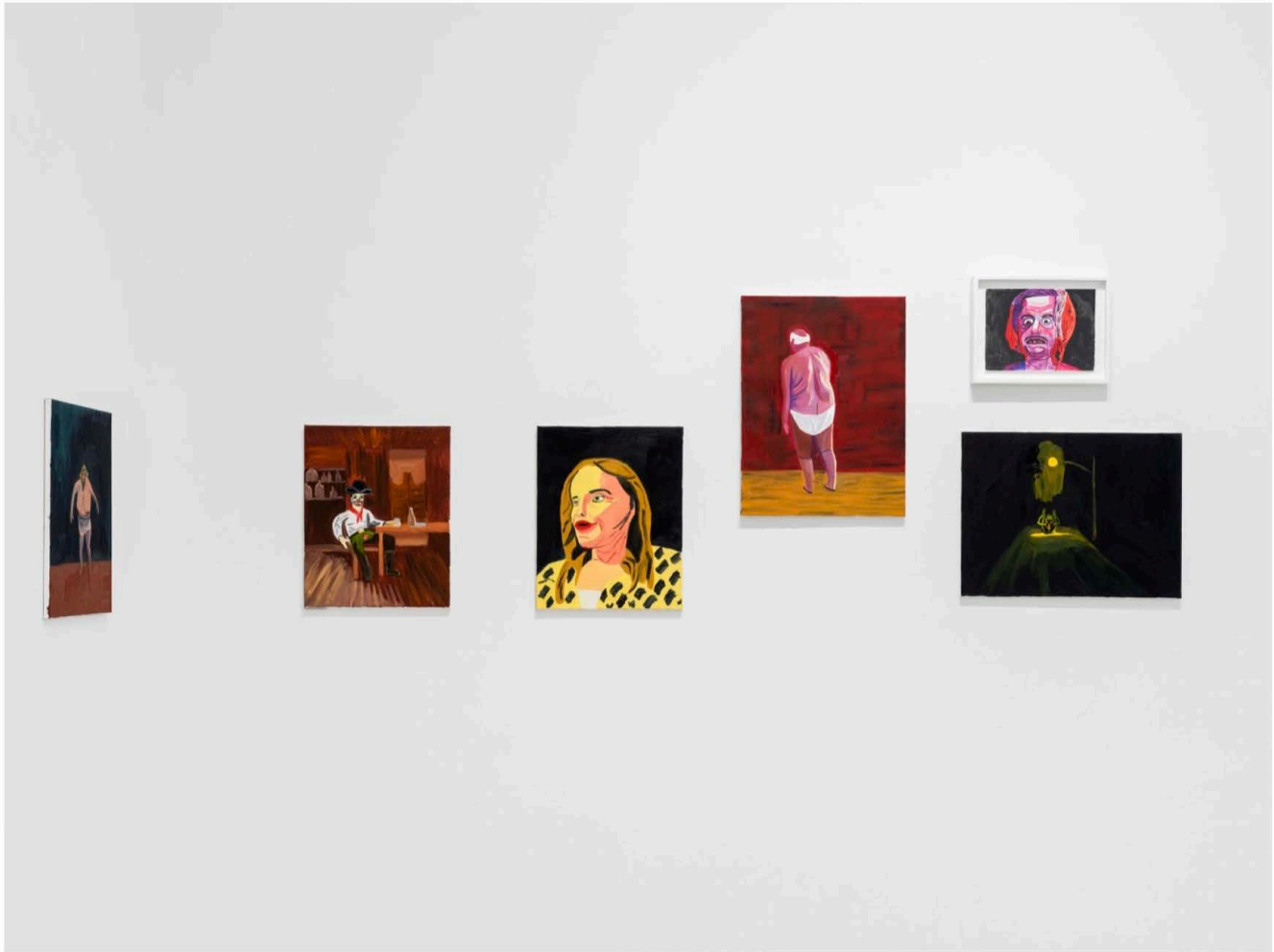


CHEIM & READ

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At Blue-Chip Opening for 26-Year-Old Artist Cumwizard69420, Attendees Reacted With Glee and Confusion

 BY JOHN CHIAVERINA January 18, 2023 11:33am



An installation shot of several paintings from "The Americans," a new exhibition by Cumwizard69420 at Cheim & Read in New York. ALEX YUDZON/COURTESY OF CHEIM & READ, NEW YORK.

On the surface, it is absurd that a 26-year-old self-taught painter who goes by the name Cumwizard69420 has an exhibition titled “The Americans” on view at **blue-chip gallery Cheim & Read** in New York until March 11.

