

JAMES HARRIS GALLERY
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PRESS RELEASE



**“unmasking”
Sept 9 to October 29, 2022
Online Exhibition**

Left Image: Akio Takamori “Boy in Blue Jacket” 2015
Stoneware with underglazes 36” x 13” x 7 ½”

Middle Image: Molly Vaughan “After Boucher: Study of a
young boy drawing a cork from a bottle” 2020
Watercolor and conté on paper
24” x 18”

Left Image: Alexander Kroll “Ariel with Hibiscus” 2022
Acrylic on panel 12” x 9”

James Harris Gallery is pleased to present a group exhibition titled “unmasking.” Featuring works by Claire Cowie, Fay Jones, Alexander Kroll, Jeffrey Mitchell, Akio Takamori, and Molly Vaughan. The exhibition looks specifically at masculinity through the eyes of artists. The works in the show probe the questions of what is masculinity; its characterizations, its truths and falsehoods and how it has evolved over time. The artworks in this show convey the nuances of human expression: the innocence of a child, the immutable gaze of a self-portrait, and the contrapposto of the body. A variety of mediums have been chosen to celebrate the physicality of paint, the saturation of watercolor, the mastery of print making, and the immediacy of drawing. The works demonstrate the importance of human interaction—how a look conveys or betrays emotion and reveals essential aspects of character or psychology of the subject or the interaction between subject and viewer.

Paper is the preferred medium for Claire Cowie. The artist has an intuitive approach to image-making, where the world we inhabit is filtered through the artist’s own psychological landscape and where references to our surroundings are often paired by free association of personal and universal symbols along with compositional invention. The work “12 Views (Man on Mule)” depicts a male figure wandering through a colorful but spare landscape on a beast of burden. The solitary figure recalls Don Quixote and the book’s theme commenting on post chivalric world. Like Quixote, Cowie’s man wanders to discover the meaning of himself and his place in the world. The relationship between individuals and their environments has been an enduring theme in Cowie’s art.

Fay Jones draws upon stories, events and people in connection to her personal life to create psychological narratives with an unsettling edge. Figures are described with line and color and staged on planes of color to create a stylized illusion of depth. This signature style creates a tension between the immediacy of the simplicity of Jones’ figures and inscrutability of what she is depicting. For over 25 years, Jones has worked closely with master-printer Marcia Bartholme of Beta Press to make etchings that capture the essence of her paintings. In the print “Siblings,” the telling gesture or pose of the male figure in the form of heavy black outlines is in stark contrast to the softer lines of his sister as she gazes toward him. The brother positioned to exit the scene with his eyes closed and hands over his ears creates a disturbing narrative in which the sister has power over her male sibling. Her characters, often lost in deep private thoughts, have mask like gazes.

Alexander Kroll’s evolution from only concentrating on abstract painting towards compositions in which the figure is treated in terms of color and shape alone is not an abrupt change in his practice. Kroll began as a figurative painter and his search for a painterly language led to complete abstraction. Now he uses this language to celebrate the physicality of painting and its ability to capture the qualities of human character. The three works in the show are intimate in scale but the luminous color and vigorous brushwork give each portrait a monumental internal psychological presence. “Ariel with

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"Hibiscus" depicts a portrait of the artist's brother, his mouth covered with a flower. Painted during the pandemic, the bright yellow petals are a substitute for a mask and imbue the work with an outlook of hope and happiness. Posing in three-quarter view, Ariel's gaze is directed into the distance, the modulated brushwork of his skin tone instills a sense of quietude and sweetness. Months later, Kroll painted "Self Portrait with Hibiscus." Self-portraits create a conceptual dialogue between the duality of subject and artist – self-scrutiny that aligns with a specific moment in time. This flower now dominates the composition, obscuring and hiding the artist. The flower motif in both these works adds a femininity and diminishes the bravado associated with the historical context of male portraiture. Kroll's inspiration comes from his hours spent in the Tate Museum looking at Renaissance paintings.

"Newspaper Haus" is a classic example of Jeffery Mitchell's early drawings, replete with personal notes and bursting with images. In this work, a fish sprays water up onto a naked man. To the right of this man, a simple face with a crown and the French word for king, *Roi*, is depicted. Daisy petals populate the page. The artist has cut out a hole into the paper, a subtle reference to glory holes at gay bathhouses. Near the bottom of the page, Mitchell has created a house-like structure collaged from a newspaper, revealing the words "Cyclist battle for world . . ." and a photo of one of the male bike riders. The combination of imagery offers insight into the extended consideration of gayness and how masculinity can be celebrated by a marginalized community.

Akio Takamori's sculptures and prints have often focused on children and their perceptions, as seen through his keen ability to embody deeper metaphorical meanings that explore socio-cultural identity, human relationships, and iconographical forms. The smaller-than-life scale of his work suggests the distinct realm that his figures occupy, the immortal realm of myth, culture, and perennial archetypes. For Takamori, youth is not a signifier of inexperience but rather a refreshing optimism, where ideas and energies have boundless potential. "Boy in Blue Jacket" demonstrates his painterly approach to three-dimensional form with his contrasting blue and black glazes that evoke a feeling of joy and youthful inventiveness. The boy's facial expression conveys innocence and the brevity of it. The nuance of gesture references Greek Kouros, Renaissance sculpture, as well as Buddhist sculpture. In another work in the shape of a vase, boys frolic naked around the vessel. There is a sense of mischievousness. The artist became fascinated with childhood as he began to see his aging father change. Akio's father was becoming more child-like over time, resulting in Akio's siblings now taking on the mantle of caretakers.

Molly Vaughan's works on paper are often based on Boucher drawings in which transgender figures have been inserted to give new meaning and a personal connection. Boucher was an 18th century artist who portrayed classical themes emphasized through female eroticism. In "After Boucher: Study of a young boy drawing a cork from a bottle" Vaughan has depicted a boy holding a bottle, beautifully rendered on the label of the bottle is a figure of a trans woman. This drawing, demonstrating the struggles trans people go through accepting their authentic selves, suggests the young man may be releasing the woman inside by preparing to consume the bottle's mysterious contents. The fallacies of inherent maleness are brought to the fore. Vaughan's work is an investigation of the fluidity of gender and asks the viewer to see the positive change when gender is discussed openly and the very concept of gender is questioned.

Following more than two years of the COVID pandemic, which has made mask-wearing an essential aspect of everyday life, looking at faces and physical unspoken emotions and thoughts through facial expression and body gesture has never seemed more significant. "Unmasking" explores our collective and individual responses to the male figure and its characteristics. The works that trigger a thought-provoking encounter with the way we see masculinity in a world where the female gaze has been prevalent.