

Thomas Eggerer | Frieze

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Thomas Eggerer, *Waterworld*, 2015, oil on canvas, 2.9 x 4.1 m

It's rare today to find a single painting posing as a solo exhibition. Or, maybe, what is truly rare is to find a painting capable of doing so. Thomas Eggerer's *Waterworld* (2015), on view at Petzel, attempts the feat with nonchalance. It's a three-metre-tall canvas filled from edge to edge with an expanse of ocean, divided by a foaming wave that flows at an oblique angle while a second, smaller wave trails from behind. Everywhere, the water is populated by wading figures that concentrate most densely in a horizontal band in the middle of the canvas's upper half, growing scarcer at the very top and bottom. From this distance, the figures – their hands dangling in the water or touching their own bodies – appear to be identical: white, male, thin and brown-haired. A crowd of clones.

Like water dripping from a steam-room ceiling, much of the meaning in Eggerer's work precipitates from the space of the painting itself. This quality tends to be driven by the extremely particular ways in which figure and ground relate to one another, or how exactly the boundaries between objects and their surroundings are intensified, broken, warped or destabilized. As a motif in *Waterworld*, the wave, whose forward surge is always followed by the backward flow of a rip current, somehow feels like an emblem of wilful instability and reversal. It could also be a more ambivalent recasting of the famous 'push and pull' binary that Hans Hofmann first used to describe the painterly process of defining space – in fact, water particles in a wave move neither forward nor backward, but rotate in circles. At the most macro-level, the painting runs on a circuit of exchange between figure and

ground: just as the water shifts from an ambient state into a form when it gathers as a wave, so do the men pass between isolated particularity and collective anonymity as they are swept up in the mass.

Under scrutiny, though, the painting fractures into a series of additional, overlapping possibilities. What kind of a space are we actually looking at – an ocean, or something more artificial? A cool light spreads evenly over the crowd from above, while the men's pale skin emits a slightly violet glow against the blue of the water and a warm underpainting quietly suggests lighting from within. Then there's the nagging fact that the water appears to recede in perspective at a slightly different rate than the figures (as you stand very close to the painting, the recession combines oddly with a sense of looming-over), so the men appear to exist in the space while also being faintly dislodged from it. Likewise, temporal progression is repeatedly undermined. Here and there, figures recur, creating a feeling of fragmentation in an otherwise continuous tableau. And, whereas in paintings 'gesture' can carry a sense of velocity (speed with direction), that's noticeably absent here: the minute and subdued brushwork counter time altogether, freezing the scene.

For a long time – at least as far back as the 1990s when he was a member of the artist collective Group Material – Eggerer has probed the political potential of collectivity and social space in his work. With their eyes in shadow, it's hard to know whether these men are aware of one another, or if their attention is turned totally inward. Although I don't think *Waterworld* is addressed exclusively to a gay audience, by drawing these men who seem to exist both together and apart from one another into a kind of unstable unity, the painting brings to mind the uncertain sense of collectivity that characterizes some kinds of (real and virtual) gay social spaces today. Where norms for appearance and behaviour are most palpable, desire can be bound up, sometimes toxically, in simultaneous feelings of belonging and alienation. What gradually surfaces in the painting is an internal framework of non relationality: the realization that every possible point of connection between its components could be read simultaneously as a point of rupture. And, speaking of rupture, it would be a mistake to overlook the painting's humour. From another angle, it's a pretty hilarious spectacle.