



ART

Austin Lee's Feel-Good Art Is More Complicated Than It Seems

Where virtual-reality drawings become paintings.

By [SCOTT INDRISEK](#) | Mar 13 2019, 5:24pm

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Austin Lee, *Feels Good*, Jeffrey Deitch, New York, 2019. Photo by Genevieve Hanson.

Don't be thrown by the sugary, rainbow-tinted allure of painter Austin Lee's [latest show with Jeffrey Deitch](#). Among the enormous roses—the fields of floating hearts, the goofily grinning faces—there's an undercurrent that unsettles. Even the exhibition's title, "Feels Good," implies an instability, partly alluding to the infamous catchphrase of Pepe the Frog, a hippy-dippy underground comics character who was co-opted by the alt-right and other hate groups. "Something that seems good can be not so good for you—this show is poking at those different things," Lee tells GARAGE.

And at the same time, walking around these massive, airbrush-heavy paintings does feel good. They have a vivid, graphic simplicity, despite the high-tech road that Lee takes to arrive at them. While the artist was, for years, mocking up his compositions in Photoshop, he's since adopted an entirely new way of working, using the Oculus Rift's virtual-reality program Medium as a sort of imaginary studio. (He was introduced to the technology by V.R. early adopter Rachel Rossin.)



Austin Lee, *Feels Good*, Jeffrey Deitch, New York, 2019. Photo by Genevieve Hanson.

After donning the Oculus headset, Lee labors in a purely virtual space—a “blue void” that “feels infinite,” he says. “I can draw in space, very gestural. You just press a button and it’s almost like extruding paint tubes.” The process isn’t always easy. “I’ll sit and use [the Oculus] four or five hours at a time,” he explains. “I’ll take it off and feel crazy. I really like it—but it does make me nauseous.”

The resulting V.R. drawings are then turned into paintings—or sculptures, like *Walk* (2019), whose orange skin and cloud of yellowy hair can’t help but recall an unnervingly buff, Gumby version of Donald Trump. For *Down* (2019)—a painting of a knocked-out boxer—Lee constructed an entire V.R. scenario, complete with a boxing ring, spectators, and multiple lighting sources. This complicated source material informed the final work, which the artist attempted multiple times before nailing it during a single, hour-long session of intensive airbrushing. Lee himself used to box during high school, and thinks of painting in not dissimilar terms: a combination of strategy, physicality, and perseverance.



"Down" from Austin Lee, *Feels Good*, Jeffrey Deitch, New York, 2019. Photo by Genevieve Hanson.

He’s inspired by painters, like Alex Katz, who exude effortlessness and compelled by an older generation of artists who are able to put new technologies to intriguing use, whether that’s David Hockney and his iPad drawings, or Cindy Sherman and

good artist—you'll see them in it no matter what.”

Despite his reliance on technology, Lee is also a very traditional painter, the sort who happily nerds out over technique and process. The daily struggle of making an image, tweaking it, obliterating it, brings unexpected joy and the occasional revelation. For Rose (2019), Lee had spent a lot of time prepping a large painting of a flower, agonizing over the reddish orange background tones. Eventually, he reversed course entirely, airbrushing a totally different image—a lion, with glowing yellow eyes, chomping the head off of a nude figure. (The titular, tiny rose is still visible in person, if you look closely, inside the lion's nose—though it doesn't show up in reproduction.) What was initially a failure, he says, is now his favorite painting in the show.



"Rose" from Austin Lee, *Feels Good*, Jeffrey Deitch, New York, 2019. Photo by Genevieve Hanson.

Upstairs at Jeffrey Deitch, a series of small portraits further show off Lee's ability to squeeze real pathos out of what, at first, can seem childlike. It's not easy to take the basic components of a face—two round eyes, a loopy smile, nose optional—and give it emotional range. “The subtlety of a facial expression will mean so many different things,” he says, discussing the eccentric, small-scale paintings he has made of friends and other visitors to his studio over the years.



"Jesus" from Austin Lee, Feels Good, Jeffrey Deitch, New York, 2019. Photo by Genevieve Hanson.

Perhaps no face in the show is more unnerving and loaded than that of Jesus (2019), a pared-down riff on El Greco's early 17th-century [Christ on the Cross](#). Lee manages to translate the anguish of the original in the form of a cartoon. (The effect is oddly similar to that of the Spanish woman who attempted to "fix" a fresco of Jesus [back in 2012](#).) The artist became interested in religious imagery after a trip to the Philippines, where he was intrigued by the country's tradition of "super bloody" religious artwork. "Making a painting slows me down to think about it," he explains. "Even the El Greco—this depiction of someone in such a violent position....For me, it's really interesting—to see something new again."



