



Gideon Rubin

*We Thought It Was Heaven Tomorrow*



*We thought it was heaven tomorrow.*

There is an ambiguity in Gideon Rubin's title for these twin exhibitions. *We thought it was heaven tomorrow* is borrowed from Jane Hebbard's collected interviews published in the wake of WWII. The implication that either earthly or divine salvation was just around the corner rested on a wistful naivety. Much like the current Covid-19 pandemic which feels utterly relentless and insurmountable, many nonetheless cling to the notion that release from its viral grip is imminent. Whilst history will demonstrate that there will have been few as sufficiently delusional as #45 to think that "one day, it's like a miracle, it will disappear", there is a state between credulity and informed optimism that still allows for hope.

There is much about Rubin's paintings themselves that carry or rather transmit something crucial about optimism. Amidst the tender introspection and melancholia that accompanies some of his images and the sheer joy and sensuality that radiates from others, Rubin's special capacity is to remind us about longing and desire, about loss and lament – and about hope and what it means to feel.



Gideon Rubin makes paintings that thoughtfully and carefully condense narrative and material in an unexpectedly fierce infusion of observation and emotion. This merger presents the viewer with a strikingly potent yet understated approach to image making, one that shuns flourish and ego in each aspect of its constitution. Instead, Rubin elevates humility and perception. The apparent informality of the composition and brushwork and the close tonal register combine to deliver an object ingrained with an uncommon sense of immediacy and integrity.

Rubin often looks to photographs as a stimulus for his working. Their ubiquitous character, something that is increasingly fueled by the democracy of the so-called smartphone, gives them an informality and ease. More often than not though, it is to a selection of discarded polaroid images that he turns – fading and dog-eared, each image was an earnest attempt to hold a moment still, to not let that image fall through your fingers. Some were glamorous, most not, but each image, artless or not, were made in the service of memory.

*Untitled, 2020*  
oil on linen  
35.5 x 30.5 cm



However, it is only through the patient remaking and transformation of the images in paint - a process needing time, touch and adjustment - that impregnates his paintings with the authority that ought to accompany the amalgam of images and ideas.

Though much about Rubin's selection of images is humble, they're quietly astute and at times provocative, probing at domestic fantasy, situations of isolation, moments of communion, states of voyeurism and arousal - all of which are made approachable and familiar by his handling of paint and the lack of ostentation in their disposition and shaping.

Andy Warhol and Gerhard Richter both famously worked from photographs - recognizing that amidst the camera's capacity to snare fugitive moments there was the chance for something unexpected to be trapped – a composition arranged by happenstance, a narrative formed by luck. Both painters reveal a shrewd predilection for sentimentality, arguably borderline mawkishness and though Warhol's early works were notable for their aloof, low-brow subject matter, ultimately, he played on the audiences ballooning craving for celebrity and the sensational whereas Richter's now emblematic figurative works often bank on our expediency in the pursuit of theatre and romanticism.

*White Shirt*, 2020  
oil on linen  
30.5 x 35.5 cm

*Untitled*, 2020  
oil on linen  
45.5 x 51 cm





*In heaven, all the interesting people are missing. – Friedrich Nietzsche*

The attraction to secondary sources is also clearly evident in the works of Luc Tuymans though his work has a greater sense of detachment and emotional ambiguity which is certainly not the case for Rubin. Nor do Rubin's paintings indulge in the magical realism of Michael Borremans though there is something in their shared depiction of isolation that enacts a mutual discomfort.

Whilst I see Rubin's work as central to this ongoing figurative milieu, I don't sense any of these shrewd strategies and manipulations at work. Rather his works form a counterpoint to these dramatizations, preferring to engage our hearts and minds via their lo-fi integrity and joltingly familiar character.

It could be said that in Gideon Rubin's paintings all the interesting peoples' "faces" are missing. The figure is presented as either turned away or their face is annulled in an unequivocal assertion of absence. It is inevitable that this repeated denying of facial description... or more particularly of the orthodox map we use to navigate and locate identity, should be seen against the backdrop of his own family's history and to the generations whose lives and identities were absented to the Holocaust. This symbolism feels fated, though the more we look at the paintings the more we understand that identity also persists in a more ineffable collage of gestures and actions and that these deportments carry a deeper atavistic memory, one that simultaneously transcends particularity and yet is strikingly specific.



