

Portrait Julien Ceccaldi

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Julien Ceccaldi's carnival of queer, libidinal comics feature heroes that, unlike the macho men of yore, exhibit some serious psychoanalytic honesty. Across lust-charged paintings, films, and graphic novels, he seems to ask: do we ever really know what we want?

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By
Geoffrey Mak



Courtesy: the artist; Lomex

Pompeii Bathhouse, 2017
Acrylic paint on plywood panels, 244 x 305 cm

Boy Crazy

The aesthetic life is marked by the pursuit of complicated pleasures. In middle school, having turned down everything American media had to offer, I took to downloading 26-episode anime series with a DSL connection just strong enough to bootleg AVIs off KaZaA. There was the anime, and then there were the people devoted to the anime: *otaku*, whom I met on online forums and IRC chatrooms. *Otaku* dismissed the English-dubbed anime on Adult Swim in favour of subtitled downloads in the original Japanese, and so did I. Unlike anything on American television, anime captured my attention by addressing me as the man-child I was: a pubescent teen captivated by apocalyptic mecha combat and high school *shoujo* romcom, yet brimming with a budding and reckless sexuality that persisted beyond my ability to comprehend it.

While American culture wars were always erupting over whether, say, a Teletubby with a triangle symbol was secretly gay, anime universes offered a kind of queer sociality that was breezy and candid, unlike anything I had thus far experienced. On screen, men with pointed chins flirted with each other casually and assertively, copping feels in the sauna or collapsing into projectile nosebleeds. Actual gay porn terrified me at that age, yet I found my way to a subculture of gay *bentai* that circulated

in internet backchannels – explicit videos and comics whose romantic narratives sometimes felt too touching to exactly be vulgar.

Similarly, the Canadian painter Julien Ceccaldi – born in 1987, a year before me – discovered anime as a youngster during the 1990s, the era when Japanese anime first began to enjoy mainstream US distribution. A sort of golden age, this period saw now-classics like *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995–96) and *Cowboy Bebop* (1998), or the *shoujo* mega-hit *Sailor Moon* (1992–97), which made an early and lasting impression on Ceccaldi. During his teenage years, he drew fanart and shared it online on the image-sharing platform Paintchat. There, he fell in with a network of other fanartists expressing their devotion, simultaneously pervy and geeky, through reciprocal production. From this community, Ceccaldi honed the style for which his work today is so immediately recognised. Then and now, Ceccaldi is primarily interested in articulating queer desire within the visual vernacular and narrative structure of anime and manga. When, in his teens, he began by drawing slim women, the *shoujo* protagonists he tended to identify with, other users took him for straight. So he switched to drawing women with bulging muscles, a style that has carried over to his work today.

Just like fairy tales
that are passed down as bedtime stories,
Ceccaldi's paintings arrive with a promise
and a warning:



Courtesy: the artist; Gaga Mexico City

Crawling Over A Guy, 2019
Oil on canvas, 180 x 140 x 4 cm

that dreams can and do come true,
but you will encounter threats
and tricksters along the way.



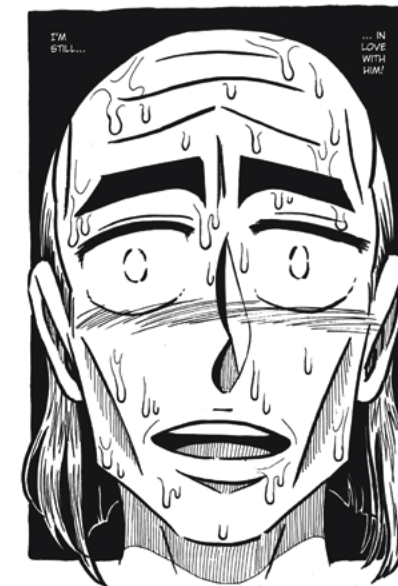
The gay men in Ceccaldi's oeuvre are typically one of two extremes: muscle queens with close cropped hair, or skinny, balding men with shoulder-length manes. This binary is on display in the painting *Pompeii Bathhouse* (2017), which depicts skinny, leering creepers furtively hiding behind columns as they gawk at towering hunks preening obliviously about the pool. The former exhibit a greenish, cadaver-like pallor as they pine after the lively, sun-like skin of the latter demigods. This tension between the desiring subject (with

whom the viewer is invited to identify) and the object of their desire runs through much of Ceccaldi's variegated work – spanning painting, sculpture, video, and graphic novel – united by a singular organising passion that lifts it from merely representing an identity position or illustrating the presuppositions of a social group.

