

DREW KOHLER: *THE INVERT*, 2012-2023
November 3–December 16, 2023

“For no one can tell at first that he is an invert or a poet or a snob or a scoundrel.”

–Marcel Proust, *Sodom and Gomorrah*

Ten years is a long time to work on a painting, but for Drew Kohler this isn't unprecedented. His process is slow and intuitive. Some of the pieces in this exhibition are the result of just a few months of meditative attention; he has been revisiting and reworking others for years.

Kohler applies layers of oil paint, sanding away portions here and there, and paints over them again, gradually building up a palimpsest of beguiling forms and figures. In a corner of one composition, you can glimpse its entire progression—a stratum of deep black peeks out from beneath a remnant layer of green sanded away last year, highlighting a swath of pink laid down a few weeks ago.

The Invert is in one sense a spatial reference to the topsy-turvy patterns produced by his accumulative process; the artist flips the canvas often in a painting's early days, reorienting it as he works until a rollicking symmetry finally emerges. In another, it references the novels of Proust, who uses the now-antiquated term “inverts” to describe homosexuals. Proust, himself a closeted gay man, describes “inversion” as “a reprobate part of the human whole, but an important part, suspected where it does not exist, flaunting itself...where its existence is never guessed.”

The bodies in Kohler's paintings are flaunting themselves, but you might not spot them at first glance. Take a closer look at an undulating pattern, and it resolves into an orgiastic tangle of male limbs and torsos. Glance sidelong at that wave of blue, and you realize that it is in fact an erupting phallus, hiding in plain sight. At least one unsuspecting collector has purchased a painting without detecting the undercurrent of gay desire that animates it.

Like the painter Milton Resnick, whom he counts as a profound influence, Kohler is preoccupied with the material possibilities of oil paint, and its potential for imbuing a work with an almost mystical physicality. Unlike Resnick, whose monumental paintings can sometimes overwhelm a viewer with their somber density, Kohler's are kaleidoscopic, joyful. There's a queer energy to his use of color: the potential for interactions is nearly limitless, and Kohler takes his pleasure in unexpected combinations that build into sly scenes populated with figures from his subconscious.

Text by Chase Martin
Quote translated from French by John Sturrock

Drew Kohler was born in 1991 in Voorhees, NJ. He holds a BFA in painting from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. He has previously exhibited at John Davis Gallery (Hudson, NY), Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery (New York, NY), Zürcher Gallery (New York, NY), and Woodmere Art Museum (Philadelphia, PA), among others. Kohler's work is in the permanent collections of the Woodmere Art Museum (Philadelphia, PA) and the Peter Bullough Foundation (Winchester, VA), where he was an artist-in-residence from 2015 to 2016. He lives and works in Brooklyn, NY.