

IN CONVERSATION

DREW KOHLER AND MARISSA GRAZIANO

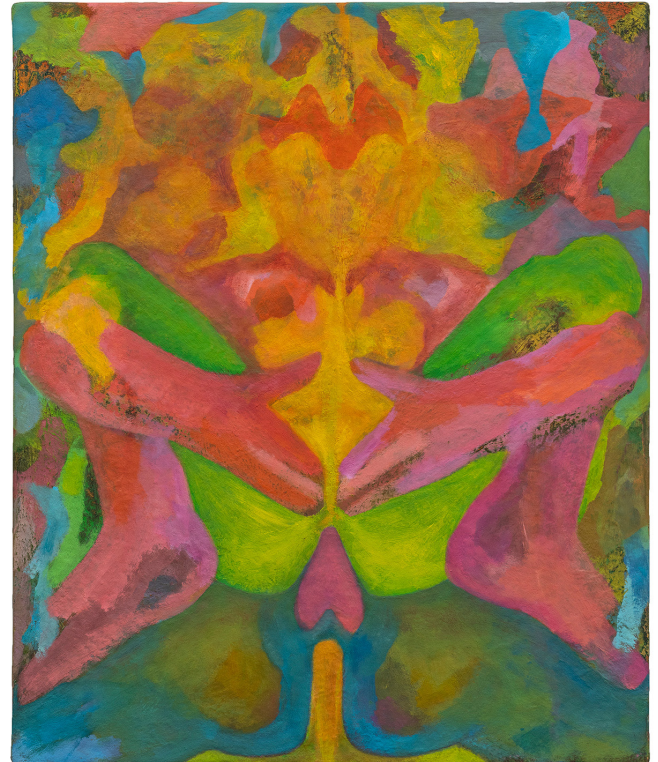
On the occasion of Drew Kohler's debut solo exhibition in New York, the artist sits down with Marissa Graziano for a conversation on the elusive qualities of language, eroticism and form. The Invert, 2012-2023 is on view at MARCH gallery from Nov 3–Dec 16, 2023. Kohler is a Brooklyn based artist whose work draws from the writings of French philosopher Marcel Proust.

MARISSA GRAZIANO: Drew, thank you so much for taking the time to discuss your current solo exhibition *The Invert, 2012-2023* on view at MARCH gallery in New York. I've always felt that your work presents as an amalgamation of language; compounding gestures that push against disparate applications of the skewed grid. Can you speak about the influence of language, both written and visual, on your practice?

DREW KOHLER: In 2015, when I was in Paris trying to cut down on smoking, I picked up reading. Before that it was difficult for me to read, especially under forced situations in school. On my own terms, reading became my cigarette break, and I became engulfed. Almost every book I love is extremely visual, and when I read I'm paying attention to the structure the author uses to achieve that. A great writer, in my opinion, makes me forget words are on the page; a great painter will make me forget the names of things. In 2020 I started reading Proust. It was a surprise to me how the passages are hypnotic. It's as if he's casting a spell, twirling down to abstract thoughts; a space where anything is possible, and that life is worth living. It is this language I seek in painting: a journey towards disorienting the senses, leaving judgment behind, to embrace a different way of seeing/being.

MG: Your use of color further disorients the viewer and echoes the perturbed psychology seen in Munch's ghoulish lovers, entwined in a feverish green. How does your palette shift throughout the act of painting as it oscillates between atmosphere and structure?

DK: My palette has been the same for years; I try to use all the colors and react intuitively. When I'm working on the paintings they change dramatically. For example, I'll have a bunch of shapes, hoping for a male figure to connect to the environment. Sometimes I'll need to interfere with the painting if the structure is off. I'll cover the whole painting in one color, sand it back, and wipe it down. In a sense the palette and the paintings shift with one another.



Drew Kohler, *Beehive (Missile)*, 2015-2019, Oil on canvas, 24 x 20 inches

MG: Often absent in conversations surrounding voyeurism and queer figuration is the perversion and shame of gratification. In your paintings, it feels present. Your figures are subversive, hidden within layers of abstraction as both the exhibitionist and the voyeur, themselves, looking out at the viewer. In your exhibition text, Chase Martin mentions the "unsuspecting collector" who was either rewarded or punished upon closer observation – presumably, both. How do you consider the erotic response in relation to withholding?

DK: It is my hope that when one views my paintings they are rewarded the more they look. There is a challenge to portray my thoughts with abstraction and figuration. If it wasn't for this struggle, I wouldn't do it. Instead of showing the obvious, I prefer the dark alleyways, where we can't see what we're doing. When I conceal the male figures, it isn't to withhold them, but to reveal a part that is only visible within the painting.

There is a part in Proust that has stayed with me since I read it. Amidst World War I, while bombs dropped and planes flew overhead, the narrator leaves a party in Paris. He wants to go home, but is lost and thirsty, and decides he will stop at the first business he sees for a drink. It is late, around 2 or 3 in the morning, when he finds what appears to be a hotel. Something is off about this place; there are whispers about chains & the owner. Young soldiers and mature men are speaking to one another. Somehow he finds himself a few floors up, greeted by a peephole, to see his older gay friend, the highly respected, The Baron de Charlus, bound up to a stretcher. An incredibly beautiful, young soldier stands at his side humiliating him, and with the lift of his hand, a whip comes down to slash his old, bloody flesh.

The scene is alluring, not only for its taboo, but for its placement during the war. We find not only a place of refuge from the explosions, but from the shame of hiding from our identity. To be in full control of our suffering is impossible; to have a grip on it is illuminating, erotic. We turn our pain into pleasure to survive.

MG: The Invert, 2012-2023 presents as an epic – sometimes Kafkaesque, often euphoric – odyssey of works painted over the course of a decade. How do you set the pace in your studio?

DK: Currently the oil paintings I have going on are in their third year. I have no idea when I'll finish them — maybe tomorrow, next year, or a few years from now. I need time with them, to change, destroy and build it back up. It is after the point of losing the painting I start to believe the world I'm making is real.



Installation view by Cary Whittier (Interior); Image courtesy of MARCH and the artist

MG: Lastly, what's next for you as we approach the new year?

DK: As we near the end of my show, I am getting back to working on my oils, falling down my worm hole, all to find my way out again.

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Drew Kohler was born in 1991 in Voorhees, NJ. He holds a BFA in painting from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. He has previously exhibited at John Davis Gallery (Hudson, NY), Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery (New York, NY), Zürcher Gallery (New York, NY), and Woodmere Art Museum (Philadelphia, PA), among others. Kohler's work is in the permanent collections of the Woodmere Art Museum (Philadelphia, PA) and the Peter Bullough Foundation (Winchester, VA), where he was an artist-in-residence from 2015 to 2016. He lives and works in Brooklyn, NY.



Drew Kohler, To A Reason, 2015-2022, Oil on canvas, 12 x 10 inches