But when viewed in concert with the gallery’s other exhibition, a show of photographs by Diane Arbus depicting residents at a house for the developmentally disabled, “The Americans” can be seen in a different light.

Cumwizard69420’s work reflects the chaotic topography of the internet, with subject matter that leans heavily on the scatological, the sexual and the pop cultural. When viewed alongside each other, Arbus’s arresting, controversial images, taken over 50 years ago, are pulled into the present, while Cumwizard69420’s 4Chan-fried paintings are dragged kicking and screaming into the longer-lens of art history.

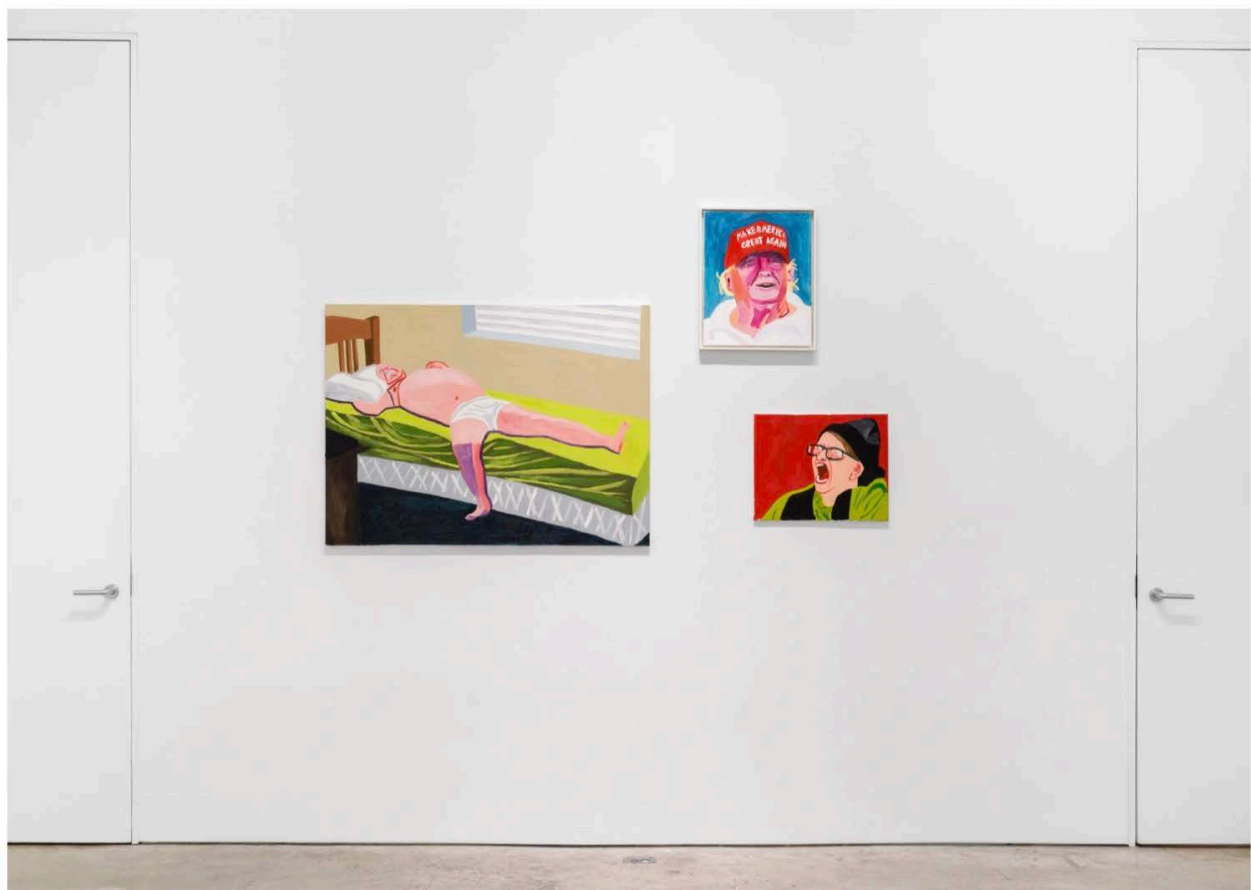
“They’re two separate exhibitions, but there is overlap in terms of subject matter, and approaching kind of controversial places, where you’re thinking about the scale of humanity and where you want to nuance yourself as an artist,” Maria Bueno, the gallery’s director of sales, told me at the opening last week.

Nuance might not be the first word that comes to mind when many think of Cumwizard69420, but after having only seen his work on a computer or phone screen, I wanted to check out what it looked like on the wall.

The artist, whose real name is unknown, wasn’t able to attend the opening: he had a newborn at home, the gallery told me the day before the opening. And so, the mystery deepened.

