

# frieze

**Review: Justin John Greene**

By Bean Gilsdorf

July 18, 2017



*Justin John Greene, Reflection (detail), 2017, oil on canvas, 104 x 69 cm.  
Courtesy: Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco*

This recent suite of paintings by Justin John Greene is set in the iconic Westin Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles. In Greene's uneasy vision, the hotel – which has been long been identified with the excesses of postmodernist architecture and featured in dozens of films – is the site of various late-night drinking sessions. Executed in 2017, the five canvases depict a rogue's gallery of suspiciously familiar figures cavorting in the hotel's famous revolving rooftop bar.

Though they conduct their revelry within the same plane of space-time, Greene has rendered these party-goers in a delirious tangle of painting styles: the cubism of Pablo Picasso, the neo-expressionism of Philip Guston and the synthetic mannerism of John Currin (to name but a few) all make walk-on appearances. Greene's approach amplifies the helter-skelter atmosphere of each scene, suggesting an intoxicated stumble through art history and 21st century celebrity.



Justin John Greene, *Natasha*, 2017, oil on canvas, 104 x 69 cm. Courtesy: Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco

Jessica Silverman Gallery  
488 Ellis Street, San Francisco, CA 94102  
415.255.9508 • [jessicasilvermangallery.com](http://jessicasilvermangallery.com)

The anarchy of each painting's visual plane underscores the ways the characters appear, self-consciously, as though performing onstage. At first, the tipsy sorority posing for *Natasha* seems amusing. The smiling central character wears a red dress unbuttoned nearly to the waist, revealing her black bra and a silver necklace with a cross. Her two friends on the left and right link their arms with hers, a gesture of support more physical than emotional. The one clutching a fruity cocktail is anti-fashion trendy in a flat green turtleneck and high-waisted jeans. The other, an older woman with whitened teeth and the taunted skin of a plastic surgery aficionado, leers at someone outside the frame. Her affectation of wearing sunglasses indoors at night generates an air of weary stardom.

The collision of recognizable styles fragments the scene into an art-historical pastiche, suggesting that the artist has more to say about the postmodern condition of painting (though the message itself seems muddled) than about celebrity-drenched Los Angeles, or the perils of contemporary Instagram culture, or even this particular group of women who totter drunkenly toward nihilism. The phoniness of his subjects would be palpable even if the scene were rendered in a unified style.



Justin John Greene, *O Buona Ventura!*, 2017, oil on canvas, 183 x 152 cm.  
Courtesy: Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco

Despite the unfettered vice on display, an air of religiosity permeates the scene of *O Buona Ventura!* At 183 x 152 centimeters, it is the largest work in the exhibition, and positioned centrally in the gallery to emphasize its status as a kind of altar panel. Four figures gather mournfully around a man so inebriated that he is halfway to the floor, caught in mid-fall by a laughing comrade. Around this drunken duo, three other figures gather solicitously: a mournful ash-blonde, a Kurt Cobain look-alike and a cubist-faced habitué of Studio 54, circa 1978. The Cobain-esque character pours the dregs from a bottle of red wine, perhaps signaling that the party is reaching its nadir. Once again, the styles don't cohere; Cobain's fingers are rendered with deft skill, while the night-clubber's pink jacket is as flat as paper. More than anything, *O Buona Ventura!* evokes a stylistic jumble sale. But why are we talking about the history of painting when everyone is getting sloshed?

*Reflection* creates a more somber note. In the background, the party rages on; but this time our view of the bacchanal is blocked by a figure standing in front of the bar's window, his darkened silhouette revealing instead the lights of the city on the other side of the glass. The viewer can just make out his performance of contemplation: with arms crossed and gaze cast downward on the city below, the figure's literal emptiness is a rejection of and commentary on the boorishness around him. Greene's ability to quote extensively from art history is impressive, and there is a sly wit to the setting. But it's hard not to leave this clattering party without feeling exhausted.