

LIAM MURPHY-TORRES
A DIRTY ARCADIA

LIAM MURPHY-TORRES, *A DIRTY ARCADIA*
Berlin Art Week 2025

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Liam Murphy Torres: A Dirty Arcadia

Introduction by Olivia Hiester

For Liam Murphy-Torres, virtue is a question of attention, not content. His paintings, drawn forth from his lived experience, recall familiar scenes from ordinary life: people walk their dogs, sit in cafes, ride bicycles, smoke cigarettes. These passages from daily life are not itemized or described photographically: there are heads without faces, hands without fingers, trees without their individual leaves. Instead they are distilled to their essential character by painterly means of shape, line, and color, and arranged in pursuit of visual resonance and order.

These paintings do not come easily: to distill the infinite visual information available in the world is a demanding task. For Murphy-Torres, any grace that arrives in his pictures is hard-won. He works on his paintings for months, taking them through all manner of changes, from barely perceptible to drastic. *Marlboro Man*, for example, began as a self-portrait during his undergraduate years in Philadelphia. Rather than existing as a closed, finished painting from that time, it served as a kind of laboratory, a place for evolving ideas and priorities to land and grow in the years that have since passed.

He moves figures around his paintings until they land where they need to, shifting them across the surface, pushing and pulling them back and forth. The figures

move around these paintings as he makes them. They move almost as we do, passing through crowded streets and quiet rooms, going about our lives. One painting may depict several different times of day before arriving at the one that feels right—with a few thoughtful changes in color, night may fall in the picture, or day may break. Murphy-Torres constructs his built-up, worked-on surfaces over the course of many sessions, painting until an image has emerged and he's resolved it. He typically has 20-30 paintings in progress at one time, and he draws from his paintings: not careful studies intended to predict the paintings or protect them from uncertainty, but working drawings, pages of active visual thought that serve as a means of solving pictorial problems and moving things forward.

His search is expansive in its modes. He frequently takes pictures of his paintings and works on them digitally as a means of exploring vastly different possibilities in a short space of time. Changing the color of an eight-foot shape ten times in five minutes is possible, even easy, with a finger on an iPhone screen, but would be an arduous undertaking in oil paint on the actual canvas. His paintings progress not in spite of dramatic change but because of it—in one landscape, a scene of Central Park, for example, he may audition dozens of colors for the sky—not just blues, but reds, greens, and pinks, until he hits a note that feels right. He never plans his paintings in advance, but considers them extensively as he works. Intention, in the form of attentiveness to the life of the work, is embedded in his paintings and enlivened by his receptivity to the accidents of paint itself.

Paint itself is a main character in the drama of Murphy-Torres' oeuvre. The paintings are not just portals depicting other worlds, they are also tactile objects that exist in our world. His paint does not try to hide itself or camouflage with what it depicts—it is a separate, material entity that emits just as much energy as the subject it represents. James Elkins articulates this in his book *What Painting Is*: “Ordinarily paint is a window onto something else, a transparent thing that shimmers into our awareness as we look through it to see what the painter has depicted: but it is also a sludge, a hard scab clinging to the canvas.” Though it is always evident, the autonomy of Murphy-Torres' paint, its visibility as material, exists on a continuum. The paint of *Tucker's Roof* is subtler, more fluid, tranquil, and contained than that of *Central Park*, *Pink Sky II* which is perhaps the most lush and open surface in the group. The paint does not threaten to swallow the scene. The painting's representational events, its upright trees and figures, winding paths, and distant buildings, remain intact and identifiable within broad swaths of thick paint, but there are moments where the paint defies the image and appears, briefly, as paint itself before resuming its place in the larger order. In the bottom left corner of the painting, a dark blue line is pulled quickly over a figure's legs, not quite syncing with their edges. Nearby, a thin wash of pure blue shows through beneath muted patches of dark paint. Above and to the left, just past the center of the painting, a muscular glob of white paint pushes its way through the pink register of the sky, announcing itself in equal measure as cloud and paint, neither one subordinate.

