

ARTY PARTY

Having a good time has never been at odds with making great art. Artists have long been sketching and painting their friends, hookups, and casual drinking partners saddled up at the bar, hanging out in parks, and partying at late night clubs and cabarets. Of course, the leisurely life of drugs, sex, and sitting around has always been an essential component of what it means to be countercultural, antiestablishment, and bohemian. The party is the hour off. It is the time not spent making money, and for that it flies in the face of capitalism. It situates itself outside of workaday norms.

Andy Warhol's Factory, with nightly limo rides to Studio 54, is probably our most modern instance of art as roving social hour, where rules are broken, lines (and eyes) are blurred, and the chance interactions that happen within a social scene take on the poetry and profundity of living art. Today, artists have continued to mine the good time in their work, studying the codes, customs, and style of life at its most group oriented. Here, five male artists have gotten past the drinks table and the dance floor to produce deft commentaries on the art of partying.

CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN

BILLY SULLIVAN

Since the 1970s, New York-based master artist Billy Sullivan has been navigating the bohemian house parties and celebrity social calls in both photography and paint. In his canvas works, the artist routinely captures the young, the handsome, and the stylishly coiffed with a flowing hand that matches his penchant for airy, candy-light oils—this loose laid-back style further enhances the feeling of casual sociability on display. Sullivan uses his own snapshots as reference sources in his paintings, so the hangers-on are cast with familiar expressions and poses; the informal arrangements of bodies groping one another, whispering into ears, or turning to the camera for a smile seem pulled from a dozen party shots in a downtown apartment past midnight.

The brilliance of Sullivan's depictions of parties lies in their normality. Painting traditionally aimed to capture magnificent historical events or portray aristocratic sitters at their most refined. Here, Sullivan gives us everyday Manhattanites drinking, smoking, socializing, and staring off into space—in other words, a mirror to our quotidian lives. What we remember most at the end of the day is not the momentous events of history, but the intimate gatherings with familiar faces. Sullivan brings a sense of dignity to time wasted on other people's couches.

BARBARELLA AND THE BOYS, 2006
ARTWORK BILLY SULLIVAN
COURTESY NICOLE KLAGSBRUN GALLERY, NYC

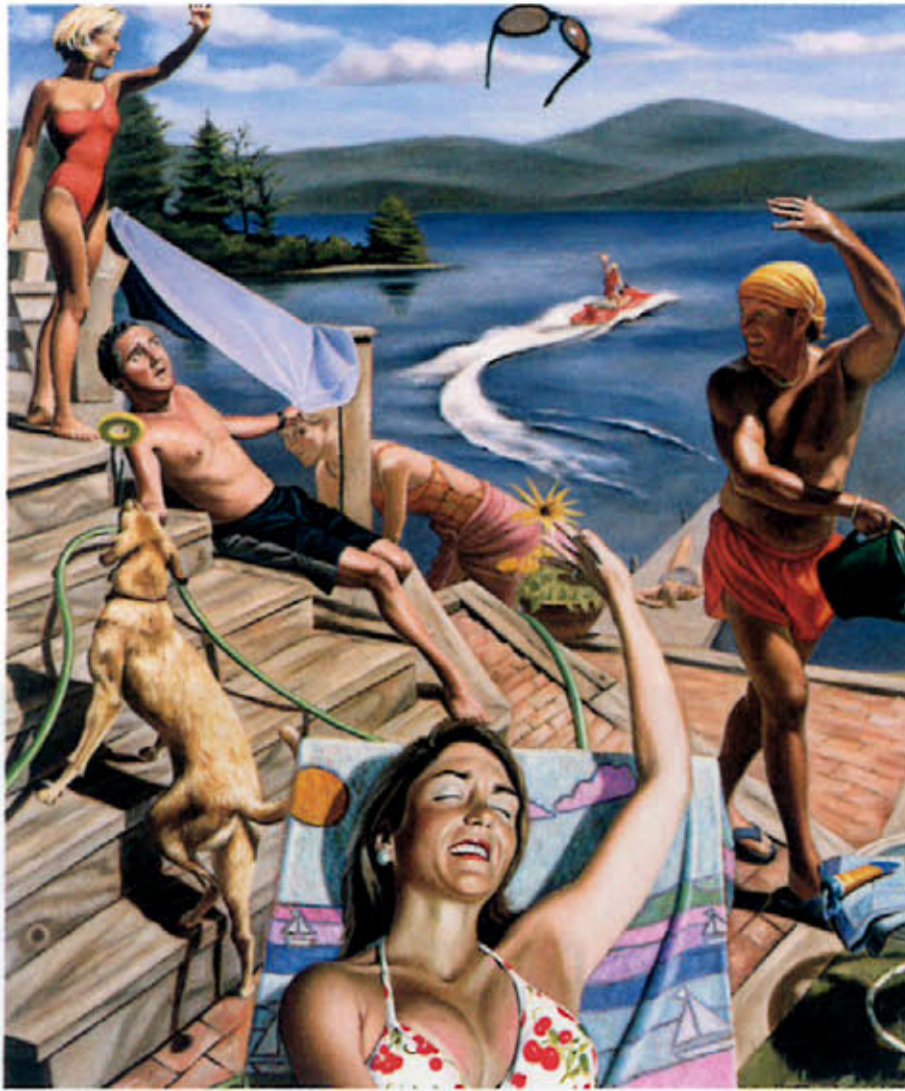


ALEX DONIS

Not all artists document the party as it happens. Los Angeles-based Latino painter Alex Donis creates provocative dance pictures that seem straight out of late night gay club culture—if one ignored the identities of the dance partners grinding or prancing around each other. On large-scale canvases and Plexiglas boards, Donis choreographs Los Angeles Police Department officers frolicking with hardcore gang members. Uniformed cops get down and dirty with shirtless, tattooed black men in loose jeans, backward caps, and color-coded bandanas.

