

SAM LIPP

An interview by Louise Dufreche

Upon meeting Sam in New York, I went upstairs on Broadway in a building I had been once before for a show at Queer Thoughts which he used to run. Now he is on another floor in a small workshop where he has been focusing his energy on his art. I had discovered his paintings the month before in Paris and was eager to set foot deeper into his world. We drank tea and talked about his art and its relation to power in his 5 square meter studio surrounded by ongoing paintings on steel.

Derosia

Louise Dufreche, Arcane Press, Issue 2, April, 2024

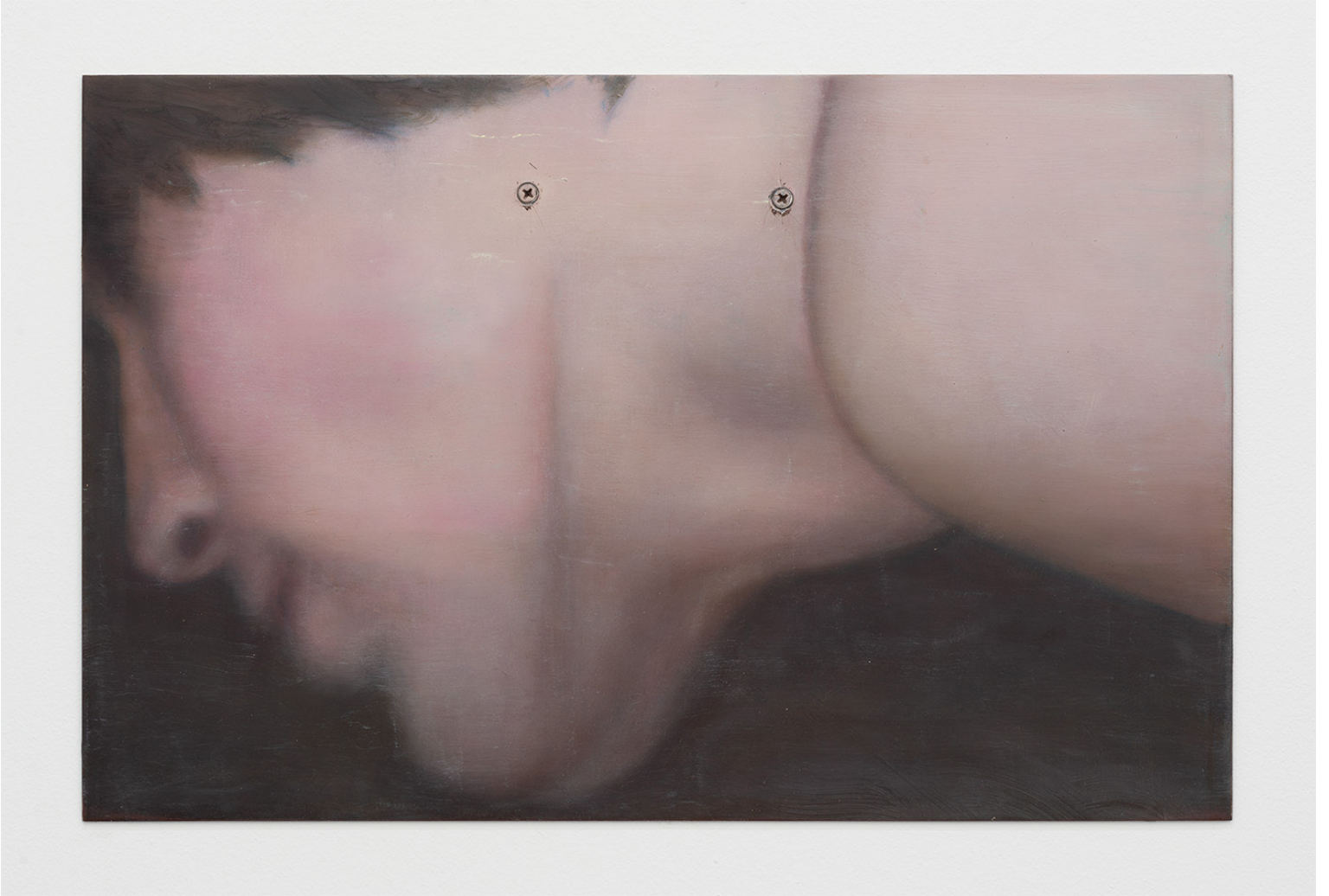


Superstar, 2023

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Joe (Flesh). 2023

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Have you always been living in New York?

I've been here for 9 years, before that I was in Chicago where I attended The School of Art Institute of Chicago.

So, you've always been making art?

Yeah since I was a child I started painting when I was 3 or 4.

What was it like for you studying art?

I painted in high school, and in college I was mostly into film and sculpture. It was only at the end of college that I started painting again, and I received retaliation from the sculpture department for making paintings. That pissed me off, so I've been painting ever since. I still have a covert video practice and I'm hoping to move into that again, filmmaking and video.

And you've also done some work on fabric and you developed that into painting?

I've always seen a painting as a sculptural object and I've always had an interest in fabric. I know how to sew, I used to make costumes for theater and movies that I made as a teen, you know, making costumes for videos, so there has always been that sort of aspect as well.

When you say you see paintings as sculptures, is the use of metal part of it?

Yeah, definitely.

Why do you use metal as backdrops for your paintings?

It's a reference to the materiality of the world we live in. A big impetus to me to use metal was just encountering refuse on the street, the courthouses and all the federal buildings that I live near are always throwing away metal furniture so I would just take pieces of furniture and start painting on that. There were literally all these objects discarded by the enforcement mechanism of the state, like the police and the courthouses, these literal pieces of metal being discarded and I started making paintings on that.

The captions say frottage and they look almost like discarded objects but I thought you were faking it. They almost look like you found them on the street.

