

SSENSE: 'FAMOUS FEELINGS WITH PAINTER SAM MCKINNISS', by Thora Siemsen, February 2019

FAMOUS FEELINGS WITH PAINTER SAM MCKINNISS

The New York Artist Speaks to Thora Siemsen About Image-Making, Small Talk, Hell, And Henri Fantin-Latour

Text: Thora Siemsen
Photography: Heather Steen



I never quite noticed how nervous a smile Jennifer Lopez wore on the night of the 42nd Grammy Awards in 2000, until I saw Sam McKinniss' interpretation in his Brooklyn studio—the painting, part of a collection of new works being shipped to Brussels for the New York artist's first solo show in Europe. For the show, he painted Lopez on the Grammy red carpet, the image so famous it prompted the creation of Google Image Search. The fly girl in her chiffon-silk and citrine-studded green Versace dress. Lopez was facing the public just months after her night in jail for fleeing a club shootout with the man she loved and a stolen 9mm handgun in the trunk of their Lincoln Navigator. McKinniss captures the spectacular tension of the moment, her eerie, stretched grin.



Left: Diana, 2018. Oil over acrylic on canvas. Right: Jennifer, 2018. Oil over acrylic on canvas. Featured in Top Image: Gucci sweater and Heron Preston trousers.

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Another Versace woman, Princess Diana, in a black dress and heels, monochrome choker and pearl earrings. Not funereal, though rest assured, rest in peace, the Princess did attend Gianni Versace's funeral a month before her own death in 1997. McKinniss chooses instead to paint the Princess of Wales in her Christina Stambolian "Revenge Dress," worn to a summer party in 1994, the same day her estranged husband Prince Charles would confess to his affair with Camilla Parker-Bowles in a [television documentary](#). The McKinniss woman is not uninterested in revenge; her working conditions may necessitate it.

While McKinniss says he doesn't read much about the lives of the famous people he paints, I suspect an exception when I see a copy of his friend Gary Indiana's book of collected criticism, *Vile Days*, closest to a painting of Arnold Schwarzenegger in *The Terminator*. Of course McKinniss has also read Indiana's 2005 book *The Schwarzenegger Syndrome*, about the Former Governor of California. Sitting at his desk in his studio, McKinniss tells me: "I don't feel uncomfortable around celebrity, but in terms of being in the world it seems like a rather uncomfortable position to hold. I care about pictures. I care about posing, the human body, image-making. When it comes to Princess Diana, I guess I care about costume and dance and tragedy."



Sam wears Balenciaga coat.



Left: White Roses (after Fantin-Latour), 2018. Oil over acrylic on canvas. Right: Sam wears Balenciaga coat.

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Sam McKinniss

What do you think makes a person tragic?

Death. Illness. Having your heart broken. Disappointment. Collapsed identities or expectations. Failed aspirations. The descent into madness. Those things seem tragic.

What time do you wake up in the morning?

It depends. I feel overworked. I went out a lot this weekend. I was out really late every night. This morning I woke up at six, because I had really wanted to go to bed early. I'm smarter in the morning. My brain works faster. Sometimes I try and take advantage of that. As the day gets longer, I get stupider and lazier and I give up faster. Or I'm inclined to finally give up for the day. It's annoying that you have to live an entire day every day sometimes.



Right: Sam wears Charles Jeffrey Loverboy sweater. Left: Still Life with Primroses, Pears and Pomegranates (after Fantin-Latour), 2018. Oil over acrylic on canvas.

Are you going out less these days?

No. I socialize a lot. I'm going out earlier. I'm not going out in the way that I used to. I used to go out to raves, dance parties, warehouse parties, things of that nature. I wanted to dance more and I wanted to do more drugs. I'm doing that less now, just because it's less exciting. It's more predictable and I've done it a lot. I don't feel like it. I have to work.

I'm still very social with a tight knit group of people. Acquaintances are exhausting. I don't find small talk exhausting. I like small talk and I hate it when people say they don't like small talk, because I think it's great and socially valuable. I like repartee. I like discussing minuscule events. I like politeness. Light inoffensive gossip, observational humor. People who can't engage with that are annoying and tiresome.

How soon do you know if you like a person?

