

WES HEMPEL

The Simple Things



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Wes Hempel has long been known for his elaborate, conceptual works that place male figures in art-historical settings, re-envisioning what the cannon of fine art might look like if homosexuality had been accepted and included.

While nude figures still figure prominently, much of his latest work, which will be on display in an upcoming solo show at George Billis Gallery in Connecticut, embodies the simple pleasures of process and beauty.

As a young artist, Hempel was working through the rejection of his own homosexuality by his conservative family, and art was an outlet to process his own experience and in a sense, a form of activism.

"That was my whole big project in the beginning," he says. "I wanted to see if I could re-present the male figure as it may have looked if homosexuality wasn't vilified. The older I get the less interested I am in the political world altogether. Also, in my case, from the time I started painting to now, the whole culture has undergone a vast change. What felt like a real energetic push toward something that needed to be said or done...I no longer feel that urgency at all."

His recent work features the male figure in seascape settings that reflect his



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1
Moment of Gratitude,
oil on canvas, 20 x 20"

2
Birthday Wish, oil on
canvas, 16 x 16"

3
Hot Afternoon, oil on
canvas, 18 x 24"

4
Last Basket, oil on
canvas, 16 x 20"

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upbringing in Los Angeles and considerable time spent in Hawaii.

Hempel is finding the shift away from conceptually complex works liberating.

"These feel a lot more simple to me, more direct," he says. "I have nothing I feel I need to prove or validate—I had that a lot in my younger years. Now I'm happy painting what I want to paint, and so long as it's beautiful, I'm happy."

That may be true on the surface, but Hempel's process is anything but simple. Working from photographs of models amassed over the years, sometimes the piece begins with a figure he wants to paint. Other times, he finds an image of a background he wants to portray then finds the right figure to fit into it. After that, his imagination takes over.

For instance, in *Birthday Wish*, the model was photographed in that pose, but Hempel added the tattoo and the candle and gave him a different haircut before placing him in the water and creating the reflection. Sometimes he takes it further by turning a daylight scene into a sunset.

"One of the things I like about the sky and the ocean imagery with a figure is the way the flesh tones interact with that setting," Hempel explains. "You get these vibrant tropical colors working with the flesh tones in a very different way than they do during an overcast day or sunset. There's a lot of fun in that for me as a painter—to get the flesh tones right in these wildly different settings."

One of his personal favorites in the new series is *Last Basket*, which depicts boys exuberantly playing ball in a race against the setting sun. One of his first "sunset experimentations," the figures started out as silhouettes and became increasingly more detailed over time. "I just love the light in the sky, the movement of the figures, the joyful experience as the game ends in the last light—they can hardly see anymore but they don't want to stop playing."

When asked if his models were as flawless as they appear in his works, Hempel says they are fairly faithful representations of them. "People have asked me if I think I have contributed to the pursuit of an unat-

tainable ideal, and I never quite know how to answer that. All I can say is I respond to the physical beauty of these young men, and I enjoy painting them."

Although these new paintings are somewhat of a departure from his signature style, he hasn't walked away from the conceptual entirely, especially in his collaborations with his partner, artist Jack Balas, who he says takes a much more adventurous approach to painting. When either get stuck on a piece, the other will put it on their easel, and together they will complete the piece.

And Hempel would not be where he is today if he hadn't poured all of himself into those early, deeply meaningful works. "There was a huge liberating change in me in doing that work," he says. "It was very liberating to find there were no rules governing what I could do as a painter—I had free rein, an open horizon before me and could go in any direction I wanted to go." ●

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