

OPENINGS: ALEX CARVER

Dean Kissick on Alex Carver



Alex Carver, *The Recipients (wound site)*, 2023, oil on linen, 79 × 79". From the series "A Desired Mesh," 2023.

Oh, wretched ephemeral race . . . Why do you compel me to tell you what it would be most expedient for you not to hear? What is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to be, to be nothing. But the second best for you is—to die soon.
—Silenus, the satyr, to King Midas, who had finally caught him, as retold by Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872)

ALEX CARVER'S RECENT BODY OF WORK, made over the past few years, fixates on the torture of human bodies. His painted figures are always suffering or else inflicting suffering on others, and he appears to revel in these depictions of violence, making them luscious, dreamlike, and seductive by rendering them in lurid Technicolor and by performing acts of violence himself: abstracting the image, obscuring it with distortion and noise, dissolving it in many-layered allover compositions. Historical scenes appropriated from arcane sources are warped, distorted, pulled apart, receding and dissolving into the paint, hard to make out.

Carver's exhibition "Engineer Sacrifice," at New York's Miguel Abreu Gallery, in 2022, comprised larger paintings of men burned alive inside an ancient Greek brazen bull and strung up to die on medieval Catherine wheels, and smaller monochromes of people and animals mummified in peat bogs. The artist reprised the wheel in *The Spinning Wheel (Ribboned Flesh)*, 2023, for a group show at Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler in Berlin this past spring. For Art Basel's Parcour's this June, he'll exhibit a suite of six paintings at the Museum der Kulturen Basel. Titled "A Desired Mesh," 2023, they are based on three grisly illustrations found in a late-fifteenth-century French almanac printed by Guy Marchant, collectively displaying a landscape of Catherine wheels, demons dismembering their victims on tables, and large pots of people being boiled alive. Though Carver's sources are usually obscure, one recent piece, *The Painting Flays Itself*, 2023, which debuted at Frieze Los Angeles, remakes a very famous painting: Titian's *The Flaying of Marsyas*, ca. 1570s, a rendering of the satyr Marsyas, having lost to Apollo in a competition over who could play music most beautifully, hung upside down as Apollo skins him alive, brutally torturing the man-goat for his lack of artistic brilliance. Carver had this image in mind as he made his "Engineer Sacrifice" show, and after that exhibition ended, he decided to attempt his own version. Both Carver and Titian use the flaying of the body as a metaphor for painting. Kneeling down and bending over, Apollo holds a knife that resembles a brush to the satyr's chest, as if creating the image in which he appears, and spills blood on the ground that is reminiscent of pigment. In Titian's original, King Midas—often thought to be a self-portrait—watches closely from the right-hand side of the canvas. (In Carver's version, he does not resemble the artist.) In both, the illusory space of the composition is shallow and flattened, the interlocking arrangement of limbs suggesting a many-armed cyborg dismembering the painting from within.



View of "Alex Carver: Engineer Sacrifice," 2022, Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York. From left: *Breaking Wheel Attenuations*, 2022; *Brazen Bull with Medusa (LIDAR)*, 2022; *Brazen Bull*, 2022.

The artist is cast as a torturer, mutilating his subjects but also mutilating the medium of the painting. While Titian's Marsyas gazes out at us with an eerily calm expression of resignation, in Carver's version his eyes are closed and he appears quite blissful, ecstatic even, as if lost in a masochistic reverie at his own disassembly. Carver takes pleasure in tearing apart the

conventions of figuration, an act of mimesis, and contrasting it with what he calls “the figural,” the expression of concepts and experiences through forms that are not wholly abstract.

