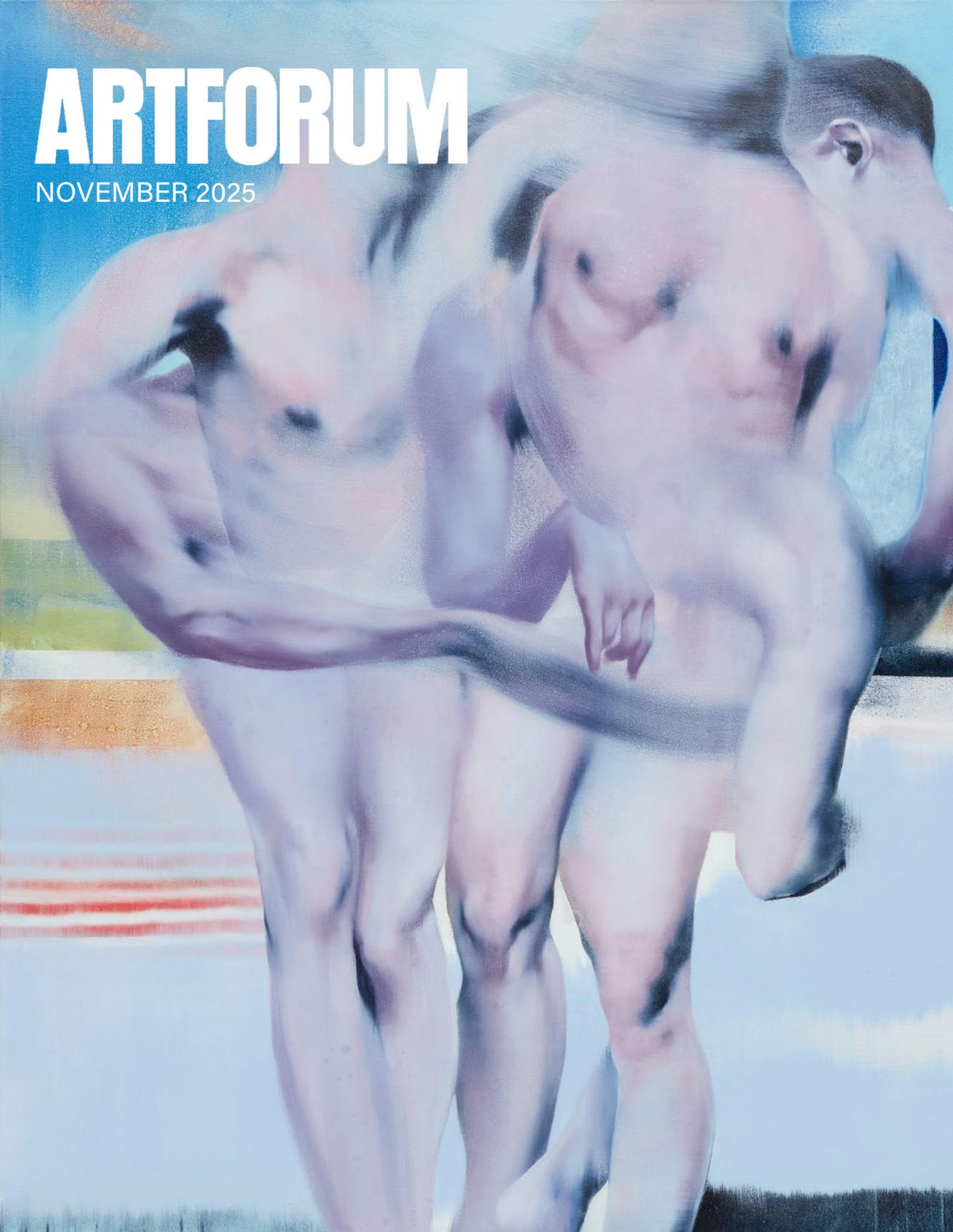


ARTFORUM

NOVEMBER 2025



Preslav Kostov

Tara Downs

The lithesome figures that Preslav Kostov yoked into knots in “Soft Focus,” his solo exhibition at Tara Downs, would be at home strutting down a runway for any high-street fashion house if it weren’t for their missing heads. The artist’s eight oil paintings featuring decollated bodies—or rather, the same body refracted and transposed into various permutations—at first read as double (or quadruple, or quintuple) photographic exposures. The reality was more gruesome. Kostov served up a primeval stew, a vague goulash of classical and more recent art-historical references (two parts Ingres, a touch of Bacon and Bellmer, a soupçon of de Kooning) that left a sour aftertaste.

