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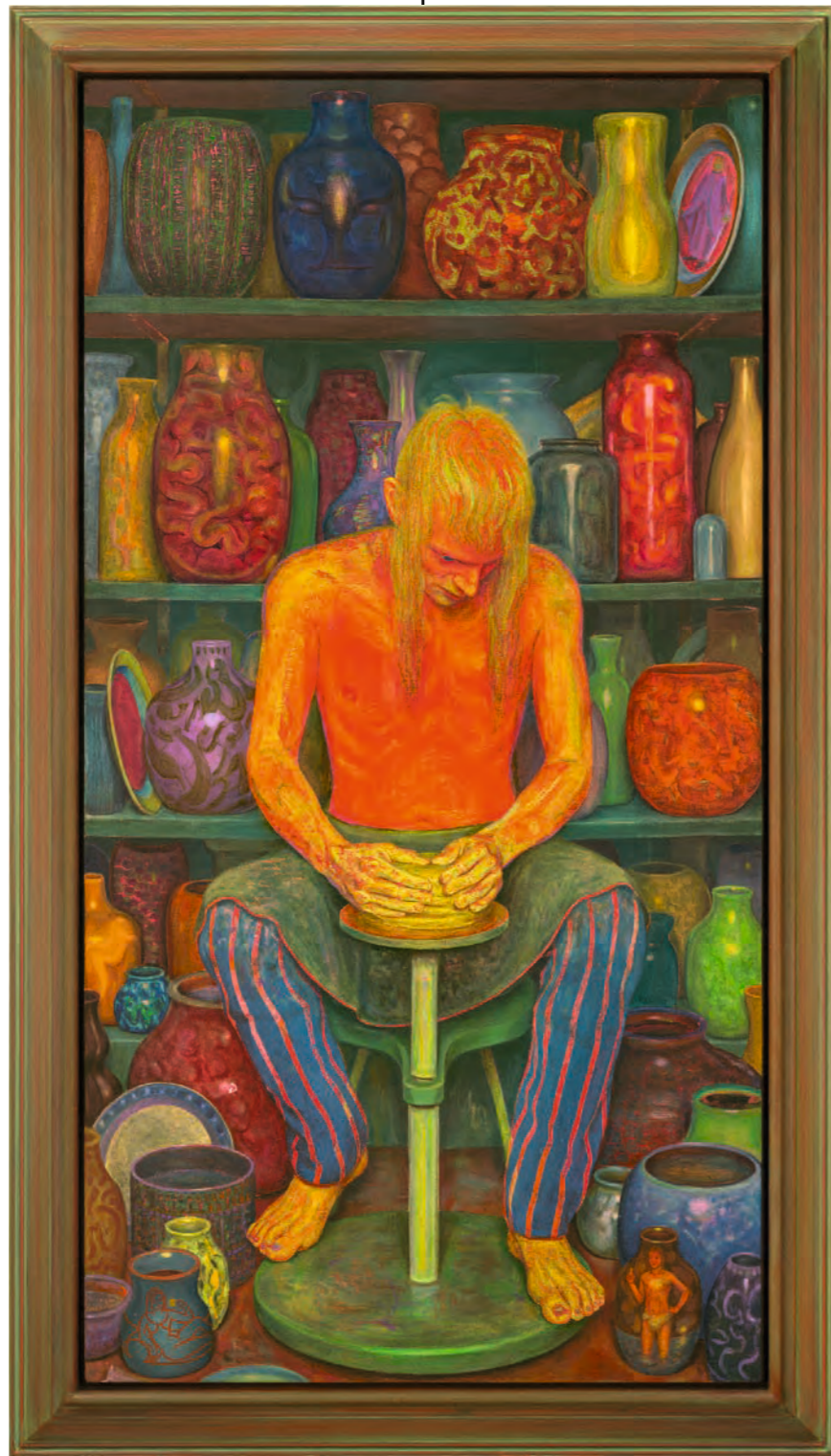


ATHENS

STEVEN SHEARER
"SLEEP, DEATH'S OWN BROTHER"
THE GEORGE ECONOMOU
COLLECTION
18 JUN 2023 – MAR 2024

Steven Shearer's (*1968) elusive paintings pay tribute to the cult of the dandy in painterly representations of finely boned, white men who pursue their own doctrines of beauty and individuality. It is customary in literature that he comes from privilege, yet shows immense disregard for money, his propensity for the arts conferring a superiority of the mind that delves into art as an esoteric journey. Shearer, who came of age as a disaffected suburbanite during grunge's long-haired heyday, reframes the Baudelairean archetype to include anyone who doesn't aspire to usual middle-class values, his dandy an unwavering life-stroller often viewed as a social misfit, a vision that imbues the entire exhibition with a blend of fine-art iconography and modish coolness.

