

**O LUME DOS OLHOS,
A LUZIR NO ESCURO**

Let's say we're talking about porn. Where then do we find ourselves? Maybe our thoughts drift into the throes of a certain idea of perfect sex; unbridled, without attachment, whenever and with whoever you want. Then again, from a slightly more sober perspective, we might instead imagine some darkened bedroom or office, its door shut tight, a screen throwing flickering light on the blood-filled face in front of it. More sober yet – the grisly and exploitative circumstances in which so much porn is produced. Still another possibility; if we rewind a few decades, before the internet released deluges of porn into these private spaces, we might think of dim, carpeted theatres. You can hear the sound of onscreen heaving and whispering. And underneath it, sounds of the audience; a softer slipping and moaning din.

While looking at João Gabriel's paintings, which are based on 1970s gay porn films, my own thoughts have meandered through all of these places. Owing to the specificity of his source material, they have also ambled through specific dynamics of desire and pleasure; a need for love and fucking and everything else intimate, coursing underneath the thick wet blanket that is homophobic conservative society. Like the movies they draw from, Gabriel's dashed and washed and hastily rendered acrylics on paper and canvas, picture the fantasy of a gay sexual world uninhibited by this suppression. Therein, sculpted male bodies twist writhe and gather, amidst unending mid-day hues.

Because we are emphatically talking about paintings, we're also brought to the question of how, exactly, Gabriel's work delivers this world. Towards an answer, I'd like to start with volume. Not in the auditory sense. Instead, volume as a broader matter of quantity and flow; the way passions and liquids move in torrents and pulses. So too flirtation, lust, horniness, the desire to make images, the pleasure of doing so and the resultant burning desire to make more more more. Don't forget sweat, paint, cum, blood, and water, released and washed and released again. Every topic and motif in Gabriel's oeuvre – including the act of painting itself – is amplified by the incongruous volume of his production – incongruous because, although he works in volumes, he also nurtures a restrained thinness. In terms both of imagery and material, the paintings are not coagulated. Rather they are loosely and conscientiously layered. While the smaller works

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on paper are hung in large clusters, their light hues soften the visual load.

Would it be ridiculous to talk about the structural pleasure produced by paintings like these, in combination with so much juicy and overflowing sex? I don't think so. When Susan Sontag called for an erotics of art, she wasn't talking only about sex. She was also talking about relationships — both between us and art, and within artworks themselves — based in felt, desiring, embodied, messy interaction. Obviously there is sexual bliss in the encounters and scenes that Gabriel works from. But there is also the structural bliss of this content harmonizing with the form he gives to it.

It took time for me to see this quality of Gabriel's work — his way of using volume in graceful concert with subject matter. When this dynamic appeared, it produced a fracture in my own deeply ingrained preference for what had always seemed a properly "rigorous" way of making artwork. This ethic of rigor describes a way of working based on a shrewd understanding of the point where consistency of style balances with a non-repetitive dispersal of motifs and subjects; starkly in contrast with Gabriel's nearly intoxicated process of production and re-production.

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To see what I mean, venture online and have a look at William Higgins classic gay porn film *Sailor In The Wild* (1983) — a later film than many of Gabriel's sources, but one whose dialogue provided the title of his recent show, *A Permit For That Fire*. As you might expect, Higgins' film, in which a U.S. Marine participates in unending trysts on the edges of a mountain lake, is a cornucopia of bodies (the dialogue seems too perfunctory, to use the word characters) body parts, fluids and respirations. The film's blue skies, grass and stone predict Gabriel's rich synthetic naturalism. Amidst these natural forces, and sometimes inside wooden cabins, men strip men. At times the film becomes a montage of these devouring, clutching, penetrating. Its texture is made from the surfaces of nature, including skin that is in turn smooth, hairy, and glistening wet. Tenderness slips in and out of carefully tended cruelty.

