

# CHARLIE SMITH london Ltd.

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Wed-Sat 11am-6pm or by appointment

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## GAVIN TREMLETT

### Amusements

Private View

Thursday December 9<sup>th</sup> 6.30pm–8.30pm

Exhibition Dates

Friday December 10<sup>th</sup> 2010 - Saturday January 29<sup>th</sup> 2011

Gallery Hours

Wednesday–Saturday 11am–6pm or by appointment

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*“Situating between an embrace of vulgarity in contemporary culture, and a yearning for a lost mode of figuration in painting, my work establishes a place of intersection between the sublime possibilities of painting, and the closed, crude nature of pornography.”*

CHARLIE SMITH london is delighted to present Berlin based artist Gavin Tremlett with his first one person show in London.

Tremlett's portraits and full figure nudes provide a point of entry into an investigation of the human self. Playfully encouraging the gaze Tremlett's classically rendered adolescent subjects invite us to engage voyeuristically whilst simultaneously turning the gaze back upon itself, as if to both absorb and reflect; to watch and be watched; to tempt and to reject. Displaying an emphatic sexuality, Tremlett's subjects are at once enticing, inquiring and accusatory. Innocent and guilty, they are both victims and perpetrators.

Tremlett's unparalleled technical ability combined with the seductive come hither pose of his subjects leads us into a confrontation with the uncanny. Beauty vies with deformity as his classically rendered, often mask-like visages both conceal as well as reveal. This rendering of face as mask is often coupled with abstract, painterly marks that serve to obfuscate the subject, thus interfering with the totality of an ideal self. There is a denial of the whole but also a doubling in process here, both physically and symbolically. The idea of the double, which can be read into portraits, reflections, shadows, totems or even the continuation of a blood line, as the psychoanalyst Otto Rank would have it, is a narcissistic extension of the self and a guarantee of immortality.

Tremlett's paintings then are beautiful and unsettling manifestations of numerous combined and fragmented sources. At once we are attending art history, pornography, popular culture, nostalgic ideals, and the artist's and our own inner drives and memories, both apparent and repressed.

Please contact gallery for images and further information

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### Biographical:

Born: 1977

Education: 2001 – 2004: MA in Painting, Royal Academy Schools, London; 1996 – 1999: BA (Hons) in Fine Art (First Class), Loughborough University School of Art & Design

Selected Exhibitions: 2010: Amusements (Solo), CHARLIE SMITH london, London; The Future Can Wait (curated by Zavier Ellis & Simon Rumley), Shoreditch Town Hall, London; New British Painting (curated by Zavier Ellis & Pilvi Kalhama), Gallery Kalhama & Pippo, Helsinki; Papyrophilia (curated by Zavier Ellis), CHARLIE SMITH london, London; 2008: Be Stiff (Solo), Wohnmaschine, Berlin; Prague Triennial, National Gallery of Contemporary Art, Prague; 2007: Malkunst 2, Contemporary Painting in Berlin, Fondazione Mudima, Milano; The Dream of Putrefaction, The Metropole Galleries, Folkstone; 2006: The Hobby (Solo), Wohnmaschine, Berlin; Icons, Chung King Project, Los Angeles; 2005: Introspective Men, Madder 139, London; Schmidt, Tremlett, Tzamouranis, Wohnmaschine, Berlin; 2005: Faux Realism Part 2, The Rockwell Project, London; Faux Realism Part 1, The Royal Academy Schools Gallery, Hornsey; 2004: The Arrivals, The Pump House Gallery, London

Awards & Residencies: 2004: The Gordon Luton Award for Fine Art Painter-Stainers

Collections: Thomas Rusche, Münster, private collections throughout Europe

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### 'Gavin Tremlett: Caught up in the Carnival'

By Jane Neal

*"Correggio is the only artist ever to have depicted the anus and scrotum of an airborne angel,"*

Germaine Greer: 'The Beautiful Boy' 2003

Germaine Greer surely intended to cause a stir when she brought out her book *The Beautiful Boy* (2003), that featured boys on the cusp of manhood and was intended to allow older women to 'reclaim their appreciation of the adolescent male body'(indeed the book's cover claimed it was 'demolishing one of the last great western taboos'). Yet while comments from Greer such as 'If nature didn't intend boys to be seduced by older men and women, why did it make them so damnably fetching, so downy-cheeked, rangy-limbed and pert-buttocked?' seem deliberately provocative and dangerously close to suggesting that the 'subject' might be (to coin the much abused colloquialism and excuse for unwelcome sexual advances), 'asking for it', the general reaction of most people who encountered the book was not to be scandalised, but wowed by the overwhelming beauty of the selected images. In an age where the naked or almost naked female body has undoubtedly been subject to over exposure on camera and used as one of advertising's most powerful selling tools, the naked male body - though increasingly a feature on our television and film screens, has been noticeably and literally less exposed than the female counterpart.

