

# AVERTED SELF-FIGURATIONS: AN INTERVIEW WITH PRESTON PAVLIS

By Farid Djamalov

When I first encountered Preston Pavlis' paintings last summer, I was moved by the care with which the young artist stewards his subjects, whom he refers to as "averted self-figurations." He affords them courteous distance for contemplative serenity by letting them seep into his unprimed canvases and seek refuge in grounds of muted dark tones. Resisting complete legibility, his larger-than-life, solitary characters are only accessible to those who take the time to get closer. Only then can viewers make out the figures from blotched brushstrokes, or discern delicately embroidered words that ventriloquize subjects' thoughts. Although the artist's small stretched canvases, like *Orchid, moth* (2021) and *Hellebore, dissolving* (2021), seem worlds away in their abstraction, Pavlis similarly cites intimacy as a key entry point, from which the emotional potency of the colour play induces introspection. However, the most seductive element of the artist's practice lies in his boundless explorative fusions of unstretched paintings with textiles. He foregrounds the materiality of his paintings by quilting and embroidering, thereby reconsidering relationships to his works as image-cum-objects.

Although emerging, the twenty-two-year-old artist boasts an impressive track record for himself. In 2016, the California native moved to Edmonton, where he studied painting at MacEwan University, before moving to Halifax, where he currently resides, to complete his education at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. With accolades that include being Alberta's regional winner for the esteemed BMO Art Competition in 2019, the precocious artist was featured at major art fairs such as Frieze NY and NADA Miami. Furthermore, he exhibited his works at various galleries and museums, such as the Half Gallery (NYC), the John & Maggie Mitchell Art Gallery (Edmonton), and Bradley Ertaskiran (Montreal), which recently announced their representation of the artist.

Farid Djamalov: I initially encountered your work in Montreal last summer during your first solo exhibition at Bradley Ertaskiran, "Still ready to curse and rage." What struck me most in your paintings was your juxtaposition of loose brush strokes, which seep into the unprimed canvases, and the vibrant objects you collaged over. For instance, you incorporated dried flower petals in *Second sight* (2021) and an epoxied butterfly in *Of opalescence* (2021). What associations do you hope to mine in your unique employment of collage?

Preston Pavlis: I approach painting with the idea that painting can occupy two spaces at once—be it in the illusionistic sense by stepping into another world, or, considering that

I work mostly figuratively, encountering somebody who's in their own space, and then trying to bring that space into the real world. This is where collage enters the frame for me, serving as a bridge between the painted imagery and the real tactile world that the viewer inhabits.

FD: What do you hope to extract from these collaged objects, which previously had a life and now are fixed?

PP: I refute the notion that art, and painting especially, has to exist forever. I like this idea of painting being more ephemeral. Attaching these things to the canvas—like dried flowers or preserved butterflies—is a way to refute the idea that art has to be a static thing. In terms of other artists who do that, I think of Eva Hesse, for example. You see her works today, such as those made of latex, and they are not really anything like they must have been when she first made them. She created these objects that evolve over time, decay and rot, and that's a beautiful thing.

FD: You demonstrate great awareness in your chosen materials. In your unstretched paintings, you undermine the assumed neutrality of a painter's blank canvas by bringing to the fore the fabrics' materiality—whether by quilting the canvas, or incorporating your emblematic curtain-like eyelets on the top edges. What's the motivation behind your frequent fusion of fabric and textiles?

PP: My motivation in approaching the canvas as a textile first is to lend a certain potential for intimacy that is not necessarily present in painting otherwise. Incorporating things like textiles and embroidery forces the viewer to come closer to the work. The technique of using large, unprimed, unstretched canvases with eyelets never really was my idea; you can look at other artists who used this technique like Kerry James Marshall or Leon Golub, for example. Using this format, which I've been working with the past couple of years, was more of an ergonomic way for me to make art. I wanted to make these large paintings, but by stretching them, you can only store paintings so large in your studio. At the beginning, this method was a way to work large to then roll the pictures up and place them in a corner. But as I continue to make these works, I'm starting to realize that by making the painting first and the textile element later, I'm taking the painting off the wall and, in a sense, draping it over myself to work on it—to either sew a title on the work, or a phrase, or, as I've been doing recently, quilting the work. This leads back to the idea of intimacy that I end up putting into the work, and that I hope is picked up by those who view it.



