

BOMB

Lewis Hammond Interviewed by [Olivia Parkes](#)

Painting dark portraits.



Lewis Hammond, *the pull of this world*, 2022, oil on wood panel, 19.75 x 15.75 inches. Photo by Gunter Lepowski. Courtesy of the artist and Arcadia Missa.

Lewis Hammond's paintings are dark, intimate, and disquieting. His figures are poised between individual and archetype and conjure states of stasis, longing, or despair. The work captures the unease of our present moment while plumbing a line through myth and the long history of the image in a way that makes all this trouble seem timeless. The circumstances matter, but the body persists in dire conditions as its gestures of connection and disconnection, desire and aversion, go on. Lewis is looking hard at what's closest to him, but the story he shows us is old. The world harms, and still we hold each other.

—Olivia Parkes

Olivia Parkes

The light sources in your paintings are often ambiguous. In some cases, the figures themselves seem like a light source or appear to be lit from within. It can feel like the figures have been pulled out of darkness or are being submerged in it. Where does that quality come from?

Lewis Hammond

I often have to catch myself that I'm not burying the pictures too much. I'm invested in atmosphere building, and I often want for things to be at the very edge of legibility. I'm interested in what that can mean for a picture and what having visibility can mean for some of the subject matter that I'm working with. I'm interested in capturing the emotional spectrum my figures are facing as well as developing a visual language that deals with the realities of a hyper-capitalized, hyper-racialized world.

From a technical standpoint, it comes out of the work I was doing as an undergraduate. I was making large photo-collages using analog photographs I'd taken myself along with a photocopier and using paint to cover the image. There were lots of layers of different mixed media and varnish, and some of the image would be partially obscured, some of it really clear. You would still see the image, but you would see it emerging from darkness. The limitations of that process led me to start painting in a more traditional way and exploring the possibilities of oil on canvas.

OP

You often refer to images of friends and family, but the figures don't read like portraits. Some of them seem to be smoldering or turning to flame. Others have a ghostlike quality or blank eyes. How are you thinking about the figure and transformation?

LH

If I take photos of friends or family that I might use in a painting, I have to prefix that with, "You know, this isn't about you." Painting them is a process of transformation. Often the bodies become more satyr-like or "less human." What you were saying about light is something I want to play with. In some of the newer works, I want to build the image up in different glaze layers instead, and for there to be a different kind of slippage between the physicality of the objects and the architecture of the room and the body. To really emphasize that ghostlike quality and temporal instability.

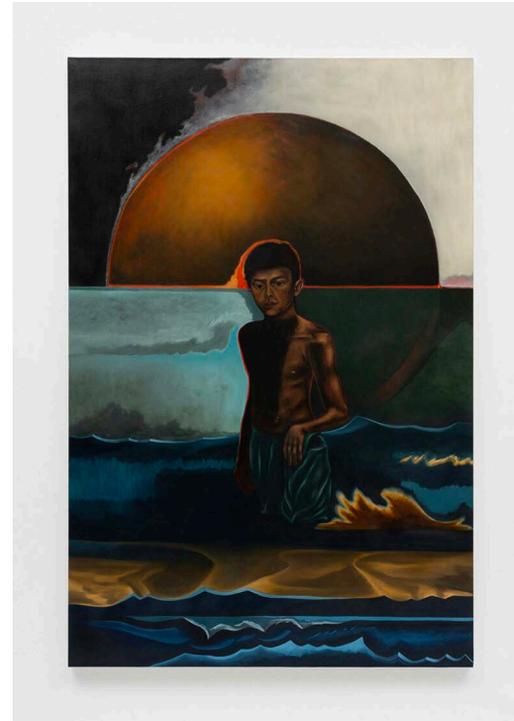
OP

Along with this feeling of being submerged, the figures are often contained in tight spaces, either by the framing or the architectures you build. Where are they? What can you tell me about this world?

LH

Well, somehow, I feel like they're in our world, even though there's this kind of fantastical, or sci-fi, or mythological staging. The conventions of those worlds are a way to grasp the real, like how sci-fi will use the story of aliens landing to have a conversation about xenophobia. The paintings go into these odd, uncomfortable settings or darker imagined spaces in order to cast light on the individuals that are portrayed. Not the individuals as I know them, but broader archetypes. They become stand-ins for people often marginalized within society.

For example, a new painting I've done of my sister and nephew might appear quite classical, as a mother and child. The image has a line throughout history, which I'm interested in bringing into the work, as well as asking what it means to have children now, given the state of the world. I see it as quite hopeful. If you're bringing children into the world, you believe in the future.



Lewis Hammond, *early attrition*, 2023, oil on canvas, 71 × 47.25 inches. Photo by Joerg Lohse. Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal.

And that's interesting, given the systemic failure and economic breakdowns that our generation has lived and continues to live through. Austerity politics and the growing island mentality of England.

OP

That island mentality occurs on the national level in discussions about borders and immigration, but also at the individual level. You see it everywhere in London: private wealth, public poverty. People have gotten poorer, but some people have gotten much, much richer.

