

GREENE NAFTALI

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Paul Chan

The Bather's Dilemma

September 12th – October 19th, 2019

Ground Floor

Greene Naftali is pleased to announce Paul Chan's solo exhibition entitled *The Bather's Dilemma*. This is his fourth solo exhibition at the gallery. *The Bather's Dilemma* features a new series of works Chan calls "Bathers." The Bathers belong to the genre of moving-image works pioneered by Chan that he calls "Breathers," which debuted in his 2017 exhibition *Rhi Anima* at the gallery.

Artists have explored the theme of the "bather" throughout history. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, artists like Cézanne and Matisse took up this motif to express evolving notions about the body, changing ideas about pleasure, one's relationship to nature, and how the longing for the new (in art) potentially renews a broader and more inclusive understanding of what it means to live with or against societal changes. Chan takes up this age-old trope to redescribe the constellation of themes and ideas the "bather" embodies for what is turning out to be a dismal 21st century.

Like the Breathers, the Bathers are constructed out of nylon fabric and powered by specially modified industrial fans. Each bather was designed by Chan to animate solely by how the fabric "body" reacts to and against the air pressure from the fans. Combining knowledge and experience from fields as disparate as fashion, physics (specifically fluid dynamics), and sculpture, Chan's novel technique creates aerodynamic forces like lift and drag within the internal structure of the body to harness the fans' air flow in order to govern a bather's movements.

In *Phenus 1* (2019), the image of a shameless bathing figure displaying themselves while holding a towel from behind is animated by two countervailing movements. The insistent swaying forward and backward of the jet-black body's lower section is counterpoised against the undulating and gyrating motion of the upper section. The rocking motion in the lower section is achieved by air flow pushing against the two connected, slightly unequal tube-like shapes, which creates the imbalance (the fluid dynamical term is "turbulent flow") necessary to generate the specific movement. The fabric shell that makes up the upper section also determines the air flow. But here, there are three openings where air escapes (one in each of the "elbows" and one on the "back"). These openings act like "thrusters," in effect pushing the upper section in three distinct directions. The curvature where the upper and lower sections meet induces more turbulence, essentially forcing the air to press against the upper section in many different directions. The white "towel" (with a specific weight of eight grams) acts as a counterweight, both exaggerating the movement generated by the air rushing out of the three openings and easing the transition of the body as it gestures rhythmically from one axis of direction to the next.

Katabasis (2019) sways from side to side as four bathers in various states of undress are connected at the arms, enabling air to enter and exit from any and all the figures. The lateral air flow traveling between the figures push and pull them into a particular ensemble of movements. *Katabasis* cycles from synchronic and ecstatic dancing to conflicting individual gestures to a state of homeostasis where all four figures are tensely, momentarily, still. This effectively imbues the work with the sense that the four bathers are either working together to travel in one direction, fighting amongst themselves about which way to go, or are too conflicted to move in any direction at all. The logo on the muscle shirt worn by the third figure (from the left) obliquely references part of their dilemma. Designed as an homage to the iconic Gold's Gym logo, the image is encircled by a Latin phrase made famous by philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) in his work *Leviathan* – "Bellum omnium contra omnes," which translates as "the war of all against all." The word *katabasis* itself also expresses something like the uncertainty of where they (or we) ought to go. *Katabasis* is an ancient Greek term for either traveling towards a coast where water is, or a descent into *Áidēs*, also known as the underworld.

Like *Phenus 1*, *La Baigneur 7 [Teenyelemachus]* (2018) uses a towel as a counterweight to attenuate how they move. But the motion is subdued, perhaps even mournful. The bather acts as if they are too weak to lift the hand-painted rag, or that they are having respiratory problems, and cannot stand upright. The upper body jerks against the weight of the towel until enough air pressure is built up within the form to be fully erect. But once the body reaches its zenith, the air becomes turbulent, thanks to the ridge-like design on the bather's back, which acts like small foils to disrupt air flow. The disruption causes the body to gracefully collapse back into its original posture, where *Teenyelemachus* must once again start to simply try to rise up.

Bropheus (2019) is even more pathetic. The extra long "arms" and hand-sewn shirt that make up the body have so much weight and drag that *Bropheus* moves as if they are always staggering or perpetually about to fall. The drunken quality of the animation is accentuated by how sluggishly *Bropheus* moves, due in part to the extra wide dimensions of the body and the cut of the extra large shirt, which acts like a parachute to resist any movement. The element on the floor resembles a beach towel and is composed of a fabric design by Chan made up entirely of opioid drug labels.

