

Right: *Keg Party Casanova*, 2021, by Karyn Lyons



ART

NEW ROMANCE

Contemporary painters are embracing modern love. *Louis Wise* couples up

The art of Karyn Lyons takes us back to a horribly familiar place. In the *New Yorker's* paintings, teenage girls embrace boys, or even ghosts, or sit longing in their bedrooms for love. Luscious and mysterious, sinister and romantic, these pictures are exorcisms of desire – of those days when all you could do was sit by the phone and hope you didn't miss the call.

"It's taken me this long to look back on those moments without shame or embarrassment or guilt," admits Lyons, now in her fifties. "I'm even embracing, now, the power those moments had. It's taken me a long time not to say: 'Oh, *God*. Remember that keg party?'"

Lyons is just one artist exploring ideas of love, intimacy and romance. Doron Langberg, about to take over Victoria Miro's booth at this month's Frieze LA, has become a star with his rich, frank depictions of queer relationships, as has Brooklyn-based Jenna Gribbon, who often paints her wife. Xinyi Cheng's pairings interact in starkly tonal landscapes, while

GaHee Park plays a more surrealist game.

"IT'S TAKEN ME THIS LONG TO LOOK BACK WITHOUT SHAME"

"I drew a lot as a child, and I was interested in images of the body and sexuality," says Seoul-born,

Montreal-based Park, who has a solo show at Tokyo's Galerie Perrotin until 25 February (paintings from \$35,000). "I'd make drawings of couples kissing and touching, or of fragmented body parts, then I would glue the drawings between two sheets of blank paper so adults didn't see them... I guess it's common, kids with Catholic upbringings, such as myself, getting naughty." It was entirely natural from an artist's perspective too. "Love and sexuality are sources of very strong and primitive emotions – they have been inspiring artworks for centuries."

Yet they've not been as prevalent recently as you might expect. For one thing, it's a minefield getting it right. "Love, sex and intimacy are fraught with all kinds of social and political issues," says Park. "If a contemporary artist were to ignore them and paint a simple scene of sex, the

intention may seem kitschy or a cop-out.” They can also not fit into current thinking, says Katerina Gregos, artistic director of the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens. In a show she has curated there, *Modern Love (or Love in the Age of Cold Intimacies)*, on until 28 May, artists explore the topic in the age of the internet.

“Today, issues of love mostly reside in the domain of commercial culture, in soap operas and romantic novellas,” says Gregos. “The art world is preoccupied with appearing serious and intellectually sophisticated – as if love does not merit serious intellectual interrogation.”

Langberg agrees. “Things that are beautiful and effeminate and sensitive, and are about feelings and desires, are kind of looked down on,” says the Israeli-born, Brooklyn-based painter. “For years, I really tried to fight against it – like it’s schmaltzy or kitschy. It’s uncool. But I think that the response to my work began to transform once I really leaned into it.”

LANGBERG HAS, IN FACT, gained huge traction for his often highly explicit portrayals of lovers and friends, with prices for his last show in London reaching \$80,000. Both this subject matter and his way of painting are “kind of indulgent and romantic”, he admits (he is fond of exuberant colours, with a special thing for

the rainbow palette). “It’s something I think about a lot when I wonder, ‘Is this too cheesy?’ Would it be less cheesy if it was an austere rectangle on top of another? Maybe. But is it worth it?”

Often the reaction to such works is visceral. “I had a studio visit the other day from a middle-aged man,” says Lyons. “He saw a picture and said, ‘I can feel how that felt.’ It was a couple embracing. That was the

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best thing anyone could say.” Similarly, a collector once told Langberg that his works felt “real”. “To me, that’s the most worthwhile endeavour,” he says. “I’m not that

interested in creating something that exists in an ivory tower that very few people can relate to... I’m as basic as anyone else!”

Langberg always paints people from his life, but doesn’t want to be too specific on details. Xinyi Cheng tends to do the same because “I think I have a fair amount of understanding of how they would talk, how they would move their bodies, and what even the tiniest frown could possibly mean,” says the Wuhan-born painter, who just had a solo show at New York’s Matthew Marks.

The first painting she made exploring intimacy dates from 10 years ago, when she was a student in Baltimore. Two friends of hers who were dating told her they’d just got a haircut. “They meant that they went to the barbershop together, but in my head I imagined a picture of them, being naked and cutting each other’s hair,” says Cheng, who promptly painted it. “Since then, I have painted different intimate situations.”

She has mixed feelings about romance, though. “It’s kind of old-fashioned,” she levels. To her, there isn’t an exact translation of it in Chinese. However, even she can’t deny that it has influenced some of her paintings – and her life. “At moments, when I have a walk with my lover by the Seine at sunset, the idea of romance is still very present.” ■HTSI

Above left: *The Haircut*, 2014, by Xinyi Cheng. Left: *Couple in a Field*, 2022, by GaHee Park. Below: *Friends*, 2022, by Doron Langberg