

Foreword to *22 Young Men*

The central focus in the paintings of Paul Shank's *22 Young Men* is the male figure, lithe, beautiful, young, and serenely self-contained. Sometimes subjects among the 22 receive multiple treatments. Some wear light-creased and shadowed clothing that highlights their physicality, or they pose, casually nude in the familiar studio convention. Only here that older tradition is transformed in interesting ways. In each painting, a figure gazes away in silence and calm absorption, or catches our eye in momentary recognition. Faces are sidelit, recalling Vermeer; strong lighting also creates shadows that chisel features and map veins on hands and feet, as in the 1980 *Figure with Blue Bowl*. Lost in sleep, or in states of dreamlike suspension, they offer visual pleasure while remaining remote and impersonal, even as their relaxed appearance gives them a warmth of familiarity. As with other artists such as Thomas Eakins, John Singer Sargent--or closer to the present--David Hockney, these are less studio exercises than meditations on real men, men the artist has known.

The staging of the male nude has been explored by many painters and photographers before Paul Shank: Eakins' visions of homosocial camaraderie; Sargent's sensuous studies; the Greek and Mediterranean photographic dreams of Herbert List; or the enigmatic silent scenarios of Paul Cadmus, painted on the shifting dunes of Fire Island. Indeed the beautifully rendered male nude would become Cadmus's nearly exclusive preoccupation through the latter part of his career. In *22 Young Men* the focus on the subject is sustained across compositions of great variety and within a broad range of lighting, used with wonderful effect to heighten the contrast between textures. Flesh--heightened against flat, planar collaged backgrounds-- invites touch. Other works--such as the 2014 *Reclining Figure Under a Night Sky*-- also explore an older trope of body as landscape, encouraged by ambiguities of scale and by the craggy topography of patterned textiles that suggest mountainous terrain. These elements of narrative and landscape unfold in scenarios that are unfastened from specific markers of time and place. Throughout, the studio becomes the site of reverie. Seemingly unlabored, these works launch memories of past voyages and other times brought to life in the present, gathering in the space between the real person and the studio fiction.

Sometimes titles reference films--*Zabriskie Point*--or novels and plays--*Sverige* (1980) or the work of other artists such as Picasso's Spanish landscapes, as in *Hor-*

ta de Ebro (2008). Sometimes the abstracted patterns that form the ground are made from kilims, textiles, embroideries, fragments of landscape. The figures themselves flicker between abstracted muse, studio model, and oddly familiar men: friends, models, people who have left their memory trace on the artist and who seem magically preserved from the effects of time and change. Some carry proper names, others are identified by a place name or object. They are set against backgrounds composed of the remains and shards of earlier paintings and watercolors that have been cut up, reassembled, and arranged with objects collected by the artist: posters, rugs, kimonos, spinning tops: all chosen for the abstract patterns they contribute to the overall composition of the painting. The solidity and presence of the figures is set into relief by these flat abstracted forms.

Paul Shank's idealized youthful male remains largely unchanged, from the earliest images of 1971 to the most recent works by the artist. These paintings are sites of memory, in search of lost times, as the allusion to Proust in *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu* (1981) renders explicit. They may be understood as one continuous series, tracing a theme with variations over nearly half a century. The artist, through retrospect, from the distance of experience and time, revisits the themes and subjects of the past that continue to live through his devotion to his craft and his medium. These are images drained of the turmoil of real life, transporting us to imagined islands of calm and beauty. They recall the places where the artist lived or to which he traveled in the past: North Africa, the South of France, New Mexico, and Death Valley: where the arid landscape and simple monumental forms—refracted and abstracted—counterpoint the liquid gaze and flesh and sentient presence of the models; where suggestions of age and time, or more complex psychological histories, are backdrops to the languid figures who dream and gaze clear-eyed and in seeming indifference to the chaotic world of memory and experience around them. For Paul Shank, as for other artists before him, painting traces the shadow of past desires, giving back to the artist, and to his subjects, an image purged of time and change.

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