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"The cat is Punchy, and he is the 'morale' equivalent of the cave miners' canary at the studio—like a mascot. This role warrants his inclusion as an esteemed friend and a symbol for the fraternity."



"The juxtaposition of hiding one's identity while also securing it in a portrait just seems ridiculous and therefore fun to me. I want to retain the sense of wonder that comes with not knowing everything about the subject."



# ART BARR NONE!

Stephen Appleby-Barr's historical-fused artistry is a class act. TEXT: KATIE ADDLEMAN

**S**tephen Appleby-Barr hangs out the window of his Toronto art studio. "Come in," he says, his eyes hidden behind pink plastic sunglasses. There is no door, no stairs. I hold my skirt up and climb through the window.

Inside, Appleby-Barr's work is displayed in various phases of completion: oil paintings of coteries and operatic figures so masterful that the brush strokes are nearly invisible. While his work with his collective, Team Macho, engages with trends in contemporary art—bright colours, simple graphics, the use of text—and is sought after from Toronto to Madrid, Appleby-Barr's solo practice is disinterested in these prevailing aesthetics. His mentors are Velázquez, Sargent and Vermeer, his medium is oils and his inspiration is early-19th-century portraiture. His work is a love letter and lifeline to tradition, and, at 28, he stands poised to remind the art world of the value of its own history.

## HERE'S HIS TAKE ON...

**How he started painting** "The first image I saw that made me think I was really going to dedicate myself to this craft was a Michelangelo, because he's basically the best step between a comic book and a fine art practice. It's a bunch of rippling dudes and pseudo-homoerotic... content. But there's also a grace there that made me

think there's something totally different about the classics." **His chosen material** "Oils were like a huge open door to tradition that I could just walk through and scramble around in. We don't even use them on a large scale anymore because it's too dangerous, too confusing. I have moments where I'm so confused with what's going on with the material that it's a little despairing. Before I was using these synthetic and very forgiving materials that you almost couldn't fuck up, but they were weak colours. With the real ones, you have all the real problems and all the real effect."

**Seeing the masterworks for the first time** "I literally think I clocked 24 hours in the National Gallery and the National Portrait Gallery in London. I could *not* stay away. You know when you see religious paintings of people in rapture? It was a little like that—which was appropriate because those are the kinds of images I was looking at." **Seeking out reference material** "I love to stay within Canadian stuff. It definitely speaks to me more than someone in lederhosen with a war hammer. Maybe it's because I keep repeating to myself 'tradition, tradition, tradition' and my own tradition is hidden in those references. I'm 10th-generation Canadian. I bet there's something I'm related to buried in there." **Up next...** Appleby-Barr's solo show opens at Narwhal Art Projects ([narwhalartprojects.com](http://narwhalartprojects.com)) in Toronto on November 4. □