

Paul Hoyer

CHICAGO WORKS

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FOREVER, 2015. Acrylic on silk taffeta; 37 x 48 in. Collection of Meredith Darrow. Photo: Robert Heishman, courtesy of the artist and Chapter NY.

A WALKWAY FROM THE BODY TO THE SKY

Omar Kholeif



I see a series of flowers: Are they in bloom? Black holes, portals into an abyss, look like bludgeoned veins and wounds that will never heal. An object of beauty is being devoured by some form of decay. This describes my first encounter with Paul Hoyer's work, a 2015 painting titled *Four Suns*—its title boasting a sort of optimism that contradicts the violence inherent to its image. The material shimmered before me. Was it silk or a cheap textile such as lamé, a material found in fabric stores and stitched together to make outfits for drag queens performing in North America's queer nightclubs?

As I started to dig deeper into Hoyer's work, I began to see how the translucent surfaces acted as a metaphor for the body—a body in constant flux, negotiating its place in the world. These materials flow into a body of work that are accompanied by sky-like canvases in the style of the late artist Paul Thek, boasting slogans that range from the sublime to the ridiculous, echoing a legacy of the literary uncanny: "I am the sky," "time isn't real," "every day is Halloween." These innocent phrases are etched into sumptuous backdrops, suggesting the impossibility of the body's ascension to a state of euphoria and ecstasy—a world of grand delusion.



When I spoke with Hoyer, he explained that many of his works are influenced as much by queer subculture as they are by the history of Western painting, from the Renaissance to the present. What mesmerized me were the ways in which every painting sought to create spaces of encounter that inspire euphoria. Standing in front of one of his luminous

cowboy paintings in his Chicago studio, I was reminded of the poem *Intense Desire* (c. 1988) by the queer, English artist and poet David Robilliard. Published near the end of his life, it goes, simply:

*The thing that thrilled them
Was the thing that killed them.*

Robilliard died of HIV-related causes in 1988. His work, intentionally or not, was an attempt to understand his own queerness, something that one gleans from his poems and paintings, which echo a deeply discomfiting sense of the artist's self.

Hoyer's paintings likewise suggest a negotiation with his own body. In numerous paintings, skeletal figures act as stand-ins for the artist, recreating a youth lived in the Chicago suburbs. This was a time fretfully spent trying to occupy his time, while attempting to comprehend the visual culture emerging in the 1990s, a culture that intimated the reclamation of queer experience.



Hoyer has transformed this visual cultural into a domain that is filled with the double bind of human experience, with swirls that evoke Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970), forms that merge painter El Greco's skulls with the experience of contemporary clubs, and endless skies that offer a buoyant space free of thinking. It is an honor to have worked with Erin Toale, former Curatorial Assistant, to organize Hoyer's first solo museum exhibition, which erupts as though a dream, capturing the body in its wondrous phenomenology. It is a walkway from the body to the sky.

The Future, 2016. Oil on canvas; 30 x 40 in. Collection of Sean Patrick Murphy. Photo: Jeff McLane, courtesy of the artist and Night Gallery.

Time Isn't Real, 2017. Acrylic on canvas; 36 x 60 in. Courtesy of Chapter-NY. Photo: Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago.

I Am the Sky (Version 1: BORN), 2016. Acrylic and charcoal on canvas; 21 x 25 in. Collection of Meredith Darrow. Photo: Robert Heishman, courtesy of the artist and Night Gallery.

THE BLOOM OF THE PRESENT MOMENT

ERIN TOALE

Chicago Works: Paul Hoyer invites viewers to participate in a radical ritual of awareness, immersing them in a phantasmagoria of elaborately adorned sculptures, ethereal paintings, and a soothing soundtrack. Hoyer (American, b. 1982) speaks of these fantastical realms as focal points for a pop, pseudo-spiritual meditation practice—playful, yet touching on profound, existential themes. He wants the work to "free the viewer's brain from lived reality" and "allow people to imagine what it would be like to experience relief from their physical bodies." To this end, Hoyer has installed works in two rooms that promote wonder and mindfulness, seducing us into looking up from the screens that we stare at all day long.

The artist's first museum solo exhibition reveals a range of high and low inspirations. Club culture and art history merge, manifesting in a confluence of flamboyant nightclub aesthetics and numerous references to the artists who have influenced him, painters Claude Monet and El Greco foremost. The works also address identity politics, and oblique, queer intonations permeate the exhibition. Hoyer describes his practice as queer because it presents an alternative to canonical art history. He approaches his studio practice as an analog for other systems of belief in need of interrogation, including religion, politics, spirituality, partying, and drugs: "My paintings are fantasies—that's what makes them queer."



Skeleton in the Woods (Huffing), 2017. Oil and acrylic on polyester; 55 x 70 in. Courtesy of Night Gallery. Photo: Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago.