Preston Pavlis, *when the jig is up, when the act is finished, when the curtain descends*, 244 x 335.5 cm, oil, fabric, and pressed flowers on canvas, 2020. Courtesy of Bradley Ertaskiran.

The interesting thing for me about quilting in particular is that a painting can have two sides. This helps me refer to the painting more as an object as opposed to an image. For example, in my recent painting *Man with tattoos* (2021), even though all the images you'll see of it online are of the painted surface, there's a quilted backing to it—a quilted pattern of a cross. In that sense, I'm interested in the idea that a painting can have two sides, and even if both are not accessible to the viewer, some parts are taken in and some parts are allowed to be accessed.

FD: You mention the quality of intimacy both in the production of your works and in how you imagine viewers interacting with it. Why is intimacy so important for you, and to what end?

PP: For me, painting has always been both a mirror and a vessel for communication. In a way, these works are a way for me to reflect on certain aspects of myself that otherwise I may have no avenue exploring. But then in that same sense, I'm also trying to give the viewer access. The main crux of what I'm trying to do in my work is rooted in the idea that an understanding of the world really comes from an understanding of the self first. I don't paint myself, but the figures embody certain aspects of myself and in another sense are totally different from me. There's a duality in it for me.

FD: Your work exhibits that complex exploration of self, and I feel the contemplative interiority of your subjects, which if I'm not mistaken, spawn from your memory and imagination. While you feel a connection to these subjects, you resist the labels "self-portraits" or "alter egos" in favor of the term you coined: "averted self-figurations." What does this distinction mean to you and the way you steward your subjects?

PP: Averted self-figuration—sort of the way you avert someone's gaze—is a way for me to explore aspects of myself without physically painting myself over and over again, which I don't think would be very interesting—at least, I would lose interest. Figures in my paintings haven't been real people, but that doesn't mean that they couldn't be in the future. I've thought about that too: what would it mean to have a painting of a real person in a group of paintings of invented people? These figures are, more often than not, larger than me, and engaged in some confrontation with the viewer. I usually do that through the gaze, or through some sort of power relation, such as having the figure be larger-than-life or guarded in some sense.

I recognize that there is definitely a certain amount of responsibility that is needed when making images of mostly Black characters. As the person creating them, it's up to me to give them visual fortitude to negate any predatory intent that could befall them. It's not something that is easy or clear in terms of how to do it. It's not something I intentionally consider when I'm making a work, but something I consider more subconsciously or implicitly. I think it has to do with scale again, since these figures are larger than life, and even if they are not visually aware of the viewer, I feel like some of them are so large that it would be foolish for the viewer to assume that they have control over the narrative.

