

Mission Gallery

Come fail at love

Casper White

Art critic Hettie Judah and artist Casper White discuss how 'Come fail at love' came to be ...



Image: Casper White - Dance from Tiktok @chipscheeseanddoner, Oil on Linen

Casper White: Come Fail at Love

“Piero seems to be some kind of... I have to use the word cosmic. As if all these forms, buildings, and columns and draperies and figures, the way in which distances are located, the slowness of spaces moving up and down, the spaces across and at the same time moving in and out like planets, are like a celestial system of some kind, which produces this feeling of wisdom. Or some kind of emotion...”

Philip Guston, ‘On Piero della Francesca’
(Lecture at the New York Studio School, 1971)

“Lacking music and sound effects to punch up these emotional scenes, comic books relied on pouring tears and melodrama... Expecting these masklike, often masked faces to convey understatement was like expecting stained glass to act. Emotions were broadcast at maximum volume.”

Grant Morrison, *Supergods* (Jonathan Cape, 2011)

Casper White invites us to Come Fail at Love. There’s a lot of feeling in that proposal. Romance, passion, longing, yes, but the mournfulness of failure too: the promise of something bittersweet. After the low-lit woozy intimacy of his 2017 clubbing portraits, here he turns to explore relationships at one remove. How to connect in the present day? It’s tough enough without the current restrictions. Even before we were all scolded and sent off to skulk alone at home, it seemed a lot of the time we connected either side of two cold, hard, observant screens.

Can we still discriminate, emotionally, between the on screen lives of friends and the on screen lives of those we only know...on screen? How can we make emotions big enough to play out through the digital veil, to communicate and touch someone unseen beyond? Looking at coded gestures, patterns, screens, pleats, veils and filters, from Piero della Francesca to TikTok, Casper White explores how we still somehow connect despite everything coming between us.

Hettie Judah, 2020

Hettie Judah: The first works that I saw of yours were paintings of your friends clubbing, with motifs of giant sequins. It was a much darker palette than the one you're working with at the moment: indigos and dark crimsons. Then I saw the exhibition at Kingsgate Project Space, and your work had changed: you were using silk veils, and there was a sense of objects in the paintings being seen through layers.

Casper White: The dancing works came out of the National Portrait Gallery travel award. I was trying to figure out how I could do what I want to do in a way that would fit their system. So, I said: "I'm going to go clubbing in Europe and take my friends" basically, and that worked.

HJ: That was the most outrageous proposal for a travel award, that you'd go to the Balearics and Berlin and go clubbing!

CW: It was amazing and it was a really interesting time. I like old school portraiture, and I really am interested in the history of it, but I'm a massive fan of what could be deemed trash contemporary culture. I'm not just observing it: I'm into it. I like TikTok, and pop music. I'm on celebrity gossip websites as a genuine fan. Clubbing was an extension of that. The clubbing scenes weren't groups of people: it became about me with one other person, about that person's story. On this night something awful could happen, something great could happen, it could be the beginning of something, the end of something. Everything's about relationships: with classic artworks, with contemporary TikToks, with the person that I'm painting.

Because of Covid, I haven't had sitters. So let's figure out what this relationship was. I started to look at people who are publicly 'open' to relationships. I started looking at models and their function as a figure of adoration. I started to look at people who are like foils for feelings. Models are also aspirational figures – things to fall in love with, people to be. When I look at my favourite Titian painting or a John Singer Sargent, or an Instagram person, I see this same give and take: adoration, but also beauty. I wanted to make a painting that has these feelings.

HJ: It's like a community of images that you see now in your work: even though you're seeing them one by one, whether they're faces and figures seen in the museum, in person or on TikTok, they are all together in the same interface.

CW: When I come to the studio, I'm not seeing individual works any more: I'm seeing the relationships between them, where they would be hung, where they sit. It's not about making the pivotal artwork - everything in one go. The works sit next to each other and they earn value off each other. One piece can function as a work, but it also holds a lot of the feeling and information that is present in the others. One might be based on a model who makes their own pleated skirts, or on a ceramic Harlequin sculpture that I saw at The Met. Those things come together.

HJ: There was a period when you were really interested in people crying on TikTok.

CW: I started off by looking at comedians on TikTok. It seemed to be whenever they cried, they'd post about it. It played on religious imagery I was dealing with, this – it's not acting because it's really truthful – but willingness to show stuff. It was an emotional moment in their life, but it's also sharing. I did four paintings with a TikTok person crying. And two angels from a Florentine sculpture that I saw in Chicago.

