

Kouros by Yves Saint Laurent

1.

Brad Renfro, Skeet Ulrich, Axl Rose, Leif Garrett—I'm listing those things or people I find immediately identifiable in this Hawkins painting of 2017 that I'm looking at in a fairly hi-res digital reproduction, while sitting under a canopy in the noonday sun of Cornino, clear across the entire island of Sicily from Taormina—two different Morandi still lifes (at the top and near the bottom of the painting), numerous b/w reproductions of various Greco-Roman and/or Greco-Roman-like statuary (a few Hercules-es, some hermaphrodites), a vivid pink and yellow de Kooning, Richard Lindner's *Ice* (1966), a particular guy with a prominent red kanji or ideogram tattoo on his left pectoral whose name it kills me I can't recall at the moment and with/by whom Hawkins was obsessed/distracted for a year or more, a few Japanese male models ditto (i.e., the artist was obsessed/distracted with/by them, too, and it kills me I can't think of their names [*not* Daisuke Ueda, *not* Seijo, *not* Osamu Mukai]), an Egon Schiele self-portrait (?), perhaps a bit of a Rudolf Schwarzkogler perf, Lon Chaney (maybe Bela Lugosi) on an elaborate Hollywood-set staircase as Dracula.

Walking down an ersatz West Village street, Tom Cruise has fallen into daydreaming again, triggered by a man and woman kissing deeply in front of a gaudy shop (windows trimmed in neon, lace, Christmas lights); he flashes on Nicole and her fantasy naval officer going at it: this time she's almost naked, his strong hand fingers her pussy. As Tom turns a corner, laughter rumbles in the near distance, rowdy response to a man telling his crew about a raunchy lap dance. Noticing Tom walking toward them, one of the crew cuts off the tale to shout, "Hey, hey, what team's this switch-bitter playing for?"

Arranged in a *Hee Haw*-ish (i.e., highly aestheticized, art-directed) grid, the pictures hover in and on and even underneath (painted over) scrappy, buckeye patches of bright colors of acrylic paint, mostly magenta, fuchsia, nasturtium, and carnation pink, but in the lower left quadrant Mediterranean blue and aqua. All the colors of a Jodorowsky film, all the colors of a Bonnard interior. When Hawkins started making work, these reproductions would have been cut from *Vogue Hommes Japan* and *Tiger Beat* and *Arena homme+*, among other magazines and art catalogues, or excised from Hollywood stills; now they arrive not only from the artist's long-assembled folders and/or dossiers, but also as the consequence of deep or fast Google searches, the results sometimes printed into posters as something to be painted over, sometimes cut up. Scissors exchanged for cut-and-paste and scanning, paper of some sort for digital files—or vice versa (which could be the artist's drag name, Vice Versatile). In terms of the guys, in terms of notoriety, methodology, and history, in terms, as well, of an analogous politics and the contemporaneously insidious media/mediations/meditations entailed, cf. all the related works, poster, prints, etchings, and paintings for Richard Hamilton *Swinging London (f)*. Consider Richardness.

Cruise plays a doctor in Eyes Wide Shut. Late one night, sharing a joint with Nicole Kidman, his wife in the film and at that point "in real life," he receives a telephone call that ends the erotic tale Nicole's been divulging about a young naval officer who eyes her so forcefully she can't stop fantasizing about him. A wealthy patient has died, and Tom must pay his respects to the family. In the taxi rushing to the patient's fancy apartment building, he replays his wife's fantasy in his head, his fantasy of her fantasy, his montage of her script, and it's only this version that we see depicted in black and white, in various episodes (not flashbacks) of Tom's making sense of or coming to terms with the fantasy: the officer's uniform, his handling of Nicole's breasts, her removing her panties. It's not clear who is the object of Tom's fantasy, Nicole or Gary Goba, the male model who portrayed the object of her lust.

The painting operates as a codex-machine about a history of painting and art-making, Hawkins's own but also the medium from modernity to now, and each of its pictures synchronizes various hot points or flashes in that history. I.e., Axl Rose suggests *Appetite for Destruction* or *Use Your Illusion* as imperatives for how to begin considering the pictures assembled, which is to say, more than merely an example of what it means to be head-banging, more than merely a dialogue between destruction and illusion, a dialogue at the core of collage, between modernism's rowdiness and these paintings' facture (arranging the boys like so many flowers in a vase [*fleurs du mal*, mall flowers] removing them, painting around them, on top of them, revising or scrapping the result until some prime stasis is achieved). Morandi's still lifes provide a commentary on the solitary artist returning again and again to what fascinates him, however many times and in however many manners he's already depicted it (*them*). The Greco-Roman hunks, an insistence on lust as a foundational impulse of and/or *raison d'être* for art-making; classical fundamentals, *nalgas*; figuring out what a body is and what's to be done with it; cram session on the relation between things and people, people as things. Lindner's *Ice*, BDSM as inspiration and aesthetic, but also the reproducibility of the image, a nod to the cover of the first issue of *Avant-Garde*, the back-and-forth give-and-take of magazines and erotic pulp and art. Brad Renfro, his role in *Bully*, him in pale blue boxers, sweat-soaked, dancing for prize money as a reluctant late entry into an amateur stripper night at a gay bar; Brad Renfro, living fast and dying young, which is to say, Brad Renfro put to use and/or educated about his choices by Larry Clark, and not quite knowing how to deal with that; Brad Renfro elegized. Count Dracula, Count Chocula, Vincent Price-types; the Hollywood set, the staging of certain private fantasies and compulsions. Not unlike that hot guy's pec ideogram (I still can't remember his name!), the pictures function like written characters for the idea of things without indicating how to say them. Or what to say about them.

