



Charles Hascoët. *Kobayashi Maru* (2024). Oil on canvas. 95 x 71 inch. Photographer: Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

## CHARLES HASCOËT

### KOBAYASHI MARU

June 1 – July 26, 2024

Perrotin is pleased to announce *Kobayashi Maru*, a new suite of paintings by New York-based Charles Hascoët. Imbued with nostalgia and introspection, his colorful self-portraits place him within pop culture's embrace. Spanning film, anime, and household items, his clear references to these cultural artifacts combined with art historical tropes culminate in domestic still-life scenes and fantastical tableaux.

Do you remember that pungent citrus smell of Calvin Klein One cologne that permeated the 1990s? For New York-based Parisian artist Charles Hascoët, the unisex CK One elicits olfactory memories of hope and innocence. In his debut solo show at Perrotin New York, *Kobayashi Maru*, Hascoët presents Giorgio Morandi-like still lifes featuring frosted glass flasks of CK One, colorful barbell-shaped Listerine bottles, and other curios that are unmistakably of an era and its sensual pleasures promised by the famous motto of "Purity. Unity. Sensuality." And if these indelible mass-market 90s elixirs are not nostalgia-provoking enough, a small 2018 portrait of

the cult underground electronic music artist Bogdan Raczynski wearing the t-shirt "Rave till you cry" will send you back to the 90s "happiness and respect" Rave culture in no time!

Hascoët was raised in Paris and classically trained in painting at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts de Paris, from which he graduated in 2014, a school known for its traditional, rigorous approach. He belongs to a generation of artists—perhaps one of the last—whose fine art education was realized through in-person art critiques and studio visits, with work shared and viewed up close. Painting for Hascoët and his cohort was still painterly, an experience of lingering oil paint smells in messy object-filled ateliers— and not yet flattened by pocket-sized screens, NFTs, and the promiscuous interchangeability of viewing art on social media platforms.

Indeed, Hascoët's paintings cannot be fully appreciated until you have seen the brushstrokes, forms and textures up close. In addition to his desire to follow the tradition of figuration by extending it





Charles Hascoët. *Iceberg* (2024). Oil on canvas. 43 x 55 inch. Photographer: Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

gesturally and abstractly, the art historical references informing his work further announce that Hascoët is a painter's painter. In this body of work alone the attentive viewer will spot references to a wide range of figurative painters such as the 19th century French Romantic Eugene Delacroix's reclining figures and self-portraits to Richard Diebenkorn and David Park's mid-20th century Bay Area Figurative style portraits, still lifes, rich brushstrokes and palettes.

The titular piece of the show, *Kobayashi Maru* (2024) portrays the artist in royal blue pajamas waking up from a nightmare with his bed-as-raft half on ocean water and half on shore, while in the distance an active volcano rages. There is danger, yes, but also escape and diversion, a tension found throughout this new body of work. The title references the famous Kobayashi Maru test which first appeared in the 1982 film *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* and was featured in numerous other *Star Trek* media. The Kobayashi Maru is a training exercise that tests Starfleet Academy cadets by forcing them to make an impossible choice: they are tasked with rescuing a threatened civilian fuel ship, but attempting to do so will provoke fatal enemy attacks on their own vessel. In the film, Captain Kirk concedes that as a cadet he rewrote the rules of the exercise, hacking and reprogramming the simulation to make it possible to save the ship. Kobayashi Maru grew to take on a double meaning in popular parlance, referring both to a no-win situation as well as the incongruous belief that there is always a chance, always a way out.

This palpable tension between peril and escapism, between immediate threat and deferral, is further emphasized in one of the show's largest paintings. In *The Waves* (2024), Hascoët depicts himself floating on troubled waters in a vulnerable wooden boat—

his body as large as the boat itself—seemingly oblivious while playing on his Gameboy. In another painting, *Iceberg* (2024), the artist, bundled in arctic gear, poses reclined on a floating iceberg he shares with a cuddly sleeping polar bear. This composition directly references Nicolas Poussin's *Echo and Narcissus* c.1627—one of Hascoët's favorite paintings—but is clearly updated to denote the dream-like dissociative survival mechanism we use to avoid the reality of this century's extreme climate crisis.

Hascoët approaches painting—as he described to me during a visit to his Bushwick studio in late March—sculpturally. (Unsurprisingly, he began his artistic life as a sculptor.) For the artist, this means that he understands his oil paintings as masses that occupy space, and he forms tableaux that challenge two dimensionality by positioning objects and figures in unexpected and iconoclastic ways. He explained that even the space between the paintings exposed on the wall is important to him. This physicality, this spatial sensitivity, shows up not just in his finished work but also in his process. The artist uses a plumb line as he works, an old-fashioned tool used to manually measure vertical lines and the alignment of elements, determining the center of gravity of an irregular shape. (Hascoët proudly showed off his plumb line—a beautiful yellow gold cord with a curved pointed brass weight attached to it—to me like his prized talisman.) Beyond the world of fine art, plumb lines were used by sailors to measure the depth of a body of water so as to avoid shallow waters and the dangers below. In this way, Charles Hascoët's use of the plumb line operates for me metaphorically and practically as a means to more deeply understand the artist's work. Hascoët is a very physical painter, obsessed with recurring water themes and sculptural bodies, objects and the self in space.



Charles Hascoët. *The Waves* (2024). Oil on canvas. 79 x 75 inch. Photographer: Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

The self-portraits of the artist that dominate his new works in *Kobayashi Maru* are large in scale and may appear primarily autobiographical and self-referential on first view, but they operate beyond solipsism, richly and metonymically, personally and collectively. Their playful and optimistic accessibility is enhanced by references to countless millennial quirks, trends and fetishes: Furbies, the little electronic hamster/owl hybrid toys originally released in 1998; techno DJs; geek and underground culture tropes; *Jaws* (1975); PlayStation; Super Nintendo; *X-Files*; Jean-Claude Van Damme in *Hard Target* (1993) and other retro pop culture references.

Hascoët's imaginary worlds seem to reflect our uncomfortable contemporary moment that is plagued by isolation, irrevocable environmental destruction, doomsday spirals, and collective and generalized anxiety. Yet Hascoët's fantastical utopian scapes and escapes are rendered with much humor and nostalgia. They show him in various stages of repose, unconsciousness and play; but looming insecurity and imperilment are ever-present. These images are not just about external threats but inner psychological struggles as well.

In another painting of this *Kobayashi Maru* series, *Shiatsu* (2024), a ghostly purple blob-like monster with beady red eyes is giving the artist, seen lying relaxed on a watery-blue bed, a gentle massage. This particular creature, what Hascoët described as "an inner demon of [his] darker side," has appeared in several of the artist's past paintings, but what differentiates *Shiatsu* from other works is a tone hinting to resolution: "Here," Hascoët said, "we seem to be getting along quite well."

- Natasha Boas



Charles Hascoët. *Untitled*, from the series "Still Life", (2024). Oil on canvas. 14 x 11 inch. Photographer: Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

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