Murphy-Torres does not suppress the tactile presence of paint to convey literal information about his subjects, nor does he set aside his familiar subjects in order to paint pure abstractions. Instead, he plays a game of duality whose objective is to make everything act as two things at once, like the white paint and cloud in *Central Park*, *Pink Sky II* or the small red mark which is also the spine of a book on a shelf in *Reading, Interrupted*. The formal means of paint, color, and shape animate the paintings, infusing such prosaic things as clouds and books with energy and surprise.

These nameable characters, however—these figures, trees, buildings, objects—are not treated with greater importance than the nameless places that surround them, the spaces between them. Murphy-Torres is democratic in his attention to all parts of the painting's surface. The spaces between things are never an afterthought, but instead present an opportunity for a moment of surprise, for a painting to remind its viewer that they are looking at something other than the world and suddenly paying attention to a moment that might've otherwise gone unseen. In *Reading, Interrupted*, for example, the small triangle of space between the figure's torso and bent arm is brighter and lighter than the rest of the surrounding pink. It pops forward in view, preventing the smooth continuity of the table's edge and differentiating itself from the rest of the wall. A small, intentional change in shape and color disrupts the expected order of things. Suddenly, there is something new to know about a woman sitting at a table with a book. In *The Biker*, the shape of space between arm and torso

is a slightly more intense blue than the surrounding area, pulling it forward in an unexpected way. That closed shape of blue is the street, but instead of sitting back behind the biker's body, it exerts a gentle visual pressure upon it. This moment and others like it serve to remind us that visual experience extends far beyond the limits we habitually, and often necessarily, impose with knowledge and expectation. To give equal attention to object and space produces surprising passages of visual thought and suggests a parallel attitude which extends beyond painting: that life is inexhaustible and attention can be guided to find unexpected surprise in that which is overlooked.

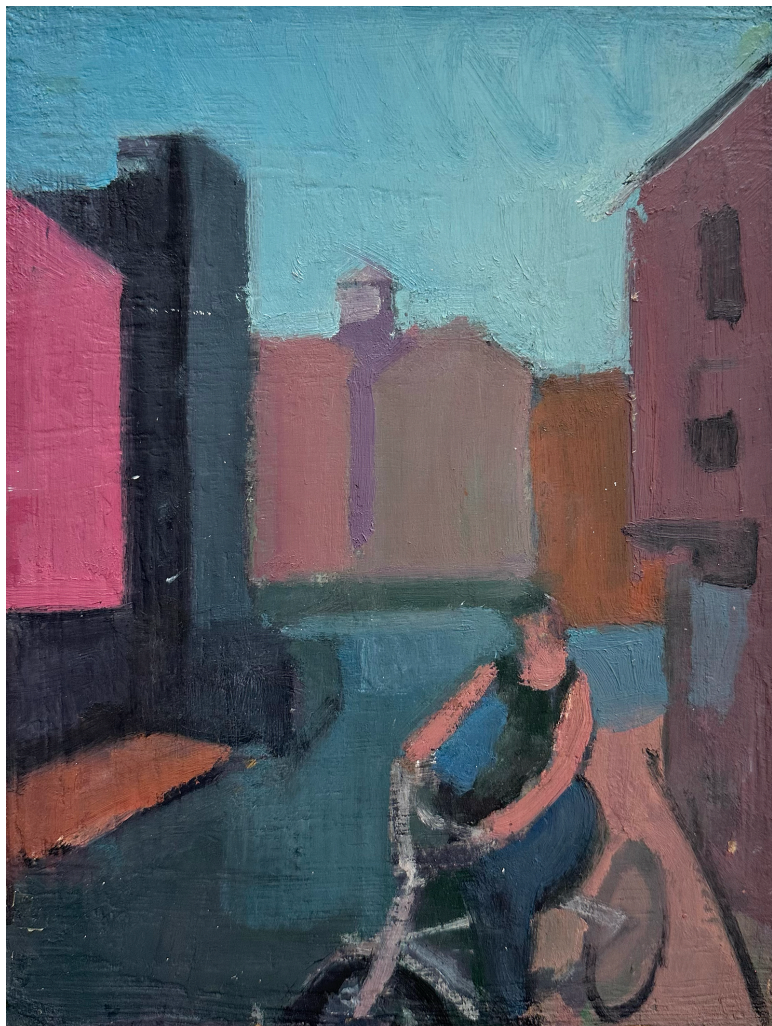
Painting also serves as a space in which Murphy-Torres converses with the art of the past. His art historical interests are an enormous source of energy in his work and his influences are broad, reaching from the Modernists of the mid-twentieth century back into ancient Rome. He looks to the frescoes of Pompeii for answers in his own work—about planes of color, spatial construction, playful figuration, and tactility. His love for built-up, scratched-on surfaces traces to them directly: he strives to make paintings that feel at once ancient and fresh, contemporary in their narrative but enduring in their material presence. He seeks guidance from Matisse on observation and invention and the infinite ways a painter might synthesize them. Matisse's teachings on shape and pattern appear throughout the paintings: the perfect pink gridded floor of *Olivia in Florence*, the single, flat blue shape of the clothing in *The Busker*. Art historical precedent, the accomplishments of those who have

