

An Interview with Nolan Simon

Virginia Torrence

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Nolan Simon (b. 1980) lives and works in Hamtramck, Michigan. His work has been included in exhibitions across the US and Europe, including solo shows at 47 Canal in New York City, Lars Friedrich in Berlin, Rieseuro Galerie Christian Nagel in Cologne, Green Gallery in Milwaukee and at What Pipeline in Detroit.

Nolan and I met in his studio at CAVE, a collective art studio located in the Russell Industrial Center.

Virginia Torrence: Can you talk about the role of portraiture and still life within the history of painting and then within your paintings? What makes your portraits and still lifes contemporary?

Nolan Simon: Sometime around like 2010-2011 in the lead-up to the Occupy Wall Street protests, there was a lot of searching for ways that art could actually talk to the problems that we were trying to address politically. At this time a dominant force in painting was a casual abstraction coming out of Michael Krebber. Embedded in that work were these historical references that he was making and other artists around him were making. We were all starting to assess older painters who at the time we considered to be not contemporary, but historical painters. Around that juncture in time some friends and I drove out to the Barnes Collection in Philly, the largest collection of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings outside of France. One of the things that was revelatory about that trip for me was really seeing these way strange artworks by Van Gogh and late Renoir. In a way, it was almost seeing the practical side of what they

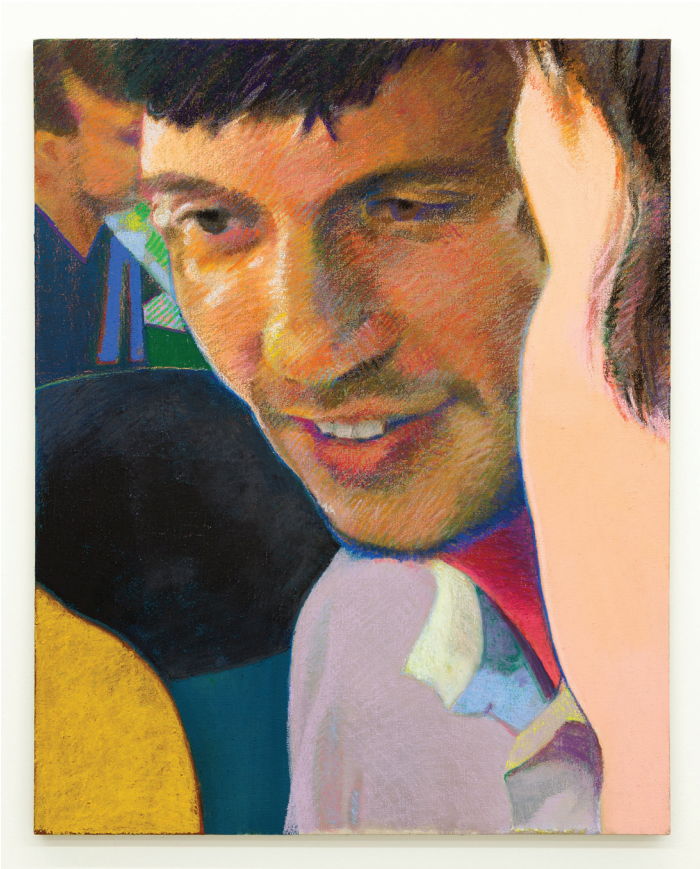
were doing. Renoir, in particular, was making these still life paintings because he knew someone would buy them. They are weird throwaway works, and I think something about how that had this sort of weird proto punk feeling to it. That work had the same kind of antagonistic relationship to money and art. You could look at one of these paintings and see him making fun of things, making inside jokes, the things that we think are very contemporary. You could see the roots in that work. They were communicating with each other in this very particular way, through painting.