LH

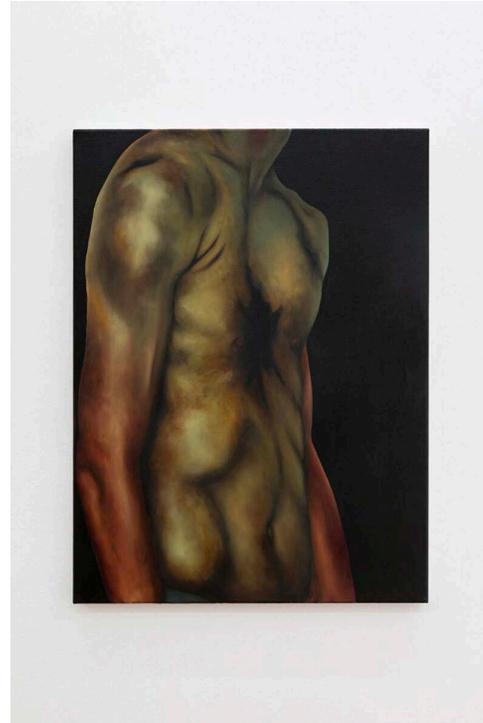
It's very sharp, isn't it? You can be in one of the most poverty-stricken parts of England and then twenty-five minutes later in Mayfair, and you can walk into a shop that will sell you a yacht. And that to me is absolutely absurd. I think the figures in my paintings feel somewhat blitzed by the world with an endless torrent of "Fuck! We're in the end times," but the following year, things get worse. You can see this in *moth eaten silk* (2022).

OP

The relationship between figure and ground is very unstable in that painting. But this instability occurs across the work in other ways. There's often a tension between intimacy and alienation; there are also hints of eroticism as well as violence. Some of that comes through the imagery—we get knives, and we get flowers—and through the composition, the attention to scale, or the relation of the image to the frame. Is painting a formal means to organize these tensions or emotions?

LH

How do you paint a feeling? That's a question I often return to. How do you paint this state of mind or experience that doesn't fully translate into verbal language? Certain images or compositions go straight to the gut. In *Returnal* (2022), the chest is kind of concave; it looks like it's been dipped in, and it's held against a stark, black background. I think people really responded to that painting. You can see the fragility of the body. There's some sense of mortality perhaps.



Lewis Hammond, *Returnal*, 2022, oil on canvas, 31.75 × 23.5 inches.
Photo by Gunter Lepowski. Courtesy of the artist and Arcadia Missa.

OP
It's intensely vulnerable. But in some ways it also feels protected by being held by the frame.

LH
Maybe that's because some of my source images were medical photos. I'm interested in how it becomes like a piece of classic figuration; in its total objectification, it could look like a Christ's body or maybe a Saint Sebastian. There's a kind of unconscious link to various paintings and art history that I'm bringing back into the conversation, but there remains a trace of the source imagery as well.

OP
But it's very tender. And a medical photograph is not tender; it's clinical.

LH
Yes, the medical gaze is clinical. The body appears like an object. The image tries to document, in the most neutral way possible, what we're seeing, whereas painting pushes the image into a different state. And maybe that's my belief in the painting process—that by working with that image I can push it into a different space.

OP
Yeah, a painting is a lived image. It's like the solidified form of a process of seeing, and that makes it available to a different kind of looking.

LH
Yeah. And paintings can be quite confrontational, can't they? Or they can ignore you.

OP
Totally. And many of your figures seem almost eyeless or unseeing. They do ignore us.

LH
Even though they're eyeless, I wouldn't say that they're devoid of soul. Or that they're hollow.

OP
No, but they're in a suspended state.

LH
Painting is a suspension of time. And it's able to meditate on our relationship to it. Hopefully, the paintings will outlive us. I'd like to make paintings that can speak beyond the immediate circumstances they find themselves in or that I find myself in. I'm trying to get to something that could be, maybe not timeless, but that has different levels of accessibility.



Lewis Hammond, *false flag*, 2023, oil on linen, 11.75 × 10 inches. Photo by Joerg Lohse. Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal.

OP

You look at a lot of paintings from the past. Has that always been the case?

LH

I think that when I began painting with a brush, then I really started looking at the history of painting. I still find it a fascinating proposition to go into the studio and play with stuff from earth mixed with oil on a 2D plane to try to describe the body and all of its liquidity, flesh, or solidity. To try to move through that with pigment.

OP

Yeah. The conditions of painting are in some ways quite unchanged. It's an old technology.

LH

I think Cecily Brown said that when you've got four sides and a flat plane, whatever you make has infinite, infinite, infinite possibilities.

OP

I have the same feeling. And sometimes when people ask, Why are you doing this? I'll say, I love rectangles. You draw a line in the middle, and you have the world. It's inexhaustible.

LH

But sometimes it's fun to start with a completely abstract space and build forward from that place. Because all the rules and systems that we have in place in the studio to make whatever we make have developed as habit. I like to trip that process up. Recently, I painted a portrait of my mother which is also a portrait of my grandmother that combines the memory of my grandmother and source imagery of my mom. There's this intergenerational link. It's almost like a devotional painting.

OP

That fusing of faces seems like another way to instill a timeless quality. That's part of what I meant when I said that they don't quite feel like portraits.

LH

It's funny because I've made paintings that are directly taken from myself. And when they've gone into shows people say, This doesn't look like you at all. I think that maybe on a subconscious level they all operate as self-portraits, or I'm just painting my own state of mind in different bodies, different bodies in different circumstances. Again, and again, and again. Because I'm trying to make sense of it all. Of what is here.

Lewis Hammond: *Bludgeoned Sky* is on view at 47 Canal in New York City until March 25.

Olivia Parkes is a painter and writer based in Berlin.