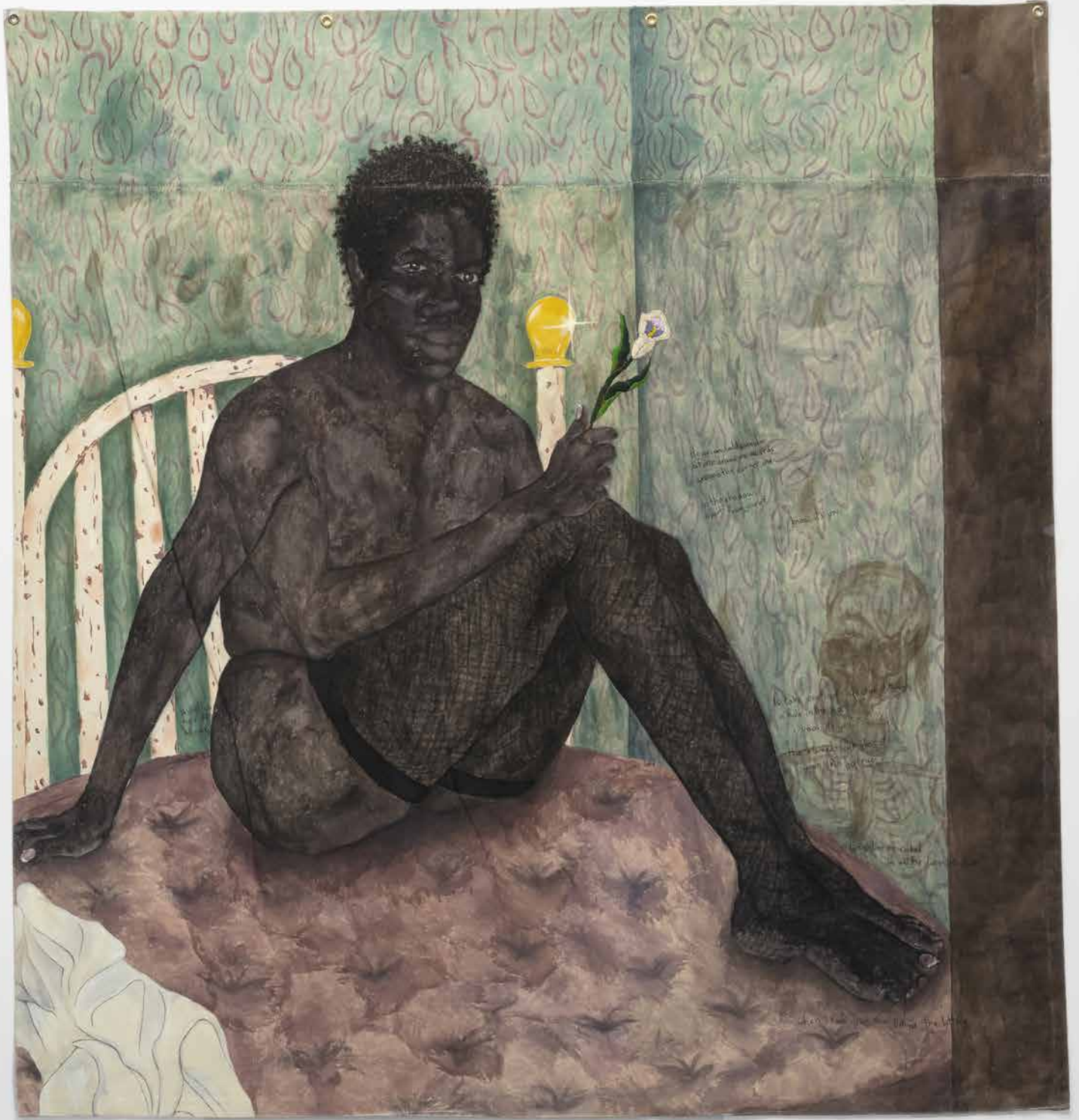
FD: In your large paintings, many of your characters are frozen moments before making important decisions. In *Of opalescence* (2021), a shut-eyed bride is about to get married; in *when the jig is up, when the act is finished, when the curtain descends* (2020), a performer wonders at her vanity backstage

whether she will perform for herself or the audience. How do you negotiate your subjects' movements and agency in relation to North America's systemic regulation of Black bodies, reified in police violence and racist laws?

PP: For me, particularly in the second work you mention [*when the jig is up, when the act is finished, when the curtain descends*], my aim is to focus on the interim period either before or after a performance. As a Black performer, as a Black artist, as a Black person in this world, you have to take moments to step back and ask: who are you doing this for? In this painting, I chose to point the gaze of the dancer—not even the dancer herself, but of her reflection in the mirror—back at the viewer to make the viewer more aware of where they sit within that space. The key to that work for me is the curtains around it, which set up this idea of performance. They don't offer a clear delineation of when the performance started and when it ends. You have this dancer who is backstage, supposedly after the performance, which is alluded to by the bouquet of flowers, but the curtains are closing in on this scene, making it a performance within a performance. With that work, I wanted to have that idea of performance not only in the content of the work, but also with me as the painter in relation to the viewer. These questions of performance come up not only for dancers, but also visual artists and anyone else.