Even if it seemed embarrassing, it felt important to be taking certain risks, so I just started making landscape paintings based off of pictures I found online. They were mountain landscapes. I would float around on Tumblr looking for post-card pictures. For me it was almost about reclaiming very conservative ways of working and thinking, and walking into conservative painting and saying, "This is mine now." It was an appropriative gesture. The internet explodes linear time, and as painters now, we have access to anything. Quantum physics uses this idea of time as a loaf of bread (4:11), slices of time, and like, distances and speeds of slices get warped. Linear time as a loaf of bread, and I can just take the slices out and put them in a different order. Why limit myself to the things people are doing right now? I can pull from whenever. Specifically, I focused on conservative painters that no one else in my world cared about. I was really looking to do things that no one else would want to do.

My last show at What Pipeline was almost all portraiture. There are a few artists messing around with what portraiture can do, like Caleb Considine, a painter in New York who has done a lot of really nice portraits of people in the art world within his friend groups, and there are really nice contradictions between the methodology and the handling of paint, which is very clean. The paintings have this kind of push and pull between the intimacy of the portrait and how it is made.

VT: In classic Dutch still life paintings, the objects often acted as metaphors for internal experiences, brevity, desire, etc. Do the objects in your still lifes act as metaphor?

NS: Yes, [there was] all the symbolism and allegory, but there was also this thing of access. Tulips that were hard to produce, oranges and pomegranates that were exotic and no one had access to. Horse paintings were set in a large landscape, showing all the land that the owner held, “I can ride this horse all over this land.” I do have a doctrinaire discomfort when those kinds of class concerns are not being dealt with on their face, thinking about the relationship that people my age and younger have to the spectacle of modern capitalism. Allegory is something that I have struggled with for a long time. I wonder if my resistance to allegory is deeper rooted somehow [in this] or that allegory just requires too much work for the viewer.



Matt in Conversation © Photo by 47 Canal

VT: Talk about our point of view within your work. Your paintings often seem like zoomed in fragments of a larger image, often splicing out parts of faces and their environments. What role does this sort of framing play?

NS: The framing devices are often compositional and a lot of what I was looking at for a long time were candid, off the cuff photographs that people are not thinking of aesthetically. Taking a snapshot and trying to find the composition in them. Looking at amateur photography and trying to pluck out interesting things. And my idea of interesting is often a little idiosyncratic. This painting (*Matt in Conversation*) is a photo taken by my gallerist of someone not knowing they were being photographed. I took this photo (*Essex Flowers, Summer Opening*) at an opening in a gallery in NYC. What I was really noticing in this, as I was choosing images and figuring out how to crop them, was a mirroring of composition between paintings. Trying to get a weird, maybe even unnoticed underlying structure that connects them. This back, that chest, that food, kind of all operating in a similar way, compositions that are relying on subtle structures. Rather than forcing compositional things to happen, it is more like finding them. Making things relate to each other through shapes and angles. Some of the early Manet compositions look like photographs. There is a painting in the Met of these two people in a boat and you can tell that they were in mid-conversation. Monet and Degas, they would start a painting and would re-stretch it to create a new frame. The opposite of a Caravaggio.

There is something about internet culture, where it is trying to capture or heighten weird surreal moments everywhere all the time. You don't get to choose the composition of that moment.

VT: This is my first time interviewing an artist, and I am feeling uncertain and insecure. Can you talk about when you feel uncertain or insecure in your art life?

NS: Oh my god, all the time. When I first decided to have a career as an artist, I had this picture of it as you move to New York and you just skate, they usher you along, and that is so not how it works and if anything, I feel like I am hustling even more now than I was then. The thing that is strange about having opportunities is that I am constantly feeling like I have to sell a sense of myself as an interesting individual, and that is a constant source of pressure.

VT: What about within your studio?

NS: I came of age in a period of time that when something went onto the internet it became available to you; “information wants to be free.” I developed this whole practice out of using these images. With the development of a discourse that comes out of Cyberfeminism, I started to think of that way of working as very exploitative. Sometimes you can find sources for something, and that is one thing, but I think that there is a really interesting argument that we are trying to punch up and critique the powers that are above us, point out larger physiological things that are happening, but that comes with responsibility. The saying, “your right to swing your fists ends at my nose.” Within the internet, where someone’s nose is, or whether you are punching down or across or up, becomes a lot more complicated. Trying to be more aware of my privileges and perspectives, constantly asking myself “is this interestingly provocative?” “Is this critical in a smart way?”