In *Khara En Tria [Joyer in 3]* (2019), the floor elements play the role of multicolored sand dunes that protect and isolate the three figures from the rest of the space. Nicknamed “Catullus” (blue figure), “Praxilla” (yellow figure), and “Sappho” (teal figure), the three are sewn together to form an ecstatic, animated circle. The motion of each figure is distinct, but like *Katabasis*, the lateral air flow that travels through the arms of the figures synchronizes the gestures of *Khara En Tria*, into a choreographic whole.

The dynamics that animate *2chained or Genesisia and Nemesis* (2019) are as varied as the elements that make up the work. Each of the two orange and yellow figures are fashioned with multiple openings for air to escape or be redirected. The curves and folds in the upper sections disrupt the air flow, causing the bodies to fall away from each other. But as one body topples over, the angle of the fall forces the other body—which is connected by one of the “arms”—to pose in such a way that air pressure builds in the opposite. The pressure in the free arm creates enough force to pull both bodies up. But the force is so great that the bodies end up colliding into one another. Like a seesaw, this “loop” begins again as one body wobbles and descends toward the floor, forcing the other body to pull them both up before the entire work collapses anew.

Los Baigneur [Poordysseus] (2018) is a bright yellow bather sporting a black bikini and a multicolored mesh shirt. Encased in a specially built wooden vitrine, *Poordysseus* is animated as if they are trapped and want to escape. The bather flings forward and crashes against the vitrine. The internal structure of *Poordysseus* is such that they can recover from the crash. The bather picks themselves up against the transparent surface. But air pressure builds inside the body in the upright position, so the figure teeters back and forth, until it can no longer contain the pressure inside and must find release. The openings on top and on the back of the body push air out and hurl the body toward the vitrine once again.

The bathers are complemented by what Chan calls “towel works”: unstretched canvases hung on wall mounted racks, like beach towels drying in bathrooms. Each towel depicts a composition derived from the patterns Chan created and used for making the bathers. The composition is painted twice, one on each side of the canvas. Chan paints these “towels” to develop the color combinations that may (or may not) be realized in the bathers themselves. Each shape in the towel is expressed in one color only. And the colors come “straight from the tube,” according to Chan. He does not mix, dilute, or add anything to the paints. And none of the shapes touch, overlap, or integrate in any way, “just like America in 2019,” Chan says.

The Bather’s Dilemma ends with a room that showcases a number of “models” Chan makes to sketch out the initial bathers’ forms. The models are sewn in muslin and mounted on floating wooden shelves. Raw materials from Chan’s studio are hung underneath each shelf, and composed in ways to help him imagine the color and material combinations the bathers might take on.

Lastly, *Untitled* (2019), is a charcoal drawing of two hands that serves as a coda and guide to the entire exhibition. Chan wrote recently:

At every age, overwhelming structural iniquities bring meaningless and arbitrary suffering and pain. And at every age, people organize to resist the best they can to try to stop the calamities from claiming more lives. [But] progress takes a toll, especially on those who want it most. Resistance wears down the spirit, and makes a mess of the body and mind. It is a shame that it feels natural to expect suffering in oneself for the sake of ending it in others, and commonplace to accept this terrible symmetry as the price one pays for progress.

The bather in art breaks with this terrible symmetry by offering an image of another way forward. Works that take up this motif invite us to reflect on how pleasure renews us. They are reminders that pleasing and being pleased – without aggression or guilt – expands our capacity for fellow feeling. Genuine pleasure is rejuvenating. And like that perfect night of sleep, it has a clarifying quality, as if one has emerged from a kind of cleansing. This sense of being cleansed is stimulating and healing, insofar as it helps renew us to more ably face what the day demands.

Progress without pleasure at heart is not progress at all. But pleasure without progress in mind is destructive, deadening, or a bore.

But what does it mean for pleasure to be genuinely progressive? How does the capacity for “pleasing and being pleased” help one be more resilient in the face of present and future concerns? And how can one be vigilant of, and sensitive to, kinds of progress that are socially and politically well-intentioned, but makes no room for pleasure and in truth are “not pleasing”?

This is what Chan calls “the bather’s dilemma.”

Paul Chan lives and works in New York. Recent solo exhibitions include *Rimai Modern*, Saskatoon (2018); *Greene Naftali*, New York (2017); *The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum*, New York (2015); and *Schaulager*, Basel (2014). Significant public collections include the *Art Institute of Chicago*, Chicago; *Hammer Museum*, Los Angeles; *The Museum of Modern Art*, New York; *Stedelijk Museum*, Amsterdam; and *Whitney Museum of American Art*, New York, among others.

The Bather’s Dilemma coincides with the exhibition *Publish & Perish: 8 Years of Badlands Unlimited*, organized by Greene Naftali and Badlands Unlimited, the publishing house founded by Paul Chan. *Publish & Perish* is on view at Badlands Unlimited Exhibition Space, 24 Rutgers Street from September 18th – October 20th.

For more information please visit www.greenenaftaligallery.com.