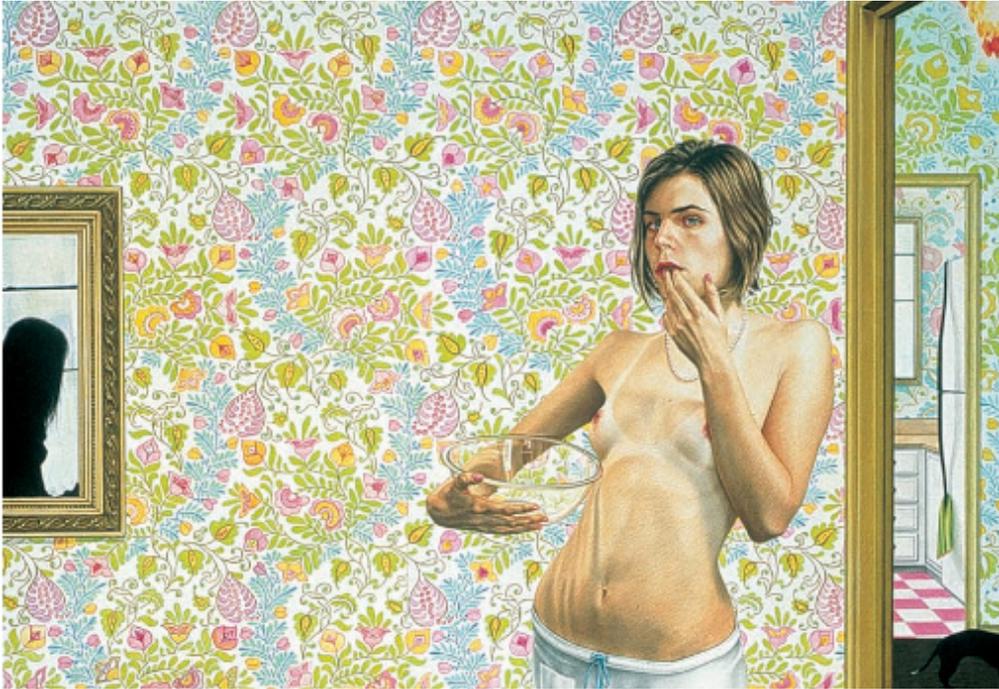


MATHEW CERLETTY

by Christopher Bollen



This page: Mathew Cerletty, *Le Saucier*, 2003, colored pencil and pastel on paper, 47 x 57 3/4".
Opposite page, top: Mathew Cerletty, *Trying to Live Beside the Point*, 2003, pastel and colored pencil on paper, 33 x 55". Bottom: Mathew Cerletty, *Fagaroo*, 2002, oil on canvas, 40 x 36"

On the menu page of Mathew Cerletty's website, a black-and-white photograph of the artist taken two years ago sits against the screen's background wallpaper of yellow, aqua, and white vertical stripes. Cerletty stares out at the viewer wearing a black gown over a collared shirt and tie, which turns out to mark his 2002 graduation from Boston University with a bachelor's degree in fine arts. On first inspection, the portrait seems appropriate to the occasion, a solemnizing rite of passage for an upper-middle-class youth moving through the ranks to adulthood. And many examinations later, it reads the same. But everything about the image—the empty stare just over the viewer's shoulder, the mouth hung half-open in an indeterminate expression, the collar alone shaded hot pink—suggests that Cerletty, at age twenty-two, was already an exceptionally sly portraitist.

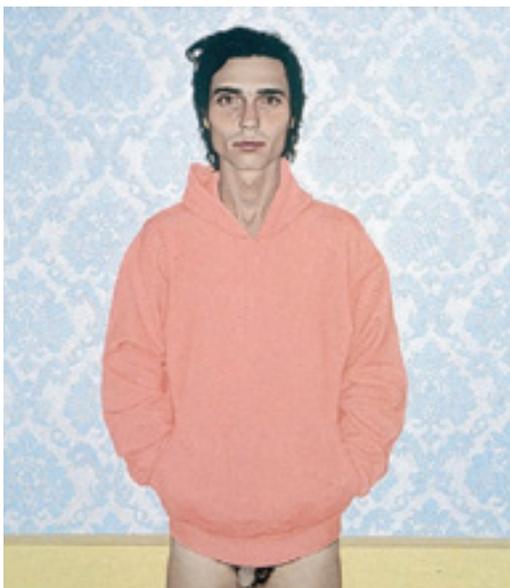
Cerletty is foremost a portrait painter. His canvases run from medium size to increasingly large scale. The figures that populate his interiors tend to be of his own age or socioeconomic background. This stands to reason, since Cerletty uses his friends and family members as models, snapping photos of them (and sometimes himself), working with a rather unrestricted license in the transfer from print to painting. The canvases are exhaustively covered with calculated, barely perceptible brushstrokes, creating a sheen of icy pseudorealism. Almost every square inch is saturated in a bright, resolute patterning that flattens pictorial space and, in several cases, turns claustropho-

obically on the viewer. Cerletty's gravitation toward overwhelming patterns—ornate wallpaper brocades, military stripes, intricate pillowcase florals—is reminiscent of Vuillard in terms of its domestic excess. His airy, pellucid palette and predilection for placing a figure on the canvas's central axis prompt comparisons to Alice Neel. But Neel's expressive handling and Vuillard's soft-focus intimacy betray a personal and even sentimental relationship to their subjects. Cerletty knows his subjects as well as they ever did; however, his style is one of disciplined detachment. His works are ultimately not portraits of his friends and family frozen for posterity; they are unions and fractures, plays of hypnotic innuendo that confront rather than clarify.



