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WES HEMPEL

## Art Redefined

Wes Hempel has long imagined what art history might have been like had the gay experience not been left out of the artistic canon. The objectification of women reflected society. The objectification of men didn't happen because the framers of the canon were men themselves. Celebration of male beauty, unless couched in the heroic, could have revealed reviled homosexuality.

Hempel comments on not finding his life experience when he visits the world's great museums because it is not part of the canon. He says, "Of course, it's a selected past that gets validated. Conspicuously absent to me as a gay man is my own story. By presenting contemporary males as objects of desire in familiar looking art historical settings, I'm able to imagine (and allow viewers to imagine) a past that includes rather than excludes gay experience—and ride the coattails, as it were, of art history's imprimatur."

An exception in the past was the literal deification of the extraordinarily beautiful Greek



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boy Antinous—who was the acknowledged lover of the Roman emperor Hadrian. When Antinous drowned mysteriously in the Nile, Hadrian built a city in his honor on its banks. Antinous was worshipped as a hero and a god and busts of him rank with those of Augustus and Hadrian as the most popular in the ancient world.

Hempel's contemporary males embody a less heroic beauty than the sculptures of Greece and Rome. His wrestlers and gymnasts are perfect in a human way, real and accessible.

In his exhibition of new work at George Billis Gallery in New York, he continues to place his figures in historical contexts but also paints them as them-

selves—living, not historicizing. In fact, a prize-winning athlete looks away from a classic boxer in *Untitled*.

A young man in *Calling (Study)* responds to the energy of the universe. In *Mischief*, one male torments another with a feather. The dramatic clouds in both paintings and the classic landscape in *Mischief* attest to the eternal nature of fraternal affection as well as that of love.

The exhibition opens October 2 and continues through November 3. ●

**George Billis Gallery** 525 W. 26<sup>th</sup> Street, Ground Floor • New York, NY 10001 • (212) 645-2621 • [www.georgebillis.com](http://www.georgebillis.com)

- 1 *Calling (Study)*, oil on canvas, 24 x 18"
- 2 *Offering*, oil on canvas, 44 x 36"
- 3 *Mischief*, oil on canvas, 32 x 40"
- 4 *Untitled*, oil on canvas, 30 x 30"