

a. SQUIRE

Ryan Huggins

PLUTO

1 June–13 July

Opening: Friday 31st May, 6–8.30pm

Covering more than 1,600m² over three floors, Essen's Pluto saunaplex is one of the largest and most beloved institutions of its kind in Germany. Among the driving house synths that accompany any given weekend, you're likely to catch not only German, but also fragments of English, Dutch, and French lingering in the air, to say nothing of the sounds that require little translation. New friends, snacks, smokes, and whatever other refreshments one might need are never in short supply. But what's most striking is that for all its vastness, there isn't a single source of external light. The space itself seems to devour the passage of time—a palace of eternal night.

For the past five years, Ryan Huggins has patronised Pluto and reconstructed his memories of its realms on canvas with varying degrees of faithfulness or fancy. *No photos please.* *PLUTO* presents his most ambitious work in the series to date. Suffused with nocturnal blues, Huggins' frieze takes viewers on a tour of the establishment's offerings via 16 individual vignettes. Rendered in an abstract central perspective, each scene gives the feeling of an adjoining room, glimpsed in passing along a single long corridor. Narratively, the cycle progresses according to three primary functions on offer, which the artist defines as wellness, pleasure, and entertainment; a structure derived from the bathhouse's distinctive architectural blend of social and sexual spaces, designed to feel something like freedom.

Built up of only a handful of colours—transparent turquoise, burgundies, Naples yellow, and a smattering of something fluorescent—the paintings rely on varying degrees of transparency to conjure space. Some surfaces with barely a glaze seem sculpted out of an inner light, while other passages give the feel of wandering off into a familiar darkness, charged as it is undefined. The narrow corridor of Huggins' installation intensifies the effect, inviting you to get lost in the individual scenes and give up any hope of knowing where you are in the whole. Between these extremes, we find an army of interchangeable lovers hellbent on making the best use of every conceivable cranny—no questions asked, or answers needed.

In major cities throughout the world, spaces for spontaneous communion are increasingly rare. From plain old gentrification to the advent of online dating, the causes are too many to list here. One handsome employee suggests that, at least for now, the reason for Pluto's staying power lies precisely in its sexual mix. Some people are intimidated by clubs, he explains, but also lack the patience for endless Grindr chats. The sauna provides something in between, while adding an element of surprise. You might hook up with your biggest insta-crush only to find you can't stand the sound of his voice. Or you could end up falling in love with the smell of an older gentleman whose face you've never seen. By his account, the formula works like no other, with around 400 visitors per day at weekends and a record high of 95,000 over the last year.

Huggins' paintings offer a subjective testimony to this self-enclosing world, while staying true to the details of its purpose-built architecture. They seem almost to historicise their subject as a monument to the utopian ingenuity of a subculture born of need, while also charting its passage into an industrialised sort of hedonism. The ability to carve out caves, then caverns apart from the rest of the world was once a matter of survival; now it's but another kind of pleasure. The paintings certainly don't say which way to go from here, though they may invite us to remember. We didn't make the world we inherit, but that doesn't stop us from building another.

— Stanton Taylor

Ryan Huggins (b. 1991, Port of Spain; lives and works in Düsseldorf) is a graduate of the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, where he studied in the class of Tomma Abts at the invitation of Peter Doig.

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Works

Clockwise from left:

PLUTO, Phase 1.: i. Entrance/Locker Room; ii. Pluto Bar 1; iii. Pluto Bar 2; iv. Main Shower, 2024

Oil on canvas, in 4 parts

Each: 40 x 60 cm, 15 3/4 x 23 5/8 in

Overall: 40 x 240 cm, 15 3/4 x 94 1/2 in

AS-HUGGR-0001

PLUTO, Phase 2.: v. Dry Sauna 1/Trocken Sauna; vi. Dry Sauna 2/Trocken Sauna; vii. Private Cabin; viii. Jacuzzi, 2024

Oil on canvas, in 4 parts

Each: 40 x 60 cm, 15 3/4 x 23 5/8 in

Overall: 40 x 240 cm, 15 3/4 x 94 1/2 in

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PLUTO, Phase 3.: ix. Wet Sauna/Cruising 1; x. Wet Sauna/Cruising 2; xi. Wet Sauna/Cruising 3; xii. Private Cabin with Glory Hole Labyrinth, 2024

Oil on canvas, in 4 parts

Each: 40 x 60 cm, 15 3/4 x 23 5/8 in

Overall: 40 x 240 cm, 15 3/4 x 94 1/2 in

AS-HUGGR-0003

PLUTO, Phase 4.: xiii. Rest Lounge; xiv. Swimming Pool 1; xv. Swimming Pool 2; xvi. Smoke Lounge, 2024

Oil on canvas, in 4 parts

Each: 40 x 60 cm, 15 3/4 x 23 5/8 in

Overall: 40 x 240 cm, 15 3/4 x 94 1/2 in

AS-HUGGR-0004

Vitrine:

Young Stars XXL, 2024

Oil on canvas

40 x 28 cm

15 3/4 x 11 in

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