

Monica Majoli

GALERIE BUCHHOLZ

No matter the medium, Monica Majoli's portrayals of men are heavy as hell—emotionally, conceptually—while, oddly, appearing utterly weightless, even angelic. In her crepuscular and modestly sized oil paintings from the 1990s, we see her subjects fuck, suck, choke, and lick—queer and carnal creatures who enjoy one another's bodies, be they limp with pain or taut from ecstasy. In a later series, rendered in luminous watercolor and gouache, they are clad in rubber from head to toe and placed in bucolic settings. Sometimes they are lashed to a tree, or suspended high in the air from an elaborate system of pulleys, cords, and chains. Majoli's pictures feel like transmissions from the afterlife, offering up a heaven of dungeons, slings, and piss parties, where every dimension of gay sex and desire is embraced, exalted—blessed into eternity.

In the accompanying text to Majoli's solo exhibition at Galerie Buchholz, the critic Bruce Hainley wrote: "People still die of AIDS—or AIDS-related complications or illness, as the dispiriting boilerplate has it." For decades, the specter has haunted much of Majoli's output: According to a 2009 interview, she shifted her approach in 1990 to making work that could "deal with gay sexuality and the AIDS epidemic" more explicitly. Yet this show's six large watercolor woodcut transfers on paper—flat, posterized portraits of male centerfolds lifted from vintage copies of *Blueboy*, "the national magazine about men"—returned us to, per Hainley, that "sexy post-Stonewall, pre-AIDS hiatus still known as the '70s."



Monica Majoli,
Blueboy (Roger),
2018, watercolor
woodcut transfer on
paper, 52 × 74¼".

Majoli conjures that halcyon era in evocative ways: Her groovy, soft-focus palette is suffused with rustic greens, limpid golds, sandy apricots, and faded purples, calling to mind swatches of calico bleached by a San Francisco sun, or the colorways of a soigné flat for a "confirmed" bachelor. (I can envision the mustachioed babe of *Blueboy [Ryan]*, 2016, hanging in Sam Wagstaff's penthouse apartment at One Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, perhaps next to a selection from his boyfriend Robert Mapplethorpe's lurid "X Portfolio," 1977–78.) And though Majoli's smooth-skinned beauties appear easygoing, the process by which they were realized is anything but. To make these prints, the artist first tacked a sheet of paper to one side of her wood block. She then loaded up various sections of the board with watercolor and pressed the paper onto her carved surface—as if she were closing the cover of a book over and over again—creating patchwork saturations of color. This repetitive gesture—like anointing skin with a holy balm, or dabbing at a fresh wound—here takes on a pointedly ritualistic air.

Although a sense of the sacred runs throughout Majoli's art, the Buchholz show was not infused with melancholy or loss: The images were warm, sensuous, inviting, *alive*. They could have been plans for a series of stained-glass windows, or vestment patterns commissioned by a cool and kinky church. See *Blueboy (Ted)*, 2019, in which the titular model squats over a vividly floral pillow as he thrusts his bronzed ass into the foreground, asking us to marvel at its otherworldly perfection. And observe *Blueboy (Roger)*, 2018, his tie loosened and dress shirt wide open, sleeping peacefully on an arrangement of pretty textiles. My favorite might have been *Blueboy (Carl)*, 2019, a sculpted dirty blond, generously endowed, who is bathed in an elegantly variegated lavender. He leans against a dusty azure wall, just as stacked as he is, fearlessly cruising the viewer. He is healthy, strong, gorgeous, and full of promise—Saint Sebastian before his arrows, an innocent before the fall.

—Alex Jovanovich