VT: My parents might like your work because of your employment of realism, although I imagine that your main and desired audience is art academics. How do you think about skill or de-skilling within a contemporary art context?

NS: There is a knee-jerk resistance to things that are legible to a non-specialized audience, and I think that was something I was interested in. I think that the point of de-skilling was to try to make paintings look like paint. When I was in college I liked being that guy. I would make my art piece just be an empty room, and the whole point of it was to make people that worked really hard mad. Once I decided that I wanted to do art, I realized pretty quickly that those sort of gestures didn’t feel fulfilling in my day to day; it wasn’t rewarding for me. So pretty quickly I developed a pretty regular studio practice because I just wanted to be in a room trying things out. One of the things that I noticed when I started doing image-based work was that the more labor I put into it, the more effectively it felt like the thing that it was trying to mimic. The more time I put into a weird painting of a mountain, the more it would feel genuine. I was flirting with this; “is it genuine?” “Is it not?” “Is it sincere?” “Is it not?” I didn’t want it to be clear; I didn’t want you to be able to go, “this is an ironic painting show.” I felt that was too quick and

too limited. I wanted my audience to have to come to terms with not knowing. Over time, as I did more exhibitions like this, I realized that quoting certain art genres had its own limits that I wanted to be able to work against. I did a show that was still lifes of peaches. The more effort that went into this, the more it looked like a still lifes of peaches, I wanted it to not be readable by my intended audience. I don’t know anymore if that game functions. I think that the art audience has become a lot more comfortable with the presence of skill in a way they were not even five years ago. So that end of it feels a little bit less rewarding, but with the peaches show, I felt like I was nailing this uncomfortable amount of labor.



Essex Flowers, Summer Opening © Photo by 47 Canal

Just in the last two years, I started to look at a lot of painters who I would have considered to be very conservative, and did not have interest in, but there is something about their relationship to skill and technique that I now find interesting. They have utilized techniques and tropes and skills in ways that I find intriguing. A fairly limited pool of subject matter, taking a single subject and trying to pull different things out of it, getting it to resonate on different levels. Technique for

me has become more exploratory in the last few years, and less about effectively reproducing a picture. At some point I decided it was interesting to try and use the language of the people I disagreed with.

VT: Clothes are essential in our public lives so that we don't go to jail, but also as a tool to express our persona, the social circles we inhabit, and culture. Can you talk about clothing and accessories in your paintings?

NS: On some level so much of that stuff is found, it is already embedded in the images, but then there is a certain occasion to try and look for those things. Like recently one of the underlying themes is erotic art. I have always considered erotic painting to be secondary, and that it hasn't emerged as an art form to be taken seriously. Counterintuitively, a lot of really important people have done it, like Turner and Rodin. One of the things that the internet has provided is a view into incredibly niche communities. It is interesting to think about how the requirements of these kind of niche sexual identity spaces generate their own energy. Let's say you are a foot fetishist. There is a creative community around producing images that fill that need. On some level, I have been starting to pay attention to how those communities signal to each other. I think it helps to get a sense of a language, and how accessories to an image signal to niche audiences. I am always looking for images that look like one thing but may also point to something else. Taking images that are erotic but in a very innocuous sort of way.

VT: In one of your new paintings I see the return of a motif you have used since 2013. A still life image split down the center, worn as a low v-neck blouse by a chest with breasts. Can you talk about the juxtaposition of these images within this particular structure?

NS: At first when I started working on this show in particular, in the midst of the confusion about what to do, I was looking for ways to make things less a downer; "why don't you just do this thing you were doing before because it was kind of funny?" So I just started sketching up a couple of them and it kind of just does this surrealist thing of what is on the surface, what is below. As soon as I started working

on them I realized that I was still caught in the issue of being a cis white guy making paintings of women. This is so completely an image that is embedded in fashion and a particular kind of body and the ways that bodies are represented and so I started getting into these conversations with artist friends about that and what kind of bodies are represented. I could re-evaluate something that I had already done.