Hoyer asks viewers to be present in the exhibition and slow down in the sanctuary he has created—to practice mindfulness, an exercise of paying attention to one's life in a systematic, rigorous way. This skill requires practice and discipline, and one typical way it is developed is through an extended externalized focus on an object or idea. Jon Kabat-Zinn, author of *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*, has written extensively about increasing one's concentration or "one-pointedness" (samadhi in Sanskrit). He writes, "You can think of concentration as the capacity of the mind to sustain an unwavering attention on one object of observation."¹ Kabat-Zinn's medical practice is rooted in the scientific application of Buddhist mindfulness principles, creating methodologies for people who are interested in moving out of the "doing" mode all of the time to a "being" mode—what transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau called "the bloom of

¹ Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life* (New York: Hyperion, 1994): 72.

the present moment.”² Heyer strives to create environments filled with objects like the text-based sky paintings that trigger this state of euphoric, transcendent observation.

Visually joyful, celebratory, and generous, Heyer’s paintings are unabashed aesthetic experiments, exercises in formalism, and ultimately conceptual prompts, presented without polemic or value judgement; he is not advocating for any specific ideology. The two-dimensional works fall into three camps: landscapes that include people or simulacra, loosely rendered floral motifs, and abstractions with whimsical texts that evoke a childlike innocence.

In his early work, the artist’s subjects assume the form of specters, cowboys, aliens, or skeletons. The latter subjects, everyman skeletons living mundane lives, are featured in macabre yet comical portraits. In *Skeleton in the Woods (Huffing)*, a young Heyer is endearingly rendered as a bony figure who lounges on a washy background and holds a tube—of glue or perhaps paint—up to his nasal orifice. Five orbs, abyss-like in their abstraction, float around his reclining figure, signifying the holes that he is burning in his brain. According to Heyer, he paints skeletons in lieu of people because he finds them humorous, charismatic, and non-threatening. In an age when social media and advertisements broadcast an unrelenting slideshow of seemingly perfect, bare-skinned bodies, there is something refreshingly relatable about carcasses kissing, doing drugs, getting drunk, and awkwardly standing around at parties. These entities are playful reminders of our mortality and the universality of lived experience.



Claude Monet, *The Water Lilies: Green Reflections*, c. 1915–26. Oil on canvas; 78 ¾ x 334 ¾ in. Musée de L’Orangerie.

Heyer locates his fascination with painting floral motifs and nature in an obsession that started when he was a “weird nature boy” growing up in the southern suburbs of Chicago. He reminisces about his rebellious teenage years spent exploring the Spirit Trail Park, smoking cigarettes and sniffing glue among the Illinois wildflowers. A work like *Skeleton in the Woods (Huffing)*, Heyer states, “Invites the viewer to enter my memory of my childhood refuge—where I went to escape arguments at home, where I foraged for wild plants, where I tried smoking and drugs, where I saw owls eating and beavers building dams, where I saw terrifying people, heard screaming, and [encountered] hooded figures.” Recently, he has begun to represent a wider range of woodsy flora and fauna, citing influences such as the French Impressionist and plein-air landscape painter Claude Monet. Heyer shares Monet’s fascination with light and painting the felt and seen world, bringing a contemporary spin to a traditional genre by painting hallucinogenic colors on paper-thin fabric, pulled taut over stretchers. (Even the skeleton of the painting is visible.) Despite the awe and hopefulness bursting forth from the bright, festive aesthetics of his works, some paintings feature gloomy, even morose, subjects: flowers droop and die, doomed star-crossed lovers anxiously embrace on bright blue grass under an incandescent pink sky, and clauses trail off and float away into the clouds. His work, Heyer admits, is a product of growing up different from other boys.

In the text-based works, meditative, psychedelic koans (paradoxical riddles akin to those Buddhists use to reach enlightenment) such as “every day is Halloween,” “I am the sky,” and “time isn’t real” prompt contemplation rather than incite controversy or promote dogma. These works reflect

2 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* (Dover Publications: Mineola, New York, reprinted with introduction; first published 1854 by Ticknor and Fields: Boston), 72. Citation refers to Dover edition.

Heyer’s interest in meme culture. (His Instagram account is a collage of in-progress studio shots and memes that he has either made or shared.) Memes—a term Richard Dawkins coined in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene* to explain the way cultural information spreads—are catchy, virally transmitted symbols of the zeitgeist and a kind of social currency. Heyer renders the perplexing aphorisms on psychedelic pink and purple skies with rust-colored clouds in a neat cursive that betrays a disciplined upbringing, if not Catholic schooling. The backgrounds of these works are inspired by the work of Paul Thek, while the texts embedded within them are reminiscent of the

Christopher Wool, *Apocalypse Now*, 1988. Enamel and flashe on aluminum; 84 x 72 in. © Christopher Wool; courtesy of the artist and Lühring Augustine, New York.



repurposed *Truisms* by feminist icon Jenny Holzer. The absurdity of the text also aligns Heyer with contemporaries such as Christopher Wool.

