

Sam McKinniss is painting Google Images of your favourite icons

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY - ARTIST IN RESIDENCE

The artist welcomes us into his New York studio to talk about his latest show - which includes Drew Barrymore, Joan Didion, and Lana Del Rey kissing A\$AP Rocky

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Sam McKinniss in his studio, New York Photography Joshua Aronson

We live, as media theorists have long agonised, in an age of oversaturation: there's simply just too much to see, too much to take in, sort through, understand. For the New York-based painter [Sam McKinniss](#), sifting through the deluge of mass media images is half the work. The artist, whose subjects have included Prince, Winona Ryder, and Lil' Kim is an avid consumer of pop culture with a sharp eye for symbolism and a deep appreciation for art history. McKinniss's charming, lucid portraits of celebrities and sometimes animals, are nearly all entirely culled from Google Images. Pinned above his desk in his East Williamsburg studio are 8 ½ x 11 full-colour print-outs of Paris Hilton in silver sequins at her 21st birthday party, Geena Davis, and Susan Sarandon taking a selfie in *Thelma and Louise*, a profile portrait of Shelley Duval, and Molly Ringwald in *Pretty in Pink*. Periodically, McKinniss takes down and rearranges the printouts, which serve as both mood board and sketchbook. Everything is source material, and McKinniss is taking it all in but is decisive and deliberate in his craft.

While some critics have characterised his work as nostalgic, pointing perhaps to the preponderance of 80s and 90s movie stars in his work, the artist prefers to think of his work as recollection. "I don't experience nostalgia that often," McKinniss tells me. "I think recollection is separate, it's a different sensation to nostalgia. Because it is an appropriative practice and process for image gathering that I'm bringing into my work, I'm appropriating via recollection and I'm not doing that because I miss the golden age of Tim Burton movies. It's more like I'm trying to understand by locating and then recollecting the items from our pop culture history during my lifetime, which have impressed themselves upon my consciousness, which then, in turn, determine the mysterious way in which I conduct myself."

"I feel like part of my job is to locate, within that, drama moments of recognition as they correspond to heightened emotional experiences that I've had interpersonally with people that I love" – Sam McKinniss

These days, McKinniss's career is as fast-paced and frenzied as the media cycle. Last year, he worked with Lorde to paint the singer's portrait for her debut album *Melodrama*, a collaboration that garnered him thousands of teen superfans, some of whom even petitioned to have his painting hung in the Louvre. Currently, he's finishing a large portrait of Lana Del Rey performing on American Idol for an upcoming show at Mass MOCA, as well as a series of paintings for Team Gallery for Art Basel Hong Kong.

For his most recent show, *Daisy Chain* at Team (Bungalow) in Venice Beach, the artist was in a self-described 'LA mood'. The nine paintings in *Daisy Chain* include a painting of Beck from the album *Sea Change*, which is taken from a video still by Jeremy Blake, a portrait of a smiling JonBenet Ramsey with baby's breath atop her golden curls, and an aged Joan Didion, her fingers clasped delicately in front of her signature sunglass-bedecked face. Though McKinniss works quickly, often finishing a painting in two to three days, his portrait of Didion took nearly a month. Partly because of the challenge of painting wrinkles, but more so because McKinniss thought carefully about how his image of the writer would be received. "I didn't know what I wanted out of that painting. I didn't want to name drop an intellectual or a theoretical reference to bolster the intellectual strength of my practice," says McKinniss. "It's not necessary, I don't care. My work doesn't rely on a vast theoretical framework to work with my imagined viewer as far as I know. What I wanted was the huge bag of contradicting emotional responses that she represents inside of her human form. She's always understood how photogenic she is, she's always understood how to pose for a photographer, and she has not lost that ability in advanced age. I wanted the show to be about America, and all her books are about America."



"Drew", 2017, acrylic and oil on canvas 14 x 11 inches, 36 x 28 cm. Courtesy of the gallery and the artist

America, with all its contradictions and its history of violence, is on McKinniss's mind of late. Before working on the paintings for *Daisy Chain*, he read *Helter Skelter* and swapped true crime recommendations with his close friend Gary Indiana. "The late 1960s were extraordinarily violent in this country and where we are now, where we have been for the past few years – as an extremely mediated violent urban society – I was trying to figure out which was more, which was meaner, which was more violent," says McKinniss. "I don't know. I don't know how to answer this question, but in my head, while I was making the show, I was trying to locate it specifically for the California venue, that's what I was trying to think about, in stylish terms." The artist's razor-sharp understanding of American culture is informed both by this attention to history and a keen ability to predict the public social mood.

More than anything, McKinniss possesses a ready self-awareness and willingness to introspect. While his paintings may have the aura of celebrity devotion, they refract bits and pieces of the artist's interior life. "I think a lot of times, what I'm doing is burying or investing private details from my emotional experience into narratives played out in public, which are then photographed and distributed at large on our grand, operatic media environment. So if there is this parade of celebrity marching through our lives all the time, I feel like part of my job is to locate, within that, drama moments of recognition as they correspond to heightened emotional experiences that I've had interpersonally with people that I love."

But despite the sometimes droll or ironic cast of his paintings, McKinniss readily reveals his hand.

Daisy Chain is on view at Team Bungalow, Venice until March 4, 2018



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