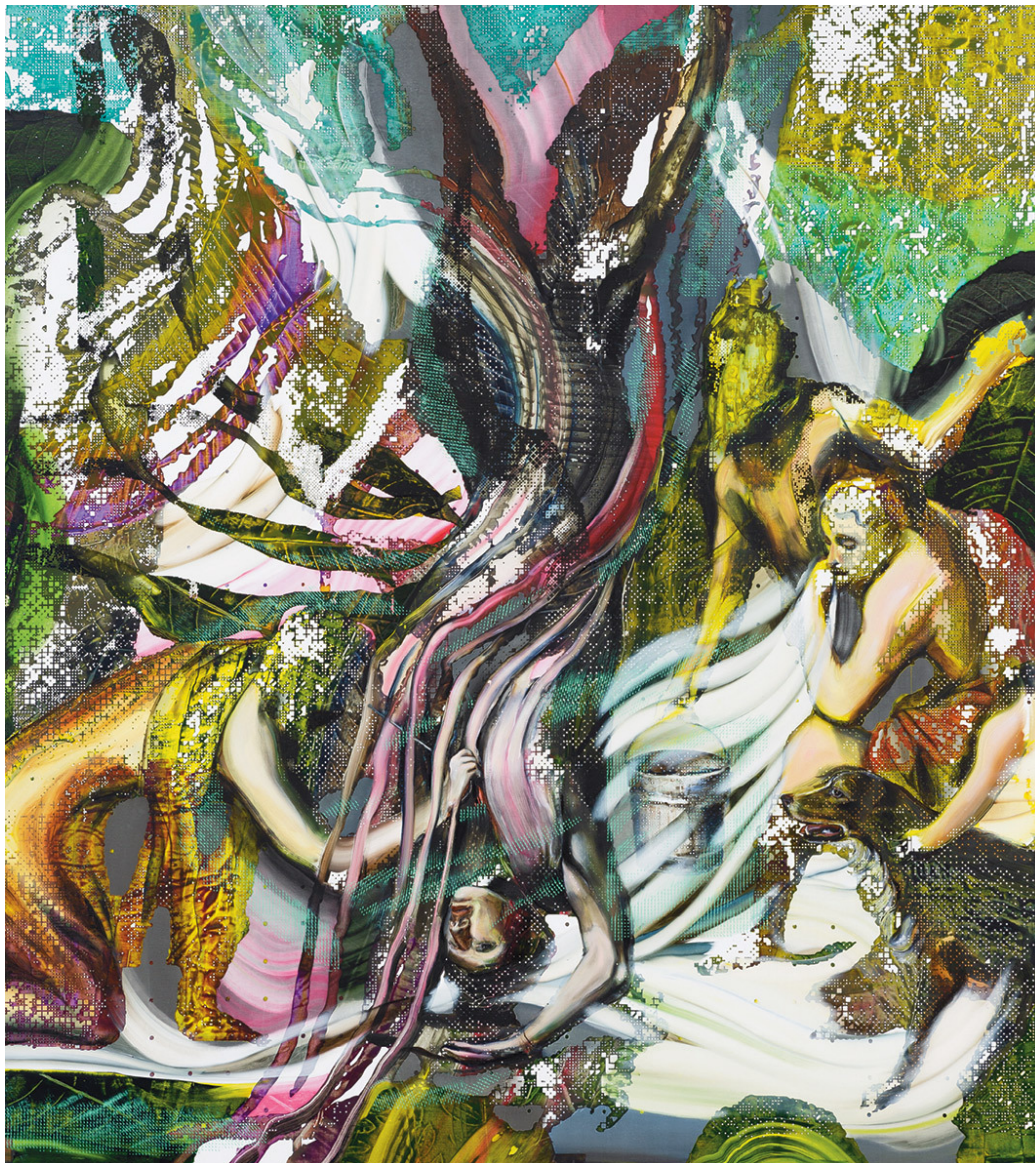
Carver’s recent paintings suggest biological matter sublimated into the virtual, figures opened up into ideas, and the confluence of the historical with the sci-fi present.



Alex Carver, *The Spinning Wheel (Ribboned Flesh)*, 2023, oil on linen, 88 1/4 × 78".

IF FOR CARVER, figuration and the figural form an opposition, these terms resolve to form a third: *membrane*. “Painting’s sensitivity (its ability to catch and restructure experience),” the artist has written, “is analogous to our largest and most outwardly facing organ, the skin.” Examples of membranes include *The Flaying of Marsyas* and Caravaggio’s two versions of *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (1601 and 1602, respectively), in which the apostle Thomas pokes his finger through Christ’s flesh and also, it appears, the surface of the canvas. Today, Carver is finding new ways of composing membranes of his own.

