Exhibition // Austin Lee's 'Tomato Can' at Peres Projects

Article by Jack Radley in Berlin // Friday, Feb. 16, 2017

"It's like I just walked out of a matinee, struck by sunlight," remarked one viewer upon confronting the neon colors of **Austin Lee**'s air-brushed acrylic paintings at the opening of 'Tomato Can' his first exhibition with **Peres Projects**. Even more surprising than someone actually discussing the work at an opening is Lee's ability to carve tension between line, space, and form with an analog paint brush atop air-brushed canvases. He marries youthful humor with masterful technique in works that lack the narrative theatricality of the matinee, but explore the gravity of bodies paused in action.

The Microsoft Painterly techniques of Lee's playful drop shadows in paintings like 'ApplePick' nod to the work of **Laura Owens** but are used as a tool, not a defining style. Lee's strongest works are figurative, as 'Slow Dance' captures the grotesqueness of **George Grosz** and the luminosity of **Jordan Kasey** at a pace that is simultaneously off-putting and embracing. He sketches with digital modeling software, such as Meshmixer, Photoshop, and Maya, to achieve vibrant light and striking focus in his paintings. Some works, like 'SnakeEyes,' in which he anthropomorphizes the abstract with facial features, feel like studies compared to his ability to capture human comportment in 'GoodLookingDog' (2018).

Austin Lee: 'Tomato Can' (installation view), 2018 // Courtesy of Peres Projects, Berlin // Photo: Matthias Kolb

Lee's subject matter feels like a mashup of Shibe dog memes and marshmallow Peeps that smoke cigarettes on their days off. Memes are images for quick communication; Lee is slowing these characters down. He animates his images so that they do not compliment a sentiment but contain, develop, and evolve it—each a portrait in its own right. As the internet is saturated with images, his paintings feel particularly rough and tactile, evidencing the deft skill of his hand.
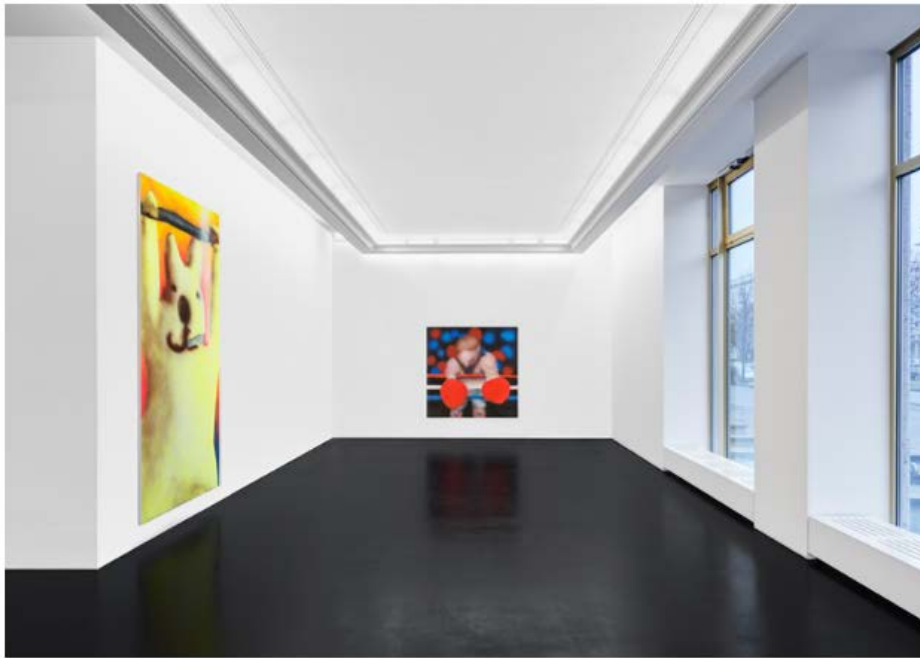
Austin Lee: 'Tomato Can' (installation view), 2018 // Courtesy of Peres Projects, Berlin // Photo: Matthias Kolb

'Tomato Can' is a boxing term for an opponent with poor skills, easily defeated. Although Lee depicts a fighting figure in 'Lean,' the show's title also references **Andy Warhol's** 'Campbell's Soup Cans' (1962). With this, Warhol elevated the canned relic of consumerism to art through the common language of advertising. Lee does the same through the common language of digital modeling, elevating spray paint from the streets to the gallery with tactful control. Lee's work straddles recognizability and the sublime, arresting our gaze in a show that holds great promise for the emerging artist. We leave the matinee craving an encore.

Exhibition Info

PERES PROJECTS
Austin Lee: 'Tomato Can'
Exhibition: Jan. 19 – Mar. 2, 2018
Karl-Marx-Allee 82, 10243 Berlin, click here for map