HJ: People on social media and saints alike become emotional totems, like touch points for other people to pin their emotions on.

CW: Potentially yes. I'm non-religious, so when I go to a church or engage with that kind of imagery, it feels odd: when you see Mary or a figure in a religious painting crying or frail or hurt, they were human emotions. These things are really forward on social media at the moment, so I was seeing links that I wanted to articulate in paint. Because social media's been part of these people's lives for longer than it has for me, they've been very open. When I go to a museum, and see a sculpture that speaks to these things, for me it's the same really. This is a way to acknowledge that and bring them to the same point.

HJ: It makes complete sense: figures that suffer for us, that help us to express our emotions or to let our emotions out.

CW: The comedian that I was painting is an actress as well, but when she shows herself crying, it is because she has been crying, but she'll take a photo of herself and draw on tears, and will use filters. I think it's really interesting.

One thing that is interesting as well is TikTok's propensity to push forward beauty, and to push forward whiteness. Until now I've always painted my friends, so that has meant my models have been predominantly gay, trans, and from various backgrounds. By looking for models and for people who are pushed forward [by the algorithm], it's become a kind of homogeneous group. I'm not trying to make a political statement, but it's something I'm aware of.

HJ: Have you been in touch with everybody you've painted?

CW: Everyone, yes. Even the relatively famous people, I've messaged or reached out. Most have been really positive. As a fan of contemporary culture in general, including enjoying the 'worst' bits, the fact that these people are engaged and want to be painted, and want to be seen in different ways, I find quite exciting.

HJ: Talk to me about beauty. Looking at that palette behind you, it's this kind of Titian skyscape with all of these evening pinks and pale blues and softness to it. Beauty is obviously a big part of the atmosphere that you're creating.

CW: With the dancing portraits and the silks, the idea was to create a sensation of intimacy. I was already doing it in the show in Kingsgate, surrounding myself with sentiments or feelings. I feel like contrast between light and dark was pushed upon me art historically, because you need contrast to articulate the image fully. Now, because I'm in a smaller range, within these colour palettes things like touch and feeling, and transparency and immediacy come to the fore. Because I've taken the darkness out, I can make a dark image that is actually very light. It's in a lighter spectrum, but actually can have more feeling rather than being thick tar black. Dark browns are so filled with history, they can become like a tool to pretend at being a serious artist.

HJ: The dark colours give a painting gravitas?

CW: Yes, like you're adding on the idea of the museum. But here I have the hands from a Piero della Francesca, and a picture of a girl off TikTok, those colours are directly taken from the Piero painting, there's details from a skirt in the Piero that I loved, and blues that reference ceramic pieces: it's steeped in artist history. There's a lot of conversation.

HJ: You can see how symbolism and gesture has endured without people necessarily realising where it has come from.

CW: Some of my favourite paintings have a piece of fabric that goes over a form: as a painter, I feel that the artist was having a good day. And for me at the moment, that's the priority really. Instead of it coming from a need to paint Mary or Jesus or whoever: the people around me are basically TikTok or YouTube, especially during Covid.

HJ: That's what I was getting at when I asked how it felt to be surrounded by this community on the wall, because it's like you've created a portrait gallery of the people that have accompanied you through the last 6 months.

CW: Yes, no doubt, and I'm pleased with it, because it feels honest. It's a change for me, from high contrast imagery through to this, but actually this has always been there. I was trying to throw everything out of the studio: my ideas of what it is to be a Welsh artist, or to be an artist anywhere, and maybe throwing away my palette was a conscious thing. The political nature of

colour is very present, but I almost needed to break that down into something I could deal with. I know today if I make a painting, there would be 3 colours I use. I like limitation. Of course then, you can clearly go from an image directly referencing an old painting through to something new, and you don't have the hard work of trying to pretend to be a painter from the 1600s.

[Hettie Judah](#) is senior art critic on the British daily paper The I, and contributor to Frieze, The Guardian, Vogue, The New York Times, Art Quarterly, Numèro Art and other publications with 'art' in the title. Her recent books include *Art London* (ACC Art Book, 2019) *Lives of the Artists: Frida Kahlo* (Laurence King, 2020) and *Caroline Walker: Janet* (Anomie, 2020.)

[Casperwhite.com](#)

Casper White is represented by Arusha Gallery.

'Come fail at love', programmed to coincide with the [2020 BEEP Painting Biennial](#), continues at Mission Gallery, Swansea until 14 November 2020.

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