

Andrew Durbin, "After Hours," *Texte Zur Kunst*, Issue No. 108, December 2017, pp. 232 – 235.

TEXTE ZUR KUNST



"Thomas Eggerer: Todd," Petzel, New York, 2017, installation view

AFTER HOURS

**Andrew Durbin on Thomas Eggerer at
Petzel Gallery, New York**

Todd: a name that rings with churchly significance, like that of a saint. (There are none, in fact.) In Middle English, it means "fox," and goes no further back. A letter longer than the German *Tod* (an old word for an old god; namely, death), it contains within it a certain solemnity of purpose. In Thomas Eggerer's "Todd" (all works 2017), one of nine paintings of men posed around manholes (and some manholes without men), it appears to be the name of a shirtless boy lying on pavement, the legs of a friend in athleisure posed above him, belonging to no one we can see. He is young, the sewer lid forming an iron halo around his tousled head, and he holds his hand to his mouth while around him cigarettes drift across the sidewalk. A ring of keys lies near him. Eggerer positions his viewer above the painting's subject, as he does in all of his new work at Petzel Gallery (the exhibition also named "Todd") – like angels stealing a view of the living caught in the *Jetztzeit* economies of the street, where boys exchange cash and beer and cigarettes, coffee cups and receipts flutter with leaves, and empty bodega bags mingle among snaking extension cords.

"I want to make something beautiful," Eggerer once told the art and culture magazine *Elephant*, and as a painter he has always rubbed up against the sumptuous and lyrical, with boys and other naked or half-naked figures dipped in colorful, fuzzy backdrops or arrayed in sketched scenes of beaches, streets, and the canned architecture of American cities. Absent is the wicked conceptualism or flirty, half-funny abstraction that marks the most market-successful painting today. One might even think of him as something of a conservative, perhaps in the classical sense, where painting is devout (if not obedient) to reality in its representational strategies, all in grateful service of

that ideal of "something beautiful." But such an impression is short-circuited by Eggerer's abrupt cuts and slices into his figures – again, mostly boys – that render them halved, incomplete, turned, and therefore somewhat cold, melancholy, and decidedly insufficient. Their abridged prettiness derives from the feeling that that they could have been whole but aren't, as Dennis Cooper's George Miles might have been just another decent kid but wasn't or Gary Indiana's Frankie a common hustler and not a serial strangler. (Eggerer, like Cooper and Indiana, is a lapsed Californian, by way of Munich and Cologne.)

But little that is beautiful exists without its attendant sniff of dread: that what we behold must someday fade, rot, grow old. Painting once attempted to remedy this by making what decays stick around as a faithful picture of that stuff, by reconciling the impermanence of wealth and desire and pretty things through the medium's relative longevity in the houses of the rich. Its failure to do so (or for its doing so to matter), at least since post-industrialism, is a well-known story; ever since, painting's tried to find its right place. But the medium remains knackered by its primordial concern with making things look nice for people who can afford to own nice things, and as such there has always been something pleasantly stiff about the work of those who still believe in painting's prime directive to be beautiful, as one might think Eggerer does.

There is something even a little discomfiting – a little dreadful! – in its (Eggerer's) aim. And this discomfort might explain, in part, Jerry Saltz's telling 2011 review in *New York* magazine of Eggerer's fourth show at Petzel, in which the critic angrily decries Eggerer's "pointlessly big, physically unoriginal, and aimlessly narrative"



Thomas Eggerer, "Street Yoga," 2017



Thomas Eggerer, "Todd," 2017

paintings. For Eggerer, Saltz reaches into his top hat for yet another two-word movement appellation he might find to simplify the artist's work into the easily-dismissed, as he often does with things he doesn't like, settling on "Scared Aimless-ism." But what Saltz reads as symptomatic of a bloated career riven with outsized but pointless pronouncements (hmm ...) is in fact Eggerer's very strength – and the source of his originality, insofar as such a thing can exist. It is also this very struggle with the big and the beautiful that allows the artist's "aimless narrative" to succeed (despite such icy prettiness) in striving to render fading youth as it's being inhaled by vast, ghostly landscapes swollen with color. Or, at the most recent Petzel show, into a flat concrete plane propped vertical for our viewing pleasure.

In "Todd," Eggerer isolates the fearful aimlessness that so bugged Saltz, and converts it to a poetics of the unmooring free time proffered by the street. His faceless figures (except in the eponymous painting and a self-portrait titled "Street Yoga") engage one another but never touch as they hang out, lie around, do nothing. These handsome men – most of whom appear to us only as limbs – kill time over manholes, an odd place for anyone to idle, given they are usually set in

the middle of the street and not a sidewalk. While that pun is somewhat obvious in its Bersanian preoccupation with the stoppered hole that leads to a vast civic grave of shit, the paintings excel when understood, in their "destabilization of a fixed viewing position [as they] appear to gyrate around the lids," per the press release, as a series of metaphoric clocks, their hour and minute hands formed out of men's bodies but incapable of telling time. Or rather, capable only of telling of a destabilized or broken time in the doldrums of the middle career: its time between. Of this, a pilgrim's progress toward *Tod*.

In "Autumn Leaves," approximately 165 by 163 centimeters in scale and slightly smaller than the other paintings in the show, a shirtless man – a hospital or club wristband on his left wrist (I imagine it's the latter institution) – crawls across pavement awash in shallow purple light, a few fall leaves blowing past him as he moves forward (or, to us, downward) amid an arrangement of coffee cups. The brushwork here, as with the other canvas, is steady across the light surface of paint, with enormous attention given to the play of shadow across muscle. At the edge of the figure's body there is a slight haze of white, as if the lines that distinguish him from the world

Andrew Durbin, "After Hours," *Texte Zur Kunst*, Issue No. 108, December 2017, pp. 232 – 235.



Thomas Eggerer, "Autumn Leaves," 2017

have begun to fade. We cannot tell if he has been dispatched from the club or is heading toward it, or is at some other station in nightlife's *via crucis*. He is not where he is meant to be, we can imagine, as he crawls on in the half-light. For us, he appears hung up by the leg, a flipped St. Peter strung upside down, a clock indicating midnight: *Quo vadis?* we might ask of him. "I am going back," Eggerer seems to respond on his behalf.

"Thomas Eggerer: Todd," Petzel Gallery, New York, September 8 – October 14, 2017.