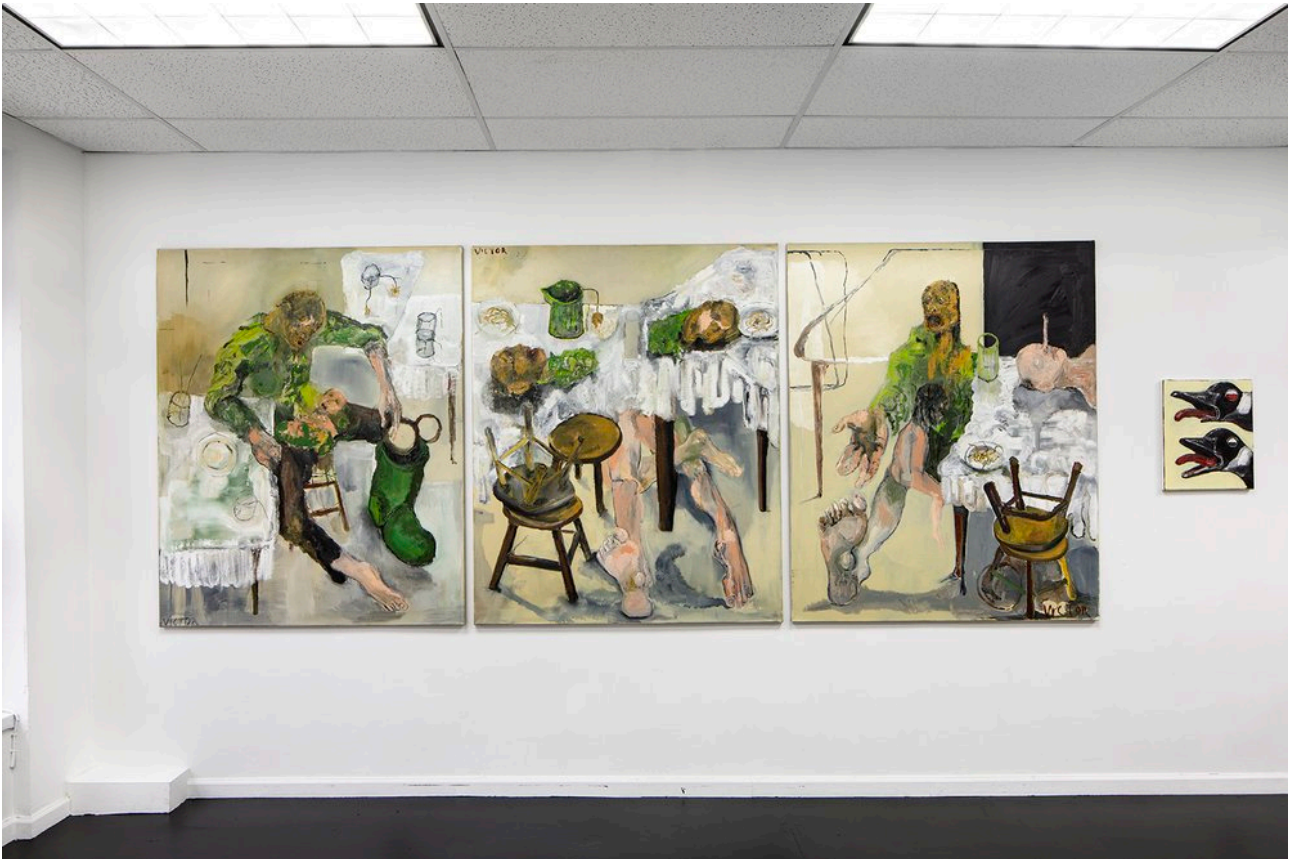


Victor Boulet: WERKK.WERKK.LIVERPOOL.PAINT ING at Lubov



Installation view. Courtesy of Lubov Gallery.

Victor

Boulet: WERKK.WERKK.LIVERPOOL.PAINTING

Lubov

February 16 through February 26, 2023

By **JAKE ROMM**, February 2023

I'm in Lubov Gallery in Chinatown staring at feet, thinking, I've seen these feet before. Feet are everywhere

in **WERKK.WERKK.LIVERPOOL.PAINTING**, an exhibition of Victor Boulet's paintings and drawings organized by Reilly Davidson. They bulge through and over thick black shoes, they twist and thrust at the viewer in outsized proportions, they appear as implications in the hulk-green boots that appear throughout the show. Now, I know I haven't seen *these* feet before, I know that, but they seem familiar, but looking again at Boulet's drawings after leaving the gallery I finally recognize the trace—it's Oskar Kokoschka. Not exactly, because Kokoschka didn't paint feet as far as I can remember, but I see the feet in Kokoschka's rendering of hands, in which all the psychological depth of his portraits became concentrated in the humps of the knuckle.

