

Warsaw



Louis Fratino, *Coming back from the beach*, 2019, manganese oxide on terra-cotta, 15 3/4 × 13 3/8 × 2 3/4".

Louis Fratino

ANTOINE LEVI

Albissola Marina, on the Italian Riviera, has a near-mythic reputation in the history of ceramics. An important center of production since the fifteenth century, the Ligurian town became a hub for avant-gardists in the twentieth century, when the likes of Lucio Fontana, Asger Jorn, Wifredo Lam, and Piero Manzoni came to it and created sculptures from clay. Albissola—with its many in situ examples of radical and traditional pottery—recently provided a change of scenery for the New York-based American painter Louis Fratino, who spent a month in residency at the local ceramic center Studio Ernan Design.

The fourteen small-scale terra-cotta sculptures and bas-reliefs Fratino produced in Albissola reprise subjects and themes familiar from his largely autobiographical oeuvre of

paintings and drawings. Among the mostly, though not entirely, young male subjects treated in clay and exhibited under the title “*Nudissima*” were a man holding a puppy, bathers, lovers, subway commuters, and the artist’s family. If tackling three dimensions presented a challenge for Fratino, whose paintings and drawings feature Cubist perspectives and Fauvist areas of flat colors, the results don’t show it. Nothing here felt labored. On the contrary, the pinches, thumb marks, and finger smears that remained visible in the fired terra-cottas added another level of intimacy to Fratino’s characteristically frank yet erotic depictions of love, desire, and communion.

While his paintings tend to feature bright, contrasting colors, Fratino’s sculptures flaunt neutral earth tones. Forgoing glaze, the artist uses manganese oxide, which he has applied in powder form and as a wash, to sparingly decorate his ruddy terra-cotta figures with umber-colored masklike faces, individuated strands of hair, and well-defined musculatures. Of the three pedestal-mounted works on view, two—*Couple* and *Dance in shower* (all works 2019)—depicted a romantic embrace. To make sense of these intertwined naked bodies, the viewer has to consider each sculpture in the round. Fratino encourages this orbital dance by ensuring that every vantage point provides just enough visual information to keep things interesting, but never so much as to suggest a true frontal view.

By nature, of course, bas-reliefs are explicitly frontal. But even in these wall-mounted works, Fratino emphasized volume. Compositional elements—a foot, a head, or butt cheeks, for example—regularly extended beyond the reliefs’ rectangular perimeters. *Coming back from the beach* depicted the interior of a subway car in which two men cuddle while holding on to a central pole that breaches the picture plane to create a three-dimensional obstacle between the viewer and the couple. If this work’s New York setting—filled with well-observed details such as an empty McDonald’s bag on the floor and a window view of the A train’s flickering lights passing on the opposite track—recalls the work of Red Grooms, its composition has a more universal spiritual connotation. From the top of the pole, the subway’s ceiling sprouts up and out into real space, forming a protective canopy over the amorous couple. This is a gay Adam and Eve under the tree of knowledge.

Other works referencing Christian iconography in this exhibition included *Fratinos*, a

family portrait depicting the artist and his four siblings snuggling under a blanket while their parents lovingly gaze down on them. This tender image is a direct reference to a Romanesque carving of the magi by the twelfth-century French sculptor Gislebertus in which the three wise men sleep together under an angel's protective eye. Similarly, the sleeping couple in *Saturday*, who spoon with their heads bowed, ankles crossed, and arms reaching toward either side of the composition, suggests a double crucifix. More than Albissola's modern legacy of experimental pottery, the region's strong Catholic iconography apparently has had a great influence on Fratino's sculptural debut.

— Mara Hoberman

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