

REAL
ART WAYS

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This exhibition is a result of Real Art Ways' "Go" competition in 2007, which requested proposals from emerging artists living in New York or New England. "Go" was juried by Derrick Adams (Artist, Founding Director and Curator at Rush Arts Gallery and Resource Center, New York); Olu Oguibe (Visual Artist, Writer, Scholar, and Curator, Connecticut); Jane Philbrick (Digital Artist, Connecticut).

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Real Art Ways is one of the leading contemporary art organizations in the United States with an emphasis on supporting contemporary artists, fostering the creation of new work, and working in creative ways with community.

On the cover: Pink Eye (after John Singer-Sargent), graphite, acrylic, and vinyl letters on paper, 15" x 20", 2008.

All images courtesy of Real Art Ways. Staff photographer John Groo.

Sam McKinniss



TRUE LOVE FIERCE DOUBT, graphite, ink and vinyl letters on paper, 15" x 20", 2008.

I want to fall in love with pictures over and over again and expect to receive nothing but heartbreak in return. For the same reasons why sad songs are the best pop songs, unrequited love is the best love because it incites the most intensely felt emotion. —Sam McKinniss, Artist Statement, 2008

Sam McKinniss

By Sherry Buckberrough

The paintings in Sam McKinniss' exhibition *True Love* pin us in place, forcing our reaction to the evocative stares of a line-up of beautiful, powerful young people. Plucked from the artist's snapshots of friends, the figures seem too young to have already been inscribed into the tradition of oil portraiture. Its weight, charged by the lushness of the artist's brush, ennobles them, generating art that is also a gift of friendship.

McKinniss is a romantic, his skill spawned by passion, yet guided by his savvy knowledge of style. He borrows as much from the worlds of contemporary fashion, film, and music as from the

Sam McKinniss was born in 1985 in Northfield, Minnesota, and then moved with his family to Connecticut shortly after. In 2007, he received a BFA from the Hartford Art School at the University of Hartford, where he studied painting under Stephen Brown and Carol Padberg. His work rarely strays from portraiture, exploring themes related to desire, love, pop music, the male gaze, the gay experience and the history of painting. He currently lives and works in Hartford, Connecticut.

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2008 installation view at Real Art Ways of *Josh in Savannah* (oil on canvas, 40" x 50", 2007), *CJ Day at Dawn* (oil on canvas, 12" x 12", 2007) and *True Love (Josh)*, (oil on canvas, 66" x 58", 2008).

hallowed halls of art museums. Celebrity culture looms large in the mix. Acknowledging illustrious realists—David, Sargent, and Fantin-Latour—he looks as well at Symbolism. Whistler and Hodler come to mind. Borrowed styles are layered. His camera finds them in friends, invoking, through pose and placement, their likenesses to pop images. In the transfer to painting, subtle adjustments—scale of figure to ground; scale of eyes to lips; contrasts of color and tone; opposition of carefully rendered faces to the abstract textures of grounds and brushmarks—heighten the appeal. It is in these significant alterations that the artist separates his style from the ones he apes. Settling onto the forms of the figures, it divorces them mostly, but not definitively, from the people who have populated his active social life.

Like Pygmalion, McKinniss develops beauty so tempting that he falls in love with his own creations. But in his case no Venus intervenes to grant them real life. Rather, he is left to relish his longing, relinquishing his art to us, its viewers and potential buyers, in a spiral of desire that brings him money in place of love. It's the twenty-first century. Nonetheless, the responsive viewer, pinned by the gaze, is compelled to consider the dynamics of love and art. Modern and postmod-

ern art generally reject love as a subject, leaving it and its morality tales to pop culture. McKinniss' gambit is to reunite them, but to sidestep love's traps. A contemporary aesthete, recalling the sensibility of the late nineteenth century, his love is not for people, but for style.

McKinniss' artist's statement evokes courtly love—the love of heroic knights for noble ladies who remained forever outside their reach. Inspired to perform virtuous deeds, their unrequited love marked them as superior and separated them as unique. This phenomenon was, in fact, an early indication of the emergence of modern individualism. McKinniss' process, functioning now within the modernist tradition of the new, marks his artistic practice as unique—not by style or necessarily by deed, but by his comingling of planning and passion, his risky and retrograde presentation of love as subject, and his self-inclusion as model for the experience of the work.

The hackneyed phrase "true love" has little to do with courtly love. It is tied to the romance novel and the era of the bourgeoisie. Bourgeois love is structured around the goal of marriage. Characterized again by uniqueness (there is only one true love), it functions to confirm the lovers' reciprocal

individuality (they can only love one another). They marry for love, marking their integrity, and they live happily ever after, stabilizing the family within bourgeois social organization. The images in the exhibition *True Love* strive to represent individuals. With rare exception, they are alone, in fact, estranged, disconnected from anyone other than the viewer, who, in the fusion of the gaze, becomes their romantic opposite. The gaze marries us as viewers to them. Yet, like noble ladies, they remain untouchable, their insistent distance producing their power.

While *True Love* exposes the impossibility of "true love," it also articulates the problem of individuality today. In the era of social networking, where images projecting beauty and happiness are shared incessantly, visual hallmarks of individuality fade. Constructing our self-images through fashion, hair style, gesture, and expression, we negotiate constantly between what might seem individual and what looks good. Looking good, and like everyone else, assuring love from our publics, is likely to win. In the fleeting and intimate moment of actually falling in love, however, of connecting with our utterly unique other, we bask briefly in the sweet intensity of what seems to be our truly individual existence and are assured that we are, indeed, fundamentally real. Through the paradoxical power of their distance, McKinniss' paintings ask, perhaps uncomfortably, for our re-engagement with ourselves through our return to romance.

True Love includes four sketches that provide welcome relief from the intensity of the oils. Their figures are intimate and give us more insight into the artist's creative process. His distancing techniques proceed at the level of the sketch by associations of images and words. A figure walking on the beach, looking back, is ironically thrust into an alternate narrative by the label "True Love Can't Wait." Such banal phrases yank the images from their origins and spin them into the artist's longing. A copy of Sargent's sketch of a young man with a slash of pink watercolor across his eyes is accompanied by the words "Pink Eye," a pun on the idea of the gay gaze. The term could, in McKinniss' words, apply to the entire exhibition.

Often enough the words come from pop songs. McKinniss makes this overt by enticing viewers into the exhibition with

the spinning reflections of a disco ball held by a lawn jockey. This "disco jockey"—supported by two small paintings that reference the rock groups New Order and ABBA—complicates the show's context. We infer that this gathering of portraits constitutes a dance party as well. Like dancers, the bodies reach toward one another with gazes that seek to touch. Their desires ricochet across the room. The viewer is pinned in the crossfire. As singular images, they implore us to engage with them. As multiples, in contrast, they produce a matrix of connection that denies the dyad of "true love." Oscillating between self-absorption and a reaching beyond that unites the group in a carefully contrived network of desire, they soundly defeat the bourgeois goal of marriage. They are a new order of love.

Ross at the Beach, oil on canvas, 40" x 50", 2007.



Sherry Buckberrough teaches at the University of Hartford where she chairs the Art History Department. She writes on modern and contemporary art with an emphasis on gender and design.