

Nolan Simon

Cut off from the World, Attached to One Another

November 1–December 21, 2024

A group of us went down to the PMA, some of my favorite people going to one of my favorite museums, and spent some time in the Duchamp collection, one of my favorite rooms in the museum. We took photos gazing through the hole in Étant Donnés. —Ashley

Nolan Simon's paintings are laden with references. Those familiar with Western art history can draw connections between his recent paintings and infamous artworks depicting sexual organs, specifically vulvas, and consider them within their respective contexts. The historical works were quite underground upon creation and slowly worked their way into mainstream circulation as societal norms changed. Their voyeurism, in counterpoint to Beaux-arts fantasias, spoke to an almost fetishistic fixation on the mundane and prosaic. Yet their graphic realism held mysteries. Obscured faces and secretive viewings protected the identities of the artists' models while heightening the erotic tension of the unknown.

Romantic, renaissance-esque vibes playing alongside modern themes and social concerns (gender expression, self-identity) remind people that [there are] questions that are timeless and universal.—Eva

On the other hand, the models in Simon's paintings are known. Ashley is a transfemme artist living in Philadelphia. Amanda is a photographer and self-portraitist living in central Pennsylvania. Eva is a New Jersey Native, avid reader and enthusiastic procrastinator. Shannon is a writer and old friend living in Brooklyn. Mike is a professional amateur model and photographer from New Jersey. Kiko is an artist living and working in Brooklyn. Martin is a drummer, producer, sound artist, and mental health counselor living in Detroit (Pisces sun, Leo rising, Libra moon). C is a sound artist and comfort liaison living in Detroit. Morgana is a queer trans professor, artist, and monster living in Brooklyn. Erin is a photographer and model living in Brooklyn. The artist invites this cadre of intimate friends to play somewhere between a persona, a role, and a self. They are Simon's friends, lovers, and colleagues who comprise part of a repertory of individuals who have become identifiable over the years through repeated appearances in paintings.

At one point, we joked about breaking eggs in plastic underpants and that sounded hilarious and I wanted to try it so I did. Before the egg smash, we took a few shots with just the underpants, and with unbroken eggs.—Shannon

The models are his collaborators, too. The paintings in this series are the result of carefully constructed photography sessions, which rely on the input of everyone in the room. On his experience in the artist's studio, Mike recalls, "Nolan presented the concept and let me settle into it." Here, the complexity, vulnerability, and intimacy of communication, consent, and play are made visible. "Some of the models will be in the audience, so we'll have our own little moments of pride or embarrassment or excitement, alongside our appreciation of the show as a whole," Shannon adds.

[The paintings represent] networks and connections within vulnerable spaces and moments.—Morgana

These images are made to be shared, and nudge us towards tender observation. In an age of brutal image saturation, where depictions of intimacy in our visual lives are often flattened and decontextualized by algorithms, Simon's paintings replenish those intimate moments with innuendo, allusion, and a suggestive appeal. The artist is interested in the ways that private proclivity, curiosity, trauma, and desire exist around us and in turn shape our interpretations of and interactions with the paintings in this exhibition. But not everyone agrees. Ashley says, "Paintings don't represent things, they are for decoration."

Nolan Simon (b. 1980) lives and works in Detroit, MI. He received a BFA from the College for Creative Studies, Detroit in 2005. Recent solo exhibitions include "Grace Under Fire," the Shepherd, Detroit, MI (2024); "The First Machine," What Pipeline, Detroit, MI (2023); "Sons and Daughters and Lovers," Lars Friedrich, Berlin, Germany (2022); and "Polyamory," 47 Canal, New York City (2021). His work has been included in exhibitions at 125 Newbury Gallery, New York (2024); Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne, Germany (2023); Lisson Gallery, New York (2019); Greene Naftali, New York (2019); Marlborough Chelsea, New York (2016); and Lucas Hirsch, Düsseldorf, Germany (2016), among others.