Cumwizard69420 is a former economics and math student who has taken a single college art class and used to work as a food delivery driver, **his website claims**. He dropped out of school in 2019 and started making art under his current moniker in 2020. Since then, he’s painted pop culture icons and political figures and American cultural vignettes, often with a level of profanity so extreme that I’m not sure if I would be allowed to describe some of his paintings in this publication.

Since then, the artist has **built a cult following on Instagram** and attracted attention from the art world proper. In 2021, he was included in an exhibition curated by the artist Mathieu Malouf at Jenny’s in New York; later that year, he had a solo exhibition at Patrick Kellycooper in Los Angeles. Last summer, Cheim & Read put him in a group show. Though founder John Cheim wasn’t available for comment on the night of the opening, he compared the artist in a text to both John Waters and Matisse.



An installation shot of several paintings from “The Americans,” a new exhibition by Cumwizard69420 at Cheim & Read in New York. ALEX YUDZON/COURTESY OF CHEIM & READ, NEW YORK.

Over email, Cumwizard69420 kept things to the point. On the origins of his name: “I was trying to come up with a username for online and it was easy to come up with.” Of his subject matter: “I paint things I find funny and from movies that I like. I watch a lot of movies and television. My wife helps me figure out what to paint and nothing I do gets past her.” When asked if there was anything he wouldn’t paint, the artist drew the line at certain illegal sex practices and religious icons.

At the opening, Quinn Huttenhower and Maren Johnson, college students visiting from Oregon, said they were introduced to the artist’s work through Instagram.

“I think it definitely feels a lot different, because you can see the texture of all the paintings,” Huttenhower said, on the contrast between witnessing Cumwizard’s work online versus in a gallery. “It’s very funny to take it in and be a part of actually experiencing it rather than seeing it on a phone.”

“It’s a lot more formal, in a good way,” Johnson said.

When asked about favorite works in the show, Huttenhower pointed to a fairly innocuous portrait of Miss J. Alexander, a former judge on *America’s Next Top Model*.

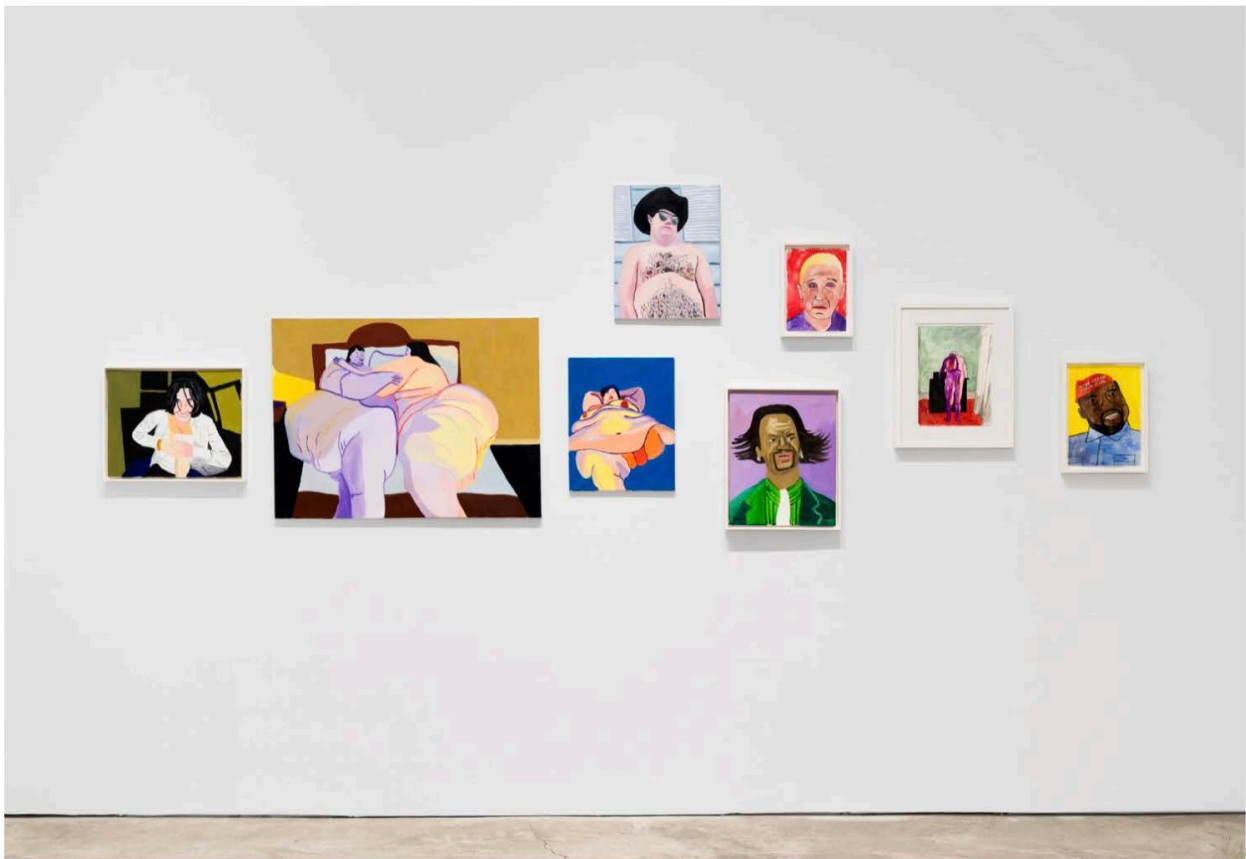
“I love all the old man ones,” Johnson interjected. One painting that would fall under this category is a 2021 work on view called *COME HELP GRANDPAPPY WITH HIS PANTS*, a portrait of an aging man with a walker, pants down, backside exposed. “I think it’s a very realistic depiction of getting old,” she continued.

