

## SLEEK

Gus Van Sant's poetic watercolours offer a haunting look at Los Angeles life

by Daisy Woodward  
September 17, 2019



*Untitled (Hollywood 1)*, 2018.  
© Gus Van Sant; Courtesy the artist and  
Vito Schnabel Projects

*We explore the celebrated filmmaker's debut solo exhibition in New York—a typically nuanced and atmospheric investigation into urban displacement*

Not everyone knows Gus Van Sant as a painter but the fêted American auteur and photographer has been dabbling in the medium since his childhood in Connecticut. He even undertook a dual major in painting and film at the Rhode Island School of Design in the 1970s, before dropping painting to focus purely on cinema. If you've watched his beloved 1997 drama *Good Will Hunting* then you've already seen one of his works: the brooding watercolour of a rowing boat at sea, propped on the office window sill of Robin Williams' Dr. Sean Maguire and dissected by Matt Damon's Will during the pair's first therapy session. (Van Sant gave the painting to Williams after filming wrapped, and it was sold through Sotheby's last year for \$90,000.)

After decades of painting sporadically, the 66-year-old polymath has devoted more time to the pursuit in recent years, showing his work around the globe at galleries including Le Case d'Arte in Milan, the Musée de l'Elysée in Lausanne and the Gagosian in Beverly Hills. Last week, meanwhile, saw the opening of Van Sant's very first New York solo exhibition at Vito Schnabel Projects in Greenwich Village. Titled *Recent Paintings, Hollywood Boulevard* and featuring a series of eight, seven-foot-tall watercolours on stretched linen, the show is centred around Los Angeles, where Van Sant first established a home in the 1970s and has lived, on and off, ever since.

The works offer a trippy, soft-hued look at LA life, as viewed through Van Sant's unique lens. Vito Schnabel—a gallerist and art dealer, as well as the son of another celebrated painter-cum-filmmaker, the American artist Julian Schnabel—aptly described it to *The New York Times*

GUS VAN SANT

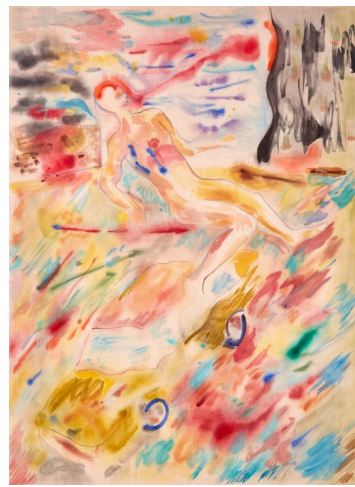


Untitled (Hollywood 7), 2019. © Gus Van Sant; Courtesy the artist and Vito Schnabel

as “a kind of crazy psychedelic walk through Gus’s time in California.” Nude male figures traverse the canvases: in one painting a figure hovers mysteriously above a car, as if levitating, while in another a giant protagonist looms over an oneiric rendering of the LA cityscape like a buff, hairless King Kong.

The effect is ethereal and enticing, enhanced by Van Sant’s loose, abstracted style and delicately rendered swathes of pastel, punctuated by sharper tones. Speaking to *SLEEK*, Schnabel says of the paintings, “I was drawn in by their dreamlike quality. There is something indescribable about the combination of Gus’ draftsmanship and the use of watercolours on linen. The paintings are beautiful and unusual.” Schnabel, who first met Van Sant through his father when he was just a teen, bumped into the director at a party and, after seeing some pictures of Van Sant’s new work, paid him a studio visit the very next day. Instantly moved by the watercolours, which he felt had an air of Chagall and Matisse, Schnabel promptly invited Van Sant to exhibit in his New York space.

But while the paintings are certainly aesthetically pleasing, they are also disconcerting: as the exhibition text reads, “roads, buildings, vehicles, and body parts dissolve into one another, yielding a persistent sense of displacement.” The plight of the outsider has long fascinated Van Sant, who has explored the theme with empathy and a coarse romanticism throughout his oeuvre. Think: *Drugstore Cowboy*’s gang of peripatetic drug addicts, robbing pharmacies across the Pacific Northwest; the young protagonists of *My Own Private Idaho*, down and out on the streets of Portland; the angst-ridden and introverted teen skater at the heart of his 2007 thriller, *Paranoid Park*.



Untitled (Hollywood 10), 2019. © Gus Van Sant; Courtesy the artist and Vito Schnabel

In Los Angeles today, homelessness is increasing at an alarming rate, and the paintings’ isolated figures appear to reflect that, while Van Sant also conveys the paradoxical glamour and sense of aspiration that the so-called City of Angels embodies. The artist has noted in various interviews that, during the painting process, he realised that his muscular males resembled the golden Oscar statuette, and it’s also tempting to interpret his inclusion of certain architectural landmarks within the pieces—like the Griffith Observatory, a star-gazing hotpot, or the iconic Capitol Records building, topped as it is by a light that spells out “Hollywood” in morse code—in this vein.

But nothing in the paintings is explicitly spelt out for us. As beguiling as they are perplexing, they are possessed of the same rugged poetry that defines Van Sant’s films—and represent another facet of the director’s singular, yet variously realised mode of expression. As one of the great experimental storytellers of our time, Van Sant has never been satisfied with repeating the same process again and again—after the commercial success of *Good Will Hunting*, for instance, he famously surprised audiences with a shot-by-shot remake of *Psycho*, with a far more niche appeal.

Similarly—as Schnabel tells us, when asked what he hopes viewers will take away from the show—Van Sant has other of styles of painting that he is yet to show, and has lately been exploring other media. “I hope visitors want to see more,” says Schnabel. “Gus has painted for over four decades and his work spans many different styles and many different types of materials. This exhibition explores just one avenue of his artistic practice, so I hope by introducing people to it through this body of work, we’ll draw them into a longer and broader conversation with his art generally.”



*Untitled (Hollywood 12)*, 2019. © Gus Van Sant; Courtesy the artist and Vito Schnabel



*Float*, 2019. © Gus Van Sant; Courtesy the artist and Vito Schnabel