

## Press Release

May 4  
June 15, 2024Opening  
Saturday, May 4  
from 11am to 8pm

# All Sunsets Risen

## Justin Liam O'Brien

The title of Justin Liam O'Brien's exhibition evokes a dual movement in two opposing directions: sunsets / risen, and as always, when contradictory forces meet, there comes a moment when they neutralize each-other and come to a standstill. Freeze... on the image. Yet there's nothing to do with photographic snaps in all of this, but rather the clash of two cultures. Firstly, that of computer software, 3D imaging, video games and a training course at an animation school—in short, the digital image and the screen, the protective barrier that a teenage Justin erected between himself and the conservative, homophobic environment of Suffolk County on Long Island.

Then in 2017, he began to paint, a change of direction confirmed by a visit to the Louvre in 2019, a watershed moment that “literally changed my life and certainly my way of painting.” Today in 2024, *All Sunsets Risen* showcases the state of grace of this dual movement of liberation: that of leaving the screen behind, as if coming out of the closet, integrating queer culture into canvasses that speak of masculine tastes, depicted in a classical tradition. In order to appreciate just how far he's come, one needs to take a look at Justin Liam O'Brien's early paintings. At first, his figures were more rounded and simplified, still influenced by 3D modelling: “the way I approach light, shadow, color and form is undeniably influenced by digital images.” As time went by, his figures became more refined, as if unfolding with each passing painting; necks, wrists and hands elongated in poses that remind us of the men portrayed by Pontormo, Bronzino and Parmigianino. There are no women in this series of paintings and the generally male figures are treated with an avowed mannerist femininity. “Men are my subject, without thinking in terms of gender, but rather in terms of this belief: every painting is a self-portrait.”

What does this statement entail? The word “belief” that connects these group scenes, portraits of young men, the painter's friends, his intimate community, all linked by the depiction of hands, right down to their fingertips, hands that evoke the rhetorical expressiveness of religious paintings. Two index fingers touch, in a scene from a date in a café, a profane promise of a loving “creation.” A bent wrist, seen in a rear-view mirror, reflecting the *Deposition of Christ* by Pontormo or Bronzino, while a plane pulls a banner through the skies overhead, with the biblical message “There's only one way to heaven.” Elsewhere, we see a close-up of two palms turned upwards towards the sky in a gesture known as supination.

So, what is Justin Liam O'Brien's essentially narrative painting seeking to tell us? In what or in whom does he believe? Perhaps a world of men united by the idea of redemptive love, a queer community of disciples of whom he would be the “creator.” His first exhibition at Semiose bears witness to the “honeymoon period” of this highly original world, where people fall in love as if for the very first time. When asked where the title came from, Justin replied: “On Valentine's Day, I wrote a poem in an attempt to find a coherent vision for this series of paintings:

*All sunsets risen,  
the heavens and earth merged.  
Can you measure such a space?  
As it expands and contracts  
What about hope?  
Can you measure hope?”*

So, is it possible to measure hope? Yes, you just have to believe!

Laurent Goumarre

1. Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14 :6)

Laurent Goumarre is a producer at the radio station France Inter and a journalist and critic of live performance at the newspaper *Libération*. He was previously a columnist for the Dance page of the magazine *Artpress*, a member of the editorial committee of the Lacanian review *La Cause du Désir*, editor-in chief of the culture section of *Têtu* and the fashion magazine *Antidote*. He was also assistant programmer for the Lyon International Dance Biennale and artistic advisor to the MontpellierDanse festival. His work as an artist is represented by the Alain Gutharc Gallery in Paris.