Tom's bewildered when the guys yell "Look at this faggot!" to him. Mostly in varsity jackets and Yale sweatshirts, each of the chorus lands a verbal punch. "Looks like the pink team." The antagonists keep approaching one another, and a rough blond soon shoulders Tom off the sidewalk and into a parked car, warning, "Watch it, you faggot." Tom's even more shaken, off-balance, as he's wished "Merry Christmas, Mary," hoping that's it. But the squad's not finished.

Rod Stewart rushed to the emergency room, after collapsing on stage, mid-concert; doctors pump his stomach and find it full of semen. Richard Gere rushed to the emergency room, after...*something*; doctors find a gerbil (*rodentia gerebillinae*) up his ass and remove it. John Travolta paying hush money to various masseurs. Eddie Murphy ditto to tranny hookers. Will Smith leaning in to wedlock and children. Tom Cruise auditioning young actresses for the role of his bride-to-be. These rumors from time past never really go away, returning like a herpes flare, when least expected, or wanted, which is the essence of rumor. When Matt Dillon, Leif Garrett, Keanu, and Mark Wahlberg appear again, major players in this series—now along with Justin Bieber and Nick Jonas (their stand-ins, their understudies) as well as porn-y or model-y others (simultaneously their doppelgängers, devolutions, and apotheoses)—of Hawkins's new combine-paintings, and appear as they were in his earliest work, which is to say in their prime (*kouros state*), summoned with and/or represented by techniques also harkening back to Hawkins's earliest modes (collage, digital manipulation, dossier-pillaging), some notion of rumor or fantasy is rebooted. The combines operate as history paintings, organizing as much as deranging time and materials as idiosyncratically as desire does. History's that nightmare we all participate in, whether we wish to or not.

*Varsity Jacket bends over as a buddy slaps his *kbaki'd* ass for Tom: "Prime cut of meat, baby!" They take Tom for a local "butt-brother," a "stupid faggot," wondering if he wants "to take a ride in this fudge-tunnel." Tom's shell-shocked. "Moon-puncher!" "Macho man!" They warn him that he's standing so close he should have tits. Tom finally begins to walk away. "Go back to San Francisco, where you belong, man" hanging in the air.*

I was going to mention Rock Hudson feeling trapped on the set of *Dynasty*; not able to ask for a script rewrite, he saw only an ultimatum—either announcing he had aids or kissing his scene partner, Linda Evans: but that's not rumor. I was going to say something about Kubrick having Tom “play doctor” or his committing Tom and Nicole to his whim for three years in creating an allegory about many aspects of their actual lives: that's not rumor either. Given the recursive energy of the combine-paintings, hung up on—the way one used to say (it seems a phrase now out of fashion) that one was “hung up on” someone, as in *unrequitedly crushing on*—the tension or difference between collage and painting, the combine's vanishing-point resolution, I was going to try to wrangle something out of the fact that Hawkins's MFA thesis show from CalArts was made up of paintings of Tom Cruise, done in a fecally palette and facture, with forlorn textual additions. If there were an Ur-Holy Trinity for Hawkins, the vertices of the beatific triangle (making a better Blinky Palermo?), a threesome role-playing “father,” “son,” and “ghost,” would genuflect to

Matt Dillon Tom Cruise

Maxwell Caulfield

Soon after the quasi-bashing, in a kind of gay panic, Tom allows a lovely lady of the evening to pick him up and take him to her place. Nothing much happens, but he later returns to her apartment and encounters her roommate, who, in passing, tells Tom that her friend just tested HIV+.

2.

I watched the opening half hour or so of *Bully* last night. I remembered the movie starting with the “teen amateur night” stripping contest. Every guy on stage in his BVDs, gyrating, looks to be around 16 or 17. Really the scene doesn't happen until about 10 minutes or so into the action. The actual opening shot is a close-up of Brad Renfro on a landline in bed. “I want you to suck my big dick,” he insists, eyes focused, but not on anything in front of him. A diamond stud twinkles on the lobe of his left ear. He's very pretty. His mom's voice, telling him it's time for dinner, interrupts his phone-sex gig, but not before he says, “I want you to lick my balls.”