Yes, for some of the works they were actually found in the street. However, the works with 'frottage' are different, which refers to the drawing technique of rubbing paper against a textured surface, like grave rubbing.

Grave rubbing?

Yes, it often refers to when you take a piece of paper on top of a tombstone and put a crayon and it makes an imprint. But the word frottage also has a gay sexual meaning. For me I'm employing that word to describe the process that I'm doing where I'm dragging the piece of steel by a chain. After the painting is finished I attach it to a chain and drag it through the streets. Literally the image is getting dragged against the pavement.

Yeah there is a raw feel to them even with the screws. Are you trying to make them look like signage hanging on a street wall?

Absolutely. As I said I think of the steel as referencing the materiality of our built world, and also the way our world is a function of war, war being a material vanguard of our society. A lot of the technology we experience is coming down from the war machine. The other part of it was that I moved to New York and was responding to being overwhelmed by the urban environment. As soon as I moved here in 2015 I started making works about road signs and this authoritative language of the state that is implemented in public space. That aesthetic inquiry took me to wanting to make works on the same material as the road signs were made of, which is steel. And then the way that they are shown by being drilled directly through the image. It was also a function of me creating works on steel and figuring out how to hang them to the wall. There is a thing that attaches this image to the wall, so image. Screws penetrating the picture become part of the image. When you look at the image you have to remember that this is an image that's hanging on the wall, it just doesn't exist only like a platonic ideal. This is an object and it has a function, there is a reason why this person put this on the wall to tell you something.

Where do you find the images that you use on your paintings?

Of the figurative works, mostly they are images from sex related social media, some works have used crops of escorts' profile pictures, and some images are photos that I have taken. They share commonality as digitally transmitted images.

It looks like you are using machine made images with what implies the machine: pixels etc.. It's not a realistic photo of something. Are you also trying to copy what the machine does on the image that you are copying for the painting?

