



Christopher Hartmann – Come so close (that I might see)

25 July – 29 August 2020

Friday – Saturday, 12–6 pm and by appointment

Opening reception

All day opening on Saturday 25 July, 12–8pm

‘I want you to know, if you ever read this, there was a time when I would rather have had you by my side than any one of these words; I would rather have had you by my side than all the blue in the world.’ – Maggie Nelson, *Bluets*

It began with an asshole.

I had stepped into Christopher Hartmann’s Deptford studio where I was struck by a painting of a bare male bum, framed close-up, impossibly pink and flawless. It had a strange kind of intimacy, very exposed, vulnerable and yet – revealing very little about itself.

It was a bright cold winter day, and no-one could know what was coming in just a few short weeks, and how strangely resonant Hartmann's android-like figures would become in the new world, where we all bunkered down and dived deeper into the simulation of real life. There's a consistent tension between arousal and despondence, eroticism and opacity, in Hartmann's paintings. In this exhibition, aptly titled, *Come so close (that I might see)* Hartmann indeed gets up closer and more personal – a version of the painting I had seen appears here, a nude male figure who appears to take a selfie, searing pink against a blank turquoise background. But unlike the digital depictions we're used to, Hartmann denies us easy image-consumption by erasing all the imperfections that make us real.

Hartmann knowingly plays with the paradox of seeing – the more he zooms in, the less we see, but the more we rely on our other senses; the beat of anticipation, visual cues that tap into less conscious readings of the painting. Hartmann suspends time and space just before some action seems to have happened or is about to take place; his figures – who are mostly, white, European, male, generic - inhabit this eerie non-space, like the disembodied avatars in an Ed Atkins video, empathetic and abhorrent at the same time. They are rubbery and awkward, their skin as smooth and perfect as a Pontormo portrait. "I deliberately bleach out details that would give the subjects too much individuality. Which reminds of digitally rendered skin or social media filters" Hartmann notes. In striving to be different, we often end up being the same.

His men gaze apathetically into the distance – their eyes never meet, and they never look back at us, or else their eyes are cut from the frame altogether - but they seem to know they're being watched, desirous and desired. This tension recalls the eros of Antonioni's cinema – the director, Hartmann says, has been a major influence on him. In this exhibition, the apparently disconnected vignettes form an unconventional narrative. Like Antonioni, Hartmann is interested in exploring atmosphere, and in particular, what has become a very contemporary feeling: isolation.

Even when his figures appear together, they look as though they are alone: in one work, Hiding until you or I forget a catatonic figure dressed in red lies on the grass, gazing towards the sky; lips almost meet in a synthetic kiss, a thumb hovers over a nipple on a phone screen – their touch "always oscillates between tenderness, rejection and eroticism." This is vividly captured in a painting of two yellow rubber gloves, a symbol for our times, that imagines "the whole idea of proximity/distance and longing for touching/being touched; especially during this lockdown in which you're too scared to get too close to someone else", – as Hartmann puts it.

"My paintings are not about the digital itself but the subjects I depict are definitely conditioned by it", Hartmann reflects. Hartmann too is conditioned by the digital – it's where he gets his distinct palette and the flatness of his brushwork. His process usually begins by leafing through fashion editorials and perusing photographs for inspiration – he then reworks certain elements or minutiae in these source materials, using them as a kind of motif for staging a new photograph with friends posing for his camera. Then the experimenting begins: he amps up the primary colours and plays with the compositions in Photoshop until the decision is made about what is going onto the linen, the glow of the screens and the filters of Instagram seeping in via a bright yellow base layer of oil paint for the skin, or in the oversaturated grass and skies that recall default wallpapers on Windows XP – simulations of reality too perfect to believe.

Quarantine has compounded the coldness of our interactions, turned flesh into something ephemeral, far-fetched and made us contemplate the way our bodies met even before the virus. These are paintings about love and erotic desire, pain and loss in the age of contactless connections, where the touch and the gaze become sinister, even threatening. Hartmann keeps us at arms' length, poignant and haunting, they speak of the impasse that separates us from one another, no matter how close we get.

Charlotte Jansen

Christopher Hartmann (b. 1993, Germany) currently lives and works in London. He holds a Masters in Communication Design from Central Saint Martins and is currently undertaking an MFA in Fine Art at Goldsmiths, University of London. He is a grantee from the Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation (2020). Recent and upcoming exhibitions include 'Come so close (that I might see)', Peter von Kant, London (2020); 'Drawn Together', Unit London (Online, 2020); 'Crowd', Hannah Barry Gallery, London (2020); 'I Hope This Finds You Well', Eve Leibe Gallery, London (2019). Christopher Hartmann is one of only 20 artists still studying Fine Art at the major art colleges to be showcased this summer by White Cube gallery in 'Tomorrow: London - an online showcase of work by selected graduates'.

Charlotte Jansen is a British Sri Lankan author and journalist. Jansen has written extensively on contemporary art for The Guardian, The Financial Times, ELLE, Frieze, Wallpaper*, The British Journal of Photography and Artsy, among others. She has been Editor-at-Large of Elephant magazine since 2015. She is the author of two books on photography: *Girl on Girl: Art and Photography in the Age of the Female Gaze*, (Laurence King, 2017) and *Photography Now* (Tate/Ilex, 2021).

For all further information please contact the gallery.
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