Brad Renfro was discovered by Joel Schumacher, who cast him in *The Client*, having done a national search for a “tough kid” who, it was reported, *had the necessary life experiences to understand his character*. Big box office for the legal thriller based on a John Grisham novel changed his life. Earlier in his own career, Schumacher designed the costumes for Woody Allen's *Interiors*, and if you study Geraldine Page's impeccable ensembles in that film you'll understand why I mention it. Schumacher had an eye for how things (films, clothes, life) hang on a body.

There's a beeline to be made from Brad Renfro to Brad Davis via Bradness. Fassbinder would have understood his existence, his hardscrabble *life experiences*. Ditto Genet. Brad Wrenfro. His flight through life's to-and-fro. A sad journey? A caution at least, I guess. I don't know. His Wiki page entry states that his mom, an addict, introduced him to heroin by shooting him up for the first time when he was 12. During the middle of the *Bully* shoot he and a friend attempted to steal a yacht. Brad Renfield, attentive to his master. Be rad (B[rad]). Win so. Except he didn't or couldn't, never had the chance, not for long. Stay gold, Ponyboy. Stay gold, Brad Rentboy. Brad SRO.

Brad Renfro wasn't Hercules. He wasn't even Patroclus. No Achilles caring for him. He wasn't cast in bronze, no scenes from his life painted on an urn. Clay lasts longer than celluloid. If you asked someone now the age he was in *Bully* (18) or at which he OD'd (25), would he/she/they have ever heard of him or watched even one of his films? I wonder if anyone ever bothered to ask Brad about what he thought art was, whether that

was what he was making. Egon Schiele could have caught every bit of the bravado and louche pain that they both excelled in.

Skeet Ulrich is now on *Riverdale*. Leif Garrett does whatever it is he does. Axl Rose is a mess but alive, or, at least, lifelike, given the dismaying amount of facework he's had done. Within the chicken-fried-steak-ish gridding of Hawkins's painting there are, in three or four instances, instead of solo figures, smaller grids, some referring to the artist's vast *Urbis Paganus* project (his study of, among other things, front and rear, hermaphroditism, and all kinds of transtemporal, transcultural, transy- and/or trannyshack impulses and gestures) as well as to his casually unerring collages of the early 1990s, even to some of their precise sources/inspirations (e.g., skinny guy legs and butt from Steven Meisel's infamous Calvin Klein "basement" ads; Matt Dillon in pre-*Pink Flamingo* training; Hans Bellmer forestbodysac). These works are made up *of* what the artist's work has been made up *by* for a long time—and they underscore the fact that collage, not unlike history's palimpsests, is picture upon picture, thing upon thing, layer upon layer.

I don't want to make the goings-on any safer by urging seeing these works as some not simplistic working through of a particular history of the older and younger man encountering one another. For some kind of exchange, economic, sexual and/or knowledge-based, consensual or not. In an age hellbound to normative relational units, family, and marriage. Take them, these combinatories, as a material, metaphorical/allegorical theory of the incongruent, resistant and/or counterpropositional procedures of aesthetic production, one that would include Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas, Diaghilev and Nijinsky, Walt Whitman nursing wounded soldiers, complex erotic zones and scenarios lit up by Tony Duvert, Alain Guiraudie, and Pasolini. Less savory examples would involve Lou (*NSYNC) Pearlman, Bryan Singer, Jeffrey Dahmer. The green sap meets experience, and someone might die in the end. Which is to say the encounter's one way of fathoming/construing the sublime. The sun doesn't care if it burns you.

I've veered away from Brad. Thinking about him for too long is too sad. However much the Grand Guignol or its theatrics spookify these combines with mayhem—the abattoir never faraway, Salomé (a boy or a chick with a dick) and her beheading drives never faraway, nor her dancing—there's also Brad, Brad anchoring it all, Brad bottom center (center bottom), with a strut I'm guessing Bruce Weber caught for the pages of *Interview*. The pic's post-*The Client*. In the painting, he's getting a load of Leif Garrett and his Twombly-esque ejaculatory signature jetting across some Morandi vases and jars stacked on top of the Dracula still. Brad's black T-shirt sleeves are rolled up. His natural pong is what Axe body spray would be based on. It's an attitude Justin Bieber would have to be dead, or better, to achieve. Facing the world, looking over his right shoulder, which is to our left, he's looking at the past, what he trusts he's just escaped. He's stoked. *Fuck yeah*, he thinks. *Fuck...*

Bruce Hainley, 2018