As it happened, the day after I visited Cerletty's studio in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, last February, President Bush announced his support of a constitutional amendment that would preserve the sanctity of marriage, "the most fundamental institution of civilization," as he called it, which should not be separated from its "cultural, religious, and natural roots." The president explained that he proposed this ruling to prevent "contradiction," to curtail "uncertainty," all oppositional beliefs creating "confusion on an issue that requires clarity." What we were given last February was a lesson about American identity in its own preferred terms. Contradiction, confusion, uncertainty: These were values being cast as malignant forces in the nation. What makes Cerletty's productions so explosive is the way he manages to convey these qualities in a style that suggests precisely their psychological opposites—an obsessively "clear" painterly technique that one imagines partisan conservatives might appreciate. His intensive studies work best when they operate on multiple levels of ambiguity. On his studio windowsill lay a David Bowie record cover and a photograph of David Byrne, two men rocketed by their sexual haziness. They induce a visual double take similar to the one elicited by many of Cerletty's strongest works.

In an early charcoal, *Wishing I Had a Twin Sister*, 2002, the artist sketched the body of a topless waif model but replaced her face with a delicate portrait of his own.



A similar move occurs in the more ambitious *Le Saucier*, 2003, a candy-colored pencil drawing of a young woman clutching a bowl with her left hand, her other lifted limply to her mouth. The flowering jets of wallpaper behind her dominate the composition, aggressively asserting a barricade of repeating pastoral decor that collapses the space between ground and figure. But the consistency of the background only accentuates the unsettling tension of the portrait. The masculine face betrays another cryptic self-portrait, as the eyes, more his than hers, confront the viewer in a sneer of emotional stalemate. Her nude, tan-lined torso further hampers a clear sexual reading. We aren't turned

on, we're turned over. Attempts at anchoring a fixed identity result in red-eyed dead-lock.

Cerletty doesn't confine himself to ancillary gender blurs. In *The Bath*, 2002, he stations a middle-aged man in a tub, modeled on photographs of his father with a face that morphs somewhere between junior and senior. The look is aloof, surrounded by a wall of pastel field daisies that repeat in the reflection of the bathwater. Some might argue an emasculation-of-papa critique here, but such readings still turn on absolute polarities: father versus son, male versus female, age versus youth. Cerletty's characters seem more intentionally elusive. They are held in their own amniotic wombs of class, marked by constant transformations in the act of looking, but they do not supply any stable conclusions. The naked father submerged in the girlish interior isn't feminized; his sagging chest and vacant expression suggest a body dumped rather than luxuriating in ornamentation. Cerletty's handling of nudity is less erotic heat and more evidentiary fact. In *Fagaroo*, 2002, the handsome young man gripped in the canvas's center wears only a coral sweatshirt. The work's tremor comes not from the inclusion of his halfexposed genitals but rather from the frisson between the perplexing figure—with his defiant stare and generic monochrome top—and the meticulous brocade he disrupts.

To view Cerletty as a painterly Bret Easton Ellis, depicting twentysomethings adrift in their own nihilistic pathos, is to appreciate the glamour but fail to feel the punch. In *Trying to Live Beside the Point*, 2003, a man stands at his bathroom sink, toothbrush in hand, oxford shirt unbuttoned, facing his reflection in the mirror. While the subject and his reflection fail to match up evenly, destabilizing any human continuity, the hostile blue-and-white-striped wallpaper seamlessly flows between "real" and "reflected" worlds. In *Birthday Boy*, 2003, a youth rests his head on another striped pillow, his lips cracked and eyes glazed, as red ribbon wraps around his neck in decorative asphyxiation. Something more than ennui builds in Cerletty's canvases. The more skilled he becomes in detailing his rich-but-rote atmospheres, the more his subjects seem to fight with their environs and their own physical features. Basically, they neither sink nor swim, and this slippery indeterminate middle ground makes them an unnerving demographic. They float like fissures in the center of comfortable interiors, unwilling to offer themselves up naively or to allow us to attach stock personalities.

At twenty-four, Cerletty arrives at figurative painting at an interesting moment in terms of its critical potential. Unlike many of his peers, he succeeds not by producing easy seductions, or resuscitating historical clichés, or championing painting's persuasive capabilities through a New Wave realism. His works are cool and precise, while they are also consciously difficult and worrisome, often failing to emotionally cohere. When asked which contemporary painter he most admires, Cerletty mentions John Currin, and this makes some sense: Both rely on traditional, academic means to create unsettling depictions of the figure, and both demonstrate a certain preoccupation with the signifiers of social class. But rather than trafficking in overt anatomical distortions or historical mannerism, Cerletty prefers a steadier, more buttoned-down, domestic center. His interiors are so thoroughly explicit, so precisely patterned and furnished, that there is no room to consider them anything but institutionally middle class. We know all too well the cultural background of his subjects. But what we can never really count on knowing is them.

Christopher Bollen is a New York-based critic.