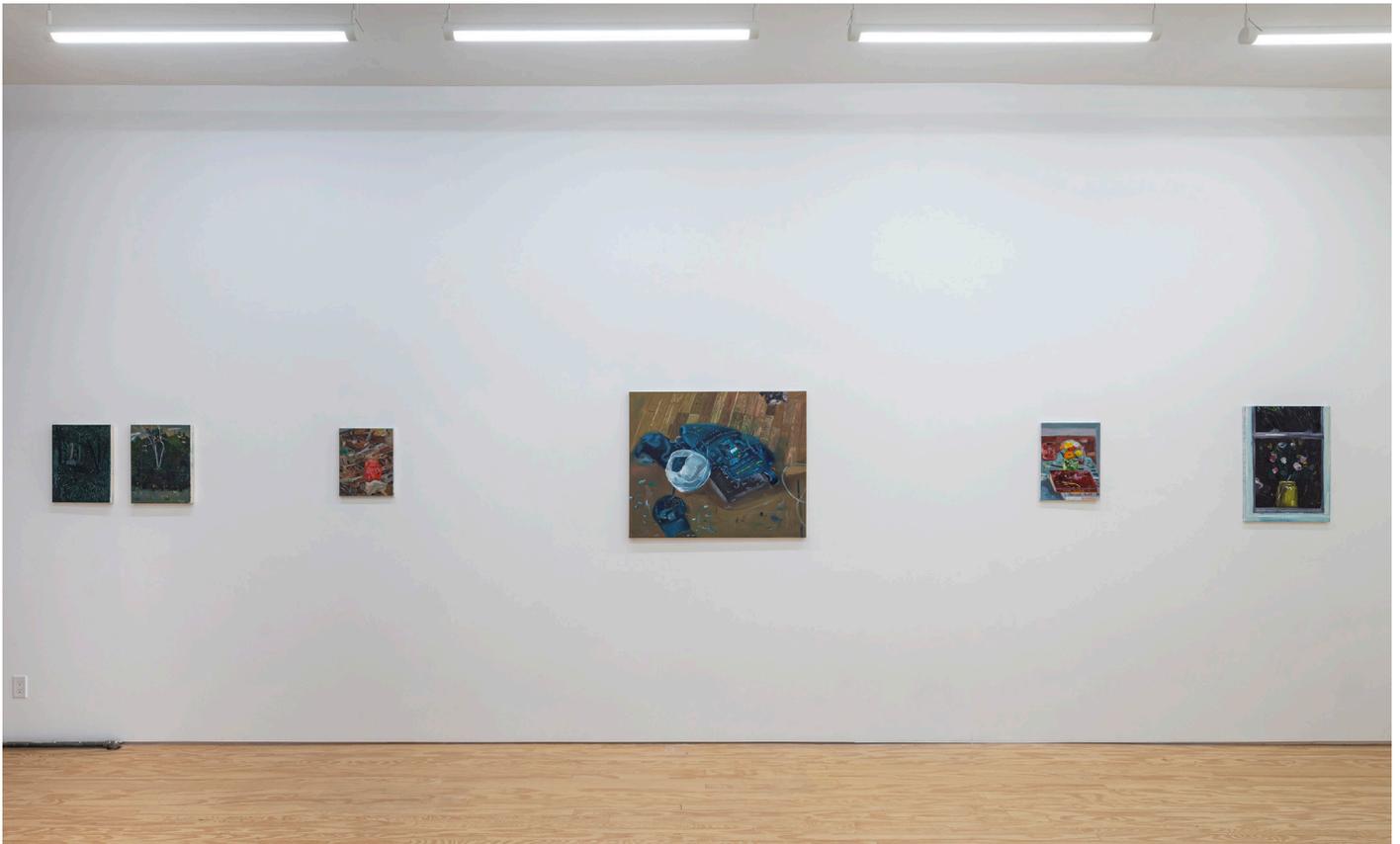


Under the Eyes of a Dry Mountain: Aaron Michael Skolnick's intimate still lifes at MARCH

By Sonja Teszler



Aaron Michael Skolnick, *Under the Eyes of a Dry Mountain*, 2022, Installation View at MARCH. Photography by Cary Whittier.

Driving through the picturesque hills and forking dirt roads of Upstate New York on my way to Aaron Michael Skolnick's cottage and studio in Old Chatham, it's hard as a foreigner not to immediately romanticise this idyllic rural enclave of the New York art scene. Everyone drives, eats fantastic homemade pies overlooking luscious forests and quiet fields and meets up for intimate dinners, talking about books, art, life.

In the spirit of Southern hospitality, Kentucky-born Aaron greets me with a generous tour around the house narrated with his quintessential, awkward charm I've grown to feel comfortably untethered around. I'm soon introduced to several domestic companions, including some chickens who will enthusiastically consume absolutely anything, and two adorable dogs, one of them - a large, sweet and nervous creature with big eyes - only to be petted from below because she had been traumatised by a previous abusive owner.

