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In the studio with... Hernan Bas



Hernan Bas in his studio in Miami. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro; © Hernan Bas

The American artist Hernan Bas is best-known for his theatrical figurative paintings, in which androgynous young men appear engaged in rituals of courtship, love and death. He draws on a vast range of influences, from decorative arts to the writing of Oscar Wilde, childrens' TV shows and cinema. 'The Conceptualists', a solo exhibition at Victoria Miro gallery in London (18 November–14 January 2023), features a new body of work in which Bas presents us with different kinds of artist, consumed by a variety of obsessive pursuits. 'What before might have been seen as a rogues' gallery of "weirdos" is now, under the guise and cover of "art", a series of portraits of intellectuals. The humour I hope these works convey is intentional... I don't consider my series of paintings to be a parody, but I have enjoyed the liberty of making portraits of artists who, while taking themselves seriously, might concede they're being quite "clever",' Bas has said of this latest series.

Where is your studio?

My studio is in Little Havana in Miami, just a few blocks from where I live. So I can walk to work. Little Havana is an old Cuban neighbourhood and a bit of a tourist trap, so I walk past all these people taking pictures on my way there each day. The only time I really liked [the busyness], or missed it, was in the early days of the pandemic when everything was shut down. Walking down that same street when it was completely empty was very strange – no double-decker tour buses, no noise. Generally though, [the crowds] are more of an annoyance.

Do you have a studio routine?

I'm pretty routine. I usually get here at around 10:30 or 11 in the morning. I don't drink coffee, but I have one can of Coke a day, which I drink first thing. Then I basically just go straight to work. I don't have an assistant, so it's just me in the studio and I will continue working until around 7pm, seven days a week. I try to take some days off, but I like to work a lot.

Have you always worked alone?

I had an assistant years ago, in the mid 2000s, but it was to help with clerical work. I've never had anyone work on my actual paintings or touch anything I do. After a while I realised that it took longer for me to explain how to do something than to just do it myself. I also like to have my private time.

Do you listen to anything while you're working?

Silence drives me crazy. For years now, I've had a TV on in the studio. It's mostly just background noise and I'll watch the same things over and over again – it tends to be dumb ghost-hunting shows and weird stuff on the History or Travel channel. But if I'm on a deadline, like I am now, and I have to get something done very fast then I put music on to help me concentrate because even though I'm not distracted by the TV, there are moments when I'm looking at the screen. Yesterday, I had Depeche Mode playing all day.

What's the strangest object in your studio?

I have a [taxidermied] javelina, which I originally bought for my friend, after the Pixies song Havalina, but she lives in Brooklyn, in quite a small apartment so I can't really send a four-foot javelina – in my head I thought they were much smaller.

I also have a kind of cabinet of curiosities – there's a lot of weird stuff in there. I collect all kinds of antiquities, a lot of Victorian mourning objects and things like that. But the thing that most people find the strangest is an 18th-century cooling casket – a coffin, basically. It's made of wicker and [the corpse] would be put in it during the wake. It would be reused multiple times for different people, which is a little freaky to think about.

Who's the most interesting visitor you've had to your studio?

I'm pretty private so I don't really have many people visit and I've only been in this studio for about a year. Usually, it's just the gallerists that I work with. Once in a blue moon, a curator or someone will stop by. I guess the most interesting [visitor] for me is my brother, who actually lives next door to me. He's not an artist and not in the art world, so I like that whenever he pops in, he gives me a kind of unbiased review of what I'm working on.

Is there anything that frustrates you about about the space?

I always get frustrated towards the end of [preparing for] a show because I run out of space to hang paintings. But then the works get picked up a day later, the studio is empty and I'm fine again.

'Hernan Bas: The Conceptualists' is at Victoria Miro, London, from 18 November–14 January 2023.