It has not escaped the theorists' notice that there is a considerable imbalance between the amount of naked female and male flesh found exposed on the big and small screen, on billboards, on the internet and in art. The general consensus for the root of this phenomenon in Western society is Descartes' pronouncements (1596-1650) on body and spirit. The dualisms of Cartesian thought divide the mind and spirit from the world and the flesh. Traditionally men have been identified with the mind, control and culture, whereas women have been situated as the epitome of carnality (that is, of the body or flesh), creatures of the world. Theorists such as Susan Bordo (b 1947) argue that as womanhood became synonymous with the corporeal, as opposed to the spiritual, so the feminine came to: 'define nature, emotionality, irrationality and sensuality'. Unlike men whose minds had precedence over their bodies, women were subject to their sensual appetites, to the frail and unpredictable nature of the flesh and thus needed to be 'over seen' or 'tamed' by men who were, by nature, 'calm and rational'.

An exception to this 'rule' of behaviour is the notion of 'carnival'. The word 'carnival' refers to a variety of folk celebrations in which, as cultural anthropologist, Victor Turner (1920-1983) argues: 'Sensuality, playfulness, and parody are paramount. The carnivalesque occupies a time and space of liminality, a moment "betwixt and between" the structures and hierarchies of the everyday. Rather than sanctioning the social and religious order, as official ceremonies often do, carnival suspends hierarchical rank, norms, and privileges, and creates an alternative world of equality, ambiguity, and transformation.' During the time of carnival (historically held across Europe the day before Lent begins), anarchy reigns and a space is created within which societal norms can be subverted, desires expressed and inhibitions abandoned. Carnival has often been celebrated with masquerades (the most famous example being the annual February masquerade in Venice), the masks allowing the wearer an even greater amount of freedom without the recriminations he or she might face for indulging in wild or permissive acts if they were visible and recognised.

For those concerned with observing societal rules and 'fitting in' but with latent pleasure-seeking leanings, carnival provides a way out, an opportunity to explore outlawed or problematic territory for a brief period of time. Permission to 'play' or 'perform' can help the protagonist to explore an otherwise forbidden side of their nature, so long as they adhere to the rules - this indulgence must be restricted to carnival only, life with all its structures and formalities has to continue outside of this 'zone', with all its rules observed.

Though the festival of carnival has its roots in the Middle Ages, the spirit of carnival and notion of the carnivalesque finds greatest expression in Baroque art. The joyful abandon that is synonymous with Baroque painting - the delight in naked flesh, wild, bacchanalian feasts, even the riotous depiction of heavenly courts complete with boisterous cherubs, is a world away from the classical purity, even the severity of early Renaissance painting. The Baroque is about theatre: death is there, drama is there, colour is heightened, shadows intensified - everything is apparently on the verge of carnival, if not already in full swing.

The attraction of the idea of carnival to gay men is well documented; 'mardi gras' has come to be associated with gay pride marches and fun-filled celebrations. It could be argued that the physical expression of homosexual love and demonstration of desire is the antithesis of Cartesian thinking concerning manhood, and that therefore, mardi gras and carnival is all the more important as a focal point for countering this societal 'rule': that it is women who indulge the fleshly desires and who exist to have desires put upon them, not men.

But what of men who are straight but refuse to be bound by Cartesian thinking? What if the straight man wants to explore the delights of the 'beautiful boy'? This way of thinking was not of course alien to societies past - ancient Greece being perhaps the most obvious example, where sexuality was arguably more fluid and less confined and codified than it is today; with beauty being prized by all. It is interesting to note that although Botticelli (1445-1510) introduced the female nude to Renaissance painting and Giorgione followed with his 'Sleeping Venus', 24 years later, the female nude only really became the 'preferred' subject of choice over the male counterpart from the 17th Century onwards (perhaps, one could argue as a result of Cartesian thinking). The Baroque movement that went hand in hand with Catholicism's attempt at counter reformation, allowed - even in the church - the depiction of sumptuous, naked flesh; celebrating the delights of the well fleshed, female body. However after looking at the delicious renderings of the young male body by Caravaggio (1571-1610) and Correggio (1489-1534), it is clear that these artists were not unmoved (and arguably preferred) to depict the more sculpted beauty of the young, male form.

Gavin Tremlett is a decidedly 21st Century artist. He sources his figurative subject matter from contemporary images drawn from a variety of sources including erotic gay literature and pornography. Yet the majority of the artist's oeuvre is concerned with depictions of the kind of 'beautiful boys' that grace the pages of Greer's afore-mentioned book or cavort across the canvases of Baroque and Mannerist paintings. As these boys twist and turn their taught and lightly muscled frames, the viewer is struck by the beauty of their young bodies, recently matured, but also by the uncomfortable nature of their poses and expressions. The work is fraught with anxiety: though the boys' bodies are beautiful, many of them have faces that appear twisted, even maimed or partially obliterated by a lurid, poisonous-coloured fog. In other examples, the boys in question may have challenging, even threatening expressions, causing the viewer to question whether they are indeed objects of exploitation, or knowing, cunning predators, callously using their youth and beauty to entrap the pleasure-seeker.

