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The ORDINARY and EROTIC

Pairing figural nudes with still lifes, painters David Palumbo and Todd M. Casey bring Skin & Tonic to Rehs Contemporary in New York.

BY MICHAEL CLAWSON

1 Todd M. Casey, *Bar Study 1*, oil on panel, 8 x 12". 2 David Palumbo, *Pulled Up and Down*, oil on panel, 12 x 9".

Painters Todd M. Casey and David Palumbo both began painting their current favorite subjects—still lifes of mixed drinks for Casey, nude female figures for Palumbo—as endeavors to experiment with light and how it falls on flesh and fabric or bottles and bartops. As they worked out the wrinkles of their compositions, refined their brush handling and pondered light in refreshingly new ways, they quickly found themselves drawn immeasurably to their subjects. Years later, those same subjects are still intriguing them.

Casey and Palumbo will be bringing their new work to *Skin & Tonic*, a two-man exhibition opening May 4 at Rehs Contemporary in New York City. The exhibition will feature 100 works, 50 from each artist, all in a range of sizes, but with an emphasis on smaller works that show the spontaneity of their brushes. For both artists, this easy-in/easy-out approach of smaller works benefits their rapid-fire approach to realism. "I loved this idea of an overly ambitious exhibition with a large number





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David Palumbo, *Feline*,
oil on panel, 12 x 16"

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Todd M. Casey, *El Dia de los Muertos Blanco*, oil on panel, 9 x 12"

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David Palumbo,
Revealing, oil on panel,
30 x 40"



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of works spread out between two artists. The fact that it could all be so playful—me with my drinks and David with his pin-up girls, almost *Playboy*-style girls, but with a bit more eroticism—really brought me into the exhibition,” Casey says from his New York studio. “We both work in similar sizes, so the pieces will pair together really well in the gallery. The small paintings are a lot of fun, but we’ll also both have larger pieces as well. Something for everyone.”

Works in the show have a subtle 1960s vibe to them. Think Hugh Hefner, Gil Elvgren, Don Draper, James Bond. They evoke a certain place and time, neither of which is here or now—although easily

could be. For Casey, another name that comes to mind is fashion icon Ralph Lauren, whose company is where the artist cut his teeth. “I used to do graphic design for Ralph Lauren, and the goal there was everything had to be vintage or inspired by vintage. People would go find old pieces everywhere, from the Rose Bowl Flea Market to old antique stores to eBay, just to extract some sort of inspiration from it,” he says. “You always have to be digging for new stuff to get those ideas. For me I tend to overbuy things to tell my story, but then once I get in the studio I can edit it down to what I want.”

You can see the vintage-inspired look in

many of his painted mix drinks: the curled label on a bourbon bottle, the boxy Mason jar holding a bloody mary, a vintage travel postcard hanging behind a Long Island iced tea, and a stainless steel cup with beaded rim that contains a mint julep. “It’s always a beautiful journey to find all this stuff. First I’ll come up with an idea about a drink and then just ask myself how I can glorify the drink as far as beauty and aesthetic,” he says, adding that he used that process for a work featuring a kamikaze. “Right at the beginning, as I was looking at the kamikaze, I kept thinking how I could take the drink and make it much more interesting.”

A number of his pieces have a cultural



flavor to them, include *Dia de los Muertos*, which includes a red rose and a painted skull. In another piece Casey uses miniature wooden carvings of skeletons, which are rendered in diffused light so delicate that a shadow seems ready to sweep over them. In a larger bartop still life, a dozen bottles of various sizes, colors and shapes are grouped with several smaller objects, including a 19th-century book, one of the first to draw attention to what is now called mixology.

Casey says his pieces fit in perfectly with the works of Palumbo, mostly because each painter focuses on the celebration of form. For one it's drinks, the other it's women.