come before him, is not a limitation or a setback, but a rich resource for Murphy-Torres. Skeptical of the more recent societal development of “originality”, his relationship to art history speaks to the kinship he feels with other painters and the value of their contributions to his individual project.

While he looks to artists who long precede him, the paintings on view in *A Dirty Arcadia* are not nostalgic for any bygone era. The very notion of a “dirty arcadia” —an idyllic, fantasy space, but tainted—seeks to affirm the good that presently surrounds us. For Murphy-Torres, heaven is not some unattainable place. He paints to remind himself that there are no better things to see, only better ways of seeing.



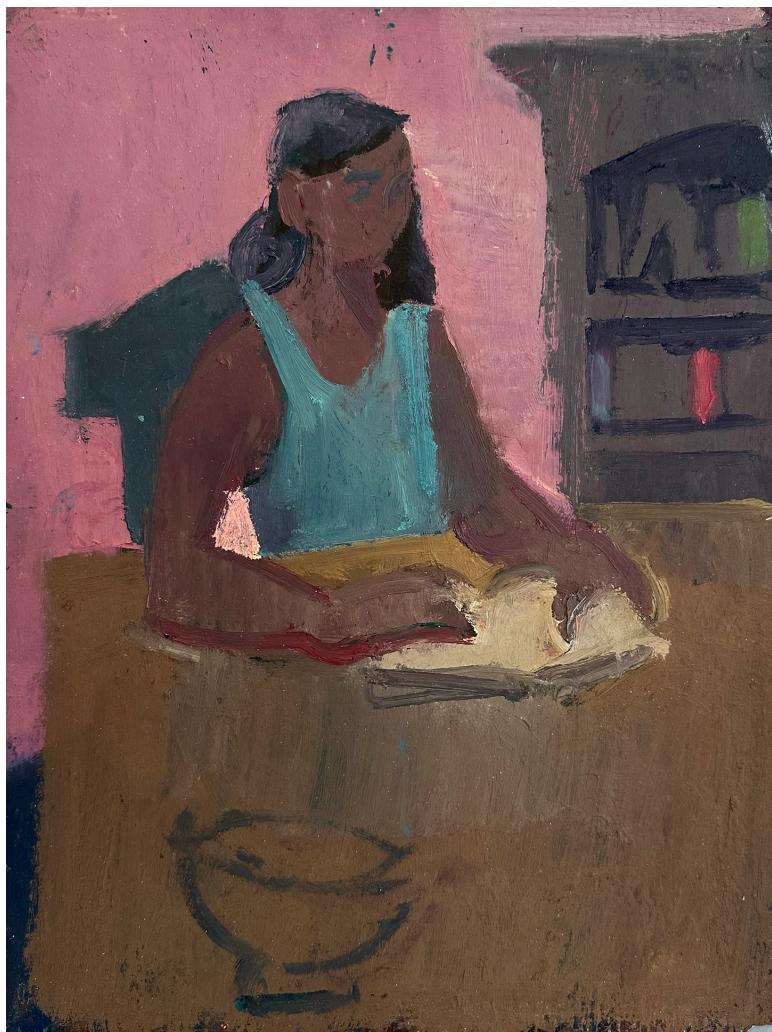
Dog Walker. Oil on canvas, 55" × 37". 2025.