Immediately. People have tells. Whether they know it or not people are exposing and presenting a set of values or a sense of humor or a sense of style and a set of prejudices. I think I'm a good judge of character and I'm also good at reading body language. I've been taken advantage of by people that I like, but I've also had really meaningful, extensive, long friendships and relationships. It's nice to be surprised by somebody that you initially think that you don't care for.

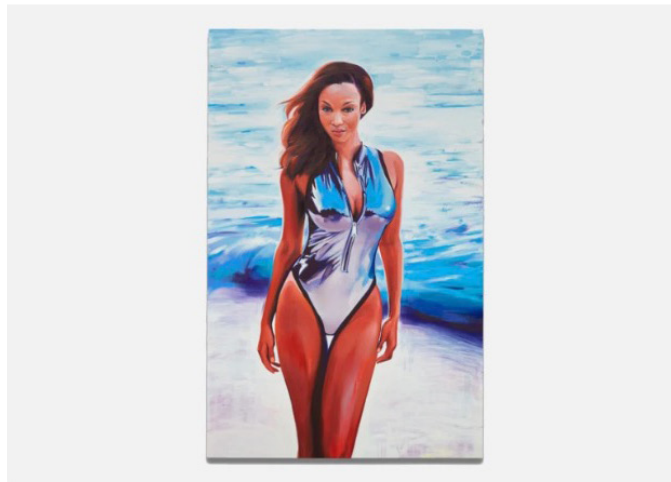
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What are your parents like?

My parents are rather conservative. My dad is a pastor at a church in Connecticut and my mom is his wife and my mom.

Do you feel a kinship to people who experienced evangelism or extreme religious fervor?

I understand certain evangelical tactics, conversion tactics, religious instruction as indoctrination. Recovering addict mentality. I think I understand people coming from a conservative background or outlook. I kind of wish I didn't, but I think my background lends a certain complexity to the way that I understand messaging. It also exhausts me. I feel exhausted by eternity and symbolism.



Tyra, 2015-2018. Oil on canvas.

What is your earliest memory of looking at art?

There was an art museum down the street from where I grew up in New Britain, Connecticut called The New Britain Museum of American Art. I remember going there when I was really young, almost pre-memory. I do remember being there and knowing that there were paintings on the wall but not being tall enough to see them. I remember a print in my childhood room. It's a Northern Renaissance masterpiece, but there was a print of it in my room, and it was a very explicit depiction, a kind of goth depiction, of heaven and hell. And the hell section rocked. It was extremely gory and violent, a lot of nudity in it, bodies in eternal agony. It was frightening, and the heaven part was really kind of straight-laced and boring. It wasn't as interesting.

Do you have any artists you're aware of in your ancestral lineage?

Professionally speaking, none that I'm aware of. There are a fair amount of dabblers. My grandmother and my mother, all the women on my mom's side of the family are good with their hands. My mom makes quilts. My grandmother made quilts. I'm sure her mother made quilts or handiwork. I have a bunch of my mom's quilts. My dad is an amateur woodworker. He makes decoy ducks as a hobby. That's what I know of.

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Which other jobs did you do before you paid your taxes as a full-time artist?

I worked as a florist for awhile. I was a bookseller. I worked a lot of retail jobs at the mall selling shitty clothes. I was a waiter for a little bit. That didn't last very long. I always wished that I'd become a bartender because I like bartenders a lot. It's probably for the best that I didn't go that way due to my own proclivity for drink. I probably would've just made a full-time life out of that. A lot of retail. I was always trying to sell paintings here and there, whenever I could. Usually I could, but it was never enough to live on.



Sam wears Gucci sweater

You've talked about feeling yourself an apprentice to Henri Fantin-Latour and you've also talked about Google Image Search as a type of master, in a way.

When I discovered Henri Fantin-Latour's paintings they seemed inherently strange, even though sedate, and superficially opposed to the more pressing artistic formal achievements of his day. There's something hidden inside of his work that takes advantage of the way paint handling changed during his era, the way that the observation of light and color developed during his lifetime and career. He absolutely took advantage of there being bourgeois society that made a market for there to be an art market commercially. He certainly took advantage of that, which is why I think there's so many of his paintings. Yet the longer I look at his paintings, the stranger they look. They care not for specific dogma or a prescribed point of view or approach. I think they're extremely intelligent paintings, endowed with an innate intelligence and sensitivity that has nothing to prove. That level of intelligence or sensitivity does not feel the need to prove itself. I really like that. I want to paint like that. I want to be that kind of artist, and I want to be that kind of human being.

