



Title

Louis Fratino: Satura

Author(s)

Chris McCormack

Article DOI**Url**

<https://www.contemporary.burlington.org.uk/reviews/reviews/louis-fratino-satura>

ISSN

2631-5661

Cite as

Chris McCormack: 'Louis Fratino: Satura', *Burlington Contemporary* (20th December 2024),

<https://www.contemporary.burlington.org.uk/reviews/reviews/louis-fratino-satura>

About the author(s)

is a writer and Associate Editor of Art Monthly.

Cover image: **Fig. 1** *You and your things*, by Louis Fratino. 2022. Oil on canvas, 145 by 198 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Galerie Neu, Berlin; photograph Stefan Korte; exh. Centro per l'arte contemporanea Luigi Pecci, Prato).

Louis Fratino: Satura

by Chris McCormack • 20.12.2024

Almost otherworldly in their anachronic stylisation of queer male lives, the paintings and drawings of Louis Fratino (b.1993) have acted as a curious lightning rod for critiques about the rise of figurative painting over the past several years.¹ Combinations of gay sex, sated and relaxed domesticity and colourful sprays of flora have generated a frisson of shared recognition on social media platforms. The recent attention Fratino's work has garnered has also arguably been buoyed by an emerging art market that seeks to extend its reach through the incorporation of otherwise marginalised lives into the canon, especially following his presentation at the 60th Venice Biennale in 2024.² A prominent facet of the artist's work is the deployment of art-historical tenets from across modernism, distinctively the fractal pulls and sweeps of Cubism and its vertiginous perspectives; his recent works, with a largely muted palette of earthy colours weighted by thick black shadowed outlines, further evoke this period. The converging styles appear as contemplative attachments between past and present art histories, even an attempt at reconstructing relationships between queer lives that have passed through these periods otherwise unnoticed. However, they also read as postwar visual historicising 'filters' applied over Fratino's life. It is as though the artist is demonstrably avoiding our current era, in search of another.

Fratino is no overt critic of gay desire, neither directly interrogating codes of racially exclusionary or bodily competitive hierarchies that are endemic within it, nor the unequal aspects at which liberations are distributed across lives and geographies. Instead, the artist wishes to return us – and indeed his work might be considered an undertaking of how that 'return' is constituted today as fragile identity loosely bound by images alone – to the radically utopian premise of same-sex desire. His is a world that is shimmering, one of doing nothing but being naked **FIG.1**, sleeping, maybe skimming a book of poetry, drinking at a café or gently fucking, masturbating or finding long expanses of time to catch the vantage of a beach onto the sea or the changing light from a window. Drawing and painting from his own life, Fratino depicts men who are typically dappled with fine body hair and edged in light or sunken shadow; they are all gentle, largely youthful and kindly to one another. Their bodies are several generations away from the exaggerated physiques of the late 1980s – a reaction to the images of those decimated by HIV/AIDS – but also counter to today's gym-selfie culture that circulates online with pulverising

effect. His pungent sense of refinery is also indelibly, if sometimes erroneously, linked to the pleasures that constitute a certain historical trajectory of gay men's aesthetic pursuits; an astute reader might take satisfaction in a reference, as though finding a visual cue of identarian solidarity.

Taking up a curved wing of the spacecraft-like Centro per l'arte contemporanea Luigi Pecci, Prato (Centro Pecci), *Satura* FIG.2 FIG.3 is the first institutional exhibition dedicated to Fratino's work, and the artist's first solo show outside his home country of the United States. The Latin word *satura* refers to an offering of food, but also figuratively suggests in English 'satire' or even 'saturnalia', a fitting title for an exhibition that concerns subjects of pleasure and the creeping footsteps of melancholia felt in its aftermath. Fratino does not overwork certain sections of his paintings. Brief scrawls outline a camera on the deck of a boat, a cock or a ghost-like crab, whereas, at other points, a loaded brush of paint satisfyingly describes the arc of a nose or a pile of mackerel – an approach that heightens a pervasive sense of ease as much as comfort with the subjects he paints.

While the contours of Pablo Picasso's revisioning of Iberian, African and Oceanic masks are felt throughout the show – a diffuse set of relations that Fratino has called a 'cloud over his work' or 'inescapable grammar' in painting – the artist primarily fixates his attention on queer and lesser-known Italian references, such as works by Filippo De Pisis (1896–1956), Felice Casorati (1883–1963) and Carlo Carrà (1881–1966), the poetry of Sandro Penna (1906–77) or hints of the starker realisms of Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–75).³ Fratino moves over and around the subjects he is drawn to, and then remixes their relationships through their placement on the gallery wall – such as a flower flanked by a naked body and an interior FIG.4 – in a manner that occasionally recalls the sharply wrought placements of Wolfgang Tillmans's exhibitions.