Biker. Oil on panel, 12" × 9". 2024-2025.



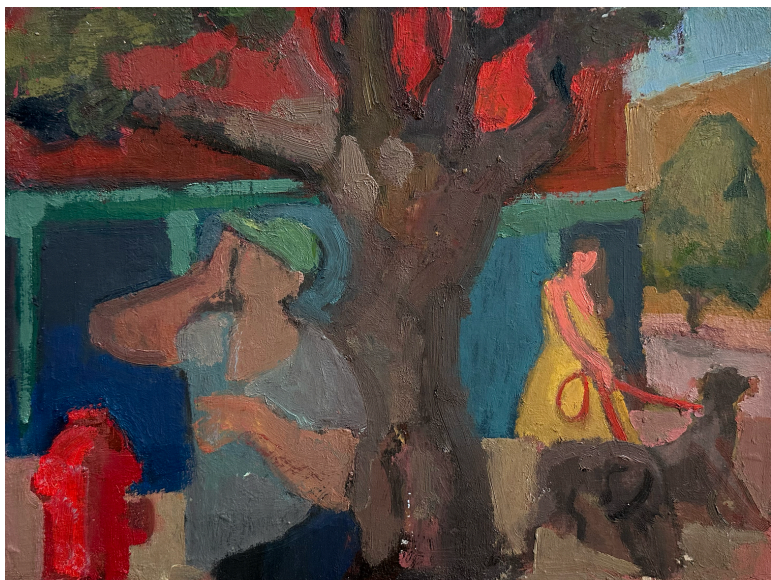
Tucker's Roof. Oil on panel, 12" × 16". 2025.