I set up a photo shoot with friends, I photographed four or five people and started playing with the relationship between the image and the background. I ended up making five or six iterations using men and women on different backgrounds. It really became this very compounded conundrum that I haven't really worked my way out of. The first painting that I made was the plunging v-neck with the image of a sandwich. I took the background image at a foodie restaurant, and that was kind of the relationship I was trying to build: the funny juxtaposition of New York fashion, the way that people think of themselves as bodies, and rather than thinking of it in a problematized way, thinking that this is the way that some fashionable people choose to represent themselves. Imagine a world that you would want this sort of foodie culture on your outfit or something. Combining two kinds of things that I thought were a little overly particular.

I feel like I am presenting myself with a knot that is extremely hard to untie. I am giving myself a challenge that I don't know that I can figure out. It feels to me like a successful painting but I don't know at this point I could untangle it and tell you how it works. In this existence it feels like more of an expanse of flesh and I don't know if it is something that I am going to keep trying to untangle. I have a few other paintings in this motif that I started and abandoned. On some level I think that they work less the more that I think about them. At one point they were just kind of funny juxtaposition jokes. The more I over-think things, the less funny they are.

VT: Some of your paintings seem like they are a painting of an image display on an RGB television screen. For example in *Matt in Conversation*, there is a blurring and a blue ghost outline of the figures face that feels digital.

NS: They are all painted from projections. In those particular instances what is happening is, they are low res jpegs so you get that sort of break up of the color schemes. I like that to be a remnant of the process. Any time I get the chance to stick non-local colors in and get them to play, I try to keep that as a part of what happens. With things being blurry, there is a definite relationship back to the photograph, and the extra colors that sneak their way in; it is a nod to their digital sources. On some level, there is a bit of a correlation between the residue of the technology on both sides. On the one hand, I am trying to allow them to still partake in their digital life, and also on the other end to be using painting techniques to comment on that materiality. What I started doing recently is printing the images onto plastic. The ink can't absorb into the surface, so it pools, and in that process they sort of articulate themselves. Something that was originally brown becomes mergers of different inks and you get all these weird effects; a very boring innocuous brown background split into a spectrum. The relationship between source and process is the basic meat. If I am going to be reiterating things that already exist and have already been copied a million times, I want my iterations to somehow speak a different language and complicate the places they have already been, and then imagining at some point they all go back into the pool. Every image I make is photographed and digitized again.

VT: Can you talk more about your process?

NS: Recently I have been trying to use the projector a little bit more sparingly, as a way of pulling things into focus or adding details to things, using it more as a discovery tool than a literal copying tool. I am more recently making sketches of images on paper and then photographing those sketches and converting them into sublimation prints, and then essentially going through a textile dyeing process before the painting starts. The images are already kind of embedded in the linen. A lot of it gets covered over but it is kind of a way of making an underpainting, giving me something to paint on top of. The projection process is similar in that I am getting the painting to the canvas and I can work on top of it. A lot of those kinds of experiments are coming out of developing a more complicated process, allowing it to loop

on itself. I used to talk a lot about translation as a creative act.



Flood © Photo by Alivia Zivich

I listened to an interview with Masha Gessen, who had written an article about four different translations of Tolstoy and how each translation got something right about the original but then got other things wrong, and I like that as a metaphor for what I am doing. I am essentially copying but I am adding something to it or even mistranslating. Their relationship to how they are made is a little bit more on display. Now I am reproducing an oil on paper sketch that took 10 minutes and trying to translate the small-scale effects into a bigger scale. Every step of the process I am thinking about independently and how I can fool around with these things. I don't imagine that I ever want them to become formal exercises. The more I am pushing the process, the more they are

becoming capital P paintings and not just, like, translations of images onto canvas.

