

## David Shelton Gallery

**Paul Lee**

***Divided***

**May 12 – August 28, 2020**

Excerpted from “Celebrating Queer Rituals” by Bill Arning, OutSmart Magazine, June, 2020

Paul Lee’s art had totally captivated me. Born in 1974, Lee came of age as a gay man in a period dominated by fear of contagion and seeing an older generation for whom sex and death would be forever entwined. Lee wanted to celebrate the rituals that, in his mind, defined his doomed role models and mentors. The towels evoke the bathhouses that Lee had never entered and where he had never found himself walking silently for hours, like a ritual walking meditation, in search of sex, love, simple human contact, or at least to avoid leaving the baths unsatisfied.

Lee’s towels can’t help but speak of all the flesh they had been rubbed against. Is there a more romantic gesture than drying a lover after a shared shower, even if the guy is still a stranger? Lee’s discarded towels also speak of the men we have loved who are either dead or have simply vanished.

Finding those larger-than-life stories in our queer quotidian encounters was also a theme in the work of Jack Pierson, Lee’s mentor from before his arrival in the States in 2001. After Lee wrote his graduate thesis on Pierson’s use of celebrity as an artistic element, Pierson invited him to visit and immediately identified a shared sensibility. Pierson recalls encountering the mischief-filled quality of Lee’s art. “Paul’s work has always had a tough and tender quality, sort of like a 10-year-old smoking or a pickpocket who steals your wallet to give your money to a bum.”

Pierson introduced Lee to paradise in the form of the arts community of Provincetown. Seeing the movie *Showgirls* surrounded by gay men who read books and love debating difficult foreign movies changed Lee’s idea of what his future life as an artist could be.

Paul Lee’s current Houston show, his second at David Shelton Gallery on Montrose Boulevard, opened after the quarantine started, and has only been viewable by appointment. The gallery is keeping it up through the summer, which is a great gift to Houston’s safety-conscious art lovers.

Lee’s work can appear sternly minimalist at first glance—rectangles of flat color on notched rectilinear surfaces—and the artist’s queerness is incidental to the meanings and pleasures he provides. Yet the notches are filled with tambourines that are painted to unify them with the overall compositions. Tambourines were an accessory for a certain generation of disco-obsessed revelers, and we need think only of the iconic logo of the Paradise Garage—a hot guy with a tambourine—to see how the artist’s use of musical instruments in his work 15 years ago had a political cadence. Like the towels, the tambourines are meant to be held, so our frustrated desire to pull one off a painting and play it along to Sylvester’s “You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)” is part of the experience. One piece with two tambourines touching is called *The Kiss* and conjures the pagan rite of a dance floor transforming into pure heaven via a transcendent kiss with a near-stranger. It is wildly evocative, romantic, and wistful.

In the middle of the gallery floor is a recent still-in-progress towel piece with facecloths dyed a dense black. It remains the artist’s intention to come to Houston before the end of the show and give them a deeper black finish that totally absorbs light. The washcloths are arranged to suggest two tiny adjoining rooms. The piece is titled *315 Tenth Avenue*, Lee’s New York City address in Chelsea, one of the gayest neighborhoods on earth. Many gay Houston men will recognize that address as being right around the corner from The Eagle NYC bar.