In *Human Furniture* (2018), a graphic short story that Ceccaldi also adapted into a video on YouTube, one of these balding, stick-thin men is given a character: Francis. After a long trip “abroad” visiting



Human Furniture, 2017, graphic novel



his parents, “figuring stuff out”, he returns to an unnamed American city, and celebrates his return with his friend Caroline. When they arrive at a club, they have trouble at the door – they’re not on the list – and when Caroline tries to talk their way in, a voice from inside says, “Let them in, they’re my friends, hehe!” The man is Simon, a spritzzy, beefy ‘roid queen whose “abs you can see through his shirt”. He is the object of Francis’s undying infatuation. Years ago, Francis gave him a hand job in a hot tub, but their romance “fizzled overnight”. Present day, Simon considers Francis a good friend – “You’re so special to me!” he professes – but Francis is desperate in the throes of unrequited eros.

From the club, Francis and his group of friends go over to Simon’s apartment for afters. One thing leads to another, and Francis wakes in the afternoon to find Simon in bed with Caroline. Torn with jealousy, Francis flees the scene and heads to a gay bathhouse. After undressing, he enters the darkroom and is immediately approached by anonymous men who remove his towel. As they envelop him, Francis cries, “They’re eating me up!” “Now tell me you love me”, one partner says in the dark while Francis rides him like a piece of “living furniture”. “But I’m in love with Simon!” cries Francis. “C’mon, say it. Say it now”, the stranger persists. Then Francis says, “I love you! I love you!” Jizz. “Can I have more?” he begs in the dark, and the men, snickering, fuck him, one after another. Afterwards, in the revels of joy, Francis skips out of the bathhouse, saying to himself, “Wow, I’m a slut! I can’t wait to tell Simon all about it.”

Can Francis’s pivot at the end of the narrative be considered a moment of change? His desire for Simon remains as unconsummated as ever, though its momentary displacement triggers a transformation from misery into ecstasy. Classified by Ceccaldi as a short story, *Human Furniture* follows the traditional literary structure, exemplified by James Joyce’s *Dubliners* (1914), which features a slice of a protagonist’s life in a predicament that brings forth a climactic epiphany: a discovery, or moment of reflection, that hints at change without necessarily delivering one.

In the Aristotelean model, a story requires a protagonist who overcomes obstacles to satisfy his desire. These frustrated wants, successful or not, are what animate the plot. By this brief outline, *Human Furniture* meets the bare minimum requirement of what would be considered a story, even if its characters are absent of the psychological interiority most strongly associated with the depictive realist tradition. Francis and Simon are stripped to the very basics of what’s demanded for a character to illusorily “come to life” on the page or screen: a hint of backstory, physical characteristics that approximate age, and brief details that answer the who-what-why-where-when. To call them “shallow” would be to miss the point, even if they may seem one-track minded. (For instance, this is not a satire about the vacuity of sexual promiscuity rampant in cosmopolitan gay life.) Instead, characterisation is abstracted, not unlike the way visual detail and nuance is reduced to hard, spare lines. Rather than resurrect a thoroughly discredited brand of literary realism to depict scenes of bourgeois leisure and debauchery,



Sinking Swimmer, 2017
Acrylic paint on polyester film and board, 66 x 51 cm

Courtesy: the artist; Lomex



Guest Coming Over, 2019
Oil on canvas, 180 x 140 x 4 cm



Out the Window Towards the Bavarian Castle
2019, oil on canvas, 180 x 140 x 4 cm

Ceccaldi stages an act of heroism within a space of
(artificial, and therefore controlled)
moral anarchy.



Red Light District, 2019
Oil on canvas, 180 x 140 x 4 cm



Poppy Flower Field, 2019
Oil on canvas, 180 x 140 x 4 cm

Courtesy: the artist; Gaga Mexico City

Ceccaldi finds recourse to the manga short story to elaborate a queer psychosexual subject.

Core to Francis' persona is his own drenching anxiety about his unrequited desire. In an exchange with Simon at the club, Francis cries, "I can't stand how you don't want me! Could I be more offputting?" Simon replies, "Listen, it might be too painful to hear, but the reason I can't be with you is –" but Francis interrupts, "Shut up! I don't want to know ..."

But why *doesn't* he want to know? Perhaps what is more painful to him isn't a potential insult – e.g. "you're unattractive" – but a definitive rejection that would necessarily foreclose desire, itself an exquisite pleasure whose gratification requires an iota of possibility to move the story forward. Imagine if the answer was as simple as "you're not my type" – something so inflexible and irrational that it can't be negotiated with, giving Francis no choice but to move on. But of course, Francis doesn't want to move on. Like Jacques Lacan's classification of the obsessive neurotic, Francis is the type to either fall in love with someone completely unattainable or set absurdly high standards that would be impossible for a potential lover to satisfy. Though he isn't self-aware in this regard, he is often ashamed or disgusted by the idea of his desire's satisfaction. One might recall the aphorism from Jenny Holzer's 1985 Times Square billboard: PROTECT ME FROM WHAT I WANT.

