

Review: "The Young and Evil", @jarrettearnest Jarrett Earnest's historical group exhibition at David Zwirner uses two rooms to first, establish Earnest's concept of "'reactionary' form in service of 'radical' content", and then to paint a portrait, in so many portraits, of the personal and explicitly queer lives of a group of American painters in the mid-twentieth century (Paul Cadmus, Jared French, Pavel Tchelitchew, George Tooker etc). The first room presents the uncomfortable approach which Earnest considers reactionary form—the return to figurative and classical imagery (and egg tempera) that is inflected with the specter of these artist's homosexuality. This room includes includes Paul Cadmus' famous 1933 "Shore Leave" on loan from the Whitney Museum as well as his haunting 1940 "Herrin Massacre", two scenes both infused with the subdued horror that makes Cadmus one of my personal favorite painters of all time. This second chamber, the inner chamber, provides a wonderful spread of biographical material which serves as evidence of the "closeted" radical content that the first room suggests. Portraits, vacation photos, sketches of sex scenes, and erotic photography fill the second room, and demonstrate the ways that these artists sought out small escapes from a world that was not as ready to tolerate their "lifestyle". The escapism of the second room might even seem excessively idyllic to those viewers who were stirred by the punk attitude of the David Wojnarowicz exhibitions-bloom that we witnessed last summer in New York. I will not deny that I found it hard to access and relate to the lives of pre-Stonewall, pre-AIDS gays lounging on beaches and at New Jersey country homes, in an era where a cisgendered able-bodied white gay leisure class often comes under more critical scrutiny, but this show preserves the fantasy of that time for this circle of painters with a respectful and nostalgic melody rather than revisionist and politicized roar. Particularly interesting among the biographical materials were the examples of these artists' involvement with the sexualities research of Alfred Kinsey, who famously asserted that all humans fall somewhere on a spectrum from hetero- to homosexual. Earnest's curatorial choice was to keep the beautiful lives AS radical content separated from the examples of reactionary form (reacting to mid-century abstraction), and it enhances the effect by spatializing the closeted-uncloseted game that these artists, writers, and friends had to play.

The Young and Evil is on view at David Zwirner, 533 West 19th Street, through April 13. There is an exhibition catalog forthcoming in Fall 2019. Pictured: Untitled photo by George Platt Lynes c. 1952 that I believe is Paul Cadmus holding one of his Seven Deadly Sins paintings

(Originally published on Instagram, February 27, 2019)