

Stephenson, Sarah, *Paul P's New Body*,  
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Paul P.'s portraits-romantic and sensual but not explicitly sexual paintings, primarily featuring young men-are elusive, sensitive incidents amidst a saturated genre. They are also thoroughly researched, his subjects sourced from 1970s and 80s porn magazines from the Toronto Lesbian and Gay Archive, which the Canadian-born artist frequently revisits from Paris, where he has lived for the past five years. The tension created by these dense images is part of a historical inquiry into the motivations of genre. In "Sherbert in Damascus," P.'s new exhibition at Daniel Reich Gallery in New York, the artist takes a different tack, vacating his pictures and focusing, in dark and chalky oils, on the mystique of landscape.



UNTITLED, 2010. COURTESY PAUL P AND DANIEL REICH GALLERY

SARAH STEPHENSON: You have been working on landscapes for the past two years, and, of course, the first thing a viewer will notice is that the paintings lack a human subject. But you've maintained many of the atmospheric qualities...

PAUL P: The [landscape paintings] are different but they are very much part of a progression. The idea of landscape as a subject in my work has been germinating for a while, especially if you look at the bats in flight in some of my earlier paintings, which were made simultaneous to the portraits. Although bats don't fall into a conveniently pastoral archetype, they were an early incident in my work of a broad atmospheric landscape. These new paintings fall into a more architectural, geometric and compositional category.

STEPHENSON: Have you experimented with landscapes (empty of a figure) simultaneous to working on a figurative painting or drawing prior to this series?

PAUL P: No, this is the first time, over the past two years, although the works in this show are also an exception because they are on canvas. My 2008 show at Marc Selwyn Fine Art in LA, which compared Venice Beach, California to Venice, Italy, consisted of a lot of landscapes, but mostly drawings. There I was comparing these two notions of "Venice"- the louche, 19th Century aesthetic highpoint and the site of photo shoots in vintage gay magazines-as locations for what I had been following in portraiture. Suddenly landscapes had meaning; they were not neutral but contested, political, erotic spaces that imply encounters and traces of something far beyond me. This show expands beyond the two Venices, although it contains images of both cities.

STEPHENSON: You have emphasized when speaking about your portraits your interest in the archive and the ability to repurpose an existing, conscious and subconscious body of images. How do landscapes fit into that pursuit, aside from being a genre with a long history?

PAUL P: I think the term "archive" is important, but it's also about a method and system of looking at objects. Aestheticizing the archive is important, or else you lose it. Repetition of themes is important, and this came up in the landscapes as I revisited places and scenes, it ends up becoming an archive. Impressionist artists would do that as well—Monet, for example, in terms of his strategy of looking at things again and again in different lights.

STEPHENSON: Impressionistic is not a particularly popular genre for contemporary interpretation, and your approach to it is unique not only for that, but for your sensual take on it. Monet, who you mention, immediately comes to mind as someone who used light-whose light could smolder-as a figurative technique, but as a new optical model, and a way of offering different naturalistic modes of painting. You came to landscapes by gauging the differences between California light and Italian light: what are you testing for?

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PAUL P: Light is definitely something that I'm chasing after. I don't yet know if I can say absolutely what the type of differences are painting in different lights, because this is part of the learning curve of the whole project, executing so many types of seasons and environments and occurrences that the light is constantly shifting. The crucial thing is that you know that you're in a special place, one that makes almost every moment unique. It's just so volatile and when you're looking at the canals or out to sea in Venice; there's something very singular about what's taking place there. My revelatory light experience first occurred in Paris actually. There is something amazing in the light there, especially at l'heure bleue, the "magic hour," that time of day when everything turns a pinky wash. But it's not only about being at the location it's also about then removing yourself from the location and being far away, that Proustian idea of distance [as difference]. There aren't many things in Paris that I find as interesting subject matter, because I live there.

STEPHENSON: How has your portraiture evolved alongside the landscapes?

PAUL P: One of the portraits from this 2010 series is a new idea: It's not so much about the face. This has made me think about how movement and the landscape have refreshed other things, even my work in different mediums: pastel and then watercolor and then oil painting. When I paint a portrait now they seem to have all the learning of landscape within them, like weather or atmosphere. The second 2010 portrait, for example, has dusky sunset colors running through it, so it feels very organic to be expanding and moving between landscape and portraiture.

STEPHENSON: Your figures are all taken from photographs, what is your method now with the landscapes?

PAUL P: They are generated in a different way. They are all from first-hand experience; I make drawings "in the field" but I also take photographs. The paintings, however, are produced in the studio and that then gives them the removal. So, although it's from my own photographic source, there's also an essence of something missed, heightened or longed for that can happen once you're away. This isn't so much a nostalgia since that would suggest that I am feeling badly that a certain period is over which is not the case. It's more about evoking or conjuring of a ghost especially in terms of the ephemerality of the light.

STEPHENSON: Whistler comes to mind, particularly his small landscapes from Venice.

PAUL P: Well, I am still really preoccupied with Whistler because I feel like there are so many stages and types of Whistler. It was quite unexpected when I came across his work for the first time at art school because so much of his work that isn't well known is equally amazing. His seascapes and watercolors and the pastels in Venice are atmospheric and smudgy, whereas the late work has a more organized style. When I first started to study Whistler it was in a pastiche where I would take elements of things from the background of his portraits and add it to my own portraits. Through studying him it's almost like I learned what Whistler was doing and, although superficial at first, I do things now that don't reference him directly anymore.