Fig. 1 *You and your things*, by Louis Fratino. 2022. Oil on canvas, 145 by 198 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Galerie Neu, Berlin; photograph Stefan Korte; exh. Centro per l'arte contemporanea Luigi Pecci, Prato).

This results in an engagement with intimacies as they are experienced and how they are sensorially remembered. For example, the non-genital contact in *Kiss* FIG.5, in which one figure eats out another's arse, is similarly arresting for the ripples of flesh that torque over the receiver's prone stomach. This work is paired with *Hydrangea aspera, kitchen sink* FIG.6, a simple yet effective bridge between stilled domestic worlds and the lives that are rarely pictured within them. *Bastiano Chair* FIG.7 is a pastel on paper of a man staring blankly outwards while masturbating on a black leather chair, a dribble of ejaculate caressing his forefinger, his Neo-classical feet a carved, statuesque heft offering gravity to his emptily climaxed body.



Fig. 2 Installation view of *Louis Fratino: Satura* at Centro per l'arte contemporanea Luigi Pecci, Prato, 2024-25. (Courtesy Centro per l'arte contemporanea Luigi Pecci; photograph Alessandro Saletta).

Further bucolic moments are presented in the stillness of the vast canvas *Garden at Dusk* (2024), in which two figures are occupied in their own worlds. One clutches a beer bottle at a table in the foreground, his head down, seemingly lost in sleep, while another tends to a deep abundance of flowers at the rear. Here, one cannot help but be reminded of how artists in the postwar era were able to afford homes in such cities as New York, London or Paris – from today's vantage point, the viewer might more realistically look on enviably at the idea of possessing outside space. One wonders whether Fratino is attempting to grapple with a queer past that remains unwritten, constructing it afresh and with newfound positivity, or whether the work signals something more disturbing than that: a saccharine version of a life that not only remains unliveable for many, but is constructed from the still-narrow fields of vision that have been afforded to gay lives. Queer desire has historically been typified by certain negative affect, such as need or longing. Fratino returns us to the sad, gay and lonely trope as mysterious interiority, an aesthetically refined awareness that blankly signals to an outside world – even during moments of heightened pleasure, gratification or climax.

In his pivotal essay 'Is the rectum a grave' (1987), Leo Bersani wrote: 'There is a big secret about sex: most people don't like it'.⁴ Here, Bersani posits the idea that sex – perhaps when done correctly – is painful to the preservation of the psyche itself, a breaking open of one's understanding of an identity so that it in turn becomes fraught or tenuously held. These tensions that cohere around visual depictions of sex are ultimately reinscribed and diffused by Fratino as one of romantic union; we are suspended in dream and wordless connection, rather than the complex

ambivalence of Bersani's assertion. In *The paper lamp* FIG.8, one of the artist's works that depicts penetrative sex, and might even be described as pornographic, one wonders if we are in a pre-condom, pre-AIDS world or the PrEP-defined freedoms of today? This question of how intimacy has been reconfigured as a result is a rich, intergenerational one that has barely been discussed. Yet, one can conclude that Fratino's view is a more languid access to the pleasure of the now, albeit folded into art-historical languages. Viewed from the plurality of sexual attachments and identities in contemporary post-liberation queer discourse, Fratino's scenes bring a somewhat myopic, occasionally sentimental set of assurances and safety into the relationships we hold with others.