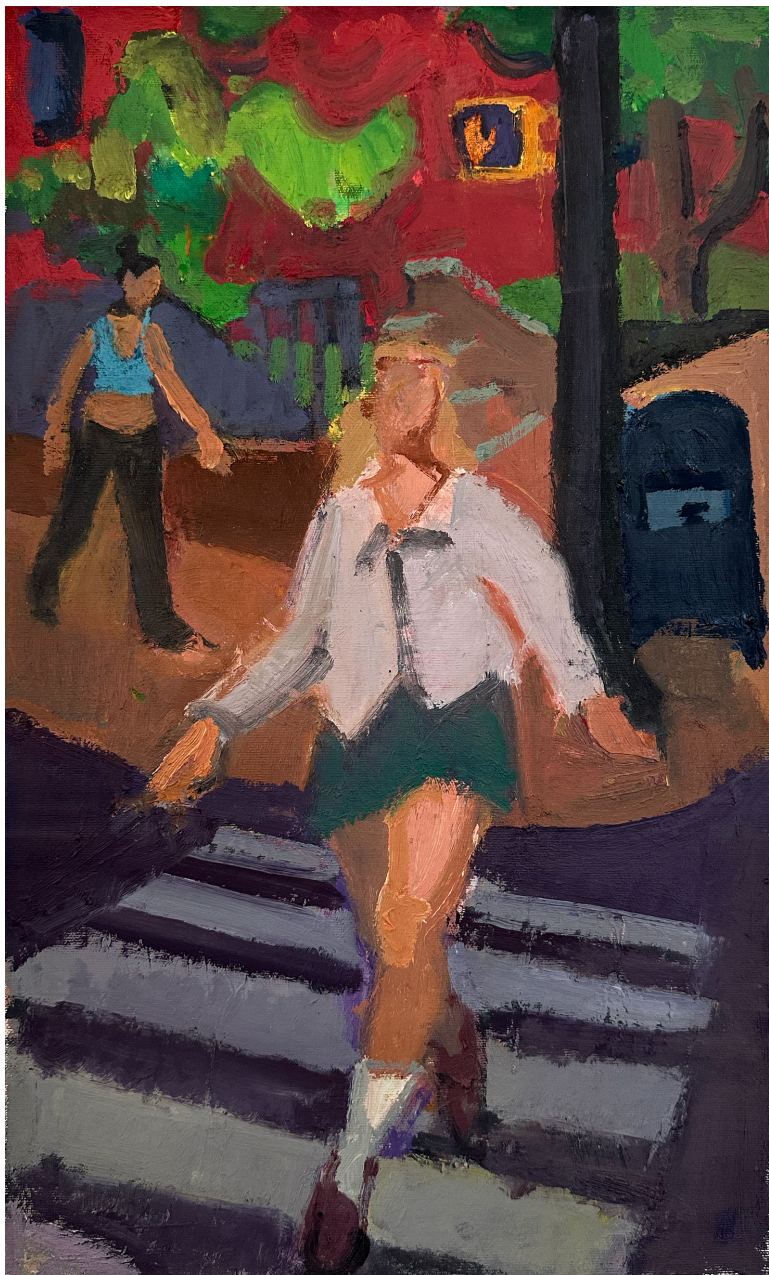
Reading, Interrupted. Oil on panel, 16" × 12". 2025



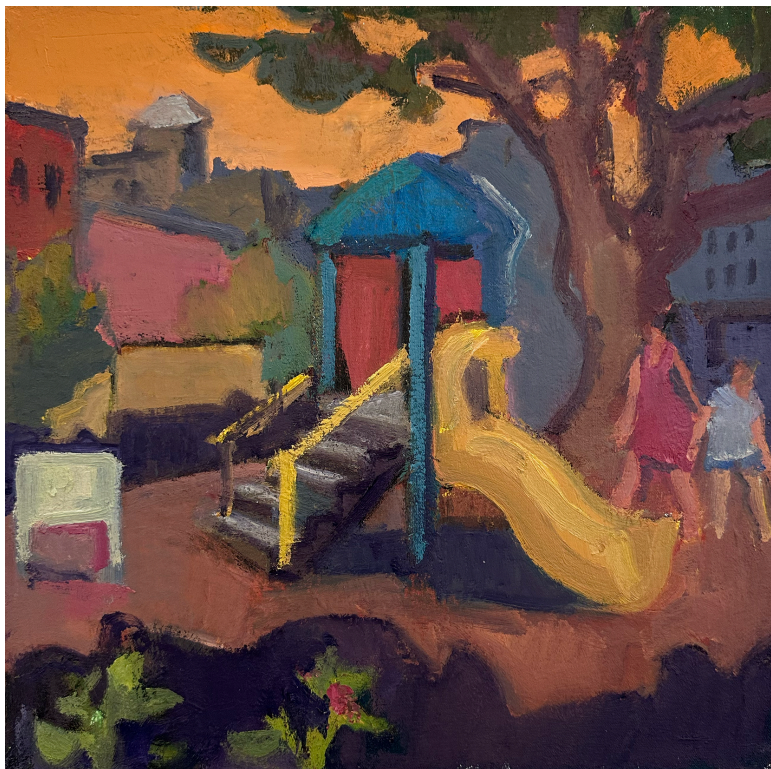
Waiting for the C. 34th Street. Oil on panel, 20" × 24". 2025