Tremlett's art is meticulously executed. He works on paper, combining a mixture of linear, graphite drawing with tonal shading and oil washes. His subjects vary between depictions of the whole or part figure and small 'bust' portraits in charcoal, graphite and oil. His obvious dexterity and command of his medium begs comparisons with old master works, yet the boys' poses that look to be derived mostly from gay pornography, and Tremlett's often overly heightened use of acid colours reveal the influence of 20th and 21st photography, film and television.

It is this tension between traditional medium, wrought with considerable skill, fluidity and sensitivity, crossed with the lurid nature of the contemporary sources that Tremlett scours for material that creates conflict. This conflict pulses through the work itself, but it also courses through the viewer. The medium and execution of the work demand to be looked at. The nature of paint and pencil and the finesse of its handling is extremely seductive, yet the poses of the subjects often make for uncomfortable viewing. There is a sense that what is on display is intended for intimate engagement and encounter, yet the nonchalant and provocative poses reveal protagonists who care little for the discomfort of the viewer and appear to be flaunting their sexuality in an open if not blatant manner.

Tremlett is conscious that the work can be problematic for those who view it. Apart from the embarrassment of being 'caught' looking at something 'naughty', there is the shock factor that accompanies pornography. Laying bare everything, the viewer is confronted by raw carnality, whereas eroticism gently titillates, covering up as much as exposing and allowing the imagination to complete the final act, as opposed to dictating the outcome. Tremlett is well versed in his knowledge of art history and the work of his 'heroes' find echoes in his art. Courbet's (1819-1877) 'l'Origine du Monde' (1866), is clearly a weighty influence. With the subject's legs akimbo, and its head covered so the viewer's focus is on the trunk and most especially on the pubic mound with its mass of sprouting dark hair, the shock factor that registers the first time this bold work is encountered is apparent even today. Why this work is so shocking is difficult to precisely determine. It's not as if a woman's genitals are difficult to come by via one kind of screen or another, rather it is the absence of personality in the work that is perhaps its most persistently shocking feature. Expressions humanise, but there is no head to be viewed and therefore no way of gauging if the woman is compliant or victim - even worse, the blue tinges of the flesh tones on her legs could point to necrosis; the woman's vagina may indeed bring life into the world, but is this woman still living?

Like Courbet, Tremlett plays with sinister hues in his works, though unlike Courbet he pushes his palette towards the edge of psychedelia. The hazy blurs that encase his figures are suggestive of colour field paintings and indeed this abstract element, so strongly present, introduces a second tension in Tremlett's work, the play between figuration and abstraction.

Tremlett lists Mark Rothko (1903-1970) as a major influence and it is not hard to find him in Tremlett's grounds. Yet if Rothko sits upon the artist's shoulder, he shares that space with the young Duchamp (1887-1968), Picasso (1881-

1973), and Mapplethorpe (1946-1989) - whose beautiful subjects are so seductive as to sometimes cause the viewer to overlook the brilliance of the artist's photography, where the prints themselves are marvels in technical mastery. Perhaps Mapplethorpe appeals to Tremlett on both counts: for his love of human beauty, and for his dedication to his craft - twin obsessions both artists share.

Tremlett is clearly in love with painting. His delight in the way light and colour play together, coupled with his feeling for line are a constant in his practice. This can be traced back to his early art school training in Loughborough. He shared this love of 'old school' fine art practice with his Loughborough contemporaries, artists such as: Reese Jones, Gavin Nolan, Chris Davies and Mark Jackson. Tremlett's dedication to his chosen medium persisted through his time at the Royal Academy in London, but the artist remembers his post graduate student days as being clouded by anxiety. Tremlett was anxious about being in London, he was anxious about his paintings and his tutors' and fellow students' responses. He was anxious after art school, about what would happen next, and this anxiety pervaded his art; he and the work became cowed.

Yet though unpleasant to experience, the weight of anxiety the artist experienced led him to where he is today. Tremlett began to use anxiety as a means through which to question society's imposed 'norms'. He questioned his own thoughts and responses: what is normality, what is acceptable, what is permitted. Eventually Tremlett sought to find the place between the real and fantasy in his art. Helped by overdoses of Hitchcock films, the experience of moving to Berlin - a new city with an historically liberal arts and club scene, Tremlett found carnival. For if Greer can claim (or re-claim) the young male body for the delight of the older woman, surely an artist can celebrate the beauty of the human form, male or female outside the fetters of social conditioning.