Limbs emerged from impossible places; torsos ended abruptly. Although the artist’s subjects were nude, they remained asexual, the funny bits conspicuously absent, smoothed over as if belonging to some dissociating Ken doll in the throes of an existential crisis. Where the eye expected genitalia, one was instead met with a glitch, a spot of amorphous decay that carried the piquancy of tortured erotic frustration.

Kostov’s acephalous beings were animated by some form of psychic distress, which torqued their bodies into a pained dance. Sometimes the contortions were elegant, à la Martha Graham. Elsewhere they were more violent and staccato, recalling Pina Bausch’s *Rite of Spring* (1975), or Robert Longo’s drawings of flailing men and women of the late 1970s and early ’80s, but denuded of their power suits and flayed like sides of veal. (Longo threw objects at his subjects to achieve their reactions; one wonders what Kostov did to yield his). All of the artist’s figures were rendered in peachy flesh tones save for those that appeared in the cadaverously hued *Over the fence* (all works 2025). These people were painted a hypothermic blue, as if poisoned by colloidal silver—a hopeless tangle of cold corpses piled into an open grave.

Kostov’s skill is remarkable. In certain instances, his facture was perfectly crisp; in others, he let the paint drip, crackle, or spatter. Sometimes the medium

was pulled or wiped away with Richteresque flourishes. But the works never veered into full-on abstraction—representation maintained its stubborn grip.

The artist is clearly interested in Surrealist strategies. That these pictures were haunted by the unwelcome presence of AI seemed unavoidable. The artist’s mutated characters evoked the malformations of the algorithm, overfed with data and belching out images with conspicuous errors. Places interrupted by blurs seemed like instances in which the picture failed to render. Read in this way, even the backgrounds took on the quality of a corrupted Windows screen saver—a nonplace that exists only in the fever dream of the machine.



Preslav Kostov, *Over the fence*, 2025, oil on canvas, 70³⁴ × 55”.

Despite Kostov’s splicing, his bodies remained intact, possessed of an unnaturally pliable flesh that never ruptured. The body horror suggested a stage of evolution yet to be reached, where grotesque adaptations are the result of toxic PFAS and microplastics wreaking havoc upon their creators. Of course, all of this could just be metaphor for internal struggle, the artist’s id and ego grappling for supremacy. He uses his own rangy body as the model for his subjects, so the pictures, on some level, were psychological self-portraits. Kostov might be interested in exploring a Bergmanesque fracturing of the psyche, but the obsessive disfiguring of his own body came off more as narcissistic expression—gym selfies in a fun-house mirror.