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*Red*, (detail) 2020

oil on linen

23.5 x 30 cm

*Purple*, (detail) 2020

oil on linen

90 x 101 cm

Balthus

*La chambre Turque*, 1963–66

oil on canvas

180 x 210 cm

Musée National d'Art Moderne

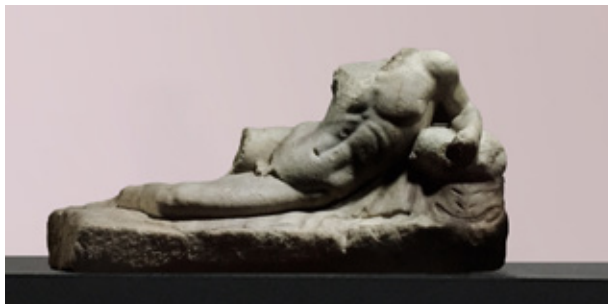
Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

*The artist's experience lies so unbelievably close to the sexual, to its pain and its pleasure, that the two phenomena are really just different forms of one and the same longing and bliss. – Rainer Maria Rilke*



So, in denying us the hardware of facial recognition one might assume that Rubin inserts an abrupt divorce between subject and audience. However, his decision to deny ready identification allows us a role in re-identifying the subject, to some degree even co-authoring the content, perhaps preserving the subject from further anonymity. In doing so, Rubin offers up a place for us, for our memory of someone we love, miss or desire to be part of his painterly versions of a “photo stand-in”. In this way Rubin’s idiosyncratic family of characters becomes our family - at the beach, alone in a landscape, undressing, turned aside.

The first paintings we presented of Rubin’s were in an exhibition titled *Eros* in 2019. The paintings were presented alongside a diverse range of museological objects and works by other contemporary artists whose work embraced notions of the erotic. His “at-home” erotica set itself aside with its convivial approach to seduction and foreplay.



*Roman Reclining Hercules*,  
c.1st - 2nd ad  
marble, 40 x 81 x 28 cm  
Installation view: *Eros*, 2019  
Fox Jensen Sydney

*Untitled*, 2019  
oil on linen  
25.5 x 20.5 cm  
Private Collection, Sydney



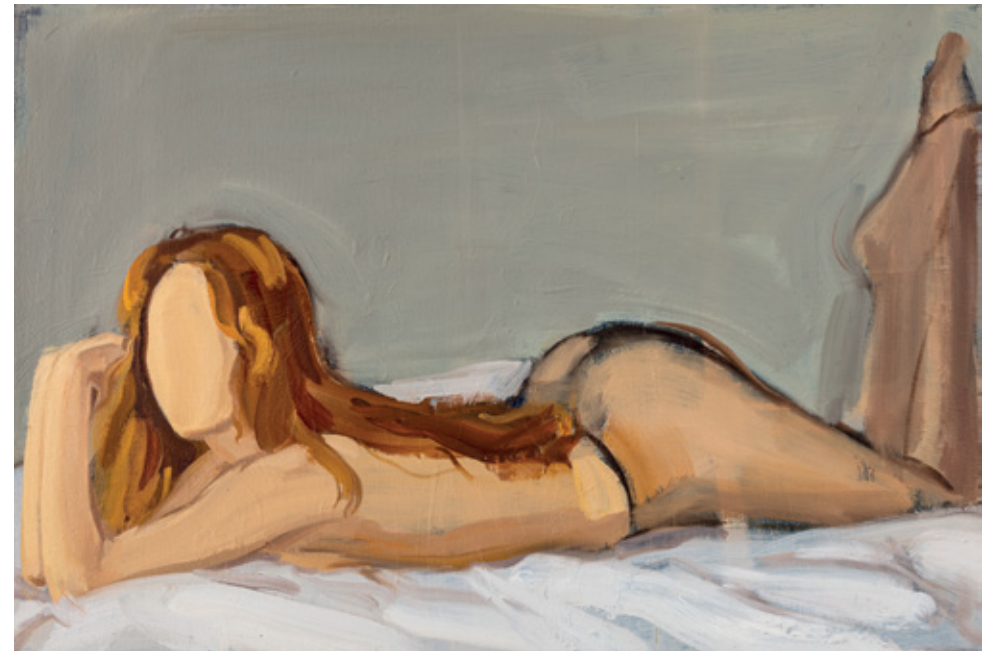
*Go to Heaven for the climate,  
Hell for the company – Mark Twain*