Do you feel like you have things to prove?

No. I hold these truths to be self-evident. [*Laughs*]

In terms of choosing to be an artist as a vocation, in past regimes, in past centuries, that would have meant going to work for an established master in their studio, learning their technique, learning their work, learning how to make their work, so that you could work under them and produce more pictures. To fulfill whatever the commission or assignment or whatever the demand is. That no longer really exists, although obviously people work with assistants. I think this is different from there being a master and apprentice. The apprentice system doesn't exist anymore, but it's probably a good way to learn how to paint. I've latched onto this figure, Fantin-Latour, based on an initial attraction and copied a few, out of a desire to self-educate and learn technique, look at his composition really closely, how things are built inside the rectangle. It turned into my work, but it also turned into a master-apprentice kind of relationship. But also, it felt analogous to what I was already doing when I would copy any other jpeg off the internet. I'm copying it to get to know it better. I'm a good copyist. I like mimesis as a post-modern attitude toward imagery and image-making.

When did you move away from shooting your own original photographs to paint?

I just got annoyed with it. I got annoyed with myself. What's true is that I've always liked copy-work, or mimesis, or something about appropriation, but I wanted also to make romantic looking work. When I was in art school initially what I gravitated towards, and felt was really powerful art in the world that really left an impact on me, were people photographing members of their circle. People like Nan Goldin or Jack Pierson or Mark Morrisroe. People who were making art out of people close to them in their life and it turning into some kind of melodramatic or operatic romance. That kind of impulse felt immediate and cool and sweet and accessible. If you're young and you have a camera, it's really easy to make work like that.

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What do you think makes an artwork romantic?

Emotionalism. Emotional appeal. Manipulation. A lot of that is also based on color and light and the formal aspects. There are cliches and tropes that may be relied upon. Big themes: death, love, individuality, character, fortitude.



Diana (on Jonikal), 2018. Oil over acrylic on canvas.

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Would you paint the person you're in love with?

Yeah, privately. Out of respect of my own privacy and his privacy, I would refrain from asking anyone else to look at or care about it [Laughs]. I usually feel like oversharing needs to be something that people are wary of, and now people are not. I'm not interested in memoir anymore. Maybe I once was. I'm not anymore.

Do you plan to write more about art?

I'd like to. I used to think I was interested in creative writing as a form that helped me explore some details of my life. I'm less driven or motivated to do that now, but I think that's because I've gotten more involved with [writing for] *Artforum*. I don't like collaborating that much, but when I write for the magazine it feels collaborative in a way that I understand. Every time I write something, I feel like I have to read four or five books. There are a number of voices that I'm contending with and working to understand that have already made arguments and observations on whatever the given subject is. There's an editor who is working with me to make a better piece of writing, a better researched argument, a better stated point of view. That feels collaborative. Then, there's the object itself I'm seeking to understand. Whoever the subject of the piece is. These are all things that make me feel that my brain is healthy.

What are some of your tics during your ambient hours?

I talk to myself in here when I'm alone a lot. Just exclamations. I yell a lot just to try and stay amped. Also because I get frustrated. Just to keep the intensity up. I listen to pop music a lot, a habit I can't break. I drink a lot of coffee all day. I stand up and sit down.



Sam wears Balenciaga coat and Loewe jeans.

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Which object in your studio brings you the most annoyance?

Oh my god. Whatever painting I'm working on, because it's so demanding. Beyond that, the three flights of stairs I have to go up to get here.

Do you exercise?

Yeah, I go to yoga, which is like exercise-lite. I can't bring myself to hang out at gyms.

How would you describe your wardrobe?

Rather plain, but I think I look cool [*Laughs*].

Do you follow fashion?

Vaguely. I'm aware of fashion as a force in the world and I'm aware of its presence within contemporary cosmopolitan life. If I have to show up and present as a member of the art world then I guess I try to dress like somebody who grew up in Connecticut with a chip on their shoulder about everything.

Thora Siemsen is a freelance writer living in New York City. Her work has appeared in Rolling Stone, The Creative Independent, The New Yorker, and more.

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