

# LUBOV

**Andres Serrano & Benjamin Bertocci**

***In Battle or in Vain***

**November 9–January 11, 2025**

Why does Andres Serrano—an artist perpetually preoccupied with the Zeitgeist, and a notorious victim of its vitriol—now turn his attention to figures rendered half a millennium ago? Sifting through images rendered by Michelangelo nearly 500 years ago, Andres Serrano reflects, “What happens in the past does not always stay in the past.” This past includes his own, as he returns to painting for the first time since enrolled at The Brooklyn School of Art almost fifty years ago. To make the works on view, Serrano photographed, enlarged, printed, and painted onto images he took at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Villa Borghese, and his own library of books. With energetic brushstrokes, he transmogrifies the cardboard backing used as his palette into a framing device for Christian iconography, as well as the act of reification.

While many of his recent works visualize destruction—indexing the vilification and vandalism that has laid claim to both his work and his career—in this series, Serrano enacts resurrection. Wielding a brush like a crozier, he invigorates long-chronicled subjects with renewed energy, humanizing symbols of empire with fragility. The titles of these paintings genuflect to a sense of doom: Sad Christ, Torso with Missing Limbs, Angel of Death, Eternal Sleep. In imagery that transcends nationhood, he renders figures that retch but cannot wreak.

Benjamin Bertocci describes his work using the concept of ontologies, a biological term that describes factors animals need to identify for their survival. A lion’s ontology includes the sun, thorns, and hare—but not shellfish, caves, or leavened bread. When encountering a factor outside its ontology, creatures grapple with hurdles by weaponizing tools of reason. In his Philosopher paintings, Bertocci looks to the ontology of the human, which involves “navigating family life in the post-generative AI, late-capitalist pre-apocalypse.” His paintings materialize anxieties around these conditions even more than they illustrate his concerns. In the face of immeasurably accelerating technologies and resource scarcities, how does one face the present?

Serrano gives one possible answer to this conundrum by concretizing the ontology of the artist. Wielding reason within the factors of artmaking—technique, content, circulation, history, devotion—he resurfaces immortal images that have, for centuries, provided wisdom for the crises that ensue. Most notably, Serrano reifies the power of credence in times inconceivable.

—Jack Radley, November 2024.

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