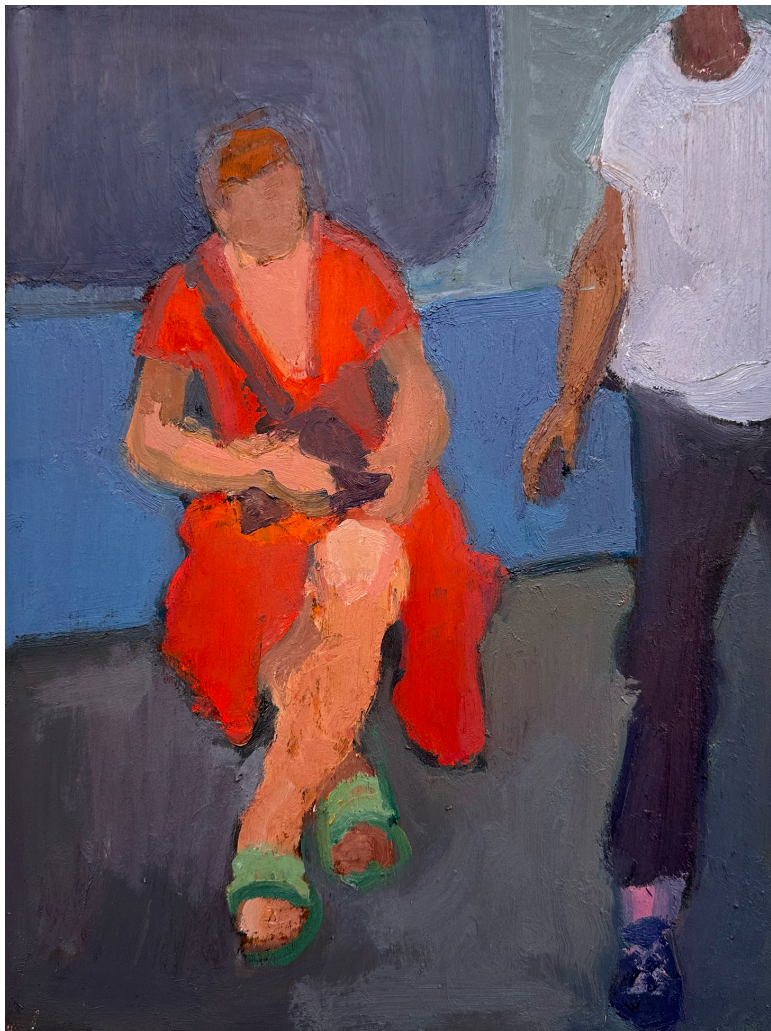
Street Scene I. Oil on panel, 12" × 16". 2025.



Street Scene III. Oil on mounted canvas, 21" x 13". 2025.



West Village Playground. Oil on canvas, 16" × 16". 2025.



The Uptown E. Oil on panel, 16" x 12". 2025.



Blue Dress. Oil on canvas, 10" × 8". 2025.



Playground, Central Park. Oil on panel, 12" × 12". 2025.



