PATRICK EUGÈNE: STILL LIVES

PATRICK EUGÈNE
Photo by Sydney Foster

WRITTEN BY:
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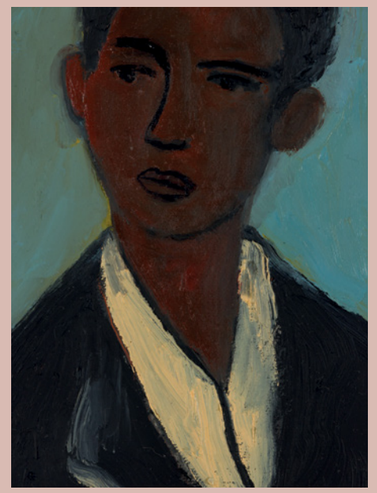
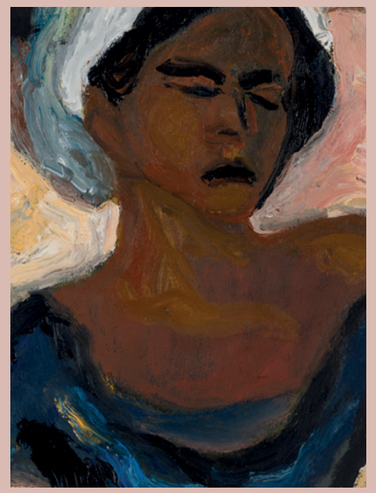
HAITIAN AMERICAN ARTIST PATRICK EUGÈNE'S FIGURES ARE SO STILL AND DIGNIFIED AS TO APPEAR TIMELESS.





Patrick Eugène's figurative paintings are still, the way that paintings from an older, slower-paced time are still. They're the type of painting that you want to sit in front of for a long time. And then when someone asks what they're about, all you can think to say is something deceptively simple: "they're about people."

The timelessness of Eugène's work is unusual in a contemporary art landscape often marked by cultural and political iconography. Indeed, in today's art world, it seems somewhat of a sacrilege to admit that Eugène's figures, who are partly inspired by his Haitian heritage, would look as much as home in Matisse's Nice with their rich, earthy colors and simply lined features, as in 21st century Port-au-Prince. But when I ask Eugène if he intended to remove his portraits from time, locale, and therefore political pressures, he gets excited that I've seen what he's up to. "You hear a single narrative about Haiti," he declares. "I'm getting away from that. And while I paint figures with pigments similar to my own, we're all human, we all have the same emotions."

On the faces of Eugène's figures, you see an affective neutrality familiar from earlier eras–think Van Gogh's self portraits, or Matisse's close ups–where the person looks neither happy nor sad. That neutrality is deliberate for Eugène to "stay true to who I am, to keep it super vulnerable," by allowing the figures to be open to–and thus vulnerable–to a viewer's interpretation, "or projection." Ironically, Eugène's own artistic process mirrors this openness to something beyond himself. Rather than painting from a sitter or a photograph, he approaches the canvas like an abstract piece at first, with layer upon layer upon layer until "maybe something tells me the head should be placed here." And then, the figure, just..."emerges."

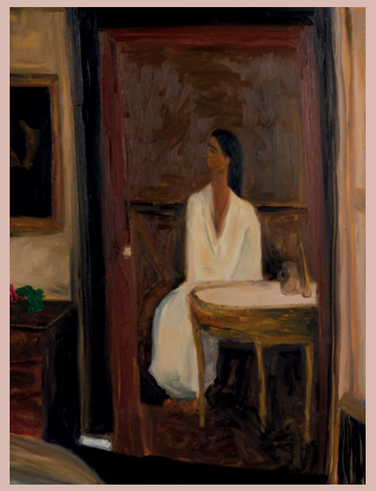
50 LBS. (INSTALLATION)
Patrick Eugène, 2023
Courtesy of Mariane Ibrahim and Artist

IN STILLNESS (DETAIL)
Patrick Eugène, 2023
Courtesy of Mariane Ibrahim

DREAMS IN REPOSE (CROP)
Patrick Eugène, 2023
Courtesy of Mariane Ibrahim

The emergence of Eugène's artistic career was as mysterious and surprising as the arrival of his figures' faces. He began his career as a financial advisor at J.P. Morgan after studying marketing in college. It was feeling miserable in that career that inspired him to take up painting as a hobby at age 27. Without ever intending to make money at it, he started selling small pieces via social media, and realized that he could turn something that he could do "ten hours a day without even noticing it" into a profession. He quit his finance job and started painting full time as an entirely self-taught artist. "I'm the type who goes all in," he says with a laugh.

As anyone who is self taught knows, that's not a road that you can go alone. Eugène lived for months at a time with fellow artists and collectors, observing how they worked at a time when he didn't even know the difference between acrylics and oils. It's a testament to Eugène's talent that these artists stuck with him and kept "sticking their necks out for me." People would spot him a studio space or refer him to a collector, and then success just sort of happened. "This journey feels bigger than me," he says with awe, "it has exceeded my expectations at every turn."