VT: What is success for you?

NS: A couple years ago I went on a trip with a friend of mine to Joshua Tree. It was a month out from an exhibition in Berlin and I left open space for whatever I made in Joshua Tree. I made these little landscape paintings. I was thinking about places that artists congregated and was trying to make images of those spaces. This place had this history to it that I was trying to encapsulate. All that is prologue, but while we were there I was thinking, “Man, you know, there is something about being able to use art as an excuse to go on vacation and to meet cool people and have interesting conversations.” It’s not that I think that art people have better conversations than the general public, but I do think there is something to art as a culture and the people that I have decided to surround myself with that I identify with and have constructed my identity around. I really started to think about art as a way of facilitating a life I wanted to live. The last time I had a job-job, where I worked for someone else, was in 2014. To whatever extent I can use this stuff to maintain that, to not have to work for someone else and be able to sit and think about such specific things. I make my own schedule, I get to hang out with people and do a nominal amount of traveling. I also do get the rewards, at least so far, of people paying attention to what I make. Painting as a way to sustain community. It is so hard to create a life where you don’t have to work for other people.

VT: Can you talk about living and making your art in Detroit? The art scene in Detroit is insular for a lot of artists. How do you feel this disconnect has impacted your practice and how do you navigate staying a part of the national field?

NS: On the front end of things, I moved here because it was a scene that I was familiar with and it is smaller and quieter, I can get away from all the New York bussel and stress and just focus on working, which 4 years later I have definitely been able to do. I knew that I could come here and count on connecting with Alivia and Daniel and Dylan and Kylie, and there was this base of people, you know. But I also

feel like the insularity here has turned into this weird fetish almost, something that I fixate on as a source of either calm or stress, it has become this lens through which I view my own career. When I was working on this show and I felt like things weren’t going very well and I was putting all this energy into work where I could not see the thread of the show, I felt that it was because I was in this insulated place and I was not getting enough input and not able to refresh my sense of what is good and interesting. There was this sense that not being on the pulse was going to cause some problem, and was going to make the work less interesting. But once the thread was there and I was 5 or 6 works into the show and I could see what was happening here and I can build on this, then being somewhat removed from the 1,000 events that are happening at any given time made it possible for me to work 80-90 hours a week which I could not do if I was in New York. It would be physically and socially impossible. Here I think there is often 3 or 4 friends meeting at a restaurant or going to someone’s house or meeting at a thing and going out to a thing, when in NY socializing is very public. Here I can always fit that stuff in when I need it and in NY going out to openings will take over your evening. Here I can socialize and be productive, there isn’t as much to suck away your energy. Things here just aren’t normally all that interesting, but maybe that’s not fair...

VT: I think that’s fair, there is such a small pool of people in Detroit, and maybe within these ecosystems of art within different cities there is a certain percentage of things that are interesting, but in NY there are more things because there are more people.

NS: Like quantity, that is for sure, and major cities attract more major people and more privileged people. In NY the shows, you need to keep talking about them, parce things out after an event, it is how you socialize there. The way that you get ahead in NY is by learning how to articulate what you don’t like in an interesting way, I feel like there is this negative capital flow in terms of your cultural relevance. Here I feel like for the most part people are just pooled into one pile, which isn’t entirely true considering there is the Birmingham set, and other different scenes, but they are minimally separated. It is easier to be involved in a meaningful

way here in the scene. But the disconnect here can feel pretty total sometimes.

Having some income that comes from outside Detroit is super important. Every connection that I have didn't all come from NY but came from diving into the middle of the social environment of the art world, talking to people, meeting people, and I am not a really social person, so it was just a slow process and I heavily rely on the handful of people I have dragged over into my corner. The isolation here, you can overcome it by getting out and going on a little trip.

VT: Do you think the positives of isolation outweigh the negatives?