Pennsylvania-based Palumbo began his career as an illustrator—doing commissioned sci-fi and fantasy work for Dark Horse Comics, Heavy Metal, Lucasfilm and Tor—but slowly began expanding his profile into fine art. As he stretched his legs, he found these “finely rendered figures with monochromatic underpaintings...with small brushstrokes and very detail-oriented design.” They struck a nerve with collectors as he began showing in galleries. “I quickly began experimenting and playing with things I might have been too timid to approach normally,” he says. “I started doing these 5-by-7-inch nudes. They allowed me to fool

around and experiment, to test my process and move the paint around in interesting ways. I thought I would do half a dozen or so, but that was nine years ago.”

Today Palumbo uses a mixture of live models and photography to capture his images. He works closely with his models to encourage them to find their own poses and to be relaxed in his creative environment. “They'll bring a bag or two full of clothes and we'll just find out what works and doesn't work,” he says. “I've realized that the most interesting thing is to give very little direction to the models. I try not to interfere too much, because as soon as I start dictating commands you





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start to lose things. Sometimes the model will do something totally unexpected, something with an improvisational flow to it. That's what I'm looking for."

Many of the works depict quiet moments of deep reflection, where the subject is almost acknowledging the world beyond the panel. In *Gina 6*, the figure, tugging her shirt over her head, glances quickly at the viewer, holding eye contact in a flick of action that likely takes less than a second. In *Feline*, a model's bare legs lead a winding path up to her face, which regards the viewer with a detached fascination. Several of the subjects make frequent appearances, including Meredith, whose skin has an olive tone in the lavender background of *Meredith 16*, but a milky-white softness in a darker, more noirish *Meredith 17*—

lighting is everything, and Palumbo shows how colors can shift when held up against different kinds of backgrounds.

Palumbo will often use black-and-white photographs as the inspiration for his works. "I picked up that habit a long time ago. It allows me to see values and structure, but not color. I was inspired by a quote from artist Dan dos Santos, who said, 'Value does the work and color steals the credit,'" Palumbo says. "Without color I can really focus on so much more and let the painting take me where it wants."

Lance Rehs, vice president and director at Rehs Contemporary, says a still life and figurative pairing like the one for *Skin & Tonic* was an obvious choice for the gallery. "With a growing presence of realism in the contemporary art world, it is no surprise to

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Todd M. Casey,
Mint Julep Bulleit,
oil on panel, 10 x 8"

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David Palumbo, *Gina 6*,
oil on panel, 7 x 5"

see a contemporary twist on these classic motifs," he says. "David's work, on the surface appears erotic, but is far deeper and more sensual. The female figures arouse a sense of intimacy—well-crafted and composed to give you a window into a very private moment in time. It is that intimacy, and sense of vulnerability, that instantaneously draws you in. Palumbo goes on to set the tone through hands and facial expressions while building the atmosphere using heavy brushstrokes of deep or vibrant hues. The resultant compositions are beautiful, raw and engaging."

Rehs continues: "Todd takes on a very different subject through his still life work. Todd's exploration encompasses more than you might think at first glance...he delves into the celebration and struggle of life. While his compositions of bright alcoholic drinks and objects before stark backgrounds are beautiful in and of themselves, what brings Todd's work to another level is the emotion that this imagery can evoke—we celebrate with alcohol, we commiserate with alcohol and we escape with alcohol. Todd, too, draws on this feeling of intimacy, allowing the viewer to connect the work with their own experiences—leaving the meaning a bit open ended as it parts ways with the easel but wholly complete when the right viewer steps in front of the canvas. Both artists are truly dependent on the viewer. They rely on the observer's personal experience to fully complete the narrative—and that is part of what makes their works so intriguing. It is that ability for the artist to relate and connect; to make you feel."

Skin & Tonic will be on view in New York through May 26. ●

SKIN & TONIC

When: May 4-26, 2017; May 4, 5-9 p.m., reception
Where: Rehs Contemporary, 5 E. 57th Street, 8th Floor,
New York, NY 10022
Information: (212) 355-5710, www.rehscgi.com