

The Brooklyn Rail

Todd Bienvenu: JOMO (Joy of Missing Out)

By Madeleine Seidel



Todd Bienvenu, *Tiny Wedgie*, 2022. Oil on canvas, 16 x 12 x 3/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and Almine Rech.

With the wide availability of vaccines came the parties: the downtown ragers, belated birthdays, and day-drinking afternoons that slowly morphed into 2 a.m. heart-to-hearts with old friends, and a million other activities that felt important—no, necessary—to attend after nearly a year and a half alone. But along with these came the return of an old anxiety, one which Todd Bienvenu analyzes in his most recent exhibition *JOMO (Joy of Missing Out)*, currently on view at Almine Rech.

After the extended series of lockdowns, there was a feeling that we were owed a bit of pleasure after our collective isolation, and for many New Yorkers, that meant a return to the noisy bars, loud chatter, and close quarters that have long defined this frenzied city's intertwining senses of joy and chaos. But, despite the festive mood, we saw as well a resurgence of "FOMO," or the fear of missing out on all of these post-pandemic social events that served as a symbol of successful reentry into our old lives. In his June 2021 essay "The Return of FOMO" for *The Cut*, Matthew Schreier described this phenomenon bearing down on New York's summer: "FOMO is budding again with the promise of shared experiences," he writes.

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Capturing an all-too-familiar anxiety about this moment of deep ambivalence and uncertainty, Schneier asks, *“Do I really want to go back to the old way? Will I be able to continue all the practices I developed in the pandemic era? Does everyone want to do something I now realize I don’t want to do? Do I actually want to do something I didn’t think I wanted to do?”*

In his new show, Todd Bienvenu takes FOMO and turns it into JOMO: the joy of missing out. Across a selection of pieces from 2022, Bienvenu depicts the happiness of being alone but not lonely through vignettes that see his subjects reveling in the pleasure of doing exactly what they want, outside of the social expectations of other people and their rules. The exhibition is a mix of expressive painting, collage, and sculpture, all rendered in technicolor excess—excluding a selection of bronze figurines that instead shock with their irreverent subject matter. Roughly divided into two rooms, the larger of the two is filled with large, expressive, and textured canvases while the smaller one features paper collages. The collage room is the less successful venture: the chunky paper fragments that make up Bienvenu’s images take on an arts-and-crafts quality that distract from the content of the image. Take, for example, *Lawnmower* (2022). In the piece, a man on a riding lawnmower surveys his estate as a group of people frolic in a pool in the background. There is a clear separation between the foregrounded man and the others in the pool, but the limited detail available to the medium Bienvenu has chosen here saps this image of the joyful quality for which he is supposedly aiming. Many of the scenes in the collages, such as *Wipeout* (2022), are also revisited in paintings in the next room, where the painterly qualities of Bienvenu’s work best captures the intricacy required to truly show the pleasure of stepping back from the hustle and bustle of society.

While Bienvenu’s collages fall a bit flat, the paintings at Almine Rech are a near-perfect distillation of the artist’s thesis—joyful little scenes that showcase people out in nature or in their homes, enjoying solitude. Now, these are not Walden-esque scenes of peace: instead, Bienvenu explores the irreverent, trashy, and hilarious side of life. Many of his subjects are seen lounging on the beach. In *Small Wedgie* (2022), a woman stands in shallow water with her back to the viewer, allowing us to see her adjusting her bikini and exposing her hilariously severe tan lines. It’s an intimate moment that signals this woman’s sense of comfort when she’s alone on the water—so comfortable she’ll pick at herself without a care in the world about who sees. Elsewhere, people are camping with their close friends (*Glamping* (2022)) or cloistered in their bedrooms (*Facetime* (2022) and *Bear Skin Rug* (2022)) as they embrace and enjoy their time away from the world.

The centerpiece of the show is the behemoth painting *View of NYC from my Bushwick rooftop*. Awash in shades of blue, purple, and gray, Bienvenu depicts a bird’s-eye view of the city’s buildings, stretching from Brooklyn into Manhattan. On the rooftops, you can see people mingling, drinking, and watching the sun go down as it silhouettes the skyscrapers in the distance. It is a beautiful image of joy that depicts an individual experience—looking out at the end of a summer’s day—as something deeply in tune with a collective event. Are we ever really missing out even when we’re by ourselves? As society adjusts to the shifting tide of social interaction, we renegotiate our relationships to other people and, most importantly, ourselves. Todd Bienvenu’s JOMO suggests that the answer to this dilemma is not necessarily found in the company of others, but in the sublime bliss of missing out.