

Pouting Man

Sean Burns

In 1824, the French architect and draughtsman Jean-Jacques Lequeu completed a series of self-portraits in pen, black ink and brown wash. The studies examined how facial expressions contain not only fleeting emotions but also ingrained elements of his personality. He contorted his face into exaggerated shapes, each demonstrating a different mood – yawning, preening, pouting, etc. It is Lequeu's *Pouting Man* (1792) that most reminds me of Tom Worsfold's new works (unless otherwise stated, all works 2020) in *The Sleepers*.

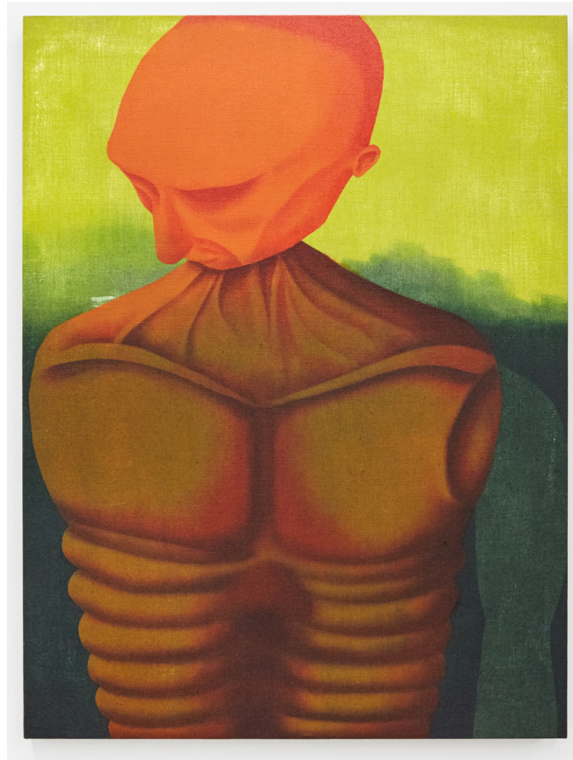
Lequeu's portraits bear a close resemblance to the artist, but Worsfold's paintings are more veiled in their autobiographical nature. There's a sense in which the characters are proxies or automated bodies with singularly expressive heads. They exist in a sort of nondescript outdoor space, mill around, spoon one another, gurn and, presumably based on their H.R. Giger-like abdominal muscles, exercise relentlessly. They appear glum, full of unrealised aspirations, and contemplating the emotional and physical intricacies of homosexual desires.

Lequeu gifted his portraits, along with many elaborate architectural designs and smutty erotic drawings, to The Royal Library, Paris. He was particularly considerate in his approach, taking care to ensure that his pictures didn't saturate the market. *Pouting Man*, for example, was completed in 1792 but wasn't displayed until 1810. I often see the same premeditation today. Artists are strategic about the trajectory of their careers. *The Sleepers* represents, for Worsfold, a risk on a new type of simplified composition and more 'honest' subject matter.



Tom Worsfold, *Fallen*, 2020, Acrylic on flax, 60 x 84cm

Painting, like drawing, is a reasonably solitary activity. Apart from the odd visit from someone like me, a limpet on the hull of art, painters are alone with their work. In 2019 Worsfold naturally drifted away from an approach he had developed over many years. His paintings made before *The Sleepers* are often on smooth canvas, and full of visual references to Andrew Christian underpants and enormous flaccid dicks. Thankfully the latter remain, take another closer look at *Fallen* – I have a similar thing heavy on my mind too. He also started to use denser canvas, with thicker fabric, revealing an inherently coarse structure.



Tom Worsfold, *Husk*, 2020, Acrylic on flax, 120 x 90cm

Breaking with comfortable logic is something resembling 'progress'. It's exposing to make art full-stop, it's even more so constructing images alluding to private sexual desires. When I visited Worsfold's studio in March, he thumbed a supplement from Men's Health magazine, full of bulging examples of gym-addicted bodybuilders – everyday jocks with jobs, families, and presumably wives. The type of material that makes me feel pressured to maintain my scrawny body like an Olympic gymnast's. The figures in *The Sleepers* have abstracted conventional thot physiques, and they don't appear very happy about it at all.

All of the works have a single word title, similar to every Pet Shop Boys' album from *Please* (1986) through to *Hotshot* (2020). Worsfold is influenced by the duo's music, in particular the humdrum quotidian drama of Neil Tennant's lyrics. There's a long tradition of this type of working class observational queerness; it's often something I associate with the north of England, Coronation Street, Sheila Delaney, Alan Bennett and, dare I say it, Morrissey. Here it can be read into the

everydayness of the figure's actions. It's easy to imagine Pet Shop Boys' *Suburbia* (1986) as the stomping soundtrack to the show: 'roaming suburban boys.'

Self-portraits are often a way for an artist to represent themselves as they want to be seen. In Rembrandt's case this meant illusions of grandeur and wealth (*Self Portrait*, 1658), even though he was penniless at the end of his career. Worsfold's 'Sleepers' aren't so clean-cut, they're self-portraits that don't immediately register as vain. They nod towards unattainably muscular body ideals, but the specificity of their identity is less defined. Collectively, I don't read them as the same individual in each, but as the constituent parts of a fragmented whole.

Worsfold's *Husk*, similar to Lequeu's *Pouting Man*, considers how subtle facial gestures, like a momentary tightening of the lips, can reveal inherent personal characteristics. *The Sleepers* aren't burdened with the controlled codification of Worsfold's earlier works. Instead, they articulate something more congruent with his inner world and sexual feelings that many gay men find challenging to express openly and easily. I often think about an interview I watched with the gay performance artist, David Hoyle. The interviewer asks Hoyle about his adolescence and 'how his otherness manifested', 'some of us are a give away!' he replied.

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