

SORTING OUT HERNAN

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NEARLY LOST amid a rainbow cacophony of accumulated stuff, a single male figure curls his lithe form over a table, lost in concentration – or perhaps in reverie. His right hand pushes a banana-topped pencil across a shifting sheet of paper. With his left, he absentmindedly toys with strands of a mounted white wig, framed in the black night of a half-exposed window. He seems oblivious to the surfeit of color and texture exploding around him: the animal-shaped cookie jars, smiling stupidly out at us; a red pair of gloves carelessly tossed across a cardboard box; various carved wooden masks, silent and timeless witnesses to the scene. The image balances the interiority and the intimacy of this figure lost in work with absolute visual availability. The contents of this image avail themselves to us, begging for our close inspection and intensive study; the abundance of visual detail dispersed across the huge expanse of the picture invites this kind of looking. We, in effect, assume the attitude of the figure, lost in our own hard work of examination, identification, understanding.

Such is the subject of Hernan Bas's large recent painting *Sorting out Andy* (2018), which imagines the behind-the-scenes action from a historical event of massive proportions: taking an inventory of Andy Warhol's vast estate in advance of the infamous Sotheby's auctions of 1988. Spread over ten days and spanning over 10,000 items, the auctions attracted thousands of looky-loos and ultimately more than doubled the pre-sale estimates; *The New York Times* disdainfully characterized it as "a gargantuan homage to consumerism."¹ Given Warhol's penchant for collecting at all levels – like his mother Julia (and indeed like Bas himself), he was a packrat, known to prowl pawn shops and thrift stores – preparations for the auctions required intense labor:

When Sotheby's got the job of auctioning the estate, two experts moved in with computer terminals and began to catalogue the contents of stacks, piles, crates, cupboards and closets. With the help of two dozen curators and other employees, they eventually combed through the cache, transferring most items to a warehouse and curatorial offices. In the process they made the house livable while retaining the character of the collections.²

One of these “curators and other employees” acts as the painting’s protagonist. Working after hours within the intimate space of the dead artist’s home, the figure at the heart of the image attempts to take stock of a life through the idiosyncratic objects that populated it. Importantly for Bas, he chose each object pictured in this painting directly from Warhol’s estate.

The centerpiece of this wide-ranging exhibition, *Sorting out Andy* reflects Bas’s recent painting trajectory. At over four and half meters wide, the canvas shows the slow but steady growth in the scale of his work since his move from Miami to Detroit in 2010: the painting is the largest he has ever tackled, approaching the heroic proportions of European history paintings. Like those precedents – Théodore Géricault’s *The Raft of the Medusa* comes to mind – the painting takes as its subject a real-life event, crystallized into a single imagined narrative moment. Pictures like Géricault’s carried specific moral and political messages, often relying on the bombastic clarity of gesture to communicate their concepts. In place of grand gesture, Bas’s epic-scale image opts for nuance and narrative openness. The artist has recalled his childhood love of *Choose Your Own Adventure* books;³ in lieu of an overarching master narrative, *Sorting out Andy* frankly teems with individual stories for us to discover and pursue. The various unopened cardboard boxes exemplify this preoccupation with mystery. Some are labeled “TC”, marking them as “Time Capsules,” Warhol’s grab-bag receptacles of ephemera he obsessively assembled and hoarded over the last thirteen years of his life. Enigmatic, unresolved, open-ended: these are some hallmarks of Bas’s painting, expressed here through the narrative conceit of the estate inventory of Warhol, one of the most enigmatic and fleeting figures of recent art history.

The macabre undertone of this image – its exploration of the lurid fascination with a dead celebrity – falls in line with themes that emerge across Bas’s career. Death, ghosts, and the occult are never far from the edges of these canvases; the artist has attributed this “life-long infatuation with the bizarre” to his childhood spent among the southern Gothic woods of inland Florida.⁴ The earliest painting featured in this exhibition, *Mephistopheles, at 17 (reading poetry)* (2007), imagines the evil spirit of the devil in the form of a teenage boy. Like the hero of *Sorting out Andy*, Mephistopheles sits blithely absorbed in his activity, seemingly unaware of the baleful, roiling landscape surrounding him. The image comes from a series of paintings exploring the decadent and destructive tendencies of male adolescence through the character of Mephistopheles and his evocative surroundings. The anti-hero skulks about in gloomy interiors, sipping pensively on an illicit drink or writing furiously through Baroque candlelight. The exterior world remains just as foreboding, all overgrown trees and swampy skies rendered with Bas’s characteristic palette, rich with hues purple and pink. These images could be construed as cautionary tales if they weren’t so spookily, gorgeously alluring. In Bas’s imagined worlds, the beautiful and the damned are not mere counterpoints but, in fact, twins.

For Bas, the supernatural often appears embedded within specific references to literature or popular culture, working in tandem to envision worlds that seem at once familiar and foreign. In

pictures like *The hallucinations of poets (painted forest)* and *A spoilt pit (or, that final creature)* (both 2010), Bas pictures a whirling, claustrophobic vision of nature in which the tiny human figures seem overwhelmed. Bas found inspiration for these paintings in the writings of the so-called Dark Romanticists, who countered the Transcendentalist belief in the purity of self in nature with an emphasis on the irrational and grotesque. In *A spoilt pit*, the landscape assumes that ominous, Dark Romanticist tone: the recurring figure of the slim young man stands alone amidst a copse of trees at the edge of an abyss at the center of the image. We might easily imagine this forest to emerge from the Florida of Bas’s youth, as the snaking leaves and jutting palms interweave to form a primordial jungle. *That final creature* of the painting’s title comes from a line by Emily Dickinson:

*Those final Creatures, – who they are –
That, faithful to the close,
Administer her ecstasy,
But just the Summer knows.*⁵

Dickinson here underscores the obscurity and mystery evident in nature – and the limitations of man’s ability to plumb its depths. Indeed, far from knowing the limits of this wild landscape, Bas’s wan observer seems far more in danger of disappearing into it completely; perhaps that’s the only way he’ll truly know it.

