



Jean Claracq, *Dikhotomia*, 2021, oil on wood, 33 7/8 × 51 1/4".

Jean Claracq

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Jean Claracq paints contemporary leisure scenes with the style, technique, and skill of a Renaissance master. His subjects are not religious or royal but do represent a kind of millennial nobility. The stylish young men who populate his oeuvre are Instagram influencers, whose posts the artist pilfers to create digital collages and, finally, meticulous oil-on-wood paintings. Claracq renders his subjects and their twenty-first-century accoutrements (smartphones, baseball caps, laptops, running shoes, sports cars) with great detail and without visible brushstrokes. In addition to referencing the rise of portraiture during the Renaissance, Claracq's paintings include quotes from archetypal illusionistic landscapes by the likes of Lucas Cranach the Elder, Hans Memling, and Joachim Patinir.

Of the eight paintings presented in Claracq's recent exhibition, three were no larger than a passport photo. Their small format, polished surfaces, and luminous quality recalled handheld smartphone screens, but these paintings also referenced fifteenth- and sixteenth-century miniatures and illuminated manuscripts. In *Unknown man against a background of flames* (all works cited, 2021), a three-quarter view of a man's face under a black

baseball cap and white hood appears before an orangey blaze. Less than two inches high, the painting boasts remarkable detail, like individual eyebrow hairs, which Claracq painted with the aid of a magnifying glass. This painting is based on a fiery portrait by famed miniaturist Nicholas Hilliard, Queen Elizabeth I's favorite court painter. Claracq has updated the subject's appearance while maintaining the original painting's sense of preciousness and furtive passion. Titled after a hookup app, another tiny painting, *Grindr*, is a close-up of a kneeling man's foot, knee, and clasped hands. Perhaps this potential match has just finished tying his shoe, but the subject's pose brings to mind Renaissance donor portraits. Claracq also riffs on the treatment of luxurious textiles in such paintings with his own masterful depiction of a striped sport sock and a black-on-black sneaker. The surrounding leafy ground cover, which includes individuated blades of grass, calls to mind the meticulously rendered greenery in works attributed to an anonymous fifteenth-century Netherlandish painter known as the Master of the Embroidered Foliage.

Claracq's larger paintings are no less detailed and afford the artist more room to play. *Dikhotomia* (comparatively monumental at roughly thirty-four by fifty-one inches) features two young men preparing to smoke a joint by an open window that overlooks a parking lot, low-rise buildings, a construction site, and, beyond, a grassy field that eventually meets rolling hills and Brutalist towers. Past this urban sprawl the landscape morphs into a fairy-tale fantasy. Using cool blues, Claracq has treated the upper part of this painting to a background of rocky mountains that rise out of a misty sea before disappearing again into low-hanging clouds. This type of imaginary panorama, sometimes described as *Weltlandschaft* (world landscape), is yet another ode to sixteenth-century painting, notably landscapes by Patinir and, more famously, Pieter Bruegel.

In the upper middle of *Dikhotomia*, the sublime Renaissance vista is visible through rectangular windows, but these glimpses might easily be mistaken for a row of framed paintings hanging inside an apartment. In addition to confusing reality and representation, Claracq creates a *mise en abyme*: Landscapes appear within landscapes, paintings within paintings. Along the same windowed wall, Claracq has painted two pictures above a dining-room table. These feature chivalric imagery from Barthélemy d'Eyck's fifteenth-century illuminated manuscripts for the King René d'Anjou's allegorical *Le livre du cœur d'amour épris* (The Book of the Love-Smitten Heart). With similar art-historical Easter

eggs sprinkled throughout, Claracq's deceptively straightforward depictions of contemporary youth culture are themselves ripe for intertextual and iconographic analysis.

— *Mara Hoberman*

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