Charles Baudelaire believed that the best criticism is the one that is both amusing and poetic, not a cold one stripped bare of every shred of temperament: art criticism should be political, partial, and passionate. And what’s more fitting for this task than a review by Bruce Hainley on Richard Hawkins? Hainley’s review, like Hawkins’s painting, oozes a profound passion not only for the old masters but also for the young men of today. His poetic musings take us into a world of dandies, celebrities, and art historical influencers, all gathered under the California sun, where, for instance, Pierre Bonnard meets a lanky Rick Owens model and RentMen meets Édouard Manet’s Olympia.

Meanwhile, Shearn Moody’s limo cruises from the Houston airport toward Galveston, a year or so after Glen Campbell’s ballad to the city helped saunter country music into the mainstream, Richard Nixon still president, to Moody’s 600-acre ranch (“part fortress, part sybaritic playground”). Contrary to his name, the host prided himself on meeting his guests’ every desire un-moodily – e.g., Roy Cohn was so thirsty for a trick at Rancho Moody that he shrugged off all red, um, flags and got a severe case of venereal anal warts. In the limo were Cohn, Moody, a lawyer from Nixon’s law firm, and a physician who provided this anecdote about the trip: from the front seat, Cohn was having a “very involuted legal
Hawkins’s *The Supermundane* (2023) buzzes and hums, bumblebee bobblings of brushstrokes organizing a pictorial hive for the spunk-honey of the artist’s thinking, desires, “a paean to the hot, heightened palette and dazzling luminosity” of Los Angeles and its vying flora, fauna, and the bodies in between. Tangerine, hibiscus, gold, and yellow vibe against complementary tones of ochre, chartreuse, bottle green, nightingale, violet, and mauve. Lunar phosphorescence arrives from the center of the terrace, catching at the edges of the foliage and coursing along the even brighter balustrade, an otherworldly luminosity in the form of a hieratic apparition, torso of a Rick Owens model-type. Think of its complicated white-flame blue vertical transfiguring Pierre Bonnard’s horizontal bathers of waverings lavenders and grays. Various cats sublime, stretch, or scamper around. The largest reigns on an end table, a becoming position that allows something akin to ghost bottom surgery on the floating figure, priapic Bastet or purring bussy, surrounded by radiating lemony sunlight.

Such painterly dialectics operate in more than two ways simultaneously, with areas that are “abstract” and areas that “represent” remaining in erotic tension, since representation/“likeness” itself requires radical abstracting, even a radical violence. As Bonnard noted: “The painting is a suite of marks that join one another and end up forming the object, the piece on which the eye wanders without any snag.” The Rick Owens model-type floats, glowing torso but also literalizing figure of the dis/organizing of representing. Not unlike the bathers who submerge, absent centers, in Bonnard’s late canvases, the “blank” of the dazed, big-handed beauty also recalls the empty support he’s painted on.

Patterns of color and murmurations of scumbles, dabs, and marks summon at once fact and ideal. What’s there coordinates and is coordinated by what isn’t. For all the art historical invocations in Hawkins’s new work, ornamental and figural, from Bonnard and Francis Picabia to Sandro Botticelli and others, references no less or more recognizable than Adam Driver or Tom Daley, one of the precedents might be most resonant and haunting because absent or working unconsciously: Paul Signac’s Opus 217. Against the Enamel of a Background Rhythmic with Beats and Angles, Tones, and Tints, Portrait of M. Félix Fénéon in 1890 (1890), its musicality, its dandy amidst/against a temporal-lepidopterological vortex worthy of Sid and Marty Krofft, handling his cyclamen explo- sive the way our painter might sometimes hold a paintbrush-cigarette-pen.

The two most directly Bonnardish canvases, *On the Terrace* and *The Supermundane*, spur the most Hawkinsish reflections. “The terrace functions as a liminal space, midway between the intimacy of the interior and the expansiveness of landscape.” While Bonnard’s painting serves as impetus for *The Supermundane*, Hawkins refurbishes the liminal as a littoral correspondence between the materiality of the figurative and the swirling liquidity of abstraction, between the living and the dead. The contextual ether is bodies auto-itemizing and atomizing to enter the relentless humblebrag of the socials, attempting to assuage the fracked as much as fractalized self, body, and personhood as those coordinates circulate and algorithmize online: abs, biceps, traps, quads, calves; duck face and DSLs. Men’s chesticles (areolas, nipples) provide puncta. In *The Supermundane* the chi-chis present like stings of bumblebees, real ones this time, but also errant, inspissated drops of fraise...
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in Sprinkler, Nick Jonas’s suckable titties rhyme with the tight pomegranate pompon salute of his just-out-of-the-cold-pool balls and cock. Clocks go TikTok, time itself divided into dinky bits and hits. Everything has been put to work. Although he would have been appalled at how corporations data mine all of these part-objects to sell the self back to itself, Jean Genet, proleptically as usual, proposed a counternarrative in “What Remains of a Rembrandt” that the digital has been programmed to work against.8