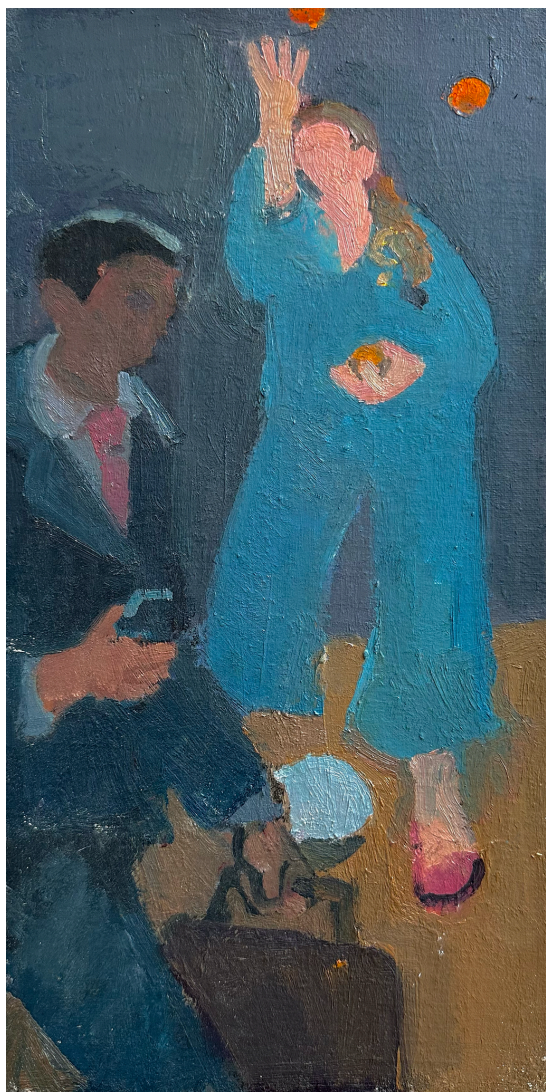
Cafe. Oil on panel, 16" × 12". 2025



Marlboro Man. Oil on mounted canvas, 16" × 12". 2021-2025.



Football Pitch, Forsyth St. Oil on mounted canvas, 16" × 12".
2024-2025.



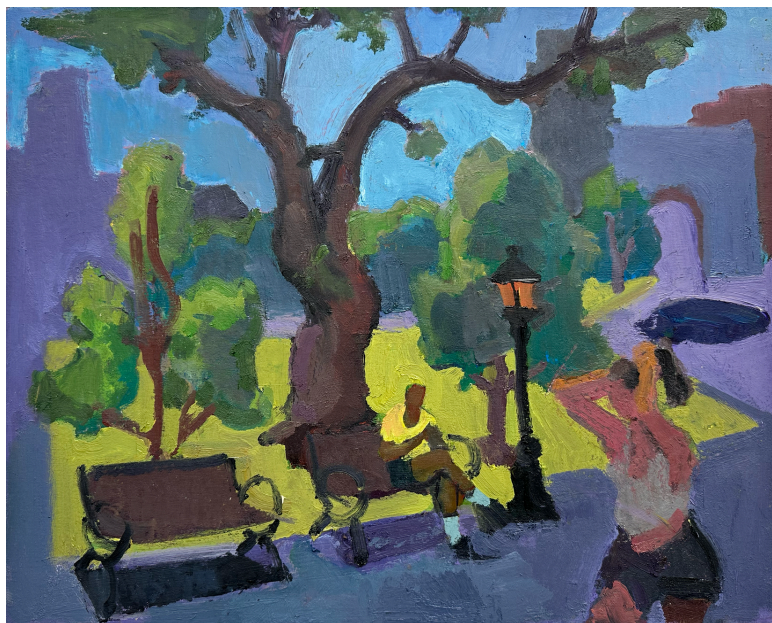
The Busker. Oil on mounted canvas, 16" × 8". 2025.



Olivia in Florence. Oil on mounted canvas, 14" × 18". 2025.



Playground with Smoker. Oil on mounted canvas, 18" × 24".
2025.



Washington Square. Oil on panel, 16" × 20". 2025.

Liam Murphy-Torres

Born 2000 in Boston, USA.

Education

2024-Present, MFA, New York Studio School. New York, NY.

2020,2024, Mount Gretna School of Art. Mount Gretna, PA.

2023, Barnes-DeMazia Certificate, Barnes Foundation. Philadelphia, PA.

2018-2022, BFA, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Philadelphia, PA.

2018-2020, Intermittent Study, Art Students League of New York. New York, NY.

Solo Exhibitions

2025, A Dirty Arcadia. Francis Cook Gallery. Berlin, DE.

Two and Three Person Exhibitions

2025, Invented Landscapes: Sutton Allen, Tucker Love, and Liam Murphy-Torres. FCG/St. Kate. Milwaukee, WI.

Selected Group Exhibitions

2025,

Euphony. THERE Projects. New York, NY.