When an object is scanned in three dimensions, it is translated into a “point cloud” (a set of data points in virtual space). This is another way of skinning a body and reconfiguring it as an engineered representation. Carver frequently begins his works by converting his appropriated two-dimensional imagery into a pixelated outline that resembles a point cloud, then converting that into a vector file and printing it as a stencil on a vinyl plotter. Using these stencils is how he adds the mark of the machine into his paintings. For the recent “Desired Mesh” series, he breaks down his source material further: After printing it out, he cuts and expands it into a honeycombed paper mesh before photographing the picture and using that photograph to generate his flattened point cloud. Carver’s interventions give a rhythmically structured accordion effect whereby bodies appear to be unraveling and the canvas unweaving itself. The act of cutting the image into a grid to stretch it out, similar to the way that plastic surgeons perform meshed skin grafts (or schoolchildren make paper chains of angels at Christmas), becomes the compositional structure and the conceptual strategy for making the images into a malleable skin.



Alex Carver, *The Painting Flays Itself*, 2023, oil on linen, 86 1/2 × 79".

Carver also uses the more traditional technique of frottage, which he sees as a primitive form of

scanning technology. Working on unstretched canvases hung on a wall, he places objects behind the canvas—such as large leaves, burlap, vinyl-cut patent diagrams for medical equipment, or his own hand-sculpted foamcore reliefs of bog bodies—and takes rubbings with plaster knife and paint. Next, he paints details in by hand, giving features to his figures. Mixing and combining these strategies of mark-making, grafting them onto one another, and in so doing tearing apart his representations before stitching them back together, Carver breaks down the figurative into the figural and reconstitutes both as a membrane. Only after he's finished is the canvas stretched over its frame and made into a completed object, the skin pulled finally over the skeleton.

The point-cloud aesthetic that is the foundation of Carver's recent paintings suggests biological matter sublimated into the virtual, figures opened up into ideas, and the confluence of the historical with the sci-fi present. The way it feels to be alive has changed a great deal over the past decade: The ways we represent ourselves and communicate, and the places our identities reside, are increasingly located in images in digital space. "The figurative painter," Carver writes, "must reckon with the material body as something that was once central to identity but may soon only function as a form of frailty and finitude that is eclipsed by a post-human, post-body form of being in the world." Bodies are becoming dematerialized, and this is the perfect time to find new ways of representing the human (and inhuman) figure.



Titian, *The Flaying of Marsyas*, ca. 1570s, oil on canvas, 86 5/8 × 80 5/8".

Much of Carver's fascination with Marsyas, and with ways of tormenting painted bodies, is a response to the proliferation of figurative painting in recent art and to the failure of such work, often executed as a pastiche of modernist styles, to express how our experiences of inhabiting our bodies, and our notions of selfhood, have changed and are continuing to change. (He has said before that he sees the frottaged mummies in his work as emblems of "zombie figuration.") Somewhat daringly, he challenges this tendency with historical appropriations of his own, but rather than draw from modernist sources, he appropriates images that are centuries old. Carver takes on his peers by looking farther into the past, by exploding and expanding the appropriative act to weird and psychedelic extremes, and, perhaps, by invoking a time when the body was understood to be more porous, fluid, and fungible. He suggests that the twenty-first-century posthuman body, which can be transformed in so many ways, has a greater affinity with the medieval Christian and ancient mythological body than it does with a post-Enlightenment or modern one.

Marsyas, let's not forget, was skinned alive for his hubris, for thinking he could outplay the god of music and dance on his double-reed *aulos*. He lost his life but was also flayed into a painting and a membrane, and in his last moments, with his last breaths, as he joined biological reality with the world of pure concepts, he would have felt both flowing together through the bloody lacerations of his body, his eyes either wide open or closed.

Dean Kissick is a writer, a contributing editor at Spike Art Magazine, and the host of the monthly "Seaport Talks" series in New York.



Alex Carver, *The Skin Bridges (donor site)*, 2023, oil on linen, 79 × 79". From the series "A Desired Mesh," 2023.