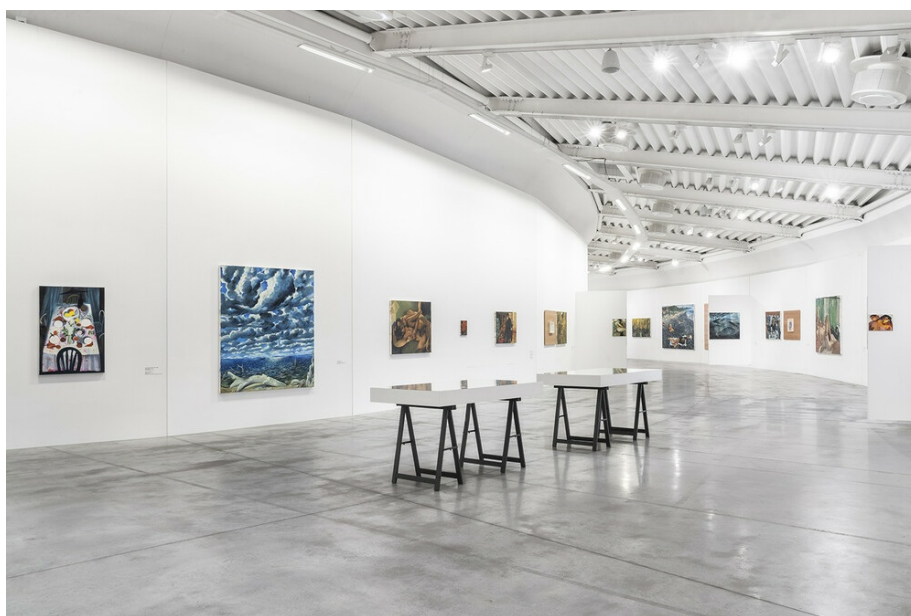


Fig. 3 Installation view of *Louis Fratino: Satura* at Centro per l'arte contemporanea Luigi Pecci, Prato, 2024-25. (Courtesy Centro per l'arte contemporanea Luigi Pecci; photograph Alessandro Saletta).

Within this heady stream of material, there are some standout works that continue to fracture a more straightforward analysis. *My sister's boys* FIG.9 depicts two naked boys tightly framed in a darkened doorway, their skin a sugary dusted colour; one looks back with a quizzical yet arrestingly tender expression. It brings to mind Douglas Crimp's essay 'The boys in my bedroom', in which he writes about having Sherrie Levine's rephotographed images of Edward Weston's naked studies of his eight-year-old son, Neil, on his bedroom wall. When 'visitors' came over to the queer activist and academic's home, they pondered the photographs of the young male nude during the 'culture wars' of the late 1980s, a period that directly equated 'homoeroticism with obscenity and with the sexual exploitation of children'.⁵ Although Fratino's works are certainly not obscene, such benign sexual behaviours continue to be vilified by the right wing who seek to uphold fantasised 'orthodox' family structures and values, not least in the confluence of children and same-sex desires. Fratino ultimately calms such

tensions by revealing that these are his sister's children in the work's title. However, his work still proves too much for certain institutions: in 2021, his show at the Des Moines Art Center in Iowa was cancelled after he insisted on the inclusion of *New Bedroom* (2021), which depicts two men having sex.

From this perspective – and viewed in Italy, which is increasingly hostile to same-sex couples who want children – Fratino attempts to reconcile the relationship between queerness and the experiences of one's childhood. The familial unit, which has so often scorned and denied the existence of gay lives, is returned to us as a place of commonality and shared plenitude. It is here that more complex and social engagements with the world Fratino inhabits – lives quietly going about their lives – is opened outwards.

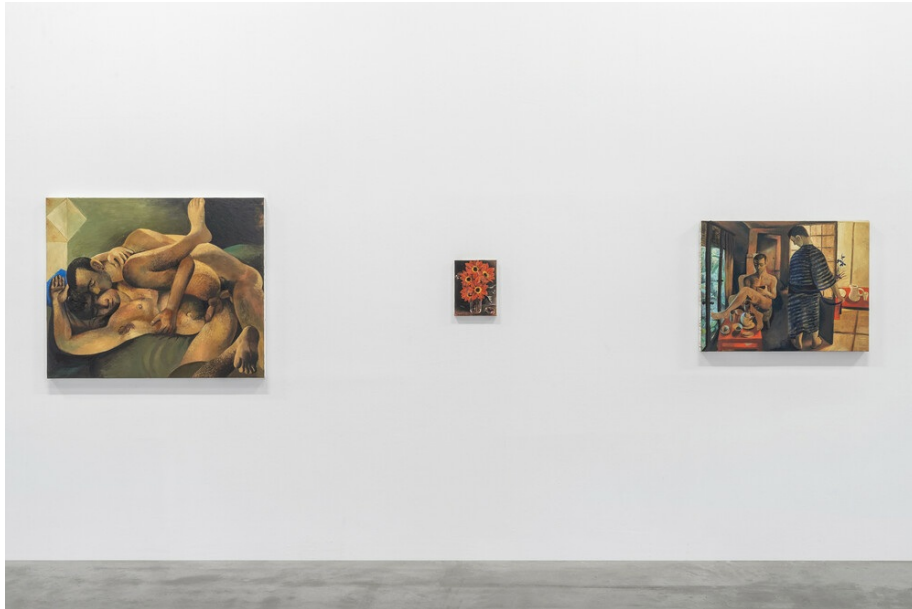


Fig. 4 Installation view of *Louis Fratino: Satura* at Centro per l'arte contemporanea Luigi Pecci, Prato, 2024–25. (Courtesy Centro per l'arte contemporanea Luigi Pecci; photograph Alessandro Saletta).



Fig. 5 *Kiss*, by Louis Fratino. 2023. Oil on canvas, 110.8 by 110.8 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York; exh. Centro per l'arte contemporanea Luigi Pecci, Prato).



Fig. 6 *Hydrangea aspera, kitchen sink*, by Louis Fratino. 2024. Oil on canvas, 55.2 by 34.9 cm. (Courtesy the artist, Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York, and Galerie Neu, Berlin; exh. Centro per l'arte contemporanea Luigi Pecci, Prato).

