

Visual Arts Alumnus Linus Borgo '22 in Solo Show at Yossi Milo

By Mădălina Telea Bortuş
December 15, 2023



Throughout the month of December and until January 20, 2024, two bronze sculptures and several oil paintings by Visual Arts alumnus **Linus Borgo '22** are on view in a solo exhibition at the esteemed Yossi Milo gallery in Chelsea. This is Borgo's first solo exhibition in New York City.

The show's title, *Monstrum*, "anchors the exhibition in a reclamation of the word 'monster'—a term that has long represented all that is feared in Western lore, but has become a front for sociolinguistic justice among transgender activists," the gallery's press release notes.

The show opens with *After the Fall of Phaeton* (72" x 96," oil on canvas, 2022), a large painting that depicts three luminous horses whose ivory white coats are accentuated by lilac and golden tones. The three horses rise out of southern Manhattan's skyscrapered landscape. Behind them, a factory and a pantheon structure float atop a band of clouds. Behind that, the ocean glows with an early-sunset serenity. This painting, which is in conversation with the 17th century painting, *The Fall of Phaeton*, by Paul Rubens, steers the viewer's experience through the show's underlying narrative: a valiant reimagining of oneself.

At eighteen, Borgo experienced an electrical accident that resulted in the partial amputation of his left arm. Thereafter, he transitioned into life as a transgender man. “These days I’m leaning into my background in looking at classical paintings. I think it’s important to place a type of body like mine—trans, disabled—into that kind of image. I’ve never seen a body like that represented in that sort of celestial or heavenly space of the Italian Renaissance paintings,” he told Alif Ibrahim for *It’s Nice That*.

Immediately to the right of *After the Fall of Phaeton*, one sees *It’s The End Of The World As We Know It, And I Feel Fine (Self Portrait with Elsinia at the Azure Window)*, a smaller work of 36” x 36” (oil on canvas, 2022) in which Borgo himself, as merman figure, rests upon a rock near the ocean’s shore, his contemplative gaze turned downward toward the wisps of smoke rising from his cigarette, his cat Elsinia perched on a smaller rock beside him, protective, alert.



Then, in the gallery’s second room, one encounters a bronze sculpture of Borgo’s merman figure posed in a similar fashion as in the painting. In *Amphibian* (28” x 15” x 16,” bronze, 2023), however, Borgo’s face is more pensive, the cigarette is gone, and one may walk around to see the back of his merman figure, to experience the tension required to hold oneself upright in the aftermath of *The Fall* or *The End Of The World As We Know It*.

Many of the paintings in the gallery’s inner room pay homage to the surgical stitches, bodily rearrangements, and hybridized figures Borgo carefully engages in his oeuvre. In many of these works, the body is either translucent, solid, or transformed. In all of them, Borgo uses scale and hue to dilate space on a canvas and to quietly suggest a particular position from which to stand before the painted figure.

In *Narcissus at the Halsey Street Oasis* (82” x 103,” oil on canvas, 2023), for instance, one sees a crouching Borgo whose face is aglow with the neon blue light emanating from the pond he’s encountered in an urban underpass. The impetus to crouch before the bottom half of the canvas is unavoidable, and upon doing so, one sees an inwardly searching gaze in the pond. At no point in the *Narcissus* painting, whether on the canvas’ visual plane or while viewing it, does the solipsistic peer through. Instead, the entire visual plane is saturated in an earnest and generous sensibility.

This multifaceted approach to figuration, symbol, event, and allegory is a tenet of Borgo’s artistic practice. “A Borgo painting or sculpture often centers upon an extraordinary body, one that merges disability and transitivity and then locates that body in a world of unnatural beauty,” writes Jack Halberstam, Professor of Gender Studies and English at Columbia University.

There are several ways in which an artist pays homage to, reimagines, or subverts a personally traumatic or sociocultural experience—Borgo opts for an unflinching tenderness. The works in the gallery’s second room feel held, in many ways, within *Amphibian*’s concentrated gaze. The merman figure in *Amphibian* rests in the corner, slightly out of view, but full of a power that anchors the multivalent narrative spread throughout the gallery’s walls.

In the spring of 2022, at the time of his graduation from the School of the Arts, Borgo received the inaugural Betty Lee Stern Prize in Visual Arts, which recognized Borgo as “a highly skilled painter with powerful imagery that works on many levels, taking the self-portrait into the allegorical.”

Betty Lee Stern is a longtime member of the School of the Arts’ Dean’s Council. She and her late husband Dr. Aaron Stern generously established this important prize at Columbia, which is awarded annually to a graduating MFA candidate in Visual Arts.



“The Stern award was crucial for me,” said Borgo. “It came as a total surprise right around the time I was starting to look into teaching jobs for after graduation. It was such a godsend because it meant that I was able to work in my studio full time. Without that award, this show, *Monstrum*, wouldn’t have been possible at all. I’m forever grateful to the Aaron and Betty Lee Stern Foundation for what they did for me!”

Monstrum is available for viewing at Yossi Milo Gallery on Tuesdays through Saturdays, 10 am to 6 pm.

Linus Borgo (b. 1995 Stamford, Connecticut) is a New York based painter who works primarily with large scale oil paintings, focusing on self portraiture and autobiographical narrative scenes. Most of his work deals with a life altering accident that he experienced as a teenager, and explores metaphysical questions of time, gender, history and the limitations of canonical definitions of nature through personal storytelling. Borgo presented his debut solo show at Steve Turner LA in January 2022.