NS: I don't know, the winters here are pretty hard. But no, I don't know. I like having a studio and this would be something that would be hard to find elsewhere and I have an assistant I wouldn't be able to afford elsewhere and it's just on the level of ideas that it starts to feel stressful. I can watch lectures on YouTube. Detroit kind of goes through these cycles of syntax and imagery and context and that can feel really bizarre coming from a place where I am seeing so much more, I tell my students that I see a lot more art than anyone probably should. We have this idea that art is becoming diffused and decentralized and confused, but unless you are spamming the internet in a crazy way no one is going to invest in you until they have seen your face. If you think about the people in Detroit who are seeing widespread success, it is people who don't live here for a time or didn't live here for a long time, but maybe that will start changing after people start moving here more and staying here from NY.

VT: Some of the works depict interactions between people, but the tight framing of the subjects cuts off the specificity of these connections.

NS: I think in these new works some part of what I was trying to do was to continue to have a level of ambiguity with regard to the social environment that they come from. I am not purposely trying to mix signifiers but I am trying to hone in on these distilled spaces. I want to compress something so that maybe it omits more energy than if you were to give

more information. When you say interactions, and that for me is the kind of base line for establishing an erotic charge, and then by focusing in on simple interaction you can kind of eliminate some of the context. The foot tea thing, maybe there is more information in that scene where maybe this is an old grandmother, but by focusing on just this thing it is more heightened in distilling out the bizarre eroticism of this moment that may not literally be there, but is now there by insinuation. I also feel like a big part of the M.O. of the work recently has been looking at places where there is this kind of slippage between virtual space and reality, and I am focused on that reality side, and looking for places where there is some kind of heightened image-ness, I feel like they are participating in that weird slipping between spaces. It feels to me like an old art idea, keeping a secret. Insinuating without showing. And I don't really 100 percent buy the idea that a veiled body is more erotic than an exposed body. I guess on some level it's true, but I just feel like there is a whole different set of languages happening when you are engaging in clothing and movement. Some part of the heightened excited quality of these images is that you have to make up so much of what is happening. A book called *What do Pictures Want?* talks about images and the way of activating their own audience. What is interesting about an image is that it doesn't just ask "what am I seeing?", it gets you to ask "why is this image addressed to me?" In art exhibitions you are always the audience for images, so you address it with, "this is supposed to make sense to me" so it gives it a different quality. In these works I am trying to push people to think about who you are in relationship to these.

Some part of cropping these so much is that the parts of the body become so much more universalized, it's not like a person's hand, it's like anybody's. I think it is interesting to think of this as Amber's chest, but eventually it's not. I think it's important for me personally to be roping my friends in and that is happening more and more. If I am going to be engaging in all of these kinds of references, it feels interesting for me to be repeating these gestures, and painting your friends is just something that painters do; more productive than painting bathers.

VT: Can you talk about fetish within your work? The repetition of appendages, such as feet, leads me to think about erotic fixations.

NS: Yeah a lot of people have asked if I have...

VT: Oh no I'm not asking you if you have a foot fetish.

NS: Well that's what makes it fun for me; feet at this point, just because of our social discourse, you almost can't make an image like that without it having at least a small amount of charge. And they really do then subsequently lend that charge to other works. There are certainly works that feel less advertently sexual in some ways, and I think being in proximity to this makes you think it might be from a foot fetish website or something. The insoles of two sets of sneakers pulled out and displayed, and the idea that they are just really dirty; dirty feet seems like an easy leap to make but then the shift to the objects that the dirty feet are in contact with is interesting to me. The erotic charge is kind of offset onto this other thing, almost relics. These things, as just objects in the world maybe wouldn't hold an erotic charge, but as soon as you decide to take a picture of them, or make a painting of them, they do.

