



Preston Pavlis

Still ready to curse and rage

In four larger-than-life unstretched canvases and five miniature works, California-born, Edmonton-based painter Preston Pavlis introduces a cast of “inverted self-figurations,” from a bride to a football player. The title for his first solo exhibition—*Still ready to curse and rage*—borrows a line from Jay Wright’s poem “The Albuquerque Graveyard” (1976), in which Wright searches for his identity among past generations of African Americans at their graves. Inspired by this introspective methodology, Pavlis plays out internal conflicts through his alter egos. But, like the unsatisfied Wright, who drops flowers at his relatives’ gravesides in defeat, Pavlis offers no resolution. The power lies instead in an unresolved tension, in which Pavlis’s characters reveal themselves in vulnerable moments of self-reflection while resisting full legibility. With simmering energy that isn’t quite rage, body language, equivocal in what it communicates, shrouds the characters’ inner thoughts. This phenomenon appears in *Inner life* (2021), wherein a seated man, topless and in spiritual contemplation, emerges from a dark ground of hollyhocks. As a voyeur intruding on the garden scene, one wonders, are the arms propped behind his head portraying assertive dominance or diffident self-cradling? The pose is reproduced on a flower-petal bed in *Second sight* (2021)—albeit shrunk, rotated, and cropped at the waist. Torsos and faces spanning the smaller paintings elude the viewer’s control through their fragmentation. By keeping their distance, Pavlis’s glassy-eyed characters gain agency.

The enigmatic poses crescendo in paintings in which characters are on the precipice of significant decisions. In *when the jig is up, when the act is finished, when the curtain descends* (2020), high drama is suspended in the crimson curtains lifted to a waiting audience. The performer, seated at her vanity backstage, selects her best shoes for the occasion: *The Red Shoes*. A reference to Michael Powell’s eponymous 1948 movie, the shoes will possess the seated performer,

eventuating her mortal dance sequence. In a mirror, over a bouquet of dried flowers—an homage to Wright—her blue, heavy-eyed gaze reflects rumination. She wonders, her mouth slack, will she perform in her swan song for herself or the audience? A similar drama plays out in *Of opalescence* (2021). Over a quilted canvas, epoxied butterflies foreshadow the metamorphosis of a bride, shut-eyed and cocooned in lace fabrics; but is the protagonist only dreaming?

These unanswered questions point to the characters being in a state of “limbo,” as articulated by Wright in his poem: “I am going back / to the Black limbo, / an unwritten history / of our own tensions.” Even as Wright references the burial sites in which marginalized people remain at the fringes, even posthumously, he also alludes to the spiritual tension that these people endure in their lifetime—that of being invisible in a white-dominated society and yet hyper-visible in only a small variety of their representation. Pavlis’s characters maintain an edgy balance in the limbo dance, whose origins trace back to the decks of crowded slave ships. The limbo, however, allows the characters to defy North America’s systemic regulation of Black bodies, reified in police violence and racist laws. Frozen in decisive moments, the protagonists push back against easily digestible tropes of blackness and create a space for themselves to remain illegible. To Wright’s quest, Pavlis retorts through a resting football player in embroidered words, *And for me, a small triumph is the greatest Hail-Mary across the longest field* (2021).

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Preston Pavlis
Still ready to curse and rage, exhibition view, 2021.

Photo : Paul Litherland, courtesy of Bradley Ertaskiran

Of opalescence, installation view, 2021.

Photo : Paul Litherland, courtesy of Bradley Ertaskiran

Second sight, 2021.

Photo : Paul Litherland, courtesy of Bradley Ertaskiran