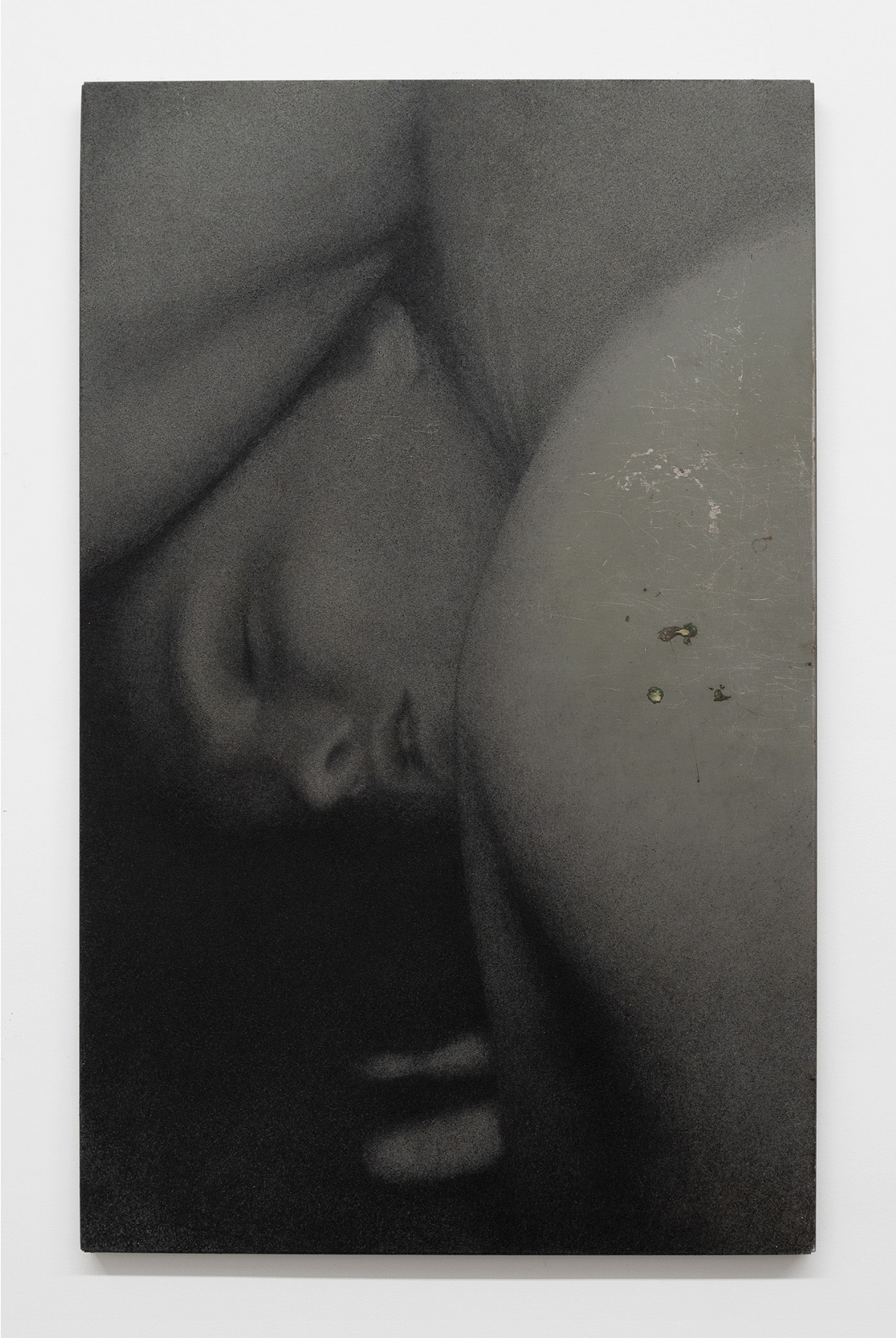
In some ways I do emulate machine processes like pixelation. Over the last decade I developed a painting technique where I use steel wool as a paint brush, which makes a mark out of tiny dots of paint, and the image is built up through the accumulation of many layers of these dots. Those are the most systematic, machine-like works I make. They end up looking grey when they are finished because you are seeing dots of every color next to each other, but some of the most complex works of those have like 30 layers of paint on them. Each different color that you see is a different layer. Also, I work from xeroxes, or rather black and white toner prints from a laser printer, and that process informs the work as well. All these methods of translation and degradation of the image, like the digital image breaking down into the Xerox and then the physical object being used and decaying.

