

GARAGE

Gus Van Sant's Hollywood Boulevard

by Nadja Sayej
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Gus Van Sant, Detail from *Untitled (Hollywood 12)*, 2018-2019, Watercolor on linen © Gus Van Sant; Courtesy the artist and Vito Schnabel Projects

In a new show at Vito Schnabel Gallery, the filmmaker, now painter, goes deep on Los Angeles' storied thoroughfare.

We know Gus Van Sant as the filmmaker behind some of the most classic 1990s films, like *Drugstore Cowboy*, and *My Own Private Idaho*, which helped define New Queer Cinema. Now, the Portland star (who has since relocated to Los Angeles), is opening a solo show of paintings at Vito Schnabel Gallery, his first in New York. *Hollywood Boulevard* features a series of watercolors on linen which brings together pale pastels, nudes, and lush landscapes, which are all met with a touch of the surreal.

Focused squarely on the oddities of—appropriately—Hollywood Boulevard, where you can find the Walk of Fame, Madame Tussaud's wax museum, and a Buffalo Wild Wings. In other words, pure schlock. Of course, it wasn't always that way. Back in the 1970s, after Van Sant graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design, he moved to Hollywood for

work. In many ways, he's painting the spirit of L.A., combining the good, the bad and, always, the ugly. His paintings exist in a world where Batman buskers, and nudes populate the sky above the Griffith Observatory, as well as the top of car hoods, like so many Whitesnake videos. GARAGE spoke to Van Sant about these new paintings, Bugs Bunny, Cecil B. DeMille, and why Hollywood's main drag is not unlike Times Square.

Everyone knows you as a filmmaker, but you started out as a painter at art school?

In the early 1970s, I was studying art. It was right at the same moment that all the painters were coming back to school, the ones that graduated, with these horror stories about walking around New York with their slides. It was a different time, but even today, it's a big risk.

But you studied film, too?

I wanted to learn more about film because the other students



"Float," 2018-2019 Watercolor on linen © Gus Van Sant; Courtesy the artist and Vito Schnabel Projects



courtesy Nadja Sayej

had more experience, they were more developed. I thought a degree in film was valuable, so I just did film, then I went to Hollywood to get work. That was hard to get into, as well.

When you were painting at art school, were you doing watercolors like you did here?

I did watercolors, and if you saw them, you might see a connection. Before I started working on film, I painted landscapes where things were floating above them. I've used those images in my films, like in *My Own Private Idaho* there's a barn where you see it crashing, and in *Drugstore Cowboy*, you see a house and trees floating. They were coming from the paintings.

When you say floating things, I'm thinking of the paintings of Marc Chagall.

Oh yeah. These paintings here are Chagall-like.

You also have some superhero references in these paintings?

Oh, with Batman because they're mostly set on Hollywood Boulevard, so there's buskers dressed as Spiderman and Batman. You pose with them and they get money. Its from me walking down Hollywood Boulevard and seeing what was going on, painting from memory.

How do you view that street as a resident of L.A.?

When I first moved to L.A., I lived on Argyle, later I lived on Grace Avenue, both are close to Hollywood Boulevard. You'd go to Hollywood Boulevard for the post office, the bookstores, there was food, you didn't go there to shop but you'd go to a restaurant. But the restaurants were automats, there was Johnny's Steakhouse, where for \$2.89, you got a steak, a baked potato and a salad. You could live off these kinds of inexpensive restaurants. There were movie theaters in the 1970s running first-run movies. Now, they're all changed into different things, like t-shirt shops and churches. It's more disheveled than it was in the 1970s.

Have you ever shot on Hollywood Boulevard?

I shot a film called *Alice in Hollywood*, about a girl in Hollywood who lived near Hollywood Boulevard who tried to get work and met people on the street. It was shot on Hollywood Boulevard without any permits. I started writing about the street kids there, but gave up on it, then I brought it back as *My Own Private Idaho*. I moved away from Hollywood to Portland, there was a similar street scene in Portland on 3rd Avenue, and I refashioned the scripts—I wrote three different scripts—about street life in Portland. It wasn't until later that I went back to it.



"Untitled (Hollywood 10)," 2018-2019
Watercolor on linen © Gus Van Sant;
Courtesy the artist and Vito Schnabel



"Untitled (Hollywood 4)," 2018-2019
Watercolor on linen © Gus Van Sant;
Courtesy the artist and Vito Schnabel

How has Hollywood Boulevard changed?

I think the whole thing is connected, life in Hollywood and Hollywood Boulevard. That's where people end up when they first come, it's like Times Square. The locals find it humorous the tourists come to see the Hollywood Walk of Fame, or the walk of shame. Today, Times Square is pretty cleaned up, but Hollywood Boulevard has this rough edge. You see the tourists looking at shops that sell pot pipes and t-shirts and that's all it is these days, plus the walk of fame-shame. They did this Oscars statue at the end, near La Brea Avenue, where people usually give up and go to Universal Studios or Disneyland. I feel sorry for them. I think they're having a good time but from the outside, is this real Hollywood? For the people who move to Hollywood they end up on the boulevard too, even in the 1920s to 1940s, like Cecil B. DeMille, one of the Hollywood filmmakers who lived in Laurel Canyon. As Hollywood got bigger, he and his wife created safe havens for actors, so they wouldn't fall in with the wrong crowd, apartments so they weren't just roaming the streets of Hollywood. That still exists, today, people come to town to be in movies, there's a lot of motels and hotels, there's this rite of passage.

You've painted a lot of nudes with cars, right? I heard one was your muse.

There was a friend of mine who lived off Hollywood

Boulevard who was very well built. He was an inspiration to paint something that was modern Hollywood. His relationship to Hollywood Boulevard was familiar. He grew up in a tumultuous family, he was street wise. The street was just a goof, funny. His name is Jordan, so I'm imagining him on the streets of Hollywood. The other part is coming from doing nude drawing class, the Oscar is also a nude. You see it being sold in the shops, knockoffs of the Oscar.

Just to put it on your mantle, you know.

Yeah. There's also the vulnerability of people on the streets, people who have become street workers, they're not nude but sometimes they are. If there's a 25-year-old at Los Feliz and the street by the zoo, he'll just stand there at the intersection naked, or almost naked, just looking around. He's just come out of the bushes and he's defying everyone around him, like he's going to attack a car. Sometimes you see that on Hollywood Boulevard, someone who really lost it and they're taking their clothes off. That's part of a connection to the nudity. Imagine vulnerability and literally people who have lost it and needed to take their clothes off because their clothes were in the way.

That's what Hollywood does to you.

One writer sent me a video of a guy who was on top of a car ripping the windshield wipers off. Someone left a halfway

house and was in a psychotic state and those are things you sometimes see. Sometimes out of frustration people are in these states, maybe they weren't stable in the first place, were told you can become an actor, then there's the frustration of becoming an actor. Even an ordinary actor can find it frustrating to become what they want.

It's a really hard industry to make it.

Specifically acting. The actors are usually the well-built, good-looking ones.

Are the people in your paintings then actors?

I think it's all mixed together. They're trying to avoid being hit by cars and are flying in the air. They're dreamy. I've tried to work in subjects that are part dreamy, characters going into dreams, or using some kind of images that are dream-like.

From where you live in Los Feliz, you have a view of the Hollywood sign, right?

Yes, out my window is the Griffith Observatory, too, which has people hiking but it also has people living in the bushes, it also has people crouching, going to the bathroom. When I first started painting, I included the observatory, too. The Hollywood sign is there but I didn't paint it because it has been painted so often. Maybe one day, I'll paint it.