In his determinedly colloquial erotica, there is less of the sexual voyeurism that we are made deliciously complicit with in a Balthus painting or an Eric Fischl for example, but there is an unexpected audacity to some of his imagery – the backyard striptease, the companionable blowjob are all handled with Rubin's undemonstrative calm, conveying intimacy and warmth more than anything else. In Balthus and Fischl one has the slightly uneasy vibe that we ought not to be looking – that our glances insinuate a carnal voyeurism and that there may be a price to be paid for such espionage at some point. But in Rubin's work there is a chance that we may well have taken the photo – in other words, we're less spy, more happy participant.

Eric Fischl  
*Bad Boy*, 1981  
oil on canvas  
167 x 244 cm  
Private collection,  
Zürich, Switzerland

*Tights*, 2020  
oil on linen  
61 x 91 cm





*White Tote, (detail) 2020*

oil on linen

30.5 x 25.5 cm

Giorgio Morandi

*Still Life (Natura morta), 1955*

oil on canvas

35 x 40 cm

Fondation Mattioli Rossi,  
Switzerland

Rubin's candor is both conceptual and aesthetic. Conducted within a restrained tonal palette there is a close quality to his observation that we might associate with Morandi, a painter whose subject matter may not have been unprecedented but whose reportage was. Like Rubin, Morandi often painted small – scrutinizing a quirky family of objects whose relationships made sense as visual architecture if not structural. The playful compositional gymnastics of Morandi aren't called for in Rubin's compositions. The anthropomorphising of Morandi's bottles and vases, their cozying up to each other as if for a family portrait, lends them personality and a folksy charm that legitimizes their huddling behaviour. These very human qualities are in abundance in Gideon Rubin's painting.

There is something too about the handling of the paint itself – a recognition that the body and weight of the pigment in Morandi and Rubin is germane to the form of the object. There is a ironic solidity in Morandi despite their speculative structure, something that gives way to a lighter caress in Rubin - a physical articulation of their evanescence.

As different as their subjects are, what ties Rubin to Morandi is the distilled economy with which they approach their duty. Painting likes to tempt flourish and ego, so I admire resistance to this, not in any Calvinist way, it's just that their shared austerity is more about rigour and lucidity - and given the recent climate of bombast and alternative facts, their incorruptibility feels welcome.