—Max Lakin

10 London Painters on Painting Today

Written by Anna Moss
Edited by Lauren Bulla

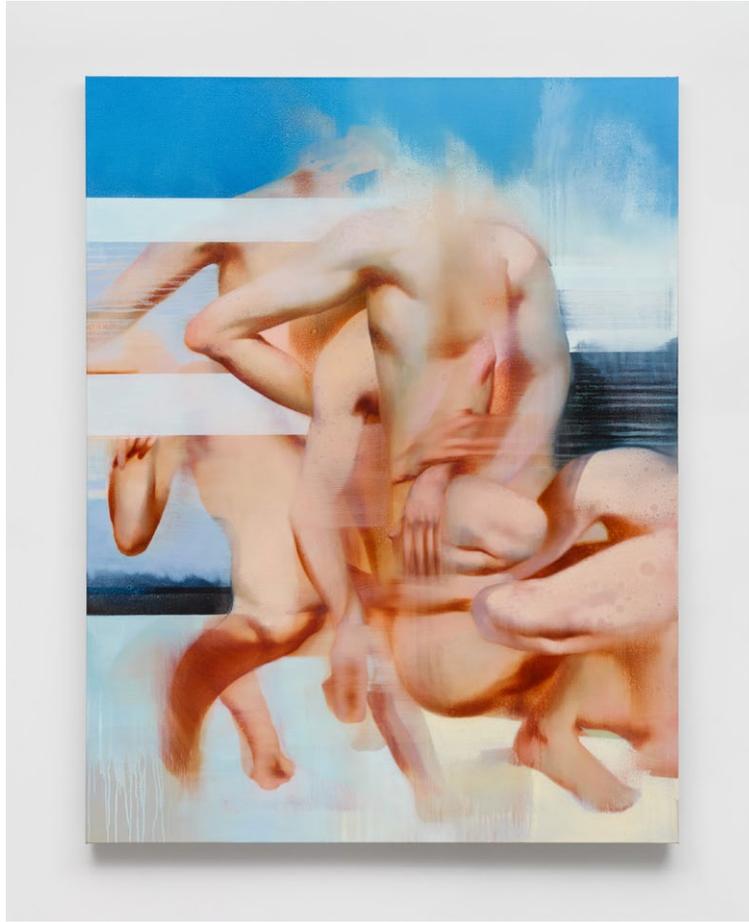


Few things have such a contradictory reputation as painting. Tell most people you are an artist, and they assume you mean ‘painter’. Meanwhile, the art world itself ricochets between praising and devaluing the medium — so often that the phrase ‘painting is dead’ has become a dead cliché.

In a depressed art market, paintings are a *safe sell*. But traipse around the younger London galleries, in East or South, and I’m sometimes hard-pressed to find paintings at all. Increasingly you see bleach, dye and transfer processes in lieu of painterly pigment — maybe it’s just oil on canvas that we’re saying is dead, allegedly? This is not to diminish mixed media or expanded painting, which has long existed. But these galleries resist the market, and by extension, often resist putting on paint-heavy shows. There is a sense that showing painting in an ultra-contemporary space ought to be somehow justified.

In one of his poems, Frank O’Hara reflects on going to an exhibition without his lover: “And the portrait show seems to have no faces in at all / just paint / you suddenly wonder why anyone ever did them.” I’m pretty sure O’Hara, who was not only a poet, but a curator at MoMA during the height of abstract expressionism, didn’t mean this. But what to him was tongue-in-cheek romanticism is hard-line thinking for others. It’s a common thought: That paint is some kind of extrinsic, secondary quality to a ‘picture’. An incidental material, rather than something *chosen* for its properties.

Rather than getting lost in a debate on aesthetics, I spoke to ten artists working in London today, one of most seemingly simple, yet core questions – why do you paint now? What is it about ‘just paint’, rather than your wider practice, that you gravitate towards?



Preslav Kostov, *Hollow Beach* (2025), oil on linen, 140 × 180cm

Preslav Kostov: “I choose painting from a very utilitarian perspective. Oil just naturally suited the way I think: it allows me to work with specific detail, while being malleable enough to redact even once something has been laid onto the surface. I see the surface as infinite potential and possibility — I don’t design, sketch, or anticipate any of the fragments within my work.

“Drying times can be natural pauses, instrumental in helping me play with fragmentation and exploring the intricacies of interpretation and narrative. As layers build up, the painting traps a kind of palimpsest of thoughts and actions. Even when ideas that feel better placed veil what came before, those earlier gestures still linger beneath the surface as small indicators of presence. I’ve tried several times to move away from oil, but always end up missing certain qualities. With mixed media, I find there’s often a pressure to anticipate outcomes, to aim for certain effects or tricks. I don’t enjoy working under that kind of expectation. Maybe there’s a kind of honesty that can be encapsulated in what, at first glance, might seem like a deceptively resolved final object.”

