

US painter Dylan Solomon Kraus' third solo show 'Holy Unrest' opened on April 1st at Peres Projects, Milan. We talk about what inspires him as an artist. Turns out, it's everything.

“‘Holy Unrest’ is that unrest inside of you that drives you towards the right path” explains artist Dylan Solomon Kraus. “Do you feel uncomfortable here? You should. Something’s not right. That’s holy unrest.”

Kraus is an intriguing character with an expansive curiosity and an appetite for mythology and symbolism. He has come through a history of drug addiction and, as a side hustle, works as a stick and poke tattoo artist in New York. As with much of his work, in ‘Holy Unrest’, Kraus is thematically drawn to nature and paints using a restricted, largely blue, colour palette. The forms of nature are for Dylan a language in which to express the human condition. I meet the artist in a crowded cafe above a bookshop in Soho, London.

“Because of his clubfoot, his mom kicks him out of heaven.” Dylan’s eyes are ablaze as he weaves another ancient tale into the fabric of our present. He tells me of the Greek god of invention and technology, Hephaestus. Dylan calls him “the first imperfect god” on account of his deformity. “So, he’s kicked out of heaven” Dylan continues “and lands in the bowels of earth. He learns to become a blacksmith. Eventually, he finds out about his mom’s rejection of him and seeks revenge. He makes her this beautiful golden throne and sends it to her in heaven. The moment she sits on it” – Dylan’s excitement is palpable – “she becomes totally paralysed.” When the Gods demand from Hephaestus his mothers freedom, he famously says, “I have no Mother.” Dylan sees the imperfect God’s revenge as reminiscent of the pernicious influence of technology. “This is the story of technology. Technology speaks to us as Hephaestus speaks to the Gods, and says ‘you created me but I have no allegiance to you! I’ll go my own way.’” Dylan is passionate about the power of universal stories, “every story of our time has been told better before us.” As the trance of social media technologies sedate us into a helpless sleep paralysis, the stories and symbols of art give us a space to wake up.

PERES PROJECTS

Kraus hands me a red shopping bag: “keep this next to you by the way,” adding with that certainty that only comes with experience, “I’ll forget it otherwise.” As I fall deeper into Kraus’ world, I begin to understand why he might forget a bag. Dylan’s mind is alive with a million stories. He is not entirely in the present moment. Or better put, for him the present moment extends out far before and beyond us. His time travelling is supplemented by fables and archetypes that stretch over the entirety of humanity’s existence and reveal to us the universality of the human experience.



