

The Most Beautiful Boy in the World
Max Xeno Karnig

CASTLE

4327 Francis Ave. Los Angeles, CA 90005
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*“His face recalled the noblest of Greek sculpture – pale, with a sweet reserve, with clustering honey-coloured ringlets, the brow and nose descending in one line, the winning mouth, the expression of pure and godlike serenity. Yet with all this chaste perfection of form, it was of such unique personal charm that the observer thought he had never seen, either in nature or art, anything so utterly happy and consummate.” - Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice**

The Most Beautiful Boy in the World is Max Xeno Karnig’s second solo exhibition at CASTLE, expanding on the subject of his first solo show at the gallery. The exhibition centers around Bjorn Andrésen’s famous portrayal of Tadzio, “the most beautiful boy in the world,” in Luchino Visconti’s 1971 film adaptation of Thomas Mann’s 1912 novella, *Death in Venice*. The movie, like Mann’s novella, follows Gustav von Aschenbach, an accomplished writer and lonely widower who sojourns to Venice, Italy for a restorative stay. But his plans are upended when he encounters Tadzio, the teenage boy whose perfection and beauty fuel an intoxicating, obsessive desire whose effects on Aschenbach become so palpable that they resemble a modern myth.

The paintings in *The Most Beautiful Boy in the World* inhabit Aschenbach’s gaze. Each portrait of Tadzio is set during a different time of day, a different moment in Aschenbach’s escalating cycle of desire. Accompanying these portraits are still lifes of the ephemera from Aschenbach’s vacation, evoking the way Mann’s lush descriptions of seemingly peripheral details reach a fever pitch of sensuality. Out-of-focus petals frame Aschenbach’s gaze; strawberries — Aschenbach’s preferred snack for watching Tadzio frolic along the beach — embody the tension and possibility of desire.

In his book *The Great Romantic Films*, film historian Thomas J. Quirk writes that stills of Tadzio from Visconti’s film “could be extracted from the frame and hung on the walls of the Louvre and the Vatican.” Karnig uses Mann’s (and Visconti’s) characters to examine the eroticism in historical religious and mythological European paintings like Antonello da Messina’s *Dead Christ* or one of Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres’s Venuses. He frames Tadzio in compositions similar to the deities, saints, and martyrs, substituting spiritual iconography with a more modern, earthier ideal. Viewed together, Karnig’s exquisitely rendered paintings conjure a formally rigorous dream of longing and obsession.

Max Xeno Karnig (b. 1990, New York) lives and works in Los Angeles, CA. Karnig received an MFA from University of California, Irvine in 2019. Solo exhibitions include: *At a Distance* (2024) at Painters Painting Paintings (2024); *The Cardsharps* (2023) at Sameule Visentin, London; *No Return* (2023) at Cruise Control, Cambria; *City of Women* (2022) at CASTLE, Los Angeles. Group Exhibitions include: *Apparitions* (2024) Seaview, Los Angeles; *Body Double* (2023) at Ketabi Bourdet, Paris; *Who are You?* (2023) at La Loma Projects, Los Angeles.