

Ryan Huggins

*Call Boys, Pimps & Dealers*

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There's a guy standing in the corner. A cigarette dangles from his lips, seemingly grasping for stability. Perhaps he's waiting for someone, perhaps just for something to happen. In this purgatory, he anticipates judgment with a look both impatient and hopeful. Summer here is especially heavy, the stickiest time of year when even a tank top is too heavy a burden to bear and jeans inevitably creep up your crotch with an unforgettable itch. Then all of a sudden the action happens. Someone appears out of the blue, rushes over, and whispers words so soft and swift that only the two men involved can catch them. Those barely audible fragments are followed by a tilt of the head and an agile exit. Two hands quickly touch, two pairs of eyes meet, and both are off and into the shadows of the next corner.

Ryan Huggins regularly paints things he sees, at times with the intention of preserving them for posterity. His recent drawings and paintings have often been based on his impressions of cruising spaces, gay saunas, or queer parties; all sites of community and faggotry that carry tender historical significance as well as contemporary momentum.

This new body of works consists of small- to medium-sized paintings made with oil on linen. They depict scenes from two German gay bars, one in Berlin called *Tabasco* and one in Düsseldorf called *Comeback*. Both have been around for a minute and came from a generation of places that gradually became vital for sex work and adjacent transactional desires. Huggins frequented them both. He spent time there, observing, understanding, following their operational codes, how they are, how they feel, how they come alive at night. Even though many sex workers now prefer to ply their trade online, these are spaces where good old fashioned hustling still pays off.

The works offer a deeply personal impression of the scenes that unfold at night in these bars. In both cases, the setting is similar. There are boys dancing in their underwear, hidden rooms that would take a minute for a newcomer to discover, where men sit alongside raised platforms, lustfully staring and touching themselves, while others put on a sex show. Some are playing pool, walking around frantically, or dancing along awkwardly to whatever the radio decides to bang out. But there are also places for communion and conversation, of the kind that makes one's eyes sparkle and breath rush. There's little in the way of reportage to be found here, no moralizing stories of sadness and exclusion. Some of these men are real, others drawn out of allusion, memory, and imagination. None of the works set out to give an authoritative account and instead give partial testimony to the beauty and messiness of queer existence.

The sites transform into something like a commons for faggotry and communal rentals made for quick thrills and loving afternoons. One could say they become para-institutional spaces where queerness occurs, or at least one of its countless iterations—where it is fostered, where closeness breathes out loud, and where the transactionality of love and labor spews out all over the sticky dance floor. The paintings do not claim to show us things as they are; they are images born of impressions in the now, the moments Ryan spent inside them. Seen, felt, and then reworked, these scenes breathe fresh air into a homosphere that was gasping for it.

I find Ryan Huggins' perspective on bars like *Tabasco* and *Comeback* a thoughtful take on a nonconforming experience of being in the world. It's about how we decide to fill our shoes and put on our bras each day. A faggy kind of masculinity that becomes a spatial thing. It needs its dimly lit corners. It requires hands on experience, screams for quick thrills, and is paid up front. Cash only.

*Text by Haris Giannouras*