

ANTHONY CUDAHY

Ivana Cholakova, Anthony Cudahy: 'My Work Feels Like a Living History', Frieze, 23 October 2023



Detail of Anthony Cudahy, *Three emmeshed*, 2023, Photography by JSP Art Photography.

On a damp and dour morning in London last week, I met with American painter Anthony Cudahy for a lively discussion about his latest body of work, 'Double Spar', a dual exhibition at GRIMM and Hales Gallery, marking the artist's first solo project in the UK.

While walking through GRIMM's intimate gallery space – the warm sunset tones of Cudahy's canvases providing welcome respite from the overcast sky outside – we discussed our mutual love of mediaeval art and touched on his avid interest in image histories, his love of musician Arthur Russell and the canonical motifs that resurface time and again in his paintings.

This interview is the first in a new series of London gallery visits where I drop in on an artist to discuss the main themes behind their latest exhibition and artistic processes.

Ivana Cholakova What is the main concept behind 'Double Spar', and how do the works at GRIMM and Hales interact with one another?

Anthony Cudahy There are a lot of thematic touchstones that I wanted to address with the dual-venue show. Iterative imagery has been in my practice for a long time: certain poses or symbols double or mutate as my work

develops. For 'Double Spar', I conceived the paintings either in pairs or in response to one another; it became this continuous metanarrative.

At times, the iterations are literal, as in Sebastian study [2023] at Hales and Sebastian, before or after [2023] at GRIMM, where both figures borrow their pose from Carl Sprinchorn's *Couple, Atlantic City* [1933], which itself has echos of Pietro Perugino's *St Sebastian* [c.1495]. Yet, the paintings interact in more subtle ways as well. With Arthur Russell on the shore [2023], for instance, I intuitively placed the musician's bare foot in the stream. There's a moment of shoeless synchronicity with another painting at Hales, *Three ages* [2023], which again duplicates a pose from Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Netherlandish Proverbs* [1559].

IC Music permeates your works. What role does it play in your practice?

AC With Arthur Russell on the shore, I was really thinking about the artist and his legacy. I pictured his music existing in a continuum, or being on a wavelength that is still resonating. I wanted to create a moment of aliveness and electricity in the stream, and it made sense for the contact to be directly with his skin. It's a stark contrast to the

rest of the painting which is imbued with cooler tones; his ghostly figure is constantly disappearing and reappearing.

Music is really important to me. I'm always listening to Arthur Russell, he's an anchor for me. He had this lyrical sensibility that makes his music feel highly personal when you listen to it. His style was so idiosyncratic and non-hierarchical: he wasn't afraid of making music that pulled from a tonne of different genres. His estate has been releasing music from his archives for the past couple of decades, which sounds like a difficult project considering he was such a perfectionist that he sometimes recorded a song more than 50 times and many iterations exist. I relate to the idea of having a baseline structure, which also allows for improvisation.

IC Your paintings are often inspired by found imagery. What does your selection process look like and has it changed as your practice has evolved?

AC Whilst I collect a lot of images, there's no hierarchy between them. I can use screenshots from Instagram – as in *Some Vision (Ian and Alex)* [2023] at Hales, for example – or quote a Titian painting. *Arthur Russell on the shore* comes from a tender photograph that his father took of him on vacation, when he brought a cello to the beach. I keep some images for years, not knowing how I will use them or why they hold such potent and persistent significance. Eventually, they align with an idea or a sensation that I want to construct in a painting.

The way that I think about images has changed so much over the years. When I was working from the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center archives in New York, my paintings were a lot more wispy; they conveyed an impression of a figure rather than a likeness. I was working with imagery that documented the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s and '90s with a very sentimental intention. I wanted to extend those stories by reiterating their image histories. However, once I started making more constructed allegorical scenes, it didn't make sense to work directly from those images anymore.

IC A lot of your work is inspired by mediaeval art which, since it was frequently born of oral tradition, has fluid narratives and often encompasses collages of literary iterations.

My work is grounded in the mediaeval, which is more expansive and weird than people realize. In *Annunciation scene (with Billy Sullivan photograph)* [2023] at GRIMM, I started to think about the strangeness of the annunciation parable. It's described in such a physical way. The biological process of inception happens solely through words that Mary hears. In a way, it's an allegory for the

transformative potential of mediums, of how art can hold information and stories.

In my work, I often look to mythology. The narcissus flower is a symbol that has popped up in my paintings over the years. I don't like separating humans and nature; I try to portray plants with agency and personality. Through my own image iterations, this plant has transformed into *Mutated narcissus flower* [2023] at GRIMM and *Mutated flowers* [2023] at Hales. When you're quoting from previous paintings, you add inflections to their context as well. I love painting because it is a self-referential medium which nonetheless allows dialogue. My work feels like a living history – a collaborative process unto itself.

Anthony Cudahy's 'Double Spar' is on view at GRIMM and Hales Gallery until 11 November