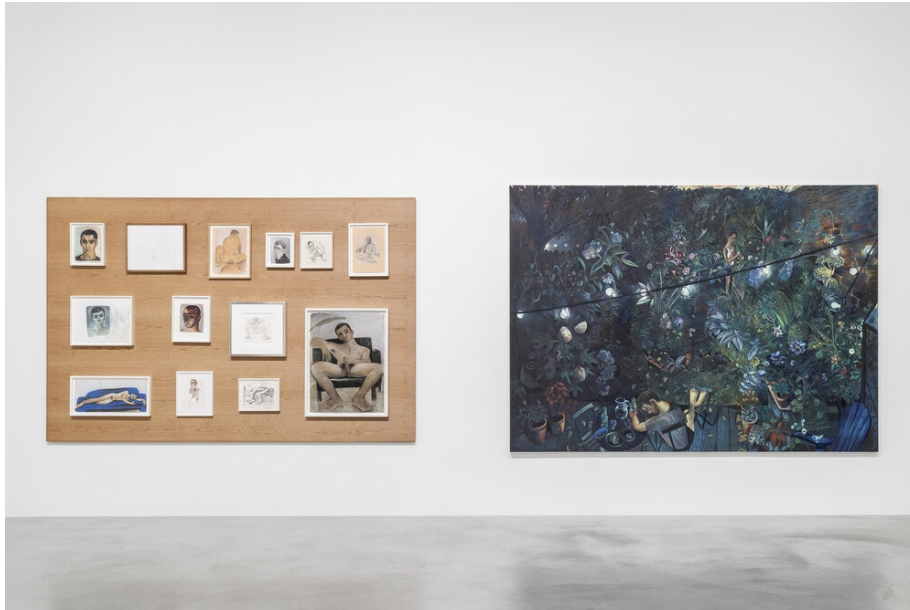


Fig. 7 Installation view of *Louis Fratino: Satura* at Centro per l'arte contemporanea Luigi Pecci, Prato, 2024–25, showing, on the left (bottom right of the wooden panel), *Bastiano Chair*, by Louis Fratino. Pastel on paper, 76.2 by 56.8 cm.; and on the right, *Garden at dusk*, by Louis Fratino. 2024. Oil on canvas, 279.4 by 205.7 cm. (Courtesy Centro per l'arte contemporanea Luigi Pecci; photograph Alessandro Saletta).



Fig. 8 *The paper lamp*, by Louis Fratino. 2024. Oil on canvas, 99.1 by 119.4 cm. (Courtesy the artist, Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York, and Galerie Neu, Berlin; exh. Centro per l'arte contemporanea Luigi Pecci, Prato).



Fig. 9 *My sister's boys*, by Louis Fratino. 2024. Oil on canvas, 48.3 by 81.3 cm. (Courtesy the artist, Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York, and Galerie Neu, Berlin; exh. Centro per l'arte contemporanea Luigi Pecci, Prato).

Exhibition details

Louis Fratino: Satura

Centro per l'arte contemporanea Luigi
Pecci, Prato
26th September 2024–2nd February
2025

About this book



Louis Fratino: Satura
Edited by Stefano Collicelli Cagol
Mousse Publishing, Milan, 2024
ISBN 978-88-6749-656-3

Footnotes

- 1** See, for example, L. Abse Gogarty: 'Figuring figuration', *Art Monthly* 465 (April 2023), pp.6–10; and G. Nugent: 'Figuration, abstraction and the politics of representation', *Burlington Contemporary* (5th July 2024), available at contemporary.burlington.org.uk/articles/articles/figuration-abstraction-and-the-politics-of-representation, accessed 19th December 2024.
- 2** Reviewed by Kathryn Lloyd in *The Burlington Magazine*, 166 (2024), pp.724–27.
- 3** Stefano Collicelli Cagol, in conversation with the present reviewer, 25th September 2024.
- 4** L. Bersani: 'Is the rectum a grave' [1987], in *idem: Is the Rectum a Grave? and Other Essays*, Chicago 2009, pp.3–31, at p.3.
- 5** R. Meyer: 'Douglas Crimp', *Artforum* 58 (October 2019), available at www.artforum.com/features/richard-meyer-on-douglas-crimp-244727, accessed 18th December 2024; see also D. Crimp: 'The boys in my bedroom', in *idem: Melancholia and Moralism*, Boston 2004, pp.151–64.

THE
BURLINGTON
MAGAZINE

© The Burlington Magazine Publications Limited. All rights reserved
ISSN 2631-5661

The Burlington Magazine
14-16 Duke's Road, London WC1H 9SZ