Annual Juried Exhibition. Bowery Gallery. New York, NY.

To Land, By Sea. Francis Cook Gallery. Portland, ME.

Summer Juried Exhibition. Blue Mountain Gallery. New York, NY.

Signs of Life. Francis Cook Gallery. Berlin, DE.

2024,

Summer Exhibition. Hampstead Art Society. London, UK.

Mt. Gretna Outdoor Art Show. Mt. Gretna, PA.

Mt. Gretna School of Art Student Exhibition. PA Chautauqua Hall of Philosophy. Mt. Gretna, PA.

The Edible Landscape 7. Mt. Gretna School of Art. Philadelphia, PA.

2023,

The Edible Landscape 6. Mt. Gretna School of Art. Philadelphia, PA.

2022,

After Pierre Matisse. Beekman and Mitchell. Philadelphia, PA.

121st Annual Student Exhibition. Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Philadelphia, PA.

Emerging Artists Exhibition. Bob Jackson Galley, The Plastic Club.
Philadelphia, PA.

2021

Art From Art. The School of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.
Philadelphia, PA.

120th Annual Student Exhibition. Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.
Philadelphia, PA.

2020

Mt Gretna School of Art. Oxford Arts Alliance. Oxford, PA.

Mt. Gretna School of Art Student Exhibition. Heights Community Center.
Mt. Gretna, PA.

2019

118th Annual Student Exhibition. Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.
Philadelphia, PA.

2018

Translations. The School of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.
Philadelphia, PA.

The Student Concours. Art Students League: The Phyllis Harriman
Mason Gallery. New York, NY.

Awards and Grants

2024, Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation Grant.

2024, Mt. Gretna School of Art Merit Scholarship

2022, The Irma H. Cook Prize, The August Cook Prize, and the Daniel
Garber Prize for Excellence in Drawing, Pennsylvania Academy of the
Fine Arts.

2021, Packard Drawing Prize (First Place), Pennsylvania Academy of the
Fine Arts

2020, Mt. Gretna Student Show Juror's Selection, Third Place (Awarded
by Clintel Steed)

2020, Mt. Gretna School of Art Merit Scholarship

2019, Hannah Shickley Memorial Prize, Pennsylvania Academy of the
Fine Arts.

2018, Dean's Scholarship Award, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine
Arts.

2018, Presidential Scholarship Award, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine
Arts.

Teaching

2025: Teaching Assistant, New York Studio School Drawing Marathon. New York, NY

2023-2024: Gallery Specialist, The Barnes Foundation. Philadelphia, PA.

2021-Present Independent: Drawing and Painting Workshops. Online.

2021: Faculty, Penn Studio School. Philadelphia, PA.

2021: Summer Academy Teaching Assistant, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Philadelphia, PA.

2018-2020: Teaching Intern, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts High School Program. Philadelphia, PA.

Curation

2025: Curator, Euphony. THERE Projects, New York, NY.

2024: Co-Curator, At the Beginning of Seeing. Oxford Arts Alliance. Oxford, PA.

2023: Co-Curator, The Other Foot Follows: A solo exhibition of works by Ana Neifeld. St. Mark's Square. Philadelphia, PA.

2019: Juror, Shaping the Conversation. School of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Philadelphia, PA.

2019: Co-Curator, Tenderfoot: An Exhibition of New Artists. School of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Philadelphia, PA

Liam Murphy-Torres: A Dirty Arcadia is published by FCG Press,
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Founded in 2025, Francis Cook Gallery is dedicated to championing emerging contemporary artists, with a particular focus on representational painting and practices that extend the formal languages of modernism.

With a presence in New York and Berlin, the gallery operates across digital and physical spaces, developing an immersive online viewing experience, organizing pop-up exhibitions, and participating in international art fairs.

Francis Cook Gallery's program is defined by a commitment to supporting emerging and mid-career artists and engaging collectors with new and rigorous perspectives in contemporary painting.

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