REVIEW OCT 6 WRITTEN BY KATHERINE WILLIAMS

Preslav Kostov: “Soft Focus” at Tara Downs



An oft-mentioned painting in Ben Lerner’s novel *10:04* is Jules Bastien-Lepage’s *Joan of Arc* from 1879. At one point, Lerner’s narrator makes note of a museum placard (the painting is on display at the Met), which describes attacks on Bastien-Lepage’s failure to reconcile the realism of Joan’s figure with the ethereal bodies of the angels suspended behind her. The perceived flaw, however, is the narrator’s favorite aspect of the painting, for as the background obscures—or “swallows”—her fingers, the tension between physical and metaphysical “produces a glitch in the pictorial matrix.” It’s as if in being called to battle, Joan really must come to trade the naturalism of the material world for the register of the elemental and symbolic. We’ve caught her in a moment of transition.

I thought of this when looking at Preslav Kostov’s paintings, on view in *Soft Focus* at Tara Downs. The limbs of bodies recede into their backgrounds, the edges of wrists and ankles and necks swallowed by the sky-like assemblages against which the forms are

set. It's not so much a pictorial glitch, though, as it might be an obfuscation of the origin and border that constitute a human body. The figures seem to come from somewhere and some time, emerging from loose oases behind them, with pale skin as if just born, but the adulthood and exalted character implied in their figures bring them into a more Elysian register.



This is not to say that there aren't "glitches," so to speak—in *Rush* (2025), one might think to peer into the more jarring segments of white and wine-dark sea, layers of depth behind the figures. In *Out of Town* (2025), the thin, dripping streaks run in paradoxically horizontal lines, bringing the edges of legs along with them. In *Trust fall* (2025) and *Facade* (2025), translucent panels interrupt the continuity of scenes, like screens in between bodies. The acetone mixture Kostov applies to still-wet paint produces an effect akin to rust or the irrevocable decay of analog film; stretches of cellular dissolution perforate the otherwise ethereal contour of muscle and shape.

For all the hands that appear in Kostov's paintings, there's a surprising anti-haptic register, as if the sensations these bodies might experience are inaccessible to viewers or elevated above mere stimuli. That all the paintings depict collections of bodies implies a kind of group portrait, but while they seem to collide and intertwine, they also seem not to quite touch, meeting on a plane indebted to time and space but belonging to a more delicate sense of proximity and exposure.



Then there's a painting like *Parade (Masstige Paradise)* (2025), more starkly segmented into quadrants and with more crisp distinction between forms. In this echo of photo-montage, the bodies are caught in different shades, occupying disparate moments in time in a day, in history. In some, the scale of each figure is distinct, a magnified torso proximate to a smaller head. Do they know each other? The degree of their contact is elusive, even as the gestures of hands and limbs often suggest intimacy and eros. At times, a painting can seem to capture a single body—both a particular and an ideal—in successive motion, akin to multiple exposure or a transposed futurism. *Rush* is like this, in which the figures seem to fan out from each other, caught at stages of evolutionary development and culminating in a kind of final form.

And yet there is no finished body, really, in Kostov's paintings; each synecdochic form lacks at least some parts of an imagined whole, a head or feet perhaps, and each seems to imply the necessity of the others which surround it, a bouquet of figuration. The effect is a kind of collectivity in both space and time: rarely do the bodies face each other directly, so perhaps their embrace is unbeknownst even to them, but they are illuminated by their physical affinity, like reprisals out of the water.

The providence of their encounters is key to the disfigurement that allows them to intertwine. Now, disfiguration is often associated with generative AI programs, notoriously bad at rendering an anatomically accurate human body—hands, it seems, are a particular challenge. (Hito Steyerl has compared Stable Diffusion's chimeric outputs to the bestiary, monstrous figures of pre-Enlightenment visual culture.[1]) Disfigured entanglements painted by other artists like George Ruoy or Ambera Wellman have drawn light analogies to such kinds of artificial images in invocations of cursory likenesses between an array of surreal, distorted forms that populate the internet as well as figurative painting. It's not dissimilar, too, to other medium comparisons: the way that Jack Whitten's use of a two-by-four to drag paint across canvas, for instance, gets compared to photographic blur.

