

Painting Desires



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The visible is only a placeholder for real desire. [1]

According to Jacques Lacan, human desire is not a simple expression of our natural instincts, but rather a complex, symbolic process that is shaped by the social and cultural contexts in which we live. At the heart of Lacan's theory is the idea that we are fundamentally incomplete beings, and that this sense of lack is what drives us to seek out the objects of our desire. 'Lack' in this case, is not simply a physical or material absence, but a deeper, more fundamental sense of incompleteness that is rooted in our being.

The idea of lack as a kind of active deficit was frequently referenced in discussions between the curator and artists in *Painting Desires*. Sophia proposes that an innate sense of lack resides in the medium of painting itself, while Tim underscores this idea suggesting that painting can elicit unfulfilled desire because all paintings are about the absence of the thing they're depicting. Kansas speaks to the vicarious and sensual pleasures of painting as inherent with a certain pull or craving. Maxime describes an 'existential spiritual yearning', while Samuel points to desire's symbolic and mythological possibilities as replacement settings for the 'real'. These perspectives highlight desire as a concept and catalyst for making.

Freud intellectualised desire from a position of patriarchal privilege. Nonetheless, his theory of desire as a central aspect of human psychology still resonates today. He posited that making art can function as a form of sublimation or wish fulfilment that allows the artist to channel their desires and impulses into a creative form. In this context, *Painting Desires* considers the proposition of painting as both subject/object, and verb/noun, i.e., the artists are painting desires, but also, could painting itself desire? and if so, what would be the object of its desire? Informed by this thought experiment, the exhibition foregrounds diverse interpretations of desire and the materiality of painting, exploring desire's restlessness, longing and delayed or mediated fulfilment.

Maxime Banks' artworks serve as archives of her personal experiences, thoughts, and material experiments, which she documents on the verso of her works in extensive notes. Using handmade pigments and her own hair, she creates a form of 'DNA self-portraiture' that references ancestral memory and mathematical concepts such as the helix coil. Banks conducts her artistic experiments in a laboratory she calls 'Mabel's Garden' (named after her mother) where she makes biological, botanical, and chemical ink solutions to create 'infinite entropy patterns' on paper. Maxime's work is a manifestation of obsessive imagination and desire using an Afrofuturist perspective to explore ideas of space travel, alternate histories, speculative futures, and the potential of science and technology as tools for liberation.

Similarly, Sophia Hewson's painting 'Untitled (Lockdown Baby)' looks at matrilineal legacy from a markedly different perspective. Her work is informed by Freud and Lacan's theorisation around the 'desire of the mother'. Lacan argued that the child internalises the mother's desire, which becomes an important part of their own psychic structure and a crucial factor in shaping the child's sense of identity. In Hewson's painting, Baby Herman the middle-aged, cigar-smoking toon from 'Who Framed Roger Rabbit' (1998) finds himself in a dynamic abstract space in which he can be viewed as an ironic symbol of the mother's desire, a projection of her own unresolved emotional conflicts or unfulfilled desires and aspirations.

Tim Phillips' artistic practice also delves into the cerebral and metaphorical dimensions of desire. In his work, Phillips examines the role of concealment and secrecy as queer strategies, presenting 'opacity as an alternative to normative visibility'. His works incorporate pictorial and conceptual veils that conceal queer desire in plain sight. Simultaneously, his painting technique emphasises a material opacity, achieved through the gradual buildup of differentiated brushstrokes. Like several other artists in the *Painting Desires* exhibition, Phillips uses fruit as a time-honoured symbol of temptation and desire. By doing so, he highlights the ways in which desire operates on both a conscious and unconscious level, and how it can be obscured or revealed through various forms of visual representation. Phillips' works challenge normative assumptions about desire, drawing attention to the complex interplay between visibility and concealment in the construction of identity.

Kansas Smeaton's artworks also explore the symbolic significance of fruit, a subject that has been frequently depicted in art throughout history. In Smeaton's paintings, the hand gestures suggest an offering, emphasising the seductive nature of food and the human desire for pleasure and indulgence. Smeaton links this seductive quality to the materiality of paint, highlighting the pleasure and joy of colour and the potential for tracing the various curves and crevices of objects and bodies with paint. Through their use of gesture and colour, Smeaton's works invite viewers to consider the complex interplay between our desires and the objects and experiences that satisfy them.