Sculpture is a newer facet of Heyer’s practice. Everyday household objects

such as brooms are made precious via elaborate adornment rituals in which Heyer burns, dips in resin, and embellishes the products, a process he describes as “dressing them in drag.” The anointed brooms are elevated to spiritual grails and playfully posited as “models of the universe.” Heyer also refers to this process as “stoning,” offering Biblical reverberations of atonement as well as a nod to the vernacular for getting high on drugs. The sculptures are both campy readymades and highbrow, finish-fetish objects. This absurdist repurposing of a mundane object is a direct reference to Surrealist painter René Magritte’s famous still life of a pipe, captioned “Ceci n’est pas une pipe.” The painting, titled *The Treachery of Images (This Is Not a Pipe)*, calls into question the straightforward correlation between language and meaning. Similarly, Heyer asks viewers to suspend their disbelief and allow their minds to wander to a place where the broom is, in fact, a model of the universe, the mutability of matter made manifest.



René Magritte, *La Trahison des images (Ceci n’est pas une pipe) [The Treachery of Images (This Is Not a Pipe)]*, 1929. Oil on canvas; Canvas: 23 ¾ x 31 ¾ x 1 in.; framed: 30 ¾ x 39 ¼ x 3 in. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Purchased with funds provided by the Mr. and Mrs. William Preston Harrison Collection (78.7). Digital Image © 2017 Museum Associates / LACMA. Licensed by Art Resource, NY.

In this exhibition, all of the distinct elements of Heyer’s practice collide in a dramatic, exciting—and in his own words—“little slice of scary heaven.” He seamlessly blends Irish Catholic rituals with drug and drag cultures in works that are influenced equally by canonical art history and Reddit. Surrealism and Impressionism coexist, spirituality and sexuality are intertwined, and spectrums collapse—evoking the words of lowbrow

filmmaker John Waters, with whom Heyer cites an affinity: "Contemporary art's job is to wreck what came before. Is there a better job description than that to aspire to? . . . Go out in the world and fuck it up beautifully."³

In the outer gallery, a constellation of brooms hangs in a circle. They have been charred to a matte black, festooned with pearlescent shells, and dipped in resin. Are they paintbrushes upended? Humble domestic objects repurposed and made absurd in the surrealist style? Or queer totems used in a glittery-witchy ritual or gothic circle-jerk? This curious mass forerounds the importance of play in Heyer's practice. Surrounding the assemblage are paintings that evoke both Impressionism and abstract expressionism. These atmospheric renderings of the daytime sky (references to *The Simpsons* or Monet?) are juxtaposed with the nocturnal darkness of the suspended sculpture—a model of the universe in totality. Says Heyer, "The sky is a painting the earth is making for us all of the time."

The inner gallery functions as a darkened dream space, where a hypnotic soundtrack lulls the viewer into a quiet state of contemplation. We leave the realm of reason. Here, large opalescent paintings depict existential tableaux and messianic prophecies. Metallic silk called lamé (a nod to drag culture) serves as the substrate of one painting; the translucent material is corporeal and euphoric. Are we Alice, down the rabbit hole? The paintings shift from abstraction to narrative symbolism as scenarios begin to emerge. Apples, perhaps referring to the Garden of Eden, float against a blue-black foundation. Has paradise already fallen? A cowboy drinks from a stream, backlit by a vessel of light. A tranquil forest scene includes animals at rest, an homage to Edward Hicks's *Peaceable Kingdom*. Hicks's series of sixty-two paintings illustrates a passage from the book of Isaiah (11:6): "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them." Is this theological prophecy a utopian rendering of the past or a sanguine visualization of the future? The viewer is encouraged to mediate and reflect. To retreat. A silver blanket (or a collapsed cloud?) adorns a large, low platform in the center of the room, forcing physical intimacy between viewers and the paintings. This grounded sculpture draws our attention downward, counteracting the levitating presence of the sculptures in the neighboring room. A square and a circle. Gravity and levity. Past, present, and future. Womb or tomb? Art, club, party, or church? Reality is an illusion. Time isn't real.



Edward Hicks, *Peaceable Kingdom*, c. 1834. Oil on canvas; overall: 29 ¾ x 35 ¼ in. National Gallery of Art, gift of Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch, 1980.62.15.



Paul Heyer (b. 1982) was born in Chicago, where he currently lives and works. In 2009, he received an MFA in painting from Columbia University. His recent exhibitions include solo shows at Night Gallery, Los Angeles (2013 and 2016), and Chapter NY, New York (2014 and 2017). He has also been included in exhibitions at Andrea Rosen Gallery (2016); Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago (2016); Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles (2016); Rodeo Gallery, London (2015); 356 Mission, Los Angeles (2015); and Rachel Uffner Gallery, New York (2012). His work has been profiled in prominent publications, including *The New York Times*, *Time Out New York*, *Artforum*, and *Flash Art*.

PAUL
HEYER

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