This particular read often implies the necessity of setting, as if the swirling and discordant non-place behind a disfigured body rendered in oil might be analogous to the "internet unconscious" from which image generators articulate more legible, though still aberrant, figures. It's a parochial read writ large, and might be especially reductive applied to Koslov's work. The figures are reminiscent both of classical sculpted torsos and the more vivid contours by someone like Lucian Freud, but it's their contact, their simultaneous excess and lack (and not a creative perversion of training data), which lends them a form. There's a kind of irony, then, to Kostov's paintings, in which pale

pink nudes, a hue in between cherub and man, collapse into heaps of flesh. Even as limbs fade into thick streaks, the figures insist on the human body as both origin and product of the world they inhabit—a light, self-aware anthropomorphism that, too, dissolves into inhuman extensions and ambivalent hues.



In *Facade*, a body is crouched, his head burrowed in the chest of a more feminine figure to his right. They may or may not be sharing in this coastal background, with its ominous storm and seeping precipitation—a celestial beach, a primordial horizon. Limbs that cannot anatomically belong to either figure emerge from the crevices between the two more fully formed bodies. His shoulder is raised, turned to protect his neck, his hand outstretched in defense and obscuration of his face. And then there is the ear, rendered in sharper detail amidst the hazy streaks of leg and pronounced decay of the acetone-treated canvas. In *Trust fall*, too, the ensnared churn of forms also gives way to an ear, the head from which it protrudes turned sideways, hidden. In both paintings, the ear is exposed while the body is obscured.

This concentration of detail occurs in other paintings as well, in the meticulous shading on a nipple and the underside of a foot, or the contours of a hand (the careful rendering of knuckles at which Stable Diffusion fails). But between the eight paintings on

display, there are no eyes or noses or mouths; the ear is the closest a viewer might get to an orifice, an implication of sensory experience. They're surprising at times, these openings into the imaginary register of the painting. Viewers never quite see the body whole, instead accessing the body as embedded in forms both similar and not, human and less so. Perhaps there's a glitch in there, too.

Preslav Kostov: *Soft Focus* is on view at Tara Downs from September 5 through October 25, 2025.

[1] Hito Steyerl, *Medium Hot: Images in the Age of Heat* (Verso, 2025), 59. See online chapter [here](#).

The Best Booths at Felix LA, from Denim Sculptures to Minimalist Assemblages



BY MAXIMILIANO DURÓN February 20, 2025 12:04pm



The scene at the Felix Art Fair.
COURTESY FELIX ART FAIR

On Wednesday morning, the Felix Art Fair opened the doors to its 2025 edition at the iconic Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel. Though there was still a line for the elevators to get to the hotel's 11th and 12th floors where about two-thirds of exhibitors are, the mood at the fair seemed more subdued than last year, with the Roosevelt's narrow hallways less claustrophobic than usual. (Even the pool was temporarily closed.) Even still, most dealers reported that many works in their rooms-cum-booths had found buyers and that the fair so far had been a success. With January's wildfires devastating many in Los Angeles, and putting this week's fairs in jeopardy, the success of Frieze and Felix feels more meaningful and even necessary this time around.

Below, a look at the best booths on view at Felix LA, which runs through February 23.

Preslav Kostov at Tara Downs



Work by Preslav Kostov at Tara Downs's booth.

Photo : Maximiliano Durón/ARTnews

Bulgarian-born, London-based artist Preslav Kostov filters his experience of immigrating to the UK from Eastern Europe into his paintings, in which he layers and fragments multiple renderings of his body. There's something almost unnatural to the way Kostov renders these fleshy limbs—a digital glitch perhaps, or even the double exposure of a camera lens. Kostov typically wipes his canvas during the painting process, giving the tableau a sleek, glossy finish; to this he later applies acetone, which gives it a cracked texture that is both unsettling and alluring.