I keep trying to know how to comprehend the figure in the lower right-hand corner of The Supermundane, turned toward the terrace-space of the painting, backward facing. The blue-green of the figure’s jacket in Bonnard, Hawkins has shifted into various shade-streaked browns. The Christie’s lot essay suggests the figure seems “to merge, wraith-like, with the surrounding ground of the terrace.” Don’t know about the “wraith-like” merging – the corner figure seems painted as solidly as anything else in the vicinity – although the adjective fascinates, given what Hawkins does with the painting. In any case, Christie’s calls upon the art historian and curator Sasha Newman to clarify: “This dreaming feminine presence, Marthe [Bonnard, or de Méligny, née Maria Boursin]...”9 While that might be the case in La Terrasse, it’s not only because of Hawkins’s nod in his painting’s title to Alfred Jarry’s novel The Supermale that I keep thinking of the figure as Bonnard and/or Hawkins, à la Genet’s both me-or-him and me-and-him, an artist “at work,” even if that work is to drift off, and the cloche a bucket hat. While the disposition of the body could suggest daydreaming, the legs might hold
a sketchbook or Sodome et Gomorrhe – a flat surface seems to rest on the lap. The gray cat stares at the figure the way an animal companion will when one has been stationary, doing nothing — writing, sketching, lost in thought — for what the animal considers a ridiculous amount of time. Is the figure looking at the scene or is it all some sort of picture of insight? Of course, it is everything at once, the optic nerve wandering, wondering, adventuring, hedonistically unhindered.

“Hedonism in art […] may well be just the term we have for an art that won’t be “thoughtful,” won’t be smart — because it thinks that intelligence is useless in circumstances like those of 1917,” T. J. Clark wrote recently, considering Matisse and Bonnard as “a central strand” of 20th-century art making.13 "A response to catastrophe,” Clark continues, “can only really happen at the level of instinct, intuition, unconsciousness. It only happens when idiot pleasure is allowed to reveal the pain at its heart." America is catastrophe’s avatar. The hedonist’s response can be seen to be “wrong” or “embarrassing” — as well as ostrich. The corner personages each turn his/her/their back to the world, figures for the artists, missing nothing, strangely feeling, who painted La Terrasse and The Supermundane, counterfactuals as much as retorts to so many hackneyed verisimilitudes of the given.


Notes
2 Richard Hawkins interviewed by Mat, eds. Francesca Lacatena and Megan Francis Sullivan, Mat #2: Inside the Circle, October 2007, 17.
4 Ibid.
6 Christie’s, “Lot Essay” for La Terrasse.
7 "Mme Verdurin asked him, ‘Did you have some of my orangeade?’ Then M. De Charles, with a gracious smile and in a crystalline tone that was rare with him, and with endless pursing of the lips and wiggling of his torso, replied, ‘No, I preferred its neighbor, the fraise. It’s delicious.’” (Marcel Proust, Sodom and Gomorrah, trans. John Sturrock (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 355–56.
8 “‘Soon,’ I told myself, ‘nothing of what used to be so precious will count: love affairs, friendships, forms, vanity, everything that has to do with seduction.’ […] Or nothing would be changed? If each enclosure, precisely, contains one single identity, each enclosure is unique and succeeds in establishing between each of us an opposition that seems irremediable, in creating an innumerable variety of individuals who think of themselves as: self-other. Might each man have nothing precious or real except this singularity: ‘his’ moustache, ‘his’ eyes, ‘his’ clubfoot, ‘his’ harelip? And if he had nothing to take pride in but the size of ‘his’ cock? But this gaze went from the unknown passenger to me, and the immediate certainty that self-other were only one, at the same time both me-or-him, and me-and-him?” Jean Genet, “What Remains of a Rembrandt Torn into Little Squares All the Same Size and Shot Down the Toilet,” in Fragments of the Artwork, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 99.
9 Christie’s, “Lot Essay” for La Terrasse.
10 T. J. Clark, If These Apples Should Fall: Cézanne and the Present (London: Thames and Hudson, 2022), 184.