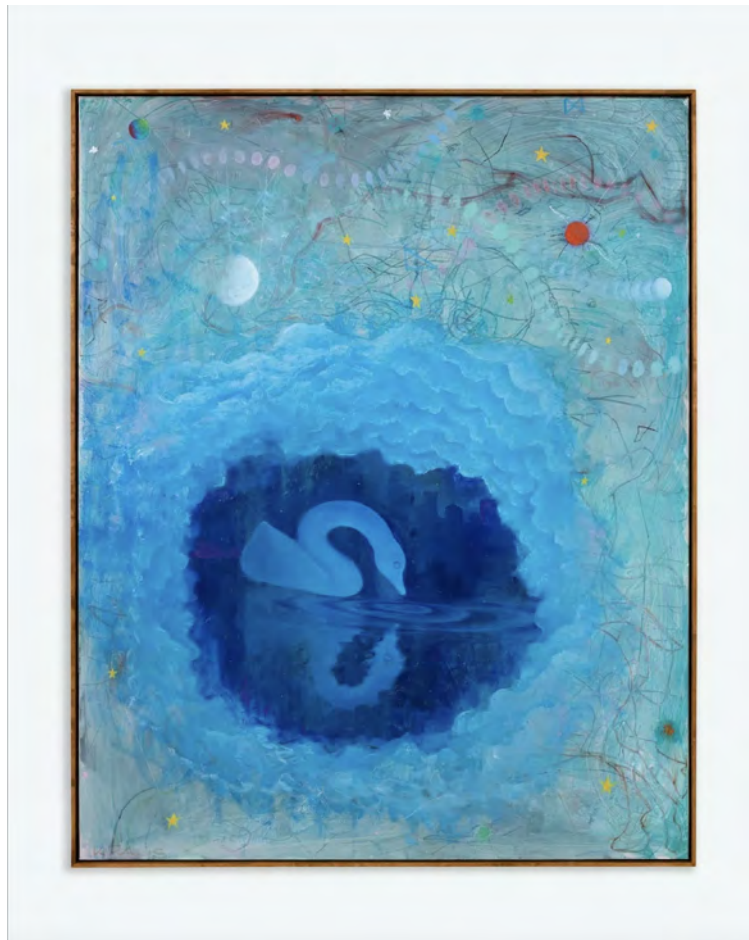
He shows me an image of one of his paintings. In the centre a swan arches its long neck to gaze at its reflection in the water below, “the constellation of the swan, Cygnus, is known as the traveller between water and air.” His painting reminds me of pastoral folk art, but Dylan’s swan occupies a more cavernous and surreal world. At the outer edges of the painting we find an abstract, geometric solar system, reminiscent of Kandinsky or Miro. A moon haunts the teal blue cosmos. There is a sense of timelessness here. Currently on show in ‘Holy Unrest’, this is a painting that poses deep philosophical questions. “This,” Dylan points to the swan cave, “is our tiny world of reality and all of this,” he gestures to the skyscape, “is outside, is the world of ideas and movement.” The painting is named ‘A Fearless Self-Examination.’ “I want to show the multi levels of dimensions” Dylan enthuses. “This is the ether sphere,” he points to the cloud-like structure that surrounds the swan’s indigo sanctuary, “the fog that separates us.” He goes on, “in sleep, we go outside. When we wake we are separated by the fog. That’s why when we wake, we struggle to remember what we’ve seen.”

The dreams in ‘Holy Unrest’ can become catastrophic. ‘Flood’ depicts a drowned city. A crescent moon illuminates sunken skyscrapers. A mass of dark colour starts to saturate the early dawn sky. The sun will rise on nothing today, it appears. ‘Flood’ is in part a climate breakdown fantasy, although Dylan explains that it is more about the feeling of fear. “It represents the end. It’s symbolic. Seeing my home and my life neutralised – it’s terrifying. The city I love, its community, my friends and loved ones. I’m worried about people and human rights,

PERES PROJECTS

about the overwhelming presence of technology. If you cut people off from nature then who are we?"

Dylan is passionate and dogmatic but there remains something refreshingly non-judgemental about him. This, in part, comes from a deep understanding that the human experience never changes. Dylan describes how inspired he felt by 'Cave of Forgotten Dreams', the Werner Herzog documentary on the Chauvet Cave in France. The film explores the oldest figurative paintings ever discovered- some 36,000 years old. "It's just so profound. I immediately thought, who did that painting? I feel so connected to you. This act of creation and the use of pictures and symbolism." Kraus imagines the first prehistoric art exhibition. "You can imagine them bringing someone into the cave and that person seeing it for the first time. The lights flickering and their awe at the sight of it. I love that. I feel deeply humanised and connected. Experiences like that are so universal."



The beauty in Kraus' work lies in its endless universality. Through symbolism, the hidden depths of his paintings remain universally understandable. Minimalistic, monochrome depictions on closer inspection give-way to layers of hidden meaning. Scrawled messages and symbolic imagery that allude to mysticism and the occult. Much like an ancient myth or fairytale, Kraus' work merges the mysterious and the familiar, ingeniously working its way into the viewer's unconscious. "I try to make sure that the conceptual aspects of my paintings are written in a universal language. If I show you a picture of a bird, you know what I'm talking about."

Dylan is obsessed with birds. Not just for their symbolism but also their geometry. "I love geometry, artists like Da Vinci and Franz Marc. I take a lot from Marc's paintings of animals, his use of colour. I am always looking for shapes that I like in the world. Birds have such a beautiful, aerodynamic shape." Geometry gives Dylan a way of understanding human beings and the universe as the same thing. He can see all aspects of existence reflected in each other and explores this through his work. He explains in earnest, "everything is a representation of the creator and the self. The human being as the microcosm of the macrocosm. I use planets, animals, time and

PERES PROJECTS

hieroglyphic imagery to talk about the inner world.”