Curated by Dieter Roelstraete, "Sleep, Death's Own Brother" is built around substantial holdings of Shearer's work at Athens's George Economou Collection and places particular emphasis on the artist's paintings. Shearer's portraits appear incongruous with the genre, as if their intention is not to capture the qualities of the individual sitter, but to mystify the style and mental space of the mostly young, androgynous figures the painter has chosen to immortalize. Take the in-profile title character in *Man Sitting* (2006), who wears his long, black hair like a veil over his face, escaping or negating the viewer's gaze. Shirtless and slump-shouldered on a green-upholstered bench, the figure is rendered with a nebulous contour of another (imaginary) painted on the side. A psychedelic amalgamation of resistant disregard and the remove of melancholia, the work is essentially an anti-portrait.



Potter, 2021, oil on linen, artist's frame, 178.1 x 101.6 cm

Through portraiture, Shearer gives his sitters an agency to bring together their cultural and personal sense of self. *The Green Collector* (2021), for example, is a portrait of a jacketed male figure, his sandy coif sternly swept back, who possessively holds a miniature female figure,

possibly a new acquisition. Desire, occasionally verging on obsession, imbues this medium-sized, one-quarter picture offering an insight into the collector's mindset. Foregrounded against a tangle of wild red silhouettes, the steel-blue and bloodshot eyes of the collector

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Atheist's Commission, 2018, oil and ink on poly canvas, 183 x 127 cm

© Steven Shearer. Courtesy: Galerie Eva Presenhuber and David Zwirner Gallery



dictate a very specific sense of self, while invoking a Kantian notion of beauty that values purposiveness over purpose.

From Plato to Schopenhauer, numerous philosophers have aligned beauty moral worth, arguing that those who appreciate beauty are, by default, more attuned to virtues of sensitivity, empathy, and compassion. The Romanticist quest for beauty as a higher moral perfuses the artist's life with agony and suffering, exacting steep costs against the comforts of social conformity. *Potter* (2021), one of the exhibition's most

ambitious works, shows an apron-lapped, thin-chested craftsman pitched over his throwing wheel, hands nearly clasped around a hump of glowing-gold clay, surrounded by vessels glazed with swirled shadows like bowels. An old-school admirer and a perpetrator of styles, Shearer's confident realism conveys a new art-historical protagonist very much in control of his medium.

Conversely, Shearer's drawings confer an ominous vulnerability. *Band* (2004), one of the most emotionally charged works on paper on display, distills the artist's passion for punk metal

and darkly proposes suicide as life's ultimate choice, his treatment sensitively mixing nihilism, empathy, and awe. The juxtaposition of his own ink works with drawings by Otto Dix, Otto Mueller, and Rudolf Schlichter underlines the artists' thematic and aesthetic affinities and complicates the reading of Shearer's work, bringing him closer to the key proponents of *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity), who arrayed themselves against Expressionism's utopian urges and distortions. The juxtaposition simultaneously serves as a reminder that categorizations of Shearer's work can feel vacuous; by paying knowing tribute to specific moments in the history of art, he grants himself the liberty – as only a dandy could – to freely navigate its currents, confluences, and contradictions.

Photography, in which rise as an art form New Objectivity was instrumental, likewise has had significant bearing on Shearer's visual language; in that sense, *Sleep II* (2015), an enormous photo collage that takes up the entirety of the collection's top-floor galleries, feels like a culmination. Comprising thousands of web-found images of sleeping people, the work cunningly invites its leaned-in viewers to pry into the exposed intimacies of others, only to startle awake the disarmed intimacy that these many anonymous persons are dead.

As the work rouses and relieves this anxiety of gazing, "Sleep, Death's Own Brother" sets forth a vision of rebellion that often turns on itself, its enactment of the anti-hero dandy exerting pressure on the parameters and possibilities of portrait-making. It is also a fascinating study of how an artist can entice the viewer into a poetic scenography of cat and mouse, where existential dread looms and strategies of release do not always ease the pain.

Vassilios Doupas