Of course, Francis' anxiety about whether he desires Simon – his overwhelming compulsion towards Simon, in dialectic with his shame and torment at wanting him – is both what makes his desire move and activates the story's plot, propelling Francis to his bathhouse orgy, which brings about a kind of supreme joy. Here, desire – as the substance of narrative – is a tricky, elusive, slippery thing. In a way, Simon is a red herring, disguising the true cause of desire which is essentially unknowable: what Lacan calls *objet petit a*, an essentially ungraspable thing that cannot be assimilated in language or the imagination, but can be perceived only as a lost object at the very moment desire emerges. Francis perceives this occlusion when he utters the displaced "I love you" to the stranger who, when positioned in this structure of desire, is necessarily unseen. Even Francis' exclamation, "I'm a slut!" suggests that there has been a fundamental shift in his becoming. Before, he was a balding incel. Now he's a slut!

But is he a hero? In nineteenth century history painting, the hero was often depicted at a decisive moment, like Caesar crossing the Rubicon. French Impressionism then rebelled by discarding these conventions to depict scenes of bourgeois quotidian life. To reinvigorate heroism in painting today – a task that can only be absurd and apolitical – one might seek a genre as ridiculous as pornographic romantic comedy. By Lacan's often-quoted dictum – "The only thing of which we can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one's desires" – Francis, brimming with uncontested and obscene vitality, emerges as a heroic figure in Ceccaldi's amoral universe. Francis, who is Ceccaldi's most recurring character, frequently appears in paintings at various stages of the hero's journey. In *Out the Window Towards the Bavarian Castle* (2019), Francis is naked and levitating in mid-air facing a gothic castle – a nod to the Grimm-style German tales of dreams-come-true romance. Here, fantasy incites movement, stirs life into action. To change one's existence and the conditions on which one is interdependent, there needs to be a fantasy of some other way to live, and this fantasy is founded in libidinal drives. Yet the task of following fantasy is anything but straightforward. Desire has its dangers, Ceccaldi warns us, by referencing a folkloric tradition that often pairs saccharine romance with a proximity to a shadowy, grotesque threat represented by goblins and witches. Another painting, *Guest Coming Over* (2019), depicts a dreamlike sequence in which a close-up of Francis applying lipstick fills the foreground while a muscled, faceless figure, shirtless in shorts – a Simon-type – looms backlit in the background like a goblin. This figure illustrates the problem of desire, why it sickens us and why we crave it. As a counterpoint, *Sinking Swimmer* (2017) shows Francis floating in a pool, eyes closed and in longing, illustrating exactly the feeling of revelling adrift in the pangs of lust.

Despite its jocular antics, Ceccaldi's work aims to teach. Adroitly anticipating the moral panic that has historically regarded sex with antagonism, Ceccaldi stages an act of heroism within a space of (artificial, and therefore controlled) moral anarchy. On a Tumblr post on his website, an anonymous user asks if he has a "message" behind his art, to which Ceccaldi responds, "Queer or otherwise, there is beauty and kindness within us, but also sickness and vanity. I like to depict characters who embody this range, and who are worthy of love despite their flaws." A platitude, it reads like something meant for children, and it is. Just like

Courtesy: the artist; Gaga Mexico City



Closet Under the Stairs, 2019
Found banister and acrylic paint on wall,
234.5 x 161 x 19 cm

fairy tales that are passed down as bedtime stories, his paintings arrive with a promise and a warning: that dreams can and do come true, they are worth pursuing, but you will encounter threats and tricksters along the way. Ceccaldi's paintings outline the stakes of the heroic act, which is either big or small, but is, by definition, arduous. This

JULIEN CECCALDI was born in 1987 in Montreal, Canada, and lives in New York. Solo exhibitions have taken place at Reena Spaulings Fine Art, House of Gaga, Los Angeles (2021); Jenny's, Los Angeles (2019); Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne (2018); and Lomex, New York (2017). He has recently participated in group exhibitions such as "Ritratto d'un capello inquietante", Galerie Buchholz, Cologne; "HOUSE OF GAGA. 20 Years Later. (A Sentimental Education)", Air de Paris, Paris; "Painting Now and Forever 3", Greene Naftali, New York; and "The Present in Drag", 9th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, Berlin.

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Arachné Hugging Pillow, 2019
Acrylic paint on punching bag and chains,
97 x 36 Ø cm

articulation is unusual, particularly in times that are rightfully sceptical of overt displays of heroism, cults of personality, and brute forces of will. And so new kinds of heroism must be imagined, even if they are hedged to fail like so many predecessors. That's where the comedy comes in: it helps us square with disappointment.