FD: Many of your works draw on poetry, whether borrowed—like the line from Jay Wright's poem "The Albuquerque Graveyard," which you used to title your Bradley Ertaskiran show—or your own, which you embroider or inscribe onto your canvases. I find your inclusion of poetry particularly impactful in *your skin behind the lattice* (2019), in which a *memento mori* skull emerges from the wallpaper's pattern alongside your embroidered words: "down an unlit corridor/ a force draws me inwards/ around the corner and/ in the shadows/ a part from yourself/ I know it's you." What is your creative process for the poetry that appears in your paintings, and what is particularly generative for you in the dialogue that arises?

PP: I neglect to call what I've written poetry. In the past, I might've articulated that I inscribe poems into some of my works, but looking back on them now, I see them more as texts. That is only to say that for me, any sort of text that makes its way into the work acts as another voice in the work. Maybe it's my voice, maybe it's the voice of the character portrayed, but it's a way of defining something that I feel is important to the work that I couldn't do visually. Writing has been a tactic to get the viewer to come closer in a work like *lucky to be me* (2019), for example, where there's a small amount of text in the top right corner of the work. I chose to embroider it in dark green on a reddish-purple background, so it is hard to read from afar. You have to step up closer. Specifically thinking of that work, I don't think it could've achieved the same meaning that it has without inclusion of the text. It reads: "the feeling of one's hand/ on one's own face/ to finally recognize a touch/ bestowed upon oneself/ lucky to be me." In that sense, the text has it all together. In some of my earlier works—and still, I feel like this is true in the works I make today—there's an element of strangeness to the imagery at play, whether that be through multiple limbs in some of my earlier works, or enlarging of scale. In *lucky to be me*, the text elucidates that in this confusion of arms, whoever this person is, they have found a moment of rest in their own hand and they think—"oh wow, I'm lucky to be me!"



Preston Pavlis, *your skin behind the lattice*, 167.5 x 175.5 cm, acrylic, oil pastel, and embroidery on unstretched canvas, 2019. Courtesy of Bradley Ertaskiran.



Preston Pavlis, *Man with tattoos*, 182.9 x 148.6 cm, oil on linen, quilted, 2021. Courtesy of Bradley Ertaskiran.

FD: In your piece "Feeling The Spirit in The Dark" for *C Magazine*, you mentioned the internal conflict you felt growing up as a gay Black man from Southern California against the Christian backdrop of your family.<sup>1</sup> You cited the effects of Christianity on spectral conceptions of Black masculinity in North American imagination, reinforced by generations of homophobic and racist ideas. However, you do not seem to give up on spiritual faith, as attested in the ruminative subjects of your recent works *Man with tattoos* (2021) and *peddling pain* (2021). What shape does that faith and queerness take on for you now, and how do you explore it in your art?

PP: This phrase isn't something that would mean the same for everybody, but for me, religion and spirituality mean separate things. In terms of thinking about faith, my whole intent in making art and trying to connect with people through art is rooted in the faith or hope that arises from the suspension of disbelief. As an artist, my hope would be, for people who are experiencing my work for the first time, to allow the viewer to believe certain things that are not necessarily true about the work. For instance, that could be that the figures I paint are real. Is there a way that I can, in the creation of these persons, create a verisimilitude not in physical appearance, but in spirit? That's how I hope my work functions, and that's what I work towards. As I've mentioned earlier also, art is a way for me to work through certain things about myself. So for me, art is trying to do those two things at once.

Thinking about *peddling pain* (2021) and *Man with tattoos* (2021), those two works in particular deny access in different ways the most in my work. In *peddling pain*, you

can't see it fully with that net fabric over the painting. It's one of those things where you have to move your head in some weird way to gain any sort of clarity of the image, or you need to back up a lot. *Man with Tattoos*, on the other hand, does not have the frontal gaze of my other works. It's clear that there's an aspect of things being revealed and guarded at the same time. His eyes are closed, his arms are wrapped around himself, and he's in no outward way interacting with the viewer. But through his display of tattoos, he reveals parts of his personality. With these two works, I'm thinking about the importance of keeping certain things to yourself with the knowledge that the viewer, or whoever this other person might be, is going to take what they will from it.