Boulet's feet, his still lifes too, display Kokoschka's virtuosic ability with lines—lines that create angular, polygonal shapes, that jut and cut but emerge as the illusion of a gnarled curvature. But, like Kokoschka as well, Boulet can also be soft, and sometimes the feet blur into masses of flesh, the once gnarled toes and knuckles rendered indistinct in liquid strokes. There is, however, no in between: in Boulet's world, flesh is either filled with too many bones or puffed and wet like a bag of meat.



*Victor Boulet, Binman (Heritage Problem), 2020-2021. Oil on linen.
63 x 51 inches. Courtesy of Lubov Gallery.*

Boulet's influences—and one gets the sense that Boulet is incredibly well studied—span the range of European modernism (fitting for a man who was born in Norway,

has a French sounding name, and currently lives in England). Boulet frequently draws on a Francis Bacon-like perspective, as in *Binman (Heritage I)* (2020 - 2021), in which the suggestion of a cube renders the two-dimensional space of the painting both claustrophobic and strangely large—the painterly equivalent of Hitchcock’s dolly zoom. There is also a hint of Georg Baselitz in Boulet’s penchant for rendering the human form as both anonymous and monstrous, dismembered and decaying and still somehow monumental. And most of all, there is James Ensor, the Belgian anarchist and master of the carnivalesque whose influence—his macabre humor, his interest in masks, clowns, and skeletons, his skewering of bourgeois mores—has been lighting the way for some of the best figurative painters working today.

But Boulet is more than his influences, much more than an imitator. Though he is very much working within a modernist idiom, his work is hardly dated. Rather, the modernist influences only highlight the extent to which Boulet is quintessentially contemporary, which, as Giorgio Agamben put it, describes “are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands” and are thus, through their critical distance, able to firmly hold the current moment in their gaze.

Boulet’s distance comes from a self imposed isolation, and from a general air of misanthropy—both perfectly

sensible reactions to the time. But unlike Ensor, whose paintings operated on an explicitly political register, Boulet's work mines the family and the domestic for scenes of the abject. And the abject is, I think, the subject of these paintings: we see it in the fleshy lump of a baby merging into the pelvis of a seated figure in the *Binman* (2020-2021) triptych—undoubtedly the centerpiece of the show; the pervasive use of excremental and mucoid tones throughout the work (there is something undeniably fecal about many of the still lifes, particularly *Potato found on Vining Street* (2021) and *Pepper stolen from Jack potato* (2019)); the nude figures under the dining table in *Binman*, either copulating beneath the tablecloth or perhaps discarded in death, the corpse-bodies of the heads atop the table.



Victor Boulet, Cherries from the Bin, 2019-2021. Oil on linen. 18 x 15.75 inches. Courtesy of Lubov Gallery.

Boulet is not out to disgust, however—this is not empty shock. Rather, the abjection of the palette and the forms correspond to the abject closeness of the family—the

blurring of boundaries, the discomfort of that which is of you but is not, strictly speaking, you.

Thus it is no accident that in Boulet's work, faces are rendered to the point of oblivion with thick impasto (*Binman* (2020-2021) or given blank mask-like stares (*Binman (Heritage Problem)* (2020-2021), or given two, bleeding, anus like mouths and empty incomplete eyes (*Binman (Heritage I); Untitled* (2021)). It is no accident that in the drawings, we sometimes see the eye's iris extending over the eyelid, the visual apparatus through which we register the blurring of boundaries itself becoming blurred.

Shit, blood, and vomit are paradigmatically abject, the sight of the corpse too, but the child-parent relation, and, more broadly, the love-relation can be as well—that which is expelled in order to live, that which disturbs identity, that which consumes you but exists, nevertheless, beyond you and your grasp. That is, it would be myopic to see these paintings as purely an expression of revulsion or disgust—rather, the abject can coexist with love, can be born from it. Thus it is no accident as well that these scenes so often take place at dining tables, that food and dead animals are also recurrent themes (the titular cherries in *Cherries from the Bin* (2019-2021) look conspicuously like bloody ground beef); that the figure of the child recurs, often fused to the body of the parent (as in *Binman (Heritage Problem)*). We eat, we expel, we give birth, we mix

fluids, we bleed; we are always living-in-death and the family, food, and waste are the closest reminders we have of the uneasy boundaries between the “I” and the “not-I”, between life and oblivion.

Boulet’s painting and drawing are not flashy, certainly not trendy in their subject or color, but part of what makes Boulet’s work so exciting aside from the clear talent of its author is that, like the work of his forebears, it displays that same modernist belief in painting—in form and brushwork and color and vision—as an end in itself, and this attitude is more relevant and exciting in our contemporary moment, dominated as it is by the market and the relative disrepute of aesthetics beyond the comforting or unambiguous, than much of the other figurative work being shown today. **WM**