3 TO SEE AT FELIX ART FAIR

By [Courtney Killough](#) • 20 February 2025

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Yesterday marked the vibrant opening of the seventh edition of Felix LA, the contemporary art fair that has become a cornerstone of Los Angeles's cultural calendar. Set within the historic Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel, this year's fair runs from February 19th to 23rd, 2025, and features an impressive lineup of 69 galleries, with approximately half making their Felix LA debut.

Among the standout artists captivating attendees are:

[Preslav Kostov](#) (b. 1998, Bulgaria)



Represented by Tara Downs, Kostov is a fast-rising artist to watch. Kostov delves into the complexities of memory through his evocative paintings. Employing automatism, his creative process involves utilizing the subconscious. His compositions are inspired from old master paintings. He integrates personal and collective narratives that comment on both the dissonance and determination found in human experience. Kostov currently resides and works in London.

Art

Why So Many New Figurative Paintings Are Missing Faces

Olivia Allen

Oct 25, 2024 9:05AM

A new body language in painting



Preslav Kostov, installation view of “Between the five wells” at Tara Downs Gallery, New York, 2024. Photo by Max C. Lee. Courtesy of the artist and Tara Downs.

In his practice, Kostov draws from his experience as an immigrant, with distorted figures reflecting the physical and emotional challenges of adapting to alien environments. Like Essers, Kostov invites viewers to draw their own conclusions rather than gleaning the figures’ emotions through facial expressions. But where Essers’s work emphasizes intimacy and connection, Kostov’s figures embody societal friction and collective struggle around identity.

This exploration of the faceless body extends beyond Essers and Kostov. In many of Bre Andy’s stylish paintings—on view in her recent solo show at Cierra Britton Gallery—she probes the complexities of bodily autonomy and societal pressures. Through her faceless figures, characterized by exaggerated proportions and twisted postures, Andy subverts traditional representations of femininity, confronting the societal expectations that shape our understanding of selfhood.

HERO

WEEKEND COMBO

Record 28 Books, Marc Almond goes Dada, and a bacon butty for tea

By [Ella Joyce](#) | 19 April 2024

Exhibition

Beauty In Chaos

North London's Hew Hood Gallery's latest show is a group exhibit titled Beauty in Chaos, bringing together a lineup of up-and-coming artists whose practices meditate on the fundamental quirks of human nature. Preslav Kostov's work engages with identity and the recollection of memory, while Solanne Bernard's sculptures are designed with abstracted body parts in mind and Danilo Stojanović, Albie Romero and Scarlett Eliza Budden each present a series of large-scale paintings finding beauty in chaos.



Preslav Kostov, Temptation, 2023

ART PLUGGED™

Softer, Softest

Exhibitions on April 17, 2024

Softer, Softest
26th April, 2024 – 21st May, 2024
Guts Gallery
Unit 2 Sidings House,
10 Andre Street
Hackney
London
E8 2AA

Guts Gallery is excited to present *Softer, Softest*; a group exhibition which explores the condition of softness and the ways in which it can be expressed in artistic composition.

Softer, Softest rejects the harsh, oppressive edges of modern machinery and instead celebrates the transitory, enigmatic nature of human touch and memory. Throughout the show, spectral bodies phase in and out of view; they shift, collide and eventually coalesce into shadowy, indistinct forms. Elsewhere, everyday objects are captured in hazy impressions; enchanting them with a cryptic, almost spiritual power. In each composition, you can almost hear the hushed breath, the strained whisper or the subdued rustling of fabric that has been captured from life and housed in the sanctum of the canvas.



