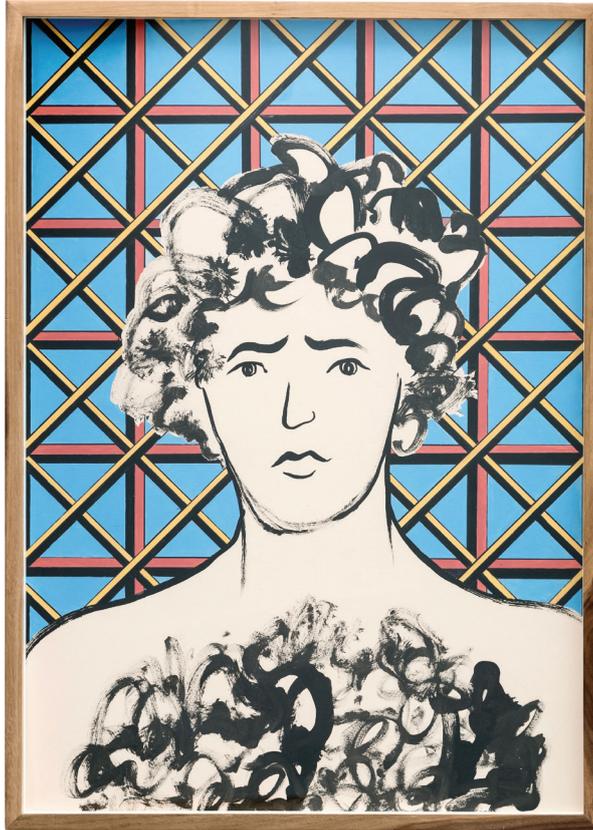


# Luke Burton

It's hard to be ambivalent in the face of such abundance.



*Ambivalent Man (surfer) in Ornamental Void II, 2017*  
Indian ink, acrylic and emulsion on botanical Somerset paper  
71 x 49 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and Bosse & Baum

Next double page spread: *Untitled (Peacock and Balls), 2018*  
Oil, acrylic, ink, emulsion on birch plywood, walnut (front)  
216 x 175 cm  
Courtesy of the artist, Bosse & Baum and Damian Griffiths

## **Ambit: Who is the ambivalent man?**

Luke Burton: Ambivalent Man is a recurring male figure I have been drawing and painting for the last four years. He represents a particular form of idealism inasmuch as he is not an observed figure, but neither is he rendered exactly the same. This results in differences within his features, from face to face, that suggest potentially subtle character differences. When seen together, they have a surprisingly diverse set of expressions, despite having essentially the same constituent parts, drawn in the same way. They can look alternately hunky, fay, weather-beaten; boyish; seductive; abject even. His 'ambivalence' is signalled primarily in one aspect of his facial expression: the furrowed brow making a frown. But this can easily be read as confusion too or an expression of anxiety. I called him Ambivalent Man because I liked the idea of a kind of cartoon super-hero, or an anti-hero, whose primary quality, their 'super power' would be their own ambivalence. Finally, he is someone whose death might be imminent, or might have even happened already. In the last solo show he was seen being commemorated on oversized war or sporting medals. So his very ontology is also the subject of ambivalence!

## **Ambit: There is an interesting contrast between laboured decoration and quick gestures of the male figure in your work. Can you discuss the oppositional merging of formal and figurative concerns?**

LB: With works up until last year like *Ambivalent Man (Surfer) in Ornamental Void*, there was a clear distinction between the background and foreground in terms of style and gesture. The male figures were drawn with ink, quickly, but precisely, and then the more labour intensive patterns would be painted in the background. Whilst the figures are drawn with an expressive, fluid and loose hand, there is still control through embodied repetition. They are 'one shot' pictures in as much as I cannot go back and change the image once it is drawn given the indelible nature of ink on paper.

With the most recent body of works in my solo show *Becoming Sweet New Styles* at Bosse & Baum Gallery I had a wider spectrum of painterly gestures that suggested different attitudes to process and subject. As you say, there are passages of tightly rendered, graphic decorative tile patterns or borders, alongside more mannered, expressive, loose mark-making. I didn't want there to be a direct contrast between the decorative patterning and the rendering of the male figures, as in previous works.



**Ambit: Why did you choose to hang the paintings of the hairy torso men at such an unusual height in your solo show *Becoming Sweet New Styles* at Bosse and Baum, London?**

LB: When I got the work to the gallery I quickly realised that because of the height of the screens, the smaller works would, if hung at conventional height, interrupt the sight lines of the larger works. It broke up a particular rhythm I wanted to have with the trio of screens, and I didn't want to have the paintings hidden, as it felt that this would have created too strong a narrative of undressed figures behind 'dressing' screens. I also realised that by placing them higher they quickly became functionally more decorative, less like paintings you would address individually. They took on an ornamental function within the architecture of the space, hung high at regular intervals, and started to become jewel-like objects within the environment.

