

HYPERALLERGIC

Patrick Angus's Honest Images of Gay Life



Patrick Angus, "Untitled" (c. 1980s) (all images courtesy Bortolami Gallery, New York)

Patrick Angus once lamented that, even well after Stonewall, gay men had few honest images of themselves. As a young art student finding his bearings in Santa Barbara, Angus was galvanized when he encountered David Hockney's seductive — if ultimately unattainable — depictions of Los Angeles as an affluent gay idyll. From the late 1970s up to his premature death in New York in 1992, from AIDS-related complications, Angus strove to make images that were true to *his* lived experience as a gay man: at once privileged by virtue of being white, male, and cisgender, but also tied to a gay subculture that was widely censured during the AIDS crisis. His mature work portrayed men in those strongholds where queer desire could be openly expressed, in public-private spaces such as porn theaters, strip clubs, and gay bathhouses, like the one where he worked nights while living at a welfare hotel.

A group of Angus's works on paper and three of his paintings are currently on view at Bortolami Gallery. In the drawings, pretty, young men lounge, recline, read, sleep, and pose in spare domestic interiors. Nude or clothed, they inhabit the page with ease, demonstrating comfort in their space and with Angus, with whom they often shared a social circle. The intimate portraits, many of which appear to have been torn from sketchbooks, have a provisional, exploratory quality. Angus borrows from and intrinsically queers the Western canon: his sitters might be expressionistically rendered in Fauvist hues, or flat and lucid and Pop-inflected, or more modeled and stylistically aligned with Realism. Though his range is broad, he also draws the same subject and scene multiple times with only the most minute variations, as if he's attempting to calibrate something impossibly delicate.

The paintings in the exhibition are tighter than the drawings, in concept and execution, with lustrous, fully worked surfaces. Detailed paintings of the gay porn theaters of New York's early '90s vividly portray little-documented, and now-lost queer spaces. Titled after pop songs, they depict the Gaiety Theater — which remarkably survived Mayor Giuliani's crackdown on nightlife, closing

in 2005 — and *The Prince*. In one painting, the crowd observes a scene of two nude men by an aquamarine pool, a clear homage to David Hockney. In the other, they watch an onscreen blowjob. Within and across the paintings, divisions between art, sex, and life dissipate.

In the third painting in the show, “*Self-Portrait as Picasso*” (1980), Angus gazes coolly into a mirror over a mantelpiece, a setup comparable to the one at Pablo Picasso’s studio. Here, Angus is not only riffing on the canon; he’s also staking a claim to it by painting himself in Picasso’s place. After years of obscurity and dire poverty, Angus did receive some recognition in his final year of life, when he was the subject of several solo shows and even sold six works to Hockney. But, working as he did to chronicle the beauty and dignity of cruising sites excoriated amid the AIDS pandemic, Angus would always be on the outside.