

In Good Company: Preston Pavlis

BY: AGNIESZKA MATEJKO

Preston Pavlis, emerging artist and winner of the 2021 Eldon and Anne Foote Visual Arts Prize, fuses paint, fabric and collage to portray solitary figures in moments of intense contemplation and self-discovery.

Everybody loves a good mystery. Extraterrestrials, UFOs, and the outer reaches of the universe are all fascinating, but as Preston Pavlis' intensely psychological portraits prove, the greatest mystery is closer to home. His larger-than-life figures – painted, embroidered, and often embellished with mixed media objects such as dried flowers or lace – are immersed in private moments of contemplation. Some look intently at the viewer or gaze into space while others close their eyes to the outer world, as if unravelling the enigma of the psyche.



This is a Feeling by Preston Pavlis

Thematically that's a tall order for a young artist to tackle: Pavlis only recently graduated with a Diploma of Fine Arts from MacEwan University, and is currently enrolled in the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. But his awards, the 2019 BMO 1st Art prize for the province of Alberta and the 2021 Eldon & Anne Foote Visual Arts Prize, attest that he is well up to the task.

As if these achievements weren't enough, this year Pavlis held his first solo show, *Still ready to curse and rage*, in Montreal's **Bradley Ertaskiran** (<https://bradleyertaskiran.com/en/>) gallery. The largest of his portraits – collaged from multiple images and not representing any specific person – are painted on canvas and tie-quilted onto fabric backing. This unusual technique is important, says Pavlis "as it lends a certain level of implied intimacy with the work."



Of Opalescence by Preston Pavlis

These warm, tactile surfaces invite viewers to come close and join in the act of introspection. “Thematically the exhibition is about the cycles of self-discovery and self-doubt and how they go back and forth,” says Pavlis. These universal experiences are best not ignored. “It’s something that has to be dealt with,” he adds. “It’s a growing process and a learning process.”



When the jig is up, when the act is finished, when the curtain descends by
Preston Pavlis

Each portrait reveals a rainbow of emotions: Some are confident to the point of defiance, others display hints of rage. One work depicts a football player in a field of billowing grass. Fiery reds bleed through his jersey as if about to engulf this peaceful scene in flame. The title, *And for me, a small triumph is the greatest Hail-Mary across the longest eld*, is embroidered onto the canvas. “That phrase is about effort,” explains Pavlis. “A small triumph requires the greatest effort, almost like a Hail Mary, almost like a miracle,” he says.



And for me, a small triumph is the greatest Hail-Mary across the longest field by Preston Pavlis

“While everyone goes through self-discovery, this process is particularly meaningful for Pavlis. A big crux of his work is growing up gay, dealing with shame and finding safety by hiding in plain sight. “The threat of hypervisibility pushed me towards the opposite: invisibility,” he says. But opening doors to the self is profoundly rewarding. “In the mystery of not really knowing who you are as a person there is a sense of joy of discovery,” he says. “You go through cycles of doubt and fear and misunderstanding but over the process of time things end up revealing themselves in a way that you wouldn’t expect.”



Inner Life by Preston Pavlis

The intense intimacy in Pavlis’ work reverses western traditions of portraiture. His paintings are nothing like the posed and self-important figures in major museums and more like entering a room full of friends. Pavlis’ choice of mixed race or Black subjects adds layers of meaning to his poignant artwork.

It’s not astonishing that Pavlis received early recognition. Still, the Eldon and Anne Foote Visual Arts Prize came as a joyful surprise and a confirmation. “There are always moments of doubt,” he says. “What every artist hopes for is moments of achievement where you see the work that you have done has affected somebody in some way.” Based on his artwork to date, that hope and dream has already become reality.

For the past 10 years the Eldon + Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Arts Prize has recognized outstanding artists from the Capital region. To celebrate, the Art Gallery of St. Albert is hosting the first ever exhibition in association with this award. *In Good Company* features award winners Preston Pavlis, Lauren Crazybull, aAron Munson and Gillian Willans, alongside the artists from the 2021 short list, including Emmanuel Osahor, Sharon Rose Kootenay and Jason Symington. Work by these seven incredible artists hang side by side, connected by their shared experience with the award, while offering a glimpse into their individual practices.

In Good Company runs November 9, 2021, to February 5, 2022.