

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

By Yxta Maya Murray

ArtSeen GEST



Installation view: GEST, Nino Mier Gallery, Los Angeles, California, 2020-21. Courtesy Nino Mier Gallery.

Nino Mier, the Austrian-born, Los Angeles-based painter and owner of his eponymous gallery, found himself adrift last March, at the beginning of the pandemic.¹ “While constantly browsing the web in a meditative and almost obsessive way on my phone,” he writes in the essay that accompanies the space’s new show, GEST, “certain works popped up through a little searching, or through group shows here and there, and stuck with me.” In the midst of LA’s first lockdown, when many people were still picking up their mail while swathed in rubber gloves and we did not yet know whether to protect ourselves with expression-erasing face masks, Mier’s melancholy internet cruise resulted in a compendium of artworks that illustrated Spring 2020’s opening chapter of fear.² Mier’s retreat to the consolations of scrolling, a kind of peripateticism or journeying, led him to devise an exhibition dedicated to the “gest,” that is, a “tale of adventure” or a knightly exploit—from the Anglo-French *geste*, which means, among other things, “romance.”³

The resulting show, which highlights 37 works from 10 different artists, builds upon Mier’s wish for freedom and sensation. GEST’s watercolors, drawings, stoneware sculptures, acrylic paintings, and collages express less an impulse towards a traditional Arthurian quest or quixotic caper than a yearning for a voyage wherein the wanderer may rediscover the joys of seeing and being seen, and the pleasures of touching and being touched. Stephanie Temma Hier’s mellifluous *Under the Volcano* (2020) begins with a foundation of dry, porous stones, which frames a gorgeous painting of four hands grasping each



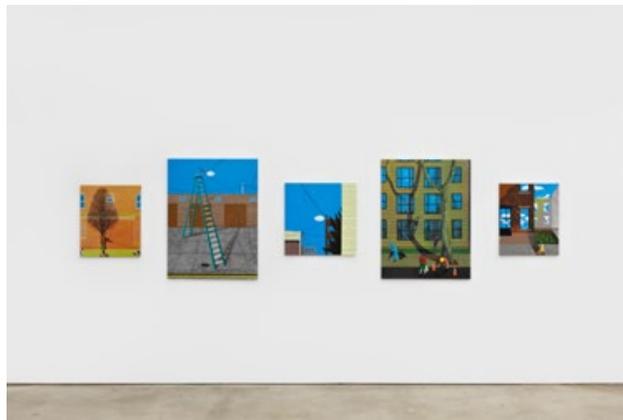
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other. The desiccated look of the rocks nods to drought, while the shining, almost oily hands grappling in promiscuous abandon speak to the touch-famine that a great number of people currently endure. As Dr. Colter Ray, an assistant professor of interpersonal and health communication at San Diego State University said about this particular side effect of the lockdowns last May: “Imagining touch when we don’t have it is like imagining water when we’re thirsty.”⁴

Blair Saxon-Hill’s *Untitled (Oyster, Pussy, Eye)* (2020), similarly evokes a longing to enter a privileged world where we can look closely into the eyes of another person and be caressed without fear of death. This collage/watercolor reveals a fragmented head, face, mouth, hand, and vagina composed largely from cutouts of photographs of marble sculptures. An eye gazes directly at the viewer from what looks to be a little bronze kiln or helmet, and a pale swoop of hair cascades down to a perfectly formed ear and a dangling, painted mouth. In the middle of the visage, a stone hand caresses the pudendum. *Oyster, Pussy, Eye* recalls not only the sensual collages of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore but also references the feeling that our eyes have been caged and our hands have turned hard and cold from so much disconnection.⁵



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Soyeon Shin’s rhapsodic series of acrylic vignettes offer dreamlike cityscapes that make new sense during the COVID-19 pandemic. Largely focusing on scenes outside of street-facing apartment buildings that could be in New York City, downtown Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, or Chicago, Shin depicts a dogwalker strolling in front of a brick building while being erased by a tree’s shadow and a sidewalk’s glare, as in *Emerson Place* (2019), and a construction worker disappearing into a space-time wrinkle while standing in front of a build site, in *Bushwick Avenue* (2019). When created, these scenarios certainly intimated the topsy-turvy world of 2019, when President Trump was declaring an emergency to pay for the Wall, fomenting racial violence, and meeting with Kim Jong-un, but today Shin’s accounts of physical deletion also seem diagnostic of our contemporary loneliness and medical hazard.⁶

In March of 2020, an article in *Psychology Today* advised those suffering already from touch deprivation to self-soothe with “stretching, yoga, self-massage, [or] even just gently stroking your own face or arms, or rubbing your feet.”⁷ But Orkideh Torabi’s brightly dyed textile, *Your Fly’s Open!* (2020), reminds us of the special sensation that arrives when we encounter another person’s flesh. Two men face each other while seated on a tandem bicycle, touching their foreheads together while making intense eye contact.



They seem to giggle, maybe at a wardrobe malfunction, but also at the joy of being in a body that is romancing another body, a body that will soon be engaged in the ancient and deeply necessary human adventure that we call the embrace.

1. Mier born in Austria and at least in 2005 had a career as a painter, <https://kantorgallery.com/portfolio/nino-mier/>.
2. The CDC only started recommending masks to be worn in public in April 2020, <https://www.livescience.com/cdc-recommends-face-masks-coronavirus.html>.
3. Gest, etymology and definition, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/jest#etymology>.
4. Dr. Ray's quote about touch, Diana Spechler, "I desperately miss human touch," The Guardian, May 21 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/may/21/touch-starvation-lockdown-why>
5. Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, *Aveux non avenues* (1929-1930), <https://cs.nga.gov.au/detail.cfm?irn=170272>.
- 6.. Ben Westcott, et al, "President Trump Meets with Kim Jong-un," CNN, Feb. 28, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/politics/live-news/trump-kim-jong-un-summit-vietnam-february-2019/index.html>; Roberta Rampton and David Morgan, "Trump Declares Emergency for Border Wall, House Panel Launches Probe," ABS-CBN News, February 16, 2019, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/overseas/02/16/19/trump-declares-emergency-for-border-wall-house-panel-launches-probe>.
7. Gregg Leovy, "The Pandemic and the Pain of Losing Touch," Psychology Today, March 29, 2020, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/passion/202003/the-pandemic-and-the-pain-losing-touch>.