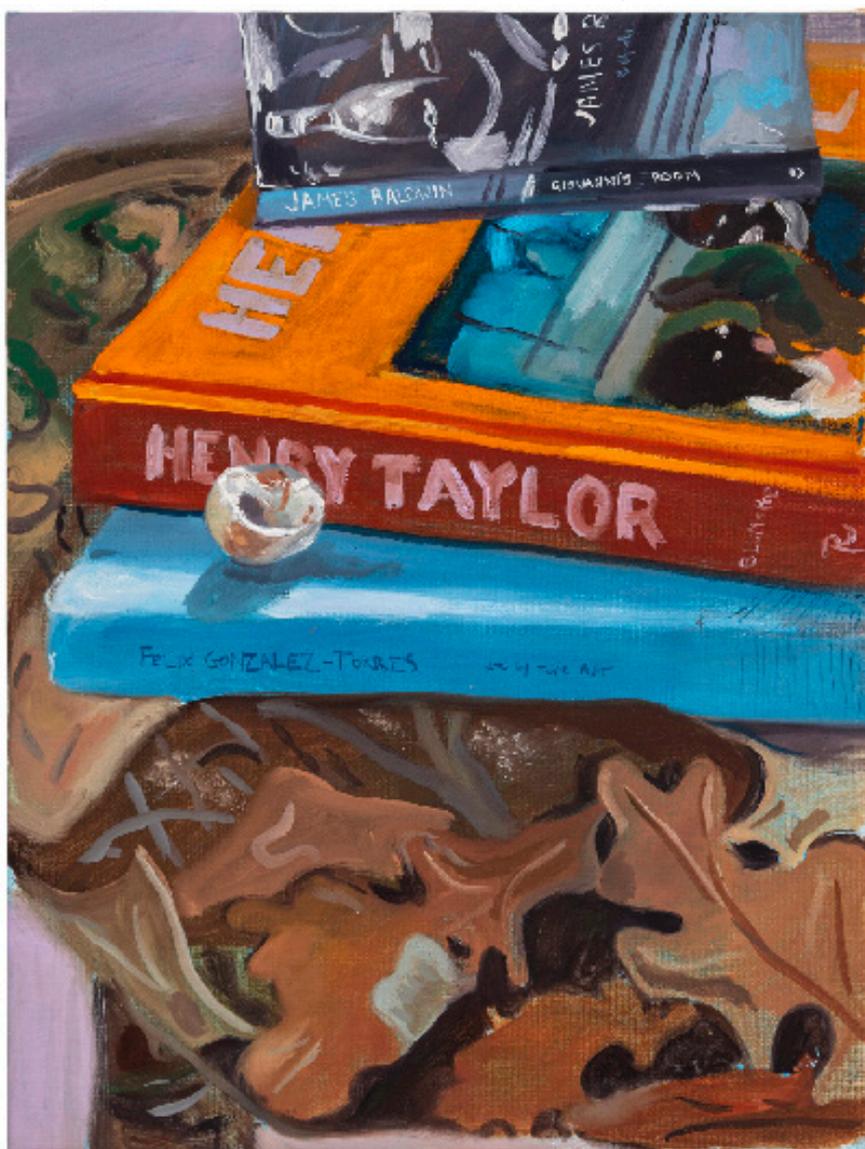
Aaron provides me with some large rubber boots for a walk in the forest behind his house, which served as the subject for his recent series of paintings for his solo show at MARCH gallery entitled *Under the Eyes of a Dry Mountain*. As he shows me around the little patch of

woodland, he guides my eyes through all the details and vignettes that have held his attention over the last months of painting; a skull, a dead bird, a particular part of the small stream, an angle of two branches between tall trees.

Later, we encounter these very same fragments depicted on canvas in his upstairs studio. The paintings host two interconnected worlds; the physical landscape surrounding Aaron day by day, moments noticed, observed, isolated and represented. The other layer unfolds gently beneath the surface, as a more elusive inner landscape of memory and personal associations.

This intimate, conceptual body of work speaks to the artist's own state of mind from a place of contemplation and self-reflection, as opposed to previous, more political works of portraiture focused around queer intimacy. His treatment of landscapes is much like that of the body throughout his earlier works - alive and loving, shivering with light and a subtle yet visceral pulse, caressing and encouraging the eye to wander and imagine further planes of vision and meaning. These still lives are much like visual poems with an array of clues and potential interpretations sprinkled across the canvases as well as their titles - An astounding capacity for worry, Nevermind, I Thought I saw You Try. They present an intricate web of present and past encounters (with people, ideas, authors, artworks) that stretches all the way back to Aaron's childhood. Every object that appears in them - books, overalls, a pair of underwear - is charged with personal significance. The artist talks about how when he was younger, books represented an escape, a community of like-minded people and a future of education and possibility, which at the same time made his difference to conservative, working class family members all the more clear. It feels as though at this later point in the artist's life, he is able to reflect on these difficult yet formative moments with a kind of fondness, acceptance and calm.

Standing in front of each painting in the warm afternoon light of Aaron's studio, I'm possessed by a similar sense of meditative contemplation. They present a story of things that have perished, things that have been worn, used, left behind on the floor, collections of lovely ghosts lingering between past and future, within constant cycles of light, life and change. These are moments suspended in between the internal and external world, of solitude, reflection and coming-to-terms; a constellation of ephemera as fragile and radiant as life itself.



Aaron Michael Skolnick, Baldwin, Taylor, Torres, 2022, Oil on canvas, 16 x 12 inches