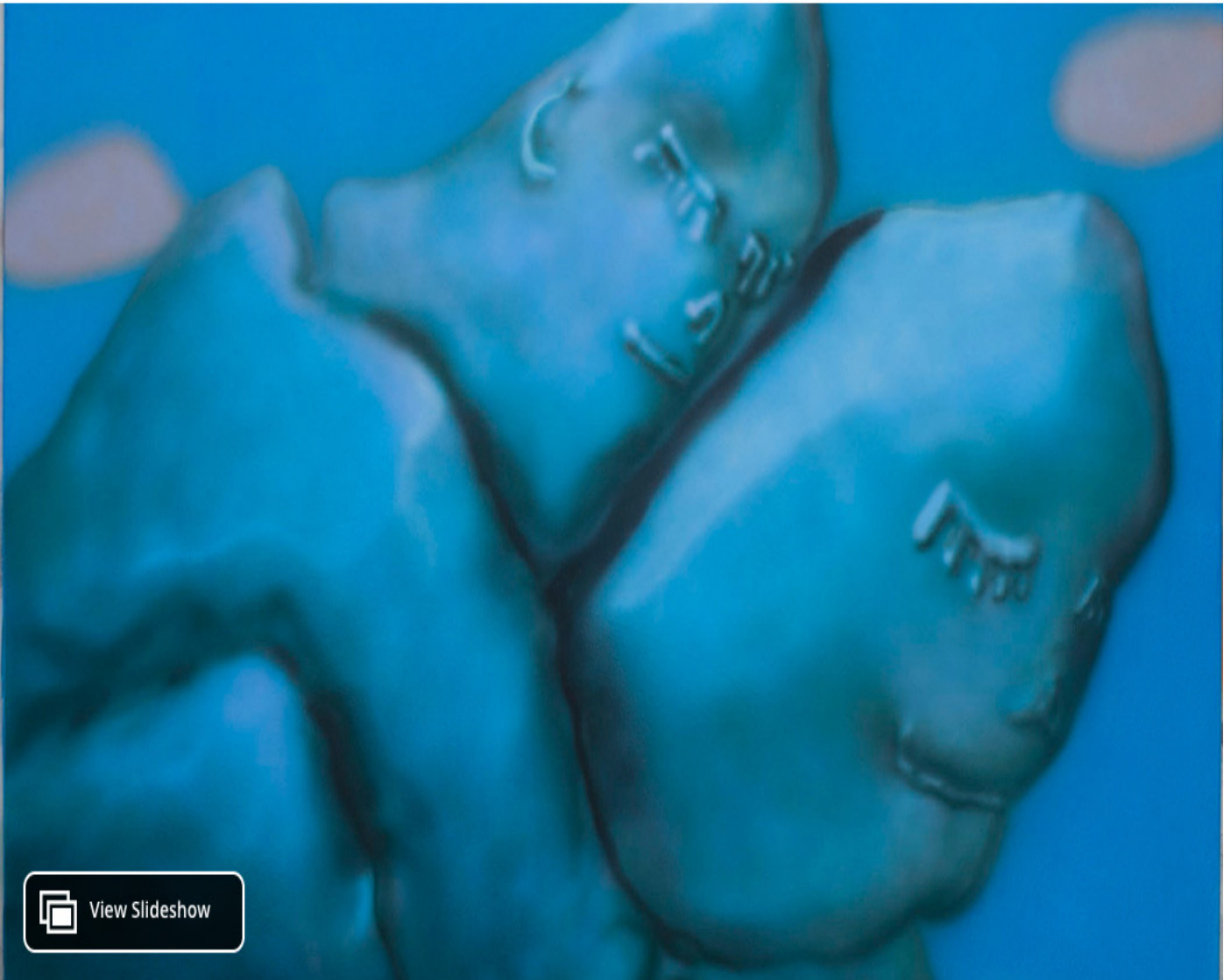


## Austin Lee's "Nothing Personal" Is Quite the Opposite

By Scott Indrisek - October 25, 2015



Austin Lee's latest show at Postmasters Gallery in New York may be called "Nothing Personal," but the decapitated heads of his parents are one of the first things you see. (To be fair, they're made out of plaster-and-paint coated 3D models.) Heads are a common motif in Lee's work, whether they're of friends, family members, or anonymous humanoids. His last show at the gallery featured a dense wall of faces, hung salon-style like an anxious cartoon crowd. This exhibition finds the artist further defining an aesthetic that, while reminiscent of and in many ways dependent on computer-based graphics, is interested in unsettling such classifications. "What can digital do well, and what can my hand do well?" he pondered during a recent walkthrough of the show. "I'm navigating back and forth, pushing both in different directions to figure out where they can meet — bringing a bit of humanity to the digital."

In this latter respect Lee is a cousin to peers like Sascha Braunig, Trudy Benson, Avery Singer, and others. That push-and-pull between the computerized and the corporeal is especially strong in "Nothing Personal," which finds the artist toggling between various visual "languages": a sort of fuzzed-out blur; sharp, flat graphic lines; doodle-like squiggles; and compositions with more depth, the result of Lee building 3D sculptures on the computer and then painting from those models. Lee is mostly self-taught in regards to the sculpture software — the occasional YouTube tutorial has been helpful. He relies on a combination of programs, including Maya and Mesh Maker, as well as

Photoshop's somewhat rudimentary three-dimensional functions. The resulting paintings have the feel of hazy photographs taken of claymation figures, as in "Me And My Dad," in which an infant Lee (re-imagined as a blue-colored baby-blob with a pointed head) clings papoose-style to the back of his equally blue padre. Continuing in that same, possibly fraught Freudian terrain, there's a 3D-model-based painting called "Smother," in which an enormous matriarch, a sort of ET with breasts, appears to suffocate a small creature who is either a human with curly white hair, or a lamb.

Other works in the show are equally unexpected. "Private Moment" is perhaps the strangest painting included, a depiction of a figure in the shower that invites comparison to Dana Schutz's recent depiction of the same subject. During my visit, Lee showed me an earlier version of the composition, in which the shower curtain is rendered with texture and folds; in the final painting, it becomes a simple sheath of flat pink covering a large expanse of the canvas. Equally bold is "Horse Fantasy (Dptych)," a pair of near-identical images featuring a wild-eyed example of the titular animal. "It started as an exercise," Lee said, "to let myself get crazy and experiment on one [of the two] canvases. But it didn't work out like that at all — it made me experiment on both. I didn't care. I let all that preciousness go away."

A handful of paintings work on an entirely different register, almost akin to the graphic pop of Keith Haring — these are based directly on sketches Lee made on his iPad, later collected in a book (with accompanying "augmented reality" app) made in collaboration with Philippe Kerrer. And "Nothing Personal" contains Lee's first large-scale sculpture: a self-portrait of sorts, presenting an oversized version of the artist, his features pared-down to Play-Doh basics. This sculptural Lee is on his knees, his arms raised, as if he's smilingly communicating with an unseen spirit in the sky. Most visitors to his studio, the artist said, have wanted to hug the figure, but it's equally easy to imagine the sculpture caught in the midst of begging someone for mercy. Granted, that might be because it's installed near a painting of one angry cartoon man about to smash in the head of another with his foot — a convenient encapsulation of Lee's overall aesthetic, in which one is never quite sure whether to embrace, or to run away.