The thing is, Gabriel's paintings never become pornographic themselves. When we see a hand-job, cock and fist are visible only as a cluster of amorphous brushstrokes. Rendered in middle hues, these flurries of thespian sex float between pink torsos and denim blue-jeaned Adonis legs. Sometimes the satiating gestures disappear altogether. A single painting can contain nothing more than a few blurry blotches that are barely recognizable as bodies at all, much less bodies having sex. Just like Gabriel's more comprehensively — though still always

provisionally – rendered figures, these corporeal shapes are in turn sketched, like hurried studies, and brushed in like diffuse shadows. Behind them are broad swaths of color; warm green, describing grass; muddy drifts of brown and grey; cherry reds forming liquid skeins and retina puckering high lights.

These pictures are not the equivalent of their subject, but translations of it. As closely as they synch with their pornographic referents, they equally replace the unflinching directness of those films, with a more diffuse approach to image and subject. Their ghostly impressionism obfuscates salacious detail. At the same time, this same effect lends the pictures coy, flirty agency. They become echoes, emptied of descriptive subtlety but for that reason rich with another, stranger sonority.

If literary translations deliver stories into other cultures and languages, what does Gabriel's painterly translation of cinematic homoerotic fantasy, do? In my case, this world of performed pleasures meets a viewer whose experience with porn is of a distinctly heterosexual, even heteronormative variety. Which begs the question: what exactly are the new relationships produced by the translation, as it brings worlds that were before discreetly separate, into contact with one another? It must be true that the paintings differently resonate with me, as an invited voyeur, than with a young gay person in 2019, for whom they might function as portals through which an era of fantasized pleasure, never known in its original moment, can live a new life in present time.

A challenging socio-political subtext boils underneath all of this. Any time an artist invites a broad audience into a world that has existed adjacent to dominant culture – in this case a dominant heteronormative society – the fraught ramifications of spectatorship become entangled with a broadening of popular consciousness, that seems innately good. Gabriel's paintings, as much as expressing perhaps the most intimate kind of spectatorial contact – that of wanting or even needing to engage with certain images to the point of transmuting them into one's own visual language – also participate in a re-framing of gay sexuality, particularly prevalent in recent films, as something (although it should not even need to be said) of its own unique and complete kind of beauty¹.

No one's sexuality or sexual fantasies should require justification or argument. Unfortunately, the history of Gabriel's imagery testifies to the fact that gayness, along with a tradition of homoerotic films, has not enjoyed the privilege

¹ Think of Luca Guadagnino's *Call Me By Your Name* (2017), Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight* (2016), Abdellatif Kechiche's *Blue Is the Warmest Color* (2013)

of remaining a-political. Produced in the 1970s, the porn films that inspired these paintings required their makers to evade moralistic and homophobic censorship. The oncoming AIDS crisis would, tragically, give connotations of death and suffering to the very fact of gay sexual desire; a brutal condition on sexuality, bolstered by the prejudicial negligence of governments in their failure to support gay communities in fighting the disease. To look at Gabriel's voluminous and layered translation, is by necessity to look through the lens of this decade written in trauma.

It's important to remember how these voluminous layers of explicit and latent content, also contain a corresponding thinness or emptiness – a conspicuous absence of personhood. Human beings that have on the one hand been rendered pink and fleshy, are on the other hand eerily devoid of unique human characteristics. There are as many ways to interpret this simultaneous fullness and hollowness, as there are viewers for Gabriel's work. A person might think of the way quick and promiscuous sex precludes rich and detailed intimacy. But to my mind, this absence of intricately described subjectivities does something else as well. It communicates a desire to make the painterly translations permeable to a plethora of gazes and projections. In retaining this openness, the pictures welcome so many exterior presences to inhabit their pleasure suffused scenes. Thus each encounter becomes a strange mutual visitation. Albeit one free of religious doctrine; instead intimate, transformative, perpetually unfinished through every stroke and frame.

Mitch Speed

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