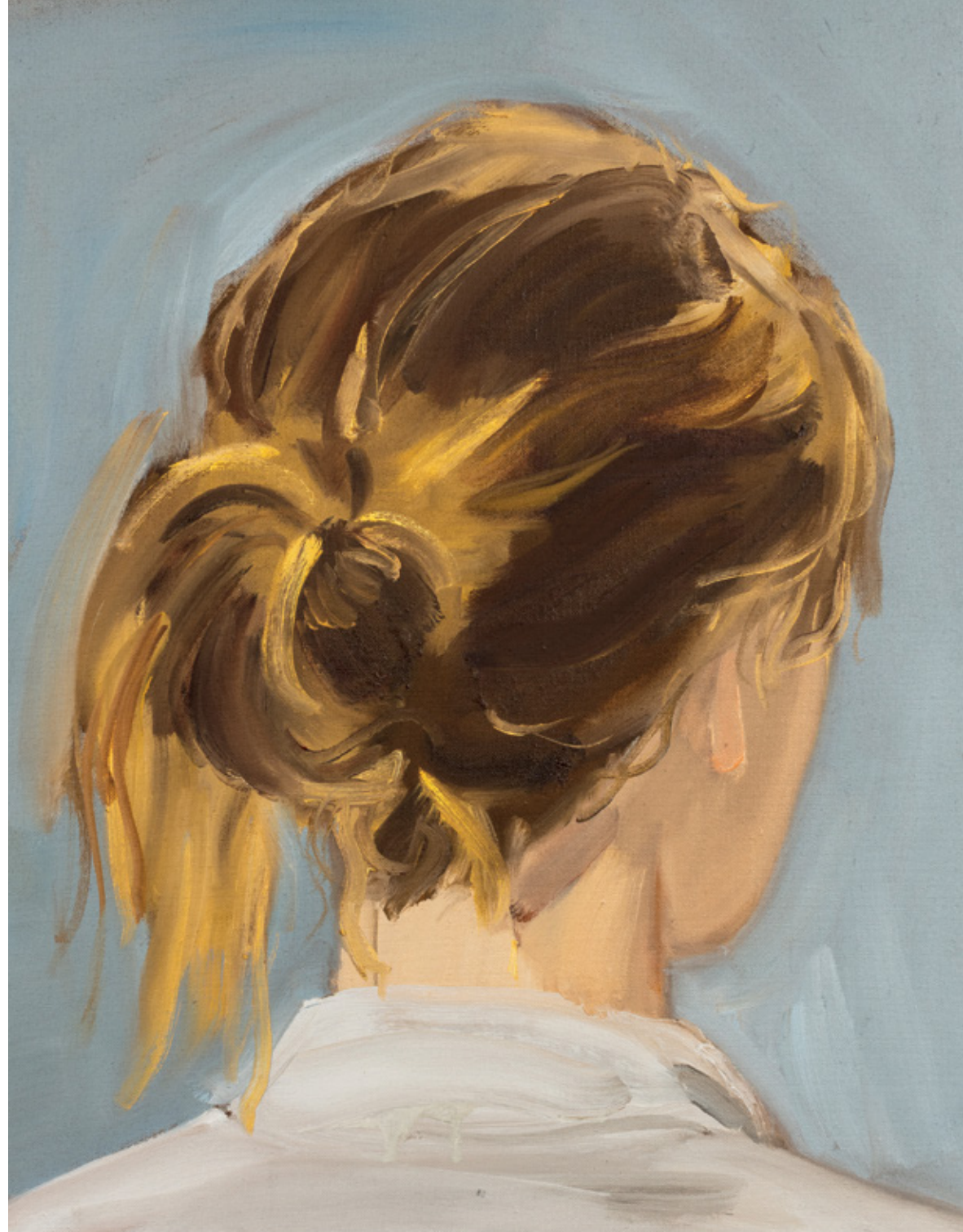
If there is a suite of paintings that rely deeply on Rubin's observational facility and directness, it is the small portrait heads. Seen from the rear, both male and female figures are often portrayed with their heads slightly bowed. Clearly there is no requirement here for Gideon's negation of facial features as we are essentially presented with the back of the head only, perhaps just a hint of profile. There is an inherent vulnerability in this, the nape of the neck, the jawline and ear, all painted with a sensitivity and material sincerity that invites a benevolence in us as viewers. The tenderness of this exchange feels hugely welcome in these hostile times. I'm not determined to view Gideon's work through this socio/political lens and I'm sure he doesn't paint them with one eye on cable news, rather I experience these paintings as an emotional antidote, a vaccine against cruelty and visual overload.

Having suggested that Rubin is not a political painter looking to leverage contemporary conditions to give his work currency, he is without doubt, a profoundly relevant painter – relevant because humanity observed brings us closer to humanity understood and this capacity alone places him within an art historical lineage that celebrates observation over fantasy, perception over viewing and feeling over comprehension.



*Hair Clip*, 2020  
oil on linen  
50.5 x 50 cm

*Untitled, (detail) 2020*  
oil on linen  
51 x 46 cm





*Hair Pin*, 2020  
oil on linen  
35.5 x 30 cm



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*Red Bikini*, (detail) 2021  
 oil on linen  
 125 x 150 cm

*Rock Pool*, 2020  
 oil on linen  
 150 x 125 cm





*Untitled, (detail) 2020*  
oil on linen  
35.5 x 30.5 cm



*Untitled, 2020*  
oil on linen  
40 x 40 cm



*Untitled, 2020*  
oil on linen  
150 x 105.5 cm



*Who knows what true loneliness is - not the conventional word but the naked terror?  
To the lonely themselves it wears a mask.  
The most miserable outcast hugs some memory or some illusion. – Joseph Conrad*

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*White Polo*, (detail) 2020  
30.5 x 40.5 cm  
oil on linen  
*Facemask*, 2021  
oil on linen  
30 x 20 cm



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