Samuel Quinteros likewise utilises various fruits as symbols in his paintings, where bodies and fleshy plant life shimmer ominously in the inky pictorial space. He draws inspiration from Bosch's 'Garden of Earthly Delights', a surreal and fantastical garden filled with humans and otherworldly creatures engaged in various activities. Gardens are often associated with paradise, a utopian place of beauty and abundance where all desires are fulfilled. In Samuel's paintings, the fantastical garden can be seen as a representation of this ideal paradise, but it may also serve as a metaphorical cautionary tale against the perils of giving in to excessive desire.

Chelsea Lehmann, 2023

[1] Richard Powers, *The Overstory* (e-pub), p. 246



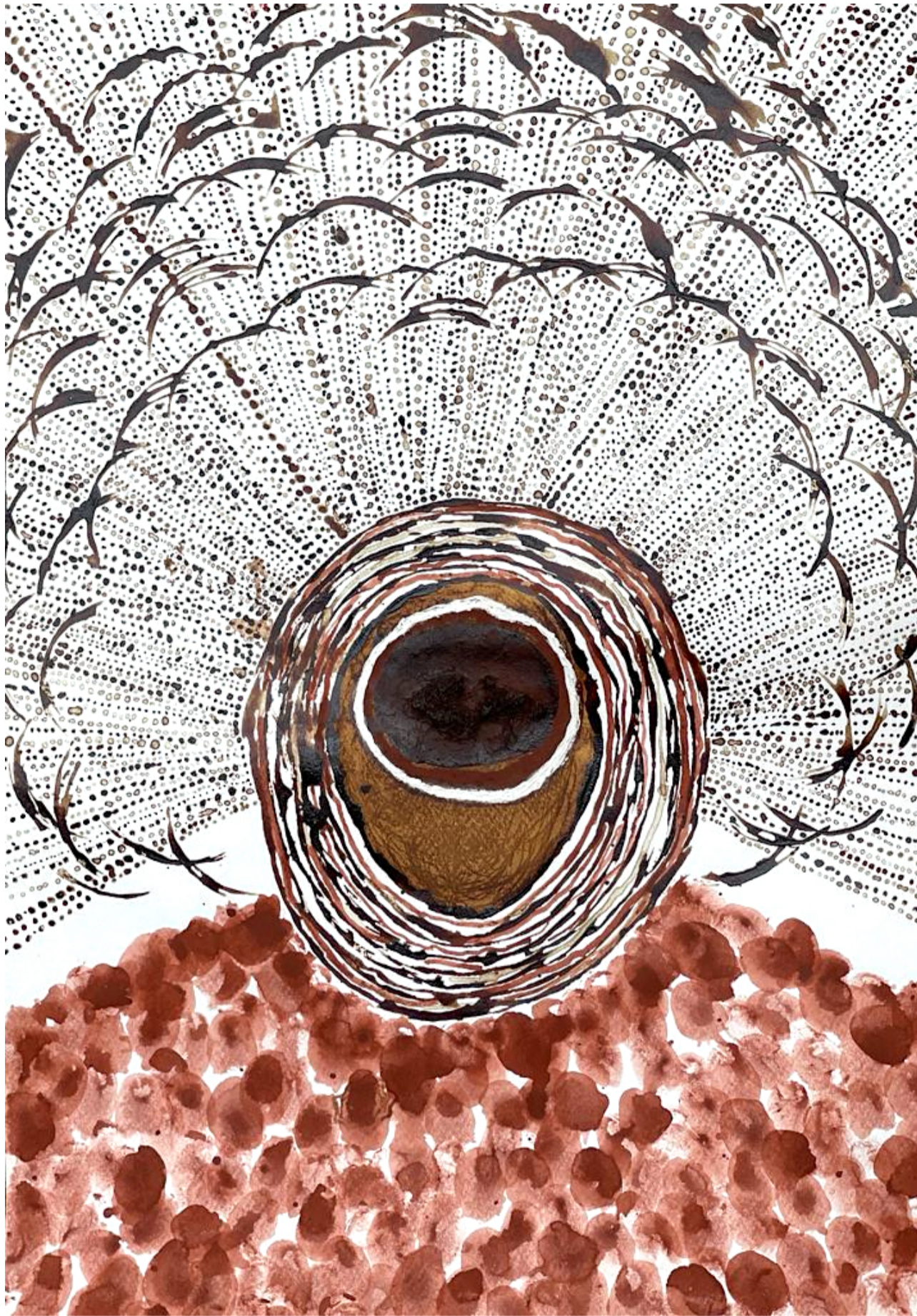
Kansas Smeaton
Hand with Grapes
2023
oil on canvas
40.6 x 35.5cm
Courtesy COMA gallery



