

LAURA LEWIS

The In-Between



MODERNFUEL
artist-run centre

State of Flux Gallery
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The In-Between

The In-Between is an immersive figurative painting exhibition featuring enigmatic renderings of Canadian 2SLGBTQIA+ artists. This show features four large-scale paintings from a body of work Lewis has spent the last two years creating. This work explores themes of psychosexuality, queerness, melancholy, identity, and community.

The scale of this work is critical as it is important for queer people to occupy physical space in an institutional setting. All the people featured in this work are friends of the artist. Each individual carefully selected their personal fashion and accessories they wished to be depicted in as a form of artistic collaboration. The artists featured in this series are Jessie Jannuska (*Jessie in Blue*), Arjun Lal (*Arjun with Butt Monster*), Madeline Rae (*Madeline in Oil*), Christina Hajjar and her partner (*Embrace*).

The male gaze is often present in figurative painting, it is challenging to escape it. The individuals featured in this work confront the viewer with direct eye-contact as a form of acknowledgement, their presence is established. This is in direct defiance of the male gaze and empowers women and gender minorities. These paintings subvert the male gaze and pose the question of who is visible and who has the power to look.



Arjun with Butt Monster (detail), 2022, oil on canvas, 72" x 60"

Risqué business: libidinal realism in the work of Laura Lewis

BY MADELINE BOGOCH

In a recent interview with *Border Crossings*, painter Laura Lewis gently distances herself from the term portraiture, qualifying that while she wouldn't be offended by the label, she prefers to describe her work as figurative painting. I understand why Lewis, an artist primarily concerned with the mutability of sexuality and identity, would resist the term. If portraiture assumes to preserve one's identity, then figurative painting offers a more flexible approach, liberating the artist to explore a more expansive and indeterminate definition of the self. This paradigm resonates with Lewis's large-scale paintings, which engage with portraiture as a historical form while conscientiously reauthoring the dynamics between the artist and subject. The works in *The In-Between* are at once faithful representations of the subjects—in both their likeness and desires—while also operating as abstractions of individual identity.

Suspended in boldly coloured backdrops that subtly creep into the subjects' flesh, Lewis's figures appear outside of real-world contexts (and often clothing). The models in Lewis's work are friends and fellow artists who, like Lewis, identify as queer. In *Arjun with Butt Monster*, *Jessie in Blue*, and *Madeline in Oil* (which I've only now realized is a well-played painterly pun), the subjects don fetish gear, signalling the overlap between the codes of queerness and kink. Lewis's mindfulness in collaboration is yet another nod to the framework of engaged consent underscored in the kink community, and adapted within her practice to mitigate the risks associated with realism.

Sexuality is never far from the field in Lewis's paintings, albeit without an overt presence of carnality. Perhaps, this is because the figures appear detached from the messy real-world stakes of sex and instead attuned to the range of desires that might arise once removed from these contexts. There's a fluidity that is accentuated by the

subtle dissolution of the figures into the background, a quality that extends to the core of the show, where the mobility of queerness and identity is emphasized.

Once at a party, someone who would later become a good friend of mine asked me if I'd like to be drawn. I declined, explaining that I preferred to remain oblivious to how I might appear to others. Reflecting on the exchange, I consider the intimacy of allowing oneself to be portrayed, and how Lewis's investment in these dynamics is evident in her work. The figures appear self-possessed and at ease, qualities which are often undermined by the presence of a camera or paintbrush. The gaze has long been a powerful tool in establishing the tone of a painting and is used here to carve out the poles of intimacy. While several of the works utilize the gaze to invite the viewer in, the enigmatically titled *Embrace* works in a very different register. In the painting, a couple is depicted, with one figure's face partially obscured by their lover, locking eyes with the viewer, and implying we are uninvited observers to this intimate moment. I briefly contemplate questioning Lewis about this notable departure from the less guarded mood in her other works, but quickly decide against it. I'm left with the impression that she's more invested in embracing the irreducible mystery contained in her subjects than revealing them.



Embrace (detail), 2022, oil on canvas, 72" x 60"

Biography

Laura Lewis is a queer visual artist originally from Kjiipuktuk (Halifax, Nova Scotia) currently based in Treaty 1 Territory (Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada). Her conceptual figurative painting practice explores philosophical questions concerning psychosexuality, queerness, the multiplicities of self, and nuances of the human condition.

Lewis graduated in 2018 with a combined degree from NSCAD and the School of Art, University of Manitoba BFA Honours program. She is the founder and facilitator of *Critical Painting Perspectives*, presented by Mentoring Artists for Women's Art. She has participated in artist residencies at the Banff Centre for the Arts and Creativity, and in Civita Castellana, Italy. She was featured in the 2023 Painting issue of *Border Crossings Magazine* and has several upcoming exhibitions across Canada including Plug In ICA, Modern Fuel, aceartinc. and Gallery 1C03 at the University of Winnipeg.



Jessie In Blue (detail), 2022, oil on canvas, 120" x 60"

Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre is a non-profit organization facilitating the presentation, interpretation, and production of contemporary visual, time-based and interdisciplinary arts. Modern Fuel aims to meet the professional development needs of emerging and mid-career local, national and international artists, from diverse cultural communities, through exhibition, discussion, and mentorship opportunities. Modern Fuel supports innovation and experimentation and is committed to the education of interested publics and the diversification of its audiences. As an advocate for contemporary art, as well as for artists' rights, we pay professional fees to artists in accordance with the CARFAC Fee Schedule.

Modern Fuel is situated on the unceded ancestral territory of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabeg peoples. We acknowledge the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabeg peoples as the past, present, and future caretakers of this land. We also recognize the Métis peoples and other nations from across Turtle Island who have called Katarokwi / Kingston home for generations upon generations. We are grateful to be able to live, learn and make art on this land and be in such close proximity to the waters of the St. Lawrence River and Lake Ontario. To acknowledge this traditional territory and waterways is to recognize this city and country's longer history pre-dating confederation and the work that must still be done in decolonizing our spaces and relations. We at Modern Fuel strive towards respectful relationships with all of our communities in hopes of walking a good path together.

We at Modern Fuel want to state unequivocally that Black lives matter, Indigenous lives matter, and that the lives of People of Colour matter. Modern Fuel strives to ensure that members and visitors feel safe and welcome in our space and at our events. We do not tolerate discrimination, harassment, or violence including but not limited to ableism; ageism; homophobia and transphobia; misogyny; racism and white supremacy. It is also important to us that Modern Fuel not only continues to present works and programs that support Black and Indigenous artists, members and visitors, but invests in the work of becoming an inclusive, anti-racist organization. We feel it is only then that Modern Fuel can advocate for artists and foster community with care and respect.

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