

Linus Borgo's naturalistic and diaristic paintings are autobiographical at their core

The New York-based painter tells us about the importance of placing trans and disabled bodies in a celestial space.

Words Alif Ibrahim

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New York-based painter Linus Borgo's work is autobiographical, diaristic even. With bright colours in unexpected places, not one to shy away from tinting an entire painting green, often, the subjects in Linus's paintings cannot be contained within the frame of the canvas. Linus asks: "What happens to a body when it loses all autonomy, such as in a hospital environment, where the person becomes merely flesh to be lifted, cared for, stitched, and medicated? What happens to a person's humanity when living in this type of body?"

Formerly, Linus attempted to explore this question through stylised figures in his painting, distorting body parts and playing around with their proportions. More recently, however, he moved closer to a naturalistic style, confronting the human body for what it is by closely studying the way that natural light falls across the body. He felt that he was hiding behind those distortions, now lifting the veil in an attempt to create more genuine work. “These days I’m leaning into my background in looking at classical paintings. I think it’s important to place a type of body like mine — trans, disabled — into that kind of image. I’ve never seen a body like that represented in that sort of celestial or heavenly space of the Italian Renaissance paintings,” he says. For him, the trans body is uncontainable, something that exceeds boundaries. Linus avoids using the term realistic, preferring the term naturalistic. This approach, a reflection of the real, is a way to pour vulnerability into the work as an “honest attempt to externalize something internal.”

Currently a first year in Columbia University’s MFA program, Linus was born in Stamford, CT before moving to London when he was three. Growing up, he spent time in Sweden and Italy, where his mother and father are from respectively. His grandfather was a professor of Italian Renaissance paintings and his father knew quite a bit about art history. Both became the source of his reflections surrounding depictions of bodies in a celestial space today. “My parents would park me in front of a Botticelli in my stroller and leave me there to do a master study with my crayons,” he says about his time in Florence. Those early experiences with bodies in classical paintings taught the artist how to paint it, which he’s now applying with his own body in the work.



Linus Borgo: Shave (Copyright © Linus Borgo, 2021), Oil on wood panel

Linus describes the way that his body has changed in the past decade. “In 2014 in my freshman year of RISD when I was 18 years old, I was in an electrical accident where I lost my left hand and had third degree burns all over my body. The way I related to myself and the way the world related to me changed overnight,” he says. “Five years after this event I started taking testosterone to transition. There are so many intricate complexities between disabled and trans identities to do with controllable and uncontrollable morphing of the body, care and community, the limitations of the body, prosthetics, surgery, and Frankensteinian bodily construction.” When he

wears a prosthetic arm, people would stop him in the streets and ask if he was a cyborg. “I would always say no, until one day I thought, what if the answer is yes?”

Linus started getting serious about painting when he was 15, when his mother took him to a David Hockney exhibition at the Royal Academy in London. “I had never seen anyone paint the way he did. There were oranges and purples in crazy places like tree trunks and bushes and I was so inspired. I went home and did a little acrylic study of one of the paintings and it taught me a lot about colour that I still use today,” he says. “The same year my mother took me to a Lucien Freud exhibition. I remember being entranced by the texture of the paint. It was so thick and gooey. The figures were so stark and unapologetic in their nudity, and yet there was a strong sense of vulnerability. I think this is something I’m still chasing in my own work.”

“Something I do these days that I didn’t used to do is I take many photos of each detail of a scene I am painting and when I’m on the bus, or drinking coffee in the morning I’ll zoom in really far to each image and look intensely at the very subtle colour variations,” Linus says of a technique that he uses more frequently nowadays. “My favourite is when I’m heading to my studio in the afternoon when the light gets all golden just before the sun sets. My studio is in Harlem and a lot of the buildings are this orangey-red brick and as the sun hits them in the afternoon, they are ablaze in their golden colour, especially when contrasted against a clear blue sky.”

With a year and a half left in grad school, Linus is continuing to study painting intensely, seeing it as something that he will continue to try to master til he is 80 years old. “There are many things that I would like to say to the art world,” he says. “I would urge everyone, especially those in powerful positions at major institutions, to take a radically self reflexive approach to their work. If you look around and all you see are people who look like you and talk like you, that’s a problem, and you have a responsibility to do something about it.”



Linus Borgo: Self portrait in my studio (Copyright © Linus Borgo, 2021), Oil on canvas



Linus Borgo: Bed of Stars: Self Portrait with Elsa and Zip (Copyright © Linus Borgo, 2021)



Linus Borgo: Nonna, the last time I saw her, two weeks before her death (Copyright © Linus Borgo, 2021)



Linus Borgo: Grape Popsicle and Morphine (Copyright © Linus Borgo, 2021), Gouache and graphite on paper



Linus Borgo: Last week's t shot (Copyright © Linus Borgo, 2021), Oil on canvas



Linus Borgo: Self portrait with Elsinia in Manhasset (Copyright © Linus Borgo, 2021), Oil on canvas



Linus Borgo: 4am Vitals Check and Gatorade (Dedicated to Anna) (Copyright © Linus Borgo, 2021), Conté and charcoal on paper



Linus Borgo: For Nick (Copyright © Linus Borgo, 2021), Conté and charcoal on paper

Hero Header

Linus Borgo: fuzzy ftm transsexual amputee plays with magic wand and poppers (self portrait) (Copyright © Linus Borgo, 2021), Oil on canvas

Further Info

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Alif joined It's Nice That as an editorial assistant from September to December 2019 after completing an MA in Digital Media at Goldsmiths, University of London. His writing often looks at the impact of art and technology on society.