

Special Report | Art in Transit

Saturday Around Sara D. Roosevelt

By **Oliver Katz**



A journey back across the skinny park brings me to Rivington Street, where Betty Cunningham Gallery is opening *Krazy Paradise*, an exhibition of recent work by John Lees. The oil paintings in this show are textured and unpretentious, imbued with a self-aware sense of humor. Lees doesn't need the pathos other painters rely on to make his paintings visually profound. He's not trying to be a tragic painter, aiming instead for an easygoing ambiguity. My favorites here use rich, bright colors that pierce through the nebulous forms. In *Man in Yellow Pants Sitting in Armchair* (2022), the yellow of the pants, the dark chartreuse of the armchair, and a murky but vivid purple that floats behind the titular man's head each add a jazzy vibrance to the almost humorously banal subject matter. Lees is at his best when his images are discernible but slightly spectral, as in the central figure of *Old Mountebank* (2015/23), who looms in a vague moonlight. It's hard to tell where his robe begins and ends, and his feet are drawn in black crayon several times, as if they are in multiple places at once. Some paintings veer too far into clear-cut figuration, others too far into visual obscurity, but most strike the balance effectively.



John Lees, *Man in Yellow Pants Sitting in an Armchair*, 2022. Oil on wood panel, 14 7/8 x 12 1/8 inches. Courtesy the artist and Betty Cunningham Gallery. Photo Credit: New Document.

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