

Male Nudes, Exposed and Examined

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Pity the poor penis in modern art.

It's almost nowhere to be seen but, figuratively and theoretically speaking, it has been everywhere at the same time. Metaphorically, male artists have long wielded their paintbrushes and chisels like so many big, swollen phalluses, decreeing for the ages how female subjects should be interpreted and portrayed. Time and time again, this portrayal has been that of vulnerable, decorative, often unclothed creatures; there is but a short aesthetic-linguistic distance between lying naked and becoming a "nude."

Roughly a half-century ago, certain feminist artists, such as Sylvia Sleigh (1916-2010) and Eunice Golden, gave the long-prevailing "male gaze" in art a run for its authority by producing revealing (in various senses of the word) portraits of unclothed men — male nudes. And since the sexual liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, some gay artists have also examined the male nude, sometimes unabashedly imbuing their imagery with a homoerotic charge.

Against this art-historical backdrop, nowadays, in the context of gender fluidity, are there new aesthetic-social-sexual settings emerging in which artists may — or should — reconsider their approaches to the nude?

For Aaron Skolnick, a 30-year-old artist from Kentucky who is gay and easily fluid about his sexuality, drawing or painting the male nude is a routine, essential part of his art-making. His images of naked men, including self-portraits, do not emphasize or fetishize the erotic but they do not shy away from it either; instead, Skolnick offers a frisson of the sexual (if a viewer really wants it) naturally embedded in the young artist's dutiful draftsmanship, which has found its groove in recent years, even as he has sharpened his thematic focus.

Now, a selection of Skolnick's small-format works is on view in *Your Voice Lying Gently in My Ear*, a just-opened solo exhibition at Institute 193 (1B) in the East Village, which will run through December 15. At the same time, Skolnick's work is being featured in several group shows, including *Young Hudson Biennial*, at September Gallery, in Hudson, New York (through November 10); *We Go Fast*, at Left Field Gallery in Los Osos, California (through November 24); and *If I Could Turn Back Time*, at the Morlan Gallery at Transylvania University, in Lexington, Kentucky (through December 3).



Aaron Skolnick, "Cuddle" (2019), oil on linen, 12 x 9 inches (photo courtesy of Institute 193 (1B), New York)

“I guess I’m having something of a moment,” Skolnick said modestly during a recent interview at his studio in Hudson, the riverside town north of Manhattan that in recent years has enjoyed an economic recovery and established some hipster bona fides after decades of boom-and-bust convulsions. There, Skolnick lives frugally in an old, wood-framed apartment building just off the town’s main street; he works night shifts at a restaurant and sticks to a disciplined schedule that allows for plenty of studio time, as well as for walks, exercise, and hanging out with friends.

When I met the artist on a warm October afternoon, he stepped out onto the sidewalk in front of his building to greet me with what appeared to be a brown-leather tablecloth masquerading as a skirt wrapped around his waist. It was, in fact, a *schmatta* from Skolnick’s collection, which, along with sneakers and a black T-shirt emblazoned with a smiling Willie Nelson, formed his uniform for the day.



Works by Aaron Skolnick, including: top, an untitled, colored-pencil-on-paper drawing (2019); bottom: “Watching You Get Into Bed” (diptych, 2019), oil on linen, 12 x 18 inches (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

“I moved here in 2018, seven months after Louis passed away,” he recalled, referring to the artist Louis Zoellar Bickett II (1950-2017), a fellow Kentucky native. Forty years older than Skolnick, Bickett was known for “The Archive,” a voracious, conceptual-art magnum opus that became his all-encompassing life’s work. Starting in 1972, Bickett exhaustively labeled and indexed every object under his roof — every pencil, notebook, plate, dog brush, store receipt, jar, photograph, book, umbrella, or other item that entered his home, including, during his last years, every bottle of medicine or package of health-care supplies he used to treat the Lou Gehrig’s disease that ultimately took his life.

Selections from “The Archive” were shown at Institute 193, a cultural center in Lexington, Kentucky, in its inaugural exhibition in 2009, and just over two years ago at Andrew Edlin Gallery in New York. (Institute 193 (1B), the Lexington venue’s small, downtown-Manhattan annex that is now showing Skolnick’s work, opened last year.)