Dylan spent a lot of his childhood outdoors. Born 1987 in Ohio, at ten he moved to the lush city of Pittsburgh. Situated between two rivers, he describes it as, “the sort of country.” Now he lives in New York. “I think there are only a couple of bird species that have survived there. Starlings, pigeons and sparrows. New York is totally deprived of nature, but I wanted to be around my peers and people who inspire me.” He went to a radical art school where every student received a full scholarship and the entrance exam consisted of five riddles. “Cooper Union was so loose and free. I couldn’t have gotten in anywhere else with my grades. It was so helpful having good teachers who opened doors and put your work in the context of art history.”



While at Cooper Union, Kraus struggled with drug addiction. He took time off university to go to rehab in Florida. Much like Hephaestus banished from heaven, Dylan used his time to forge a new profession. He began to do stick-and-poke tattoos on his fellow patients. When he moved back to NYC he became a tattoo artist. To ink shapes on the human form gave Kraus a space to meditate on life’s geometry.

Now, as a painter, Kraus’ work dwells on the act of observation, the intimacy between seer and seen. “When a bird lands in front of you and you look into its eye,” Kraus says in a heartfelt tone, “you’re looking into something that’s connected to the whole universe. When you have an intimate experience with nature, you eat a piece of eternity.” His art reminds us of something we need to remember. “I want to give people a little space to contemplate, a little peace, a reminder of what is above and below. Almost all my paintings have the moon and stars to give us context.” The images are a kind of introspection expressed through nature, a search inside to find a way to change the world.

The works on show in ‘Holy Unrest’ have an undeniably charming aesthetic. Kraus wants his paintings to be welcoming but, over time, become part of a more radical message. “Like how a fairytale or a meme can bring down a kingdom. It takes a while to get to that point. I just hope I can make art long enough for my body of work to communicate that message clearly.”

PERES PROJECTS

Kraus imagines a future where he can bring his creativity into further public spaces. “I would love to work beyond painting, in social design or urban planning.” He laments a time when art was more present in our everyday reality. “We need to bring creativity back into these realms. I love looking at the older architecture in Europe and thinking about what principles they were working out of and expressing. Art used to be everywhere; in your spoon, on your railings.” Kraus envisions a world where technology unites rather than alienates us, “imagine if someone creative designed instagram. It could be so much better than this 1-dimensional endless shit stream. We need to remember our power. The power that comes through our relation to each other.”



We wander outside of the cafe. “What the hell is that out there? A turkey!?” Dylan points out the obese pigeon across the road from us, shocked at its size and shape. He reflects, “the bird is a powerful archetype. They see things from above and have this freedom.” Kraus finds within nature the non-human symbols of myth that have a universal resonance. “Birds never fully incarnated on earth.” We joke about starting a movement dedicated to keeping birds in the sky, so as they don’t lose their power. “Wow, that reminds me of a story about China,” Dylan recalls. “Chairman Mao became sick of all the sparrows. Said they were eating too much grain and slowing economic growth.” In 1958, Mao launched a campaign to eradicate all sparrows, part of an effort to remove all pests from the country. He ordered birds be kept in the air using drums and gunfire and tearing down their nests. “They made people shoot at the birds and found ways to make sure they could never land. Eventually the birds all died of exhaustion. But then the bugs took over and ate everything! The birds were the only thing stopping them.” What followed was one of the biggest famines in history. Locust populations grew rapidly and began consuming almost everything in their path. “Nature doesn’t sleep,” says Dylan, “there is always something there to take the next step. To pick up the slack.” Dylan, half frozen, stares at the large pigeon, and mutters, “we’ll lose all the beautiful things like tigers and birds and just be left with more cockroaches.”

A collection of works that Kraus painted over the winter of 2021 in Berlin, ‘Holy Unrest’ is open until April 29th at contemporary art gallery, Peres Projects.