**Ambit: The screen paintings in the same show were also full of contradictions: peacocks next to footballs. For you, the artist, are these celebratory symbols or questioning tools?**

LB: They are celebratory symbols being used as questioning or propositional tools for sure - one in aid of the other. In the screens you have symbols of power, celebration, triumph, excess: overflowing fountains, huge over-grown grapevines, a vast bunch of flowers, a fully spread peacock, war or sporting medals. To take each example in turn, the grapes in one screen are excessive to a monstrous degree: they cramp the male figure in the picture plane, like a burden of abundance. The fountains in another screen are sprouting large jets of water, yet are modest in scale and slim, sitting slightly squished within each panel, awkward even, far from the classical ideal in terms of proportion. The flowers' stems are excessively long, but spindly, and instead of sitting in plump resplendence, droop into an arch across the concerted panels. The peacock's feathers, although spread fully and projecting out impressively, also appear somewhat bare, with the negative space around the 'eyes' suggesting a lack of fullness. The footballs also suggest a similar logic: they are a tower or totem of sorts, stacked on top of one another, but their hexagonal patterning, whilst legible enough to read as a cartoonish football, is warped and deflated. I am also interested in the deathly quality of a language of decoration and ornament. Growing up in London, I was surrounded by Victorian and specifically Edwardian domestic architecture, where there was the necessity for ornamented facades and interiors, and yet so often it was of a variety that was reduced, industrialised, and stripped. I think these passages of architecture hold a kind of charged emptiness – or a quiet air of desperation that I find compelling and strange and beautiful.



Installation views of *Becoming Sweet New Styles*, 2018  
Bosse & Baum, London  
Courtesy the artist, Bosse & Baum and Damian Griffiths



*Torso I*, 2018  
Oil, acrylic, ink, emulsion on birch, gold paint, plywood, walnut  
66 x 52 cm  
Courtesy of the artist, Bosse & Baum and Damian Griffiths



*Torso II*, 2018  
Oil, acrylic, ink, emulsion on birch, gold paint, plywood, walnut  
66 x 52 cm  
Courtesy of the artist, Bosse & Baum and Damian Griffiths



**Ambit:** Your screen paintings are two-sided with something to view on the front and back. Is this related to your own ambivalence about the forms of painting and sculpture and the reason for blurring the lines?

LB: I loved the idea with the screens you can have a front and a back to a painting, that this could establish a front-stage and a back-stage dynamic within the gallery space; that you could address each side with equal importance and that they would be dependent on each other too. I have always been interested in imagery considered outside or next to the 'main image or content' like a border in illuminated manuscripts; the doodles on the covers of exercise books; the backs of byzantine panel paintings. They set up a dialogue between what is usually considered the site of 'content' or 'subject' and its other. The screens allow me to play out this dialogue – increasingly so as the 'backs' of them become evermore loaded with imagery and pattern.

**Ambit:** What are you working on now?

LB: I'm preparing for some group exhibitions and three residencies next year, but in a measured and calm way, which makes for a welcome change. I am working on several new bodies of work that may or may not be shown together. Some medium-sized panel paintings that I am calling 'swatches' – simple patterned tiles painted on multiple panels of the same dimensions. Some rougher, looser oil paintings of various subjects; some small-scale 'micro sculptures' that are based on the language of jewellery which will be shown on fabric-lined panels – part New Bond Street/WH Samuels window display, part Archeological museum vitrine, part market stall costume jewellery stand. I'm also working on some 'snooker table' paintings which are very flat and graphic, painted as if seen from a bird's-eye view. I'm really enjoying having these different styles of work sitting together in the studio concurrently.

*Untitled (Peacock and Balls), 2018*  
Oil, acrylic, ink, emulsion on birch plywood, walnut (back, detail)  
216 x 175 cm

Courtesy of the artist, Bosse & Baum and Damian Griffiths

Luke Burton (b. 1983, London) lives and works in London. He studied BA Hons at Chelsea College of Art and Design, London (2001 – 2005) and MA at the Royal College of Art, London (2011-2013). Recent exhibitions include: *Becoming Sweet New Styles* (solo exhibition), Bosse & Baum, London (2018); *Sweep / Landskip – Kinokino Kunstal*, Stavanger, Norway (2018); *Granpalazzo* (solo exhibition), Ariccia, Rome (2017) and *Waves*, Turf Projects, London (2017). In 2019, he will be Artist-in-Residence as a Visiting Fellow at Girton College, Cambridge for the academic year. See more of his work at [www.bosseandbaum.com/luke-burton](http://www.bosseandbaum.com/luke-burton)