Especially when I'm thinking about queerness, it all comes back to this idea that for me, I understand myself most through other people. When I'm making these works, there is more often than not only one figure on the canvas. There's a dialogue between me and this other invented person, who's a reflection of me but is somebody different, and that's how I approach it. It's rooted in this idea that there's potentially somebody like me in the world that I can encounter. Maybe it's only that one person.

FD: Beyond queerness, I was wondering also how displacement appears in your practice. Having been born in Loma Linda, California, you moved within the state to Highland before coming to Canada in 2016, where you completed your fine arts degrees at MacEwan University in Edmonton and Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax. How does your geographic displacement from the United States to Canada inform your work and your explorations of ontological Blackness?

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<sup>1</sup> Preston Pavlis, "Feeling The Spirit in The Dark," *C Magazine*, 148 (Winter 2021), accessed January 15th, 2022, <https://cmagazine.com/issues/148/feeling-the-spirit-in-the-dark>.

Preston Pavlis, *peddling pain*, 114.5 x 91.5 cm, oil and fabric on canvas, quilted, 2021. Courtesy of Bradley Ertaskiran.



PP: After spending so much time in both places, I'm interested in where the history of Canada and the United States intersects in relation to the Black experience. They intersect in the place where I'm living now, in Halifax. This is one of the reasons I chose to go to NSCAD. There's this history here of Black people moving between the United States and Canada. That's something that's interesting to me, because a lot of my work has not dealt with history in a very literal sense, but in terms of thinking about the future of my work, I'm interested in expanding this crystallized notion of a mirror that my work already figures into, to ask: how do you see different histories in other ways—whether through material, subject, or subject matter.

FD: Speaking of the intersection of these histories, you were quoted—alongside Nasra Adem, the founder of Edmonton's Black Arts Matters—in *Canadian Art's* article about the lack of Black representation in the 2020 Biennial at the Art Gallery of Alberta.<sup>2</sup> How do you envision support for Black artists in the Canadian Prairies, and how should questions of racism be challenged in Alberta's art scene beyond performative allyship?

PP: In thinking about Alberta specifically, what I think needs to happen is a reckoning or a look back at the artistic contributions of Black people who have lived in the province, because they lived there for quite a long time. Not to single out visual art, but filmmaking, music, and dance have also been neglected. These people who must have existed are due that close research and the digging up of their contributions, because there are so many great Black artists of different age groups working and living in the province today. I think it's important to have that history there as a way to not feel alone in that province. I'm thinking of Cheryl Foggo from the

2020 "It's About Time" exhibition—she's a poet and a filmmaker, she's lived in Alberta and has researched Black people in Alberta for decades. There's also Elsa Robinson—she's a fantastic artist who's living in Edmonton at the moment, and she had a great exhibition at Latitude 53, which I was lucky to see before I left. Of course, there are the young artists who are in university programs or just graduated from there, like Raneece Buddan, Braxton Garneau, Shaihiem Small, eva birhanu. There are so many people.

FD: Given that you are still at the early stages of your career, how do you see your work evolving over time?

PP: I'm at a place now where I really want to refine a lot of the things that I've been tentatively exploring in the past, like the relationship of quilts with painting. I really wanted to have that be more considered, to think about those questions I had about dual-sided paintings, and then break off to some new territory. For some reason, I have this idea in my head of making books, which is totally left field. These books that I'm thinking of making would be quilted paintings in book form, so maybe the book could be really big and one side of the page could be a painting and the other a quilted backing. I'm interested in that idea because I think about access a lot in my work, so it would be interesting to have this painting that you can't even access in full all at once.

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<sup>2</sup> Leah Sandals, "Community Speaks on Lack of Black Artists in Art Gallery of Alberta's Biennials," *Canadian Art*, October 22, 2020, accessed January 15th, 2022, site inactive February 22nd, 2022, [www.canadianart.ca/news/community-speaks-on-lack-of-black-artists-in-art-gallery-of-albertas-biennials](http://www.canadianart.ca/news/community-speaks-on-lack-of-black-artists-in-art-gallery-of-albertas-biennials).