Kansas Smeaton
Gloved Hand with Cherry
2023
oil on canvas
40.6 x 35.5cm
Courtesy COMA gallery



Maxime Banks
*Afronaut Anatomy Autoethnography Archives:
I am the Universe*, 2022
Mixed media, artist's hair, collage on paper
42 x 29.7cm



Maxime Banks
*Afronaut Anatomy Autoethnography Archives:
Celestial Constellations in
the Cosmos Imagination, 2022,
Mixed media,
artist's hair, collage on paper
42 x 29.7cm*



Maxime Banks
*All the Babies I Lost
in Outer Space Ovulating from my Head*, 2018
Mixed media on paper
29.8 x 20.9cm



Samuel Quinteros
*Three Spectral Nymphs
with Fruits*, 2023
oil on linen
61 x 45.7cm



Samuel Quinteros
*Spectral Nymph with
Blue Pomegranate*
2023, oil on linen
61 x 45.7cm



Tim Phillips
*We Have Always Lived
in the Castle*, 2019
oil on gesso board
70 x 70cm



Tim Phillips
Dear Diary
2021-22
oil on linen
38.5 x 46cm



Sophia Whitney Hewson
Untitled (Lockdown Baby)
2022, oil on canvas
129 x 84cm
Courtesy MARS gallery

Artist Biographies

Maxime Banks (b. USA) is a time-traveller of the Black American Diaspora with Chicago, Mississippi roots, currently based in Naarm Victoria, Kulin country. Maxime was recently included in the 2022 Wisconsin Triennial: Ain't I A Woman? at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, Wisconsin, USA. Maxime explores an Afrofuturist Anatomy Autoethnography Archive, reimagining Black womanist beingness in the Universe through portraiture, sound, performance, painting, collage, hand-printing, quantum poetics and spoken word, invoking Black identity, culture and deep time.

Sophia Hewson is a Naarm based artist and a member at The Australian Centre for Psychoanalysis in Melbourne (2021). Hewson was a Ramsay Art Prize finalist in 2019, completed a six-month residency at Residency Unlimited in New York (2015) and was a recipient of the Northern Centre for Contemporary Art international project (2014). In 2011 Hewson was selected by Art Collector Magazine as one of Australia's 50 most collectible artists

Tim Phillips was born in 1991 in South Australia and grew up on Ngunnawal Country, Canberra. He has exhibited nationally and in The Netherlands, and in 2014 he completed a residency at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris as part of the Brett Whiteley Travelling Art Scholarship. He lives and works on Gadigal Country, Sydney, and is a current PhD candidate at the Australian National University.

Kansas Smeaton (b. 1992) is a New Zealand-born artist who lives and practices on Gadigal land (Sydney, NSW). Smeaton's artworks are informed by a fascination with the complex relationship between power, gender and sexuality. Engaging with traditional art historical strategies of symbolism and portraiture, Smeaton's paintings comment on the fraught and outmoded nature of the gender binary and critique christocentric ideas around sexuality, presenting an interrogation of these dated ideologies through the portrayal of strong subjects who push the boundaries of societal expectations.

Samuel Quinteros (b. 1992) lives and works in Sydney, NSW. He graduated with honours from Sydney College of the Arts in 2013. Quinteros has exhibited extensively in Australia, and internationally in New Zealand, Singapore & Japan. He was formerly represented by Galerie pompom, Sydney (2012-2022), having had solo exhibitions there in 2014, 2016, 2018 & 2020. Samuel has recently been exhibiting with Redbase Gallery, Sydney.

Painting Desires

29 March – 13 April 2023

Maxime Banks, Sophia Hewson, Tim Phillips, Kansas Smeaton, Samuel Quinteros.

Curated by Chelsea Lehmann

Schmick Contemporary (level 2 706 George St, Chinatown, Sydney)

Gallery hours: Thursday 1-4pm | Saturday 1-4pm, or by appointment

Front page: Tim Phillips, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, 2019, oil on gesso board, 70 x 70cm