Your image vocabulary comes from cruising or homoerotic images?

I guess my interest lies more in the act of creating images of the body. For me these images are created in a sexual context, I'm taking found images, user created content from the internet. I'm interested in the fact that all of these different people are contributing to this hive-mind consciousness of images and how these images work within an apparatus of power. Sex as a power exchange and how sex is an instrument of the larger apparatus of power.

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Can you qualify them as porn images, for me you're not trying to scandalize with these images but more like romanticize?

I'm definitely interested in Romanticism, although maybe negatively. In the images that I have chosen I'm not showing penetration or hardcore sex. I'm not making an explicit image. Some people tell me my images are explicit which is fine but I'm intentionally framing things outside of sexual gratification.

I want you to understand the context but trying not to make literal pornographic images. I think the images are situated in a continuum that is pornographic which is to make a larger statement about our society being a pornographic society and how that plays into the apparatus of power.

Two of the works that I made in 2022 were titled Pornocracy, which is actually also the title of a novel by Catherine Breillat, the basis of her film *The Anatomy of Hell*.

Pornocracy, is it like how pornography shapes our global consciousness without even seeing it?

The internet and digital images made everyone a consumer and creator of pornography, so we all participate in pornography. It's also a neologism that means a morally corrupt society, or a society run by prostitutes. Lately I've been thinking about the erotic attachment to power. Particularly in this moment with the ascent of global fascism.

Also you've made paintings about antidepressants. Is it also one of the mechanisms of power that you are investigating?

I've been mining this pharmaceutical health aesthetic which had personal significance to me but thinking about the health apparatus is another area where power is implemented onto the body. It is a place where that power is instrumental within the body or within the mind in a physical way.

And what are you working on these days?

I'm in a group show in the spring called 'Notes on Masculinity' so I'm working on a painting of a gaslight for that. I've been documenting gaslights. There are active gas lamps all around NYC and elsewhere. I've made three paintings of them so far so this will be the fourth.

What's the meaning behind gaslight, a place where you hang at night or related to sex work?

Yeah, one interpretation is that prostitutes stand under them. I guess I've been thinking about gaslighting as a concept, and trying to analyze it materially. The inquiry into this image started from just wanting to know what the etymology of this term was and why it was so prevalent. I watched the film from 1944 starring Ingrid Bergman and was trying to understand what the metaphor meant in the film. Her husband is psychologically controlling and tormenting her, making her disbelieve the narrative of her reality. I'm trying to understand what this visual metaphor means. It's the environmental condition you live under, the flickering light, like someone has such domination over you that they can control the entire environment around you. This term is so prevalent in our society, everyone says everyone else is gaslighting them, so it means nothing, but I'm trying to zoom out and acknowledge we live in a society of domination. Whoever has the upper hand, whoever is dominating, gaslights everyone else so it becomes this shorthand for a culture of domination. The history of the object, the gas lamp, is inherently tied to domination also. It's a colonial object, the implementation of the European cities in America is implemented with lighting.

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Gaslight 2024

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Yeah if you are controlling the lighting it's like you are controlling the sun and everyone's life.

This is then another fixture of state power that is used in public space just like the street signs. This is this authoritative language that we see all around us so we accept them as neutral. These things are imposed on us with this air of neutrality but it's not really that neutral.