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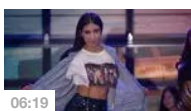
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The Joker: The Art World's Best Patron

Joaquin Phoenix is just the latest performance artist to take on the role.

By [ANGELLA D'AVIGNON](#) | Sep 19 2018, 9:43pm

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Arguably one of [the best scenes](#) in Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989) is when Jack Nicholson, as the Joker, and his henchmen romp through the Gotham City Museum, trashing a variety of eighteenth and nineteenth century masterworks and objects from classical antiquity. They deface [Gainsborough's Blue Boy](#) (1779) and smash ancient Egyptian sculptures, all while Prince's "Partyman" plays on a boombox. It's only when one of his cronies approaches [Figure with Meat](#) (1954) by Francis Bacon with machete in hand that the Joker objects, reaching out his cane in protection as he says, "I kind of like this one, Bob. Leave it."

That the Joker would have such specific taste in art goes against the archetype of an evil villain as self-interested, brutal, and seemingly incapable of experiencing emotions, let alone having a favorite painting in a museum. But therein lies the gag. The Joker doesn't hate art; he hates good taste. Of course he prefers the gruesome and psychologically disturbing paintings of Bacon, whose ghoulish depictions of individual anguish reviled the beauty-seeking midcentury public.



Francis Bacon, Figure with Meat, 1954.

Bacon's paintings epitomize the pathos of the postwar era, and depict screaming popes and caged businessmen. In *Figure with Meat*, the gaping mouth and wild eyes of the figure are not unlike the Joker's. After all, the face of evil wants to see itself in the visuals that surrounds it: smeared, monstrous, and malformed. It makes sense that the Joker would prefer the abjection of the Bacon painting to the romanticism of the [Degas ballerina sculpture](#) he so casually knocks to the floor. In art, equating standardized beauty with virtue is a falsity the Joker understands, and with his love of the debased and grotesque, he is merely making a critique.

A haunted role, the Joker's other iterations have also been monstrous aesthetes with a look drawn from art, from Nicholson's tailor-made grin to Heath Ledger's caked-on stage makeup in *The Dark Knight* (2008), which director Christopher Nolan admits was [inspired](#) by Bacon's paintings. (Don't even get me started on Jared Leto's method acting.) The Joker himself has also [been a muse for the art world, particularly for Andy Warhol, who interpreted the Batman logo in several works, made the unauthorized 1964 film *Batman Dracula*, and even appeared on the '60s TV show](#). In fact, the

must reveal the truth. (Clearly, this a comic at least mildly obsessed with the pomposities of the art world.)

Joaquin Phoenix, a noted performance artist who trolled America while filming the mockumentary *I'm Still Here*, is also in an upcoming Joker biopic. A far cry from the cartoonish Joker with his bright purple dinner jacket and a satin orange tie, Phoenix plays the titular villain dressed as [a tailored "normie" named Arthur Fleck](#) (though I hope he wears that nasty purple jacket at some point, or at least the slime green dye job). He lurks the streets in plain clothes with diabolical sociopathy lying just beneath the surface. That lack of outward evilness has disturbed lots of fans online; "it's literally a fucking photo of Joaquin Phoenix with long hair," [as one person tweeted](#).

Arthur's normie look has roots in another satirical villain of cinema, Patrick Bateman of *American Psycho*, who keeps a handful of 1980s artworks in his [yuppie-tastic New York apartment](#), including Richard Prince's [Marlboro Man](#), which was appropriated from magazine ads, as well as Cindy Sherman's self-portrait in [Untitled Film Still #56](#) (1980), which shows the artist as a beautiful blonde losing herself in her own mirrored reflection. The artists represented in both Bateman's and the Joker's worlds share a similar critique of artifice. Historically, Bacon's *Figure with Meat* is said to be a parody of the [Pope Innocent X](#) (1656)

have the wrong idea about this guy, Bacon suggests.

If Bacon's paintings teach us anything, it's that madness is always at hand, no matter how average the appearance. In Phoenix's portrayal, the downplay of the Joker's aesthetic brand of evil makes it all more insidious, more banal with the aesthetics of horror waiting to reveal themselves. Don't get the wrong idea about this normie.



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