From the cloud

8 Jul — 26 Aug 2023 at the Baert Gallery in Los Angeles, United States

18 JULY 2023



From The Cloud by László von Dohnányi, Marc Prats and Preslav Kostov, installation view of the exhibition at Baert Gallery. Courtesy László von Dohnányi, Marc Prats, Preslav Kostov and Baert Gallery. Photo by Paul Salvesson

Baert Gallery is pleased to present *From the Cloud*, a group exhibition of new paintings from three London-based artists, László von Dohnányi, Marc Prats and Preslav Kostov on view from 8 July to 26 August 2023. For the gallery's third collaboration with curator Louis Blanc-Francard, the artists in this exhibition adopt the meteorological and digital definitions of 'the cloud' to conceive environments where post-digital beings can roam, allowing their liminal narratives to unfold.

Despite their ambiguity, clouds are not weightless; the average fair-weather cloud weighs at least a million pounds. When considering the etymology of the word, which finds its roots in the Old English term 'clud', a 'rock mass' or a 'hill', this comes as no surprise. As much as clouds are the hills of the heavens, 'the cloud' in its metaphorical/data sense, forms the landscape of the modern internet - a human Olympus of sorts. Neither lauding nor wholly lamenting this immersive state of technology, the works on show present us with alternative post-apocalyptic scenarios, teasing through the authority of isolation, fascination and evolution that exists within the cloud.

László von Dohnányi's labyrinthine oil paintings on linen tread the line between me-

chanical construction and organic growth. Although the subjects of his paintings take cue from the natural world, by introducing characteristics of computer-generated images such as hypermediated interfaces, ultra-sharp edges and aesthetic over stimulation, the paintings take on an uncanny quality. Branches whet into thorny wires and apples glint with synthetic sheen in a crude biomimicry of nature.

At the centre of this is the idea of remediation: the notion that new media transforms and refashions its antecedent forms. Von Dohnányi explores the reciprocal influence between digital aesthetics and traditional painting through a unique process of creation. He first begins in the digital format; sourcing virtual 3D models from the internet and using architectural modelling software to distil the data down to forms and shapes that resonate with him. He then relies on a collage like 'cut and paste' method that recalls the truly flat 2D surfaces of online imagery simultaneously departing and honouring the three-dimensional layering of paint in traditional art. In this sense, von Dohnányi decelerates the expeditious quality of cyberspace through manual composition.

Paintings by Marc Prats turn our focus to the anthropoid consequences of social media dependency. Having been born just before the turn of the century – in a world yet to engulf itself in the fever of the Third Industrial Revolution – Prats addresses the nostalgic sensibilities of his generation. Perhaps it is the knowing longing for the analogue that makes humans more susceptible to psychological brutality associated with prolonged screen use? Prats critiques the alluring and addictive facets of internet culture by subverting their mechanisms from within. Projecting the remote and fragmented language of social media directly onto the canvas, in the act of painting, he wills into existence surreal visual cacophonies. The painting 'Prisms of Compromise' for example, plays with the textures of spray paint and glitter impasto to subvert the dark undertones of our digital reality. That in feeding 'the cloud' with personal data we are constantly bargaining with algorithms, compromising with powers often beyond our comprehension.

The presence of technology takes on a more elusive form in the five paintings by Preslav Kostov featured in *From the Cloud*. Employing the technique of automatism, Kostov's paintings emerge from a cumulative process of self-questioning. The artist engages with the practice of pareidolia, rendering human forms within nimbus billows to engage with the subconscious and somewhat formulaic patterns of digital media consumption. Untethered from any singular narrative, time period or experience, his ravelled apparitions inhabit a realm absent of worldly possessions or cultural signifiers. This veil of ambiguity stimulates interpretation of the human condition in isolation.

Kostov's imposing compositions dialog with the form and palette of the Old Master painters, presenting imagined scenes of personal struggle situated within a liminal space. The large scale triptych 'Dance of the Lilies' with their gestural sense of movement is resonant of the Elgin Marbles and finds roots in the psychological tropes of temptation, worry and regret. Without attributing the confinements of place and time to his works, in exhibiting alongside Von Dohnányi and Prats, the paintings appear to grapple with the idea of autonomy and the attempt to credit meaning to what we do within the digital sphere.