PATRICK EUGÈNE
Photo by Sydney Foster

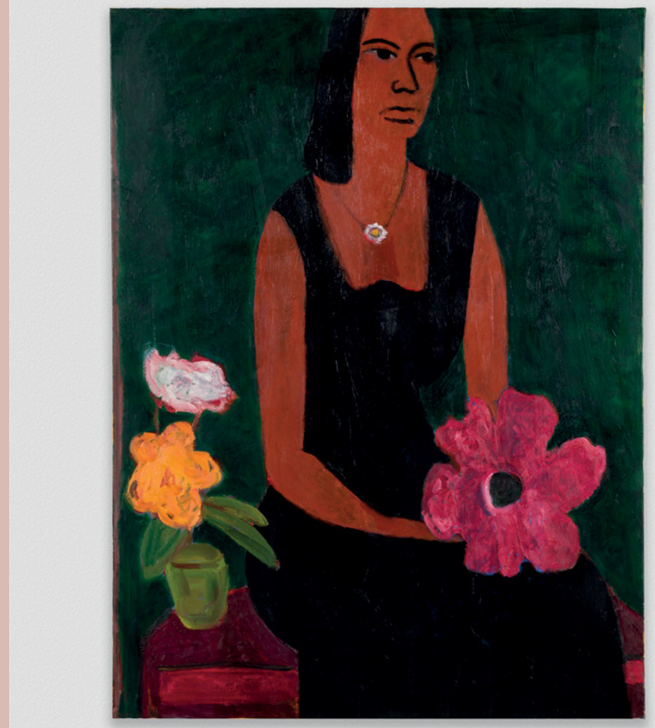
SOFT SOLITUDE (CROP)
Patrick Eugène, 2023
Courtesy of Mariane Ibrahim

In the early years of his practice, Eugène worked directly with collectors, which he describes as an amazing experience that he misses at times. But he eventually wanted to dive into his practice 100%, and decided to hand over the responsibility of working with collectors to a gallery; he is now represented by Mariane Ibrahim Gallery.

Although Eugène grew up in New York City and loved becoming an artist in Brooklyn, he and his wife, a chef who was working in a Michelen-starred restaurant, were gentrified out of the city and found themselves looking at houses and studio space in Atlanta. Eugène recalls meeting with an Atlanta realtor who explained, "this is Atlanta, not New York. You have control here." What the realtor said has turned out to be true to Eugène's experience: in NY, people assume that a Black artist is struggling, whereas in Atlanta, people assume you could be a multimillionaire. "It's like Wakanda," he says with a laugh. "This is ours. We're not second to anyone. Everyone I know seems to have benefitted from moving down here from NY."

That said, while Atlanta has proven to be a fruitful space for artists' creative processes, the city is still maturing as an art market. Eugène, for instance, hasn't yet exhibited in Atlanta because his galleries are based in NY and Chicago. His goal this year is to be more intentional in meeting locals and tapping into the community, and he believes, a la Wakanda, that it's just a matter of coming together and recognizing that Atlanta can do it: "we can sell here."

Eugène also credits Atlanta with pushing him into the figurative works that he is now known for. At the beginning of his career, he started out with figurative works, then got bored and moved to abstract work until he understood it. ("How long did that take?" I wondered. "About a year," he answers with a laugh.) But Eugène's abstract work was wild, textured, and crazy, and when he and his wife bought their house in Atlanta, she told him, "You won't ruin this place!" So he returned to figurative work in response to the pressures of a new space, and what emerged were figures who, he describes, "are like family."



OPPOSITE PAGE: **POISED**
Patrick Eugène, 2024
oil on canvas

PORTRAIT OF BERNADETTE
Patrick Eugène, 2023
Courtesy of Mariane Ibrahim

"You can only come up with so many figures in your head," Eugène explains, "so they start to resemble each other." From this recurring "family" of figures, Eugène feels that he's "tapping into something beyond this space here, something ancestral." Without putting an explicitly religious label on the process, he does mention his mother, a "very Catholic" Haitian woman, and the "different kind of communication" that she lives as a possibility through her faith. In his practice, Eugène describes himself as a spiritual person with lots of internal searching. "I go to the studio, I pray," he says. Once he finishes a figure, Eugène experiences a kind of familial or ancestral recognition, "like, 'I think I've got you.'"

"ATLANTA IS LIKE WAKANDA, THIS IS OURS. WE'RE NOT SECOND TO ANYONE."

Eugène also works with family in the earthly realm; his installation 50 LBS featured a pile of suitcases filled with memorabilia that his family brought to the US from Haiti, as well as the dress his mother wore across the ocean; the installation was accompanied by a string band playing Haitian music that Eugène recorded for the occasion. I remark that his mother's dress is so small and vulnerable and he agrees that it's such a strange feeling to imagine a parent being that way: as both so brave and so fragile. In the show, his mother's dress is surrounded by black and white photographs taken by his grandmother; "it felt kind of like doing a duel show with my grandmother," he remembers.

Central to the composition of both 50 LBS and Eugène's timelessly-rooted figurative work is a sense of dignity. He describes himself as nostalgic for the 1940s and 1950s of Haiti and Black America, when people "carried themselves a certain way" and where, "despite what people are going through, they'll never show it." People just don't sit the same way anymore, he laments. "You can have nothing but you sit properly; you still have an elegance to how you carry yourself." And indeed, that way of sitting on canvas contains its own gravitational pull: our eyes are drawn to Eugène's paintings and we sit there looking so long that we forget we have become like the figures themselves: still. ■

I KEEP MY FANCY STILL (DETAIL)
Patrick Eugène, 2022.
Courtesy of Mariane Ibrahim

50 LBS. (INSTALLATION)
Patrick Eugène, 2023.
Courtesy of Mariane Ibrahim and Artist

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