Skolnick grew up in a small town in northern Kentucky, just southeast of Cincinnati, on the other side of the Ohio River. His parents divorced, and his childhood years were, he said, rough and filled with bullying and tension. It was a relief, he explained, when he was finally able to get away to attend the University of Kentucky in Lexington, where he earned an undergraduate degree in fine art, with a focus on drawing and painting.

Skolnick recalled, “I met Louis in 2010, when a mutual friend introduced us. Louis was interested in my work; he purchased some pieces made on Mylar and paper, and then we hung out and got closer and closer.”



The artist Aaron Skolnick in his studio in Hudson, New York, October 2019 (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

If falling into Bickett's orbit came naturally for Skolnick, maintaining his own artistic identity and creative vision could be challenging, he explained, in the long shadow of the older, locally known artist.

"There were definitely challenging times living with another artist who had already developed his language and aesthetic, and was so sure of who he was," he continued. "We had rules, especially regarding my studio. It could be difficult to live with and learn from Louis without letting him become a full-time mentor, especially after dating for a couple of years. I was starting to establish my own voice and wanted see it develop, uninterrupted. As time went on, it got easier to have our studios in the same house; we grew more comfortable with that situation."

As Bickett fastidiously catalogued every scrap in their shared home, Skolnick literally had to mark off his territory, lest he and his studio became parts of his partner's grand project. Skolnick was already interested in the human figure, and drew and painted regularly, sometimes choosing Bickett or himself as his subject. He routinely worked in watercolor on paper, or in oil on canvas.



Aaron Skolnick, "A Study in Being Alone" (2018), pencil and watercolor on paper, 22.5 x 16 inches (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

More recently, Skolnick's current boyfriend has made his way into his sketches and portraits. "Though my work is extremely personal," he remarked, "it is not autobiographically about everyday life; it is about intimacy. The work I've been producing these past several months has been almost directly about me getting my sexuality back and about my new relationship — about seeing my relationship with this new love and how I have come to see my body as a sexual object again, in a very good way."

Thus, the penises, hard and soft, the exposed buttocks, anuses, and close-ups of chests, legs, or armpits that turn up in Skolnick's newest pictures appear more in the service of scientific inquiry than they do to invoke the old god Eros; in "Cuddle," an oil-on-linen painting made this year, two bodies meld into each other in a cloud of watery pink and tangerine orange. Its highlights and outlines are marked in white and chalky violet instead of black or gray, which would have sunk this wisp of an image, one that almost longs to float away.

In "Relaxing" (oil on linen, 2019), which brings to mind Eunice Golden's daring, cock-filled "Male Landscapes" of the late 1960s, Skolnick offers a sausage-like penis



Aaron Skolnick, "Relaxing" (2019), oil on linen, 8 x 10 inches (photo courtesy of Institute 193 (1B), New York)

tucked neatly between a pair of spread legs rendered in the electric palette of an acid-popping Impressionist.

In his drawings and watercolors, Skolnick's line is economical, languid, and assured; for a young artist who is still refining his craft, he seems to have instinctively learned the expressive power of holding back.

I asked Skolnick if all the cocks and balls that appear in his pictures might prompt some viewers to regard him primarily or even exclusively as a "gay artist." He replied, "I let being gay come in and out of my work. For the past several months, my work has been driven by my sexuality and sexual appetite, and my 'gayness' has been very much at its forefront."

However, he added as he sorted through a batch of works featuring hard and soft, pink and purple male protuberances, "I believe that it's okay for different parts of our identity to take the main focus at different times, but to let that happen naturally. I'm gay, but that's not my whole identity, not even as an artist."

And as far as his subject matter is concerned, he said with a gentle laugh, as he put aside the penis-filled pictures, that was the long and short of it.

Aaron Michael Skolnick: *Your Voice Lying Gently in My Ear continues at Institute 193 (1B) (292 East 3rd Street, Room 1B, East Village; Manhattan) through December 15.*



Aaron Skolnick, "Bill in Bed" (2019), ink on paper, 6 x 9 inches (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)