

Bradley Ertaskiran

Choir / Chorale

Alexandre Pépin

September 28 to October 28, 2023

Entering Alexandre Pépin's exhibition *Choir / Chorale*, against the Bunker's subterranean Brutalist walls, is to enter a medieval chamber, a sacred space. Pépin's work often echoes Renaissance frescoes, mimicking the textures and spatial devices employed by Giotto and others to merge religiosity and space into one. In *Lovers in Bed* (2023), entangled bodies recede and dissolve against a groundless, flat space made of brittle burlap. The reclining couple is depicted at an odd vantage point, regardless of the few architectural markers around them, similar to the skewed but calculated visual tools used in large-scale Byzantine or medieval murals to consider the viewer below. The lovers are both close and far away.

Combining drawing with painting, Pépin layers soft pastels and raw pigment bound with distemper. Distemper, a binder originally made from hide or rabbit skin and now commonly composed of glue and gesso, is used by Pépin to produce a distinctive result. The exhibition's smaller works on burlap are dense in information; repeated brushstrokes and gestural linework in soft tones burrow within the coarse weave of the cloth. It is a process that, in its layering, both reveals and hides the paintings' ungraspable forms: bodies on bodies, shadows atop shadows, blades of grass against blades of grass. Glimpses of the porous burlap peak through constellations of marks, lines, and traces; subtle, disquieting moments. Alternatively, in Pépin's *Alleviation* (2023), black-on-black pigment produces beams of concentrated light, as a flat matte canvas meets a glimmering surface. In both instances, the overall effect is a sort of continuous hum that envelops and softens amidst the noise of the outside world.

Singing Birds, Moving Mountains (2023), the exhibition's focal point and altarpiece, borrows the language of Renaissance tapestry. Pépin renders the textural complexities of silk and wool into softly painted panels while translating luminous gold thread into a backlit glow, like a stained-glass window. Repeated bisected shapes create rhythm and tempo throughout, borrowing from both Pattern and Decoration legacies and the Modernist grid alike, but with an overall aura that invites silent, ecstatic contemplation akin to spiritual devotion.

And while Pépin's subjects are often commonplace—birds, foliage, fruit—pulled from his early exercises in plein air painting, they are not simplistic. Here, birds appear in raw canvas, a mere outline, more empty than the space that encircles them. Their treatments, or lack of, invite an element of unresolve into a rough but otherwise complete image, and offer the artist the challenge of portraying seemingly joyous and beautiful subjects as anything but. Ambiguity reveals the artist's vulnerability, an intimacy through quiet discovery rather than loud, clear declarations. The viewer is sweetly reeled in, brought by the hand, into both sincerity and the possibility of failure.

Alexandre Pépin (b. Montreal, 1992) is currently based in Austin, Texas. He holds an MFA in Studio Arts from the University of Texas at Austin (2022) and a BFA in Studio Arts from Concordia University in Montreal (2016). His work has been exhibited in solo exhibitions at Bradley Ertaskiran (Montreal) and Arsenal Contemporary (New York), with a forthcoming exhibition at Racecar Factory (Indianapolis), and in group exhibitions at NADA New York (with Bradley Ertaskiran), the PHI Centre (Montreal), and the Rad Hourani Foundation (Montreal), among other venues.

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