide. They have backwards facing knees and tendons which hold their claws in a locked position without

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exerting any energy. If a bat dies while hanging upside down, it will continue to hang indefinitely until something knocks it loose.

I'm probably a symbolist painter in my bones; I paint things because I become obsessed with them and believe the form and subject matter will allow me to make a great painting. An X-ray of a bat looks startlingly human; X-ray's are then symbolic of the beginning of modern medicine and the end of pandemics. A hyper globalized world where a record 38.9 million plane flights took place in 2019 was essentially a pile of turpentine soaked rags in a painter's studio waiting to spontaneously combust. Newton's third law applies on a micro scale within the powerful lungs of a tiny bat and a global scale in the body of an airplane filled with hundreds of people, the most sophisticated man made accidental delivery system of respiratory pathogens.

Bats are made up of lines, trapezoids, ovoids and triangles. There is less of a public perception as to what a bat actually looks like and therefore there are more liberties I can take with its form. Nobody can reduce or categorize my bats to convenient middlebrow intellectually disingenuous marketing campaigns about liberal identity politics, which is why I'm not included in group shows about "queer figurative painters". I am a bad faggot; I don't have a graduate degree, I am a promiscuous libertine and I don't draw or paint the way I was taught. I am awake at night and I sleep during the day.

AL: Koestenbaum said something in the text he wrote for you, about art bringing out the catastrophes that you're only half aware of in waking life. What are your catastrophes, and do you truly channel them in the artistic process?

KT: I don't believe it's prudent or in the best interest of the artist to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs, to quote David Lynch again. Almost every artist I've met has experienced some kind of personal catastrophe or trauma in their early life which may or may not be the driving force behind their

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compulsion to make art. This is rarely the content of the work itself; just a mechanism which creates the compulsive behavior of the artist.

In your most recent essay, [“The Power of Weakness,”](#) you happened to pick some of my favorite films to emphasize a point about the one-dimensionality and political expediency of emphasizing one’s own trauma’s in a neoliberal society where trauma’s are ranked and give people cache and social capital. Everything cannot be reduced to victim and oppressor. There is a name for that, its called Borderline Personality Disorder, which I would argue is the bourgeois hegemonic mode of operating in America today on the left and the right. There is no nuance, no capacity for self-reflection or redemption. Everything is either morally perfect or a reason to be socially executed.

I see myself as Isabelle Huppert in *Elle* and *The Piano Teacher*, Emily Watson in *Breaking the Waves* and Isabel Adjani in *Possession*. I am Isabella Rossellini in *Blue Velvet* naked throwing herself into the arms of Jeffrey Beaumont naked and hissing, "He put his disease in me." I have personal catastrophes just like everyone else and I’m not craven or bankrupt enough to use them because my work stands on its own.

On a macro level, I have always been obsessed with human extinction—it’s something I never stop thinking about; other than contemplating my own death. The most sobering non-fiction book I’ve read on the topic is Nick Bostrom’s *Global Catastrophic Risks*, which talks about asteroid impacts, gamma-ray bursts, super-volcanoes, climate change, totalitarianism, nanotechnology, AI and of course, nuclear war and pandemics. The inevitable death of the Sun. I don’t think cabbage patch restylane and botox neoliberal-cucked-cowboy and richest deushbag in the world Jeff Bezos is going to space to save us in his cock rocket. Has anyone watched *Battlestar Galactica* for fucks sake?

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I do believe it's evident that my figuration is potentially post-human, hauntological or "doom eager," to quote Martha Graham's favorite Icelandic proverb which means "you are eager for destiny no matter what it costs you." Whatever catastrophes I may be implying are coming from my subconscious and my unfortunate Piscean capacity for empathy which borders on self destructive masochism.

AL: What do you like to read?

I find it difficult to read or write when I'm in painting mode. Currently I'm reading Wayne Koestenbaum's new book of "fables," *The Cheerful Scapegoat*, which feels like a very exciting new form for him; it's gleefully unfaithful to the genre. It's kinky, abstract and ambiguously apocalyptic. Feels very in the zeitgeist without being easy or moralizing.

I love Dennis Cooper, Samuel R. Delany, Lydia Davis, Gabrielle Wittkop and Unica Zurn. If I were a professor that would be my reading list: *The Sluts*, George Miles Cycle, *The Necrophiliac*, *Dhalgren*, *The Mad Man*, *Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders*, *Mildred and the Oboe*, and *The Dark Spring*. Also the writings of Marlene Dumas and Louise Bourgeois.

Whenever I'm drunk at the gay bar I go off on long tirades about how I'm entirely convinced all the best transgressive erotic literature of the 21st century will be written by right wing white heterosexual incels living in their mothers' basements because queers have become so righteous, careful, hopelessly boring and incapable of self-reflection. This never results in me getting laid.

AL: Your paintings focus on single images. A single figure, sometimes fragmented or even abstracted to an extent. In focusing on a single image, what do you see?

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KT: I've always been attracted to paintings and sculptures of single figures more than history painting and genre paintings. The psychological tension of representing one figure in a rectangular box and the impossibility of narrative; it's extremely limiting and yet I find it to be an infinitely compelling and expressive problem.

It is a taxonomical, primitive, conceptual, abstract and psychologically loaded space.

AL: There is a hallucinatory element to these paintings, maybe in the color, maybe in the aura of mystery and intrigue. Do you have any relationship with drugs?

KT: I used to have night terrors and very vivid dreams. Strangely enough my dreams are usually in grayscale but when I had night terrors they were in color and I did not know I was dreaming until I woke up. I still have sleep paralysis and hypnagogic hallucinations on occasion but they aren't nearly as bad as they used to be.

I was a raver before Covid, which is where I became a fan of ecstasy and ketamine. Ketamine is a very intellectual drug for me, at the rave I'd always be dancing and thinking about painting, so I experimented with making quick automatist oil sketches on ketamine, which of course were terrible since I was fucking high.

The large bat paintings were the first paintings in which I felt I used ketamine successfully as a tool. When I reach a point in the painting where I'm completely stuck, if I do a bump or two many times I'll suddenly see my next move. In order to be happy with a painting; I have to arrive at a place where I surprise myself, and sometimes a small controlled amount will dissociate myself enough to take the painting to the next level.

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Obviously, Henri Michaux was famous for the Mescaline Drawings, and many of the surrealists were into sleep deprivation and fasting as a way to alter their consciousnesses. Francis Bacon loved to paint when he got home at 6 AM hungover after being out all night drinking champagne and red wine.

I wouldn't recommend the latter; alcoholism rarely helps any artist be better, But there is something to be said for experimenting with different ways of altering your consciousness to get in a trance and fuck some shit up.

AL: This show got quite a bit of attention. What's next?

I am continuing the bat series; they are becoming abstract to the point where some of them are definitely no longer recognizable as bats. Karen Wilkin referred to them as "critters", which I intend to use as a title for some of the more abstract ones. In the 1800s, the word critter referred to large domesticated animals, like horses and cattle. Of course now it's more associated with small animals, insects, things that might be crawling in one's basement or attic. It can also be used in reference to "an unfortunate person" or a drug addict. "Critter" has elements of fantasy, body horror, the subconscious and the abject.

I will be showing with Lubov for David Zwirner's platform alongside Hahn Hwi in November, and since my partner Marsha Pels and I had back to back shows at Lubov; he's planning on bringing us both to NADA in Miami for a dual presentation.

<https://safetypropaganda.substack.com/p/safety-propagandist-7-kevin-tobin>

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