Something that gains an aura by being in a setting. I had a friend who used to sell her dirty shoes, they always came with a Polaroid. Maybe that is some way of guaranteeing that they are yours. For some reason the physical object has way less purchase for me than toying with the image. I've never considered delving into sculpture and showing dirty shoes or something. I feel like that would just genuinely be awful. And in this case it has so much to do with people feeding back this information into the world. John Bianci was in here last week and he asked if I felt like the eroticism in the work was liberating and I said I don't know if I can say that, you know. I guess it feels fairly playful for me, but I don't know if it would be that for an audience. With social media, we live in a world where everyone has a way of feeding back into the system. I don't know if that is actually liberating, or if it has just become a way for us to see connections. I wonder if maybe on some level making erotic paintings is a way to make something that everyone can in one way or another

relate to or has some experience with. I feel like the work is certainly kinky, and not obsessive, it is sort of painting is my kink™ kind of way. I don't think of them as literal fetishes, as a form of fixation, although maybe they are value creation fixation. I dunno.

I think it is interesting that there is always voyeurism one degree removed, and the hyper producibility of images has just made everything so innocuous and you can kind of see in terms of speaking specifically the kind of images that become pornographic, the things that I would have seen when I was young that were really niche, have become so mainstream. Even though we are in a place where internet porn is a big part of our discourse around sex, and when young men come into contact with internet porn is something that there is endless fretting about in the news.

I think there is something great about happening upon niche worlds. I know that dealing with this kind of information 100 years ago was considered totally unproblematic and no one cared that people were painting 14 year old girls, and I think that the difference between then and now is very important and that we are in a reexamination of all that stuff and talking about inherent problems in that. I have to be very specific because otherwise the work would be totally shitty. If there is anything that really encourages me to make something it's that other people have done that and have done it badly, and I want to figure it out. I haven't always landed intuitively on the right side. It would be weird to do what I am doing and to feel like I didn't have any more to learn about it. It does feel to me that it is important to be actively engaging. I don't know if I would be as into making these kind of images if we weren't having a complete reevaluation of ambient libido energy.

VT: The title *Other People* reminds me of "the other" or "otherness", people that do not conform to the norms of society, outsiders.

NS: The way that I was thinking about othering in this context is in a multivalent way, because of this kind of general conception that any painting is a self portrait, there is a less individualistic, or less subject driven way of thinking

about being an artist, not Nolan the individual that makes paintings. There is something about this slipperiness about myself as a contributor to that, and including myself in other people. I get into these hilarious arguments with Jana all the time, she is a moanist, the whole world is one thing, a person posts something on the internet, saying their feelings out loud, but enunciating that their feelings are unique and individual, and she wants to always shout back, “everyone has had that feeling”, she is the quintessential “you are not a special snowflake.” My response to the world is kind of the reverse, everyone is kind of hanging out in the same water, but it doesn’t hit everyone quite the same way. I have a handicap brother so I can see someone who where all the same input is being dealt with in an entirely different way than me. Maybe there is a set of parameters that can be up or down, Jana is right in a sense, in that some are just louder and quieter. Those arguments are really productive because my feelings about democracy and social media are determined by how I feel sameness or differentness. I do feel that most of my paintings are self reflective in some way, but in this very internet jazz kind of way, they are not biographical, they are impressions and insinuations all in the service of creating this kind of growing sense of myself as like a series of potentialities. Yeah. Or not. Maybe not just myself, but every self. That’s what a self is. I probably was pretty influenced by the general idea that language and images of language are an imperfect communication tool. You are never literally transmitting something from one brain to another, you are always engaging in a form of translation and then retranslation. And I don’t know if I always felt like that, but that feels right right now.

VT: The piece *Narcissus* is lonely and erotic to me, the wine glasses seem like a substitute to flesh, a placeholder for a connection between bodies, or a remnant of a past interaction. The title *Narcissus* makes me think about reflections, unattainable desire and narcissism.

NS: Sure, there is also something really hilarious about trying to make insinuation by using a minimal amount of cultural signifiers. Something that I find funny about this painting is about the champagne glasses, because we are so obsessed with overdesigning everything, like champagne

glasses today are scientifically designed to keep your drink cooler longer, so these are out of fashion and are dated. That feels funny to me because for me it feels like an American Psycho reference or something.

VT: Yes, I thought about Blue Velvet.

