

T O T A H

ALEX SEWELL

Dad?

February 8th - March 25th, 2023

TOTAH presents *Dad?*, an exhibition of paintings by Alex Sewell. *Dad?* opens February 8th, 2023. This is Sewell's third solo exhibition with the gallery.

In the context of Alex Sewell's recent body of work, autobiography and formal innovation are brought into graceful confluence. With some paintings dating from the pandemic, and others reckoning with the joys and responsibilities of fatherhood, Sewell continues to recast objects earmarked by desuetude or nostalgia, reframing them as spectral talismans.

A sense of rejuvenated wonder runs across Sewell's canvases. In works like *If you have ghosts, you have everything* what stands out is less the camping scene depicted than the eerie mode of rendering paint as if it were construction paper. Implications of isolation, and the fragility of personal identity, are literalized in the painting via its patchwork surface. While seemingly pieced together after the manner of collage, *If you have ghosts, you have everything* spells out an enigmatic tale all the more elusive for depicting undomesticated objects in ritualistic detail.

Sewell's use of realism functions more like a hallucination than a waking dream. A key technique in his painterly arsenal is the depiction of a frame within a frame, which weighs down the viewer's gaze with the compunction of a peeping voyeur. In line with the more autobiographical tendencies of his current body of work, the frames Sewell paints are often actual picture frames, windows, TV screens. In *Neighbors*, for example, the motif of a window lends the painting a found quality, as though the cartoonishly destructive doodles situated in the painting were less blueprints than actual weapons. The fact that the window peers out into a landscape empty except for darkened greenery further exemplifies the way in which Sewell balances fictive leaps of imagination with studious perception, autobiography with fantasy.

The question of where the miraculous resides in the everyday haunts Sewell's paintings, like a kind of Transcendentalist keepsake. In this way, *Dad?* invokes less the status of parentage, and opts to recontextualize questions of authorship. His paintings environ viewers in the shock of epiphanic awareness, where the imagination has suddenly overwhelmed the real. In each object Sewell depicts, the light of conventional wisdom is set on display, then devoured by a riot of girandoles eating into the atmosphere of tradition. What's born of this is a gentle schizophrenia, where objects are less dubious than insightful, and where herniations of nostalgia rupture the bedrock of normalcy with detonations of ghostly imagery.

Alex Sewell (born 1989, Salem MA) lives and works in New York. Sewell completed his BFA at MassArt in Boston, Massachusetts, and joined the studios of artists Jeff Koons and Bjarne Melgaard as an assistant sculptor/painter. Sewell's work is characterized by his use of symbols borrowed from popular, consumer and gaming cultures and his mastery of oil technique. His ability to mimic pixel with oil, or wood grain with fabric weave, sets the stage for a switch between real, imaginative, and digital representations. Sewell has had his work featured alongside Jim Dine's poetry at Hauser & Wirth, NY. He has exhibited at Blake & Vargas, Berlin, Big Pictures Los Angeles, CA, the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, MA, the Danforth Museum, MA, the Monmouth Museum, NJ, Freight + Volume, Five Myles, and Spring/Break, New York. His work has been reviewed in Artforum, Hyperallergic, and Artnet, and can be found in the permanent collections of Enterprise Bank, Lowell, MA and Massachusetts College of Art and Design, Boston, MA, and the National Gallery of Bermuda, among others.

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