

Chris Komater at Mercury 20, August 1 – September 7, 2019

By Robert Glück

Chris and I traveled around Italy—when?—twenty years ago! We wanted to see the paintings by two beloved artists, Giovanni Bellini and Michelangelo Caravaggio, denizens of the high and late renaissance. Chris fashioned the series *Jack & Mack* by borrowing gestures and physical attitudes from these famous paintings. His models, deities of Bear sex, have a very different species of fame, and this is part of the pleasure of these works.

Like any artist, Chris wants to demonstrate a truth that he is living. There are (at least) two truths here, and the way that they relate makes for the drama in these works. First there is a Bear Ideal of desire and beauty that relates outward and inward to a living community, or better a sub-culture. Jack and Mack are men Chris fantasized about.

Second these images are in dialogue with (or underwritten by) the history of the nude in Western art. Chris repositions a new kind of beauty in that frame. Think of male nakedness “hiding” in the Greek god poses in athletic pictorial magazines or the classical imagery in the work of George Platt Lynes and his contemporaries, in which the performance of official culture underwrites gay desire.

Likewise, Chris shares his excitement with us, presenting it in a familiar light, the gestures of the nude in western painting. You could say Chris explores the difference between cooked and raw. That is, how can these anarchic bodies be ordered? Then again, he is making a gift to his community (as did the two painters he emulates) presenting it with his version of the sublime.

What makes the naked body proper? Chris records the performance of two kinds of affect. Bellini isolated his saints and deities in sacred space, like sight in heaven. Jack was a porn film star, a heavenly figure of light, never very expressive, otherworldly. Bellini’s saints have little expression—I’m supposed to fill in the blank with my own feelings. I wonder if that explains the slight emptiness of the great porn actors, like Joey Stefano? In contrast, Caravaggio presented a familiar world—sacredness burst into it like an emergency, 911 Miracle. Mack made films but he was mostly a renowned prostitute—like some of Caravaggio’s friends and models who were emphatically of this world. Someone Chris could miraculously have sex with.

Some but not all of these meaty bodies translate into aesthetic or spiritual or community good, but I live most intensely in the accidents, like the skin on Jack’s hip that has been dented by his elastic underwear band.



Installation view, left to right: *Jack, after Bellini #1*, (2002) and *Mack, after Caravaggio #1* (2002). Digital chromogenic development prints, 30” x 30” each