On the edge of obscurity, skirting the realms of the unknown: Bas’s paintings often show us this frontier, no matter the historical time period of their subjects. Consider, for instance, paintings from his 2017 series *Cambridge Living*, which picture the exploits of secret societies and rituals endemic to Cambridge student life in the early twentieth century. Resulting from intensive research Bas conducted while in residence at Jesus College in the University of Cambridge, pictures like *Suicide Sunday (taking on water)* lift the veil on rites of passage and privilege among young male collegiates. In the painting, a clutch of half-dressed greenhorns float along the River Cam aboard a cardboard vessel, an element of the traditional debauched party – Suicide Sunday – after exams each June. Recalling both *The Raft of the Medusa* and Thomas Eakins’s frolicking Adonises and lissome rowers, the picture unmask the pathos bubbling under the surface of the celebration. Their enervated bodies loll and sink under the weight of the festivities. Other pictures from this series show the undergraduates as creatures of the night: *Cambridge Nightclimber (View of Trinity)* and *Cambridge Nightclimbers* depict figures inspired by the infamous ‘Night Climbers of Cambridge,’ who scaled the storied buildings of the town in the 1930s and snapped photographs of their exploits. Inspired by these flashbulb-stark images, Bas shines a light into unexplored corners of a seemingly foreign world.

A cultural magpie and child of the 1980s, Bas often finds his way to source material through recapitulated images, and sometimes even through pop culture references. This manner of dis-

covery extends back as far as he can remember: “early on, I found art by poring through the library, not through the museum,” he has explained.⁶ So it is with images like *The 2014 Mr. General Idea Pageant* (2014), in which a handsome young man struts the runway in a tiered, fire-engine red frock composed of ziggurat-style architectural forms. In its bold color and outlandish sculptural form, the garment recalls the aesthetic of the Memphis Group, the short-lived but influential circle of designers and artists founded by Ettore Sottsass in Milan in the 1980s. Highly referential, playful, and unafraid of bad taste, the Memphis look pervades the pop cultural reference points of Bas’s youth like *Pee-wee’s Playhouse* or *Beetlejuice*. The painting’s title imagines a contemporary iteration of the *1971 Miss General Idea Pageant*, a project of the art collective General Idea. A campy, gender-bending performative event staged at the Art Gallery of Ontario, the pageant grew out of General Idea’s previous work in mail art and cultural critique. The three members of the collective, Felix Partz, Jorge Zontal and AA Bronson, used the concept of the pageant as critical fodder for their subsequent work, setting a symbolic date of 1984 for the next iteration of the event. In his painting, Bas pays homage to these art historical precedents, reaching back to one star in the constellation of inspiration for the gay sensibility in his images.

From one star in that cluster to another: we return, then, to the image with which we began, to the orbit of Warhol’s specter. The concept of an inventory, of taking stock, seems particularly pertinent now. This year, Bas turned forty; he has finally shed the “art darling” and “boy wonder” tags lazily assigned by early observers of his work. As this collection of his paintings shows, Bas returns time and again to themes and subject matter that drive his curious mind: secret histories, the supernatural, fledgling masculinity, decadent youth. But the pictures have evolved, too, alongside the painter’s style. His latest paintings betray an almost classical compositional stability, and over time, his ethereal brushstrokes have coalesced into decisive, purposeful swaths of unabashed color. At this mid-career moment, Bas’s conjuring of Warhol also calls forth parallels beyond their apparent shared interest in popular culture. Both artists queerly and lovingly depict the young male form – Bas in his drawings and paintings, Warhol in several series of drawings and photographs. Both are sons of immigrant parents: Bas’s mother and father moved from Cuba to Miami, where he was born, while Warhol’s parents came to the United States from present-day Slovakia. Perhaps because of this, both are also scrupulous observers of human social relations, often positioning themselves as outside spectators through their incisive images. In a sense, *Sorting out Andy* becomes a stand-in for sorting out Hernan: a complex, ever-shifting process, filled with objects and stories stolen from another time and place to irrupt again, gaily and beautifully, in our ongoing present.

1 Rita Reif, “Bidders Throng Warhol Auction,” *The New York Times*, April 24, 1988.

2 Suzanne Muchnic, “Rummaging Through the Andy Warhol Estate,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 21, 1988.

3 Katya Tylevich, “Hernan Bas: The Story at the Intermission,” *Elephant*, Issue 18, Spring 2014, p. 107.

4 Kate Abbey-Lambertz, “Hernan Bas, Painter, Talks Growing Up in Haunted Florida, Working in Detroit,” *Huffington Post*, April 11, 2012:
https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/04/11/hernan-bas-painter-artist-miami-detroit_n_1418469.html

5 Emily Dickinson and Thomas Herbert Johnson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Including Variant Readings Critically Compared with All Known Readings*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979. 1183.

6 Tylevich 111.