Huttenhower and Johnson weren’t the only two non-New Yorkers in the building. Joe Colangelo and Grayson Lapieer were two twenty-somethings who traveled from Philadelphia just for the show. “We’ve been fans probably for, like, two or three years, following him on Instagram,” Colangelo said. It was one of Colangelo’s first times visiting a non-museum art space, he added.

“I also think it’s interesting that this room is in the farthest, most hidden corner,” Lapieer said, of the exhibition, before positing that perhaps the gallery didn’t want to “taint” the work of Arbus.

It was indeed an interesting question, one that was on the mind of more than just Lapieer. Gallery visitor Nate Frumuth was trying to make sense of it. “I’ve never seen [Arbus’s photographs] before, and I’m like, Woah, is her work more serious than [Cumwizard69420’s] work? Because it all feels sort of exploitative at the surface, but maybe it’s not?”

Artist Issac Peifer, another self-taught painter **who built a following during the pandemic**, told me that he has “kind of watched his trajectory from pretty early on.” When comparing the two artists on exhibition, Peifer noted that Cumwizard69420 often towed a line “between total jokey irreverence and maybe a gleeful mockery” of his subjects, which contrasted heavily with Arbus, who, despite occasionally courting controversy, came off more seriously.



An installation shot of paintings from “The Americans,” a new exhibition by Cumwizzard69420 at Cheim & Read in New York.
ALEX YUDZON/COURTESY OF CHEIM & READ, NEW YORK.

But Cumwizzard69420’s intentions might be changing. Even though “The Americans” contains a painting of a man performing autofellatio under a streetlight, many of the works in the show are not as extreme as the artist’s earlier paintings and drawings.

“I really love his more earnest work,” Peifer said. “I think he’s reached a place now where maybe he’s allowing himself to take his own subject matter more seriously.”

Not everyone was as enthusiastic about the work of either artist. A woman who wished to only be identified as Sarah seemed confused more than anything else. “They’re both jarring. It’s a strange pairing,” she told me. “I don’t really know what to think of it yet. I mean, it’s disturbing,” she said amidst Cumwizzard69420’s exhibition. Then she laughed.

A trio who refused to give their names were also unimpressed with Cumwizzard69420. “We’ve been discussing that it hasn’t super resonated with us, we get it, but it’s not something we would want to put in our homes,” one man said. The three seemed to be most concerned with the idea of ownership. One woman wanted to know what a collector’s “reason for buying it would be. What propelled them to spend the money to purchase this?”

The question of collectors is an interesting one. Cumwizzard69420 has work for sale directly on his website, with prices roughly ranging from \$800 to \$4,000. When asked if the Cheim & Read show would be priced differently, Bueno said that the gallery is “going to keep it consistent” with Cumwizzard’s online sales.

“I think the goal here, again, is to really introduce Cumwizzard’s work to the New York art scene,” she said.

Reactions appeared to be mixed outside of Cumwizard's core fanbase, but Oliver Westermeier, a furniture restoration specialist, looked at the work from a more formal standpoint.

"It's initially interesting," he said, before admitting that he wasn't sure if the artist was a "good painter or not." Then he looked some more. "You see the light on the back of this guy—that's pretty good," he continued, talking about the painting *MAN WITH SAGGY UNDIES*. "The guy knows how to paint."

Though he has spent the past three decades in America, Westermeier was born in Germany. I asked him if the exhibition, with its title and subject matter, captured the spirit of his adopted country.

"Yeah, it does," he said, somewhat nonchalantly.