The artist envisions these two oppositional sides interlocked in disco steps, juxtaposing their macho personas with blatantly gay sexualities. One can see the back-and-forth between criminals and crime fighters as a sort of death dance—a move on one side requires a response from the other. But Donis deflates the brute aggression, and thus the conflict—suggesting that repression and ingrained masculinity produce more violence than anything else. These works were deemed too controversial for a public art museum in the L.A. area—but their power goes beyond the incendiary allusions to Bloods and Crips versus local officials. Donis also tackles the hidden erotic element of the street that can never be made overt without opening a Pandora's box of race, class, and sex. Appropriately, the series is called "War."

SCATTERBRAIN AND SERGEANT POWELL, 2001
ARTWORK ALEX DONIS
COURTESY FRUMKIN GALLERY, SANTA MONICA



PIETER SCHOOLWERTH

What do you get when you cross premodernistic painting techniques with the congested, A.D.D.-addled excesses of contemporary life? Something like New York artist Pieter Schoolwerth's large-scale oil canvases. For the last several years, Schoolwerth has depicted various high-spirited scenes of socialization, using a brush that has the precision of shading, detail, and dimensionality of a sculptor's pick. In one series, the artist captures the delirious, tragicomic scenarios of downtown New York scenesters hanging out in walk-up apartments. There are hookups happening, binge drinking, and lots of dancing.

Schoolwerth is a narrative painter, and his loaded scenes work like allegories, filled with competing story lines and endless strains of interconnections that cause the viewer's eye to spin from one figure to the next. His canvases often give the impression of a central vortex that causes everything around the bull's eye—sunglasses, cigarettes, beer cans—to spin in a circular stew. Schoolwerth also elongates the bodies of his subjects (in a style reminiscent of the classical Mannerists and their long-necked saints), resulting in characters that flash back and forth between the attractive and the horrifying, the kind and the utterly creepy. Life, like Schoolwerth's fantastical realities, has too many twisted and convoluted stories to freeze-frame in one moment in time.

LIVE FREE OR DIE, 2002
ARTWORK PIETER SCHOOLWERTH
COURTESY ELIZABETH DEE GALLERY, NYC



PAUL GALLOWAY

The mystique of youth—its beauty and innocence as much as its disillusionment—has been an art-world fixation for almost as long as there has been art (think of Ancient Greece). Perhaps no one captures the troubled terrain of postadolescence better than 28-year-old Paul Galloway. The Texas native and current New York resident paints canvases that often look like a trip through the camera of a sorority girl drunk on Budweiser. In a reportage style that seems incidental and fleeting, his work exposes the codes and customs of young partiers wobbling between social convention and drunken recklessness. Galloway's painted snapshots reveal the skewed leg, the girl's hand quietly tucked under the boy's arm, the embrace of two young men that wavers between brotherliness and homosexuality, and the passed-out blond hanging at a guy's waist.

Violence, lust, and deliberately posed cool are all present in Galloway's canvases. Little wonder that the artist's creative process involves dropping disposable cameras off at fraternity and sorority houses and allowing the young coeds to shoot their own keg stands, hangouts, and trips to Daytona. Galloway works as an outsider, trying to reconstruct and interpret experiences that are far removed from his own—which makes sense, really, since the pivotal moments of youth are best understood when they are already gone.

YOUNG LIFE, 2005
ARTWORK PAUL GALLOWAY
COURTESY FAY GOLD GALLERY, ATLANTA



TIM GARDNER

One of the 21st century's breakout art stars is the Canadian oil painter and watercolorist Tim Gardner. Early on the young artist captured white, all-American party boys jumping in and out of pools, cruising bare-chested down a Hawaii avenue, passing out cold on a couch after ripping a few bong hits. The fact that Gardner renders these muscular bad boys in such a fragile medium as watercolor creates a jarring passive-aggressive pull on the canvas. At first, the subjects seem ordinary to the point of college cliché—but there is a disconcerting charge just below the surface. Their reckless abandon, their willing adolescence in strong adult bodies possesses a disturbing threat of violence.

Gardner's surfaces do what a photograph never could—they break down beauty, fracturing the image just enough so the viewer can study it. The ridiculous cult of the suburban American boy is on full display here. Women are rarely found in these early paintings, and when they are, they almost never take center stage. Gardner has tapped into a specific enclave to study its rites and behavior. The sense that at any moment the party could turn bloody hangs like a shadow over the canvases—these young males seem destined to drink, screw, and sunbathe until they drop—or go to jail.

UNTITLED (NICK BEING PULLED IN POOL), 2002
ARTWORK TIM GARDNER
COURTESY 303 GALLERY, NYC