NS: Yeah that is totally the era, and handcuffs too, they are kind of like the foot fetish images that signify a kind of sexual perversity that is legible to a dad. In a way there are a lot of other contemporary dumb cultural signifiers, like an eggplant would read differently. It is a mixture of two slightly dated, pedestrian signifiers.

VT: Did you create this image?

NS: Nope, found it. Trying to find these perfect images that do these funny things. I mean clearly there is this substitution of object for body. But two hands handcuffed together don’t have the end of the party feeling. That certainly was why that image felt right and that’s another one where the cropping felt important; you can sort of tell that they are photographed close up because they fish eye a little bit, and I really wanted to make that an important part of it. I cropped it so they come right up to the edge, and I do that a lot actually, have the things come right up to the edge of the image. It creates this more claustrophobic feel, and makes you feel more aware of things that are not in alignment. That was a way of making the counterveining diagonals feel like they are criss crossing the canvas back and forth. Maybe on some level that the more the dynamic the image is, the more it achieves its insinuations.

VT: What about the title?

NS: The title is in reference to another image that is around the corner from it in the show, *Echo*. In the Greek story, Echo can only repeat back to what Narcissus says to her, so it is this play on these doublings. It felt right that the mirror face is an easier narcissus reference, but that didn’t feel right because the woman in the double portrait is not interested in her reflection, it’s an ancillary effect, she is not noticing. Both the person you are not really looking at is out

of focus, and her reflection is very clouded, it felt like a good way to make that image make sense. Making those kind of work a little bit a tandem, not a diptych, but they are related, helps them to relate back and forth with each other; doublings. And I always really like mirror like insinuations because they have this kind of intuitive almost like Freudian sense of the self and the counter image of the self. The self against itself, or something. That felt to me like a way of two champagne glasses implying a couple, but I kind of just liked the idea that the couple was just one person. Thinking of the title as a way to complicate the relationship between these two glasses. I reread the story and I was thinking about it, the way that Echo can only repeat what he says, but she still says things that make sense. There is a very satisfying poetry in that. Did you watch *Hypernormalisation*?

I will say I have done a lot of wine glass paintings and they always feel to me like they are end of the party left over images. There is something kind of nice about that, instead of romantic painting, the height of the story, it is in the afterwards, this is what is left. Unattainable desire. It is their unattainability that gives them energy. Some how disinterested, being just to the side of the thing.



Narcissus © Photo by Joerg Lohse

VT: Some of your titles reference figures from Orthodox Christian stories such as Judith and Panagia, and some of your titles are from other folk-lore like Allerleirauh (all-kinds-of-fur) and Narcissus. Can you talk about the role of titles in your work, when are they given to a piece, etc?

NS: I personally feel like I am really bad at titles. I do feel like I am always looking for extra places to insert side information, for a long time I fooled around with catholic titles. I was raised catholic but I don't think that's important, because I didn't know all of these stories then. I am always doing research. The Catholic references is the stuff that paintings were about for such a long time. All of the titles harken back to a time when there was an idea that these stories point to some sort of deeper reality. A time when searching for the truth was not a question, it was just what you did. It is interesting to still hold that out as a totem of a fetish even though it doesn't feel operative right now, it is impractical.

On some level I think that something that is interesting to do for me is to take on the weight of the history of painting and really take it as a place for play. When I was younger I felt that deep time felt oppressive and now it is just a resource book of weird things you can do and that have happened, you can point back to things. When Van Gogh was painting peasants out in the field he was actually going to this town in the Netherlands where people were dressing up like peasants, it was a costume. There is a one degree removed, it was meta. For me it is a way of tapping into that.

It is always an after the fact choice. It always starts with an image and then an image processing period and then I have to title them and there is a gallery breathing down your neck who needs titles. *Other People* had 4 different titles before we landed on one. It is a crowd sourcy kind of thing. I feel very satisfied and comfortable with working in whatever I have been thinking about, I don't feel weird if I have been working on a painting for 6 months and the thing I am thinking about today is what that title is.

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