Left: **Trevor Shimizu, *Molly Ringwald (Self-Portrait)*, 1999,** oil on canvas, 32 × 41".

Right: **Trevor Shimizu, *Untitled (zero gravity 3)*, n.d.,** oil on canvas, 21⅝ × 13¾".

Below: **Trevor Shimizu, *Iparis2930*, 2017,** oil on canvas, 29⅞ × 21⅝". From the series "Groupies," 2017–.

TREVOR SHIMIZU

JOE BUCCIERO

IF MUCH ART EXISTS to stimulate admiration, even lust, few artists are as up-front about it as Trevor Shimizu. Pieces throughout his career demonstrate as much: One, from 1999, begins a recent survey, "Trevor Shimizu: Performance Artist," at the ICA Philadelphia. It's the artist's first "performative" self-portrait, portraying a painted avatar who resembles a Luc Tuymans figure—washed out against a light backdrop and given shape by a mop of black hair, black sunglasses, and a black shirt. Shimizu looks vintage, cool. To his right sits a red-haired woman eating sushi and peering at him with interest. Even without the title—*Molly Ringwald (Self-Portrait)*—you might guess that the scene derives from the 1985 film *The Breakfast Club*, with Shimizu, poised to flirt, destabilizing the flat depictions of Asian and Asian American men that populate John Hughes movies. Born in Northern California in 1978, the young Shimizu internalized those offensive movie characters; in a recent interview, he noted that he didn't feel "sexually attractive until *Crazy Rich Asians* came out" in 2018. A year earlier, he had begun a series of paintings dedicated to his "groupies"—the sexy "women" (i.e., bots) who follow him on Instagram—rendering their profiles with

basic strokes, less Tuymans than Michael Krebber. *Molly Ringwald* and the "Groupies" series, 2017–, both frame Shimizu as hot by proxy, then, desired by filmic or algorithmic characters (it's not just chic Japanese *food* that Ringwald wants). But like the artist himself, the characters in these pictures either never materialize or fade away; Shimizu's romantic life, like some of his art, remains on-screen. If he requires such women to subtend his masculine aspirations, his is a fragile masculinity indeed.

Since the late '90s, Shimizu has alternately embraced and lampooned this fragility, performing tropes associated with being male, Asian, an artist. Based in Long Island City, he follows a Warholian program that abets, even allows, life as an artist in New York. Which is to say, he does a bit of everything. "Look at me," he told C. Spencer Yeh last year in *BOMB*. "I'm from a small, rural town, hardly educated"—he dropped out of art school—"yet I've already made about a thousand paintings and drawings, taken about a million photographs." He's also played music, produced videos, worked scores of odd jobs (which he illustrated in a group of paintings from the late 2000s), held a longer gig at Electronic Arts Intermix, assisted artists

Above: **View of "Trevor Shimizu: New Work," 2016**, 47 Canal, New York. From left: *Baby Expert (Walking)*, 2016; *Koala Bear*, 2016.
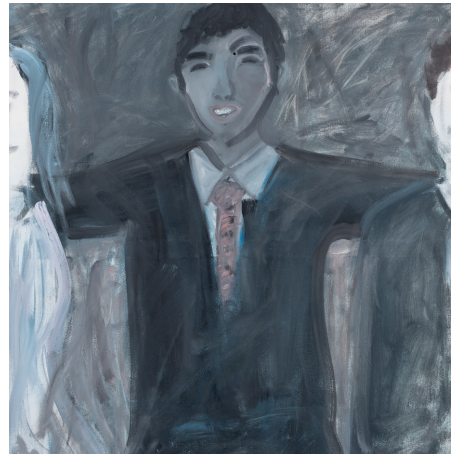
Below: **Trevor Shimizu, *Miffy*, 2016**, oil on canvas, 74 × 72".

Right: **Trevor Shimizu, *Domesticated Man*, 2016**, oil on canvas, 74 × 72".

Below: **Trevor Shimizu, *Self-Portrait* (detail), 2013**, oil on canvas, 56 × 50".

such as Shigeko Kubota and Carolee Schneemann, and operated a short-lived gallery that, befitting his self-conscious project, was called Shimizu Brand (the second word referring nominally to his co-gallerist, Josh Brand). In light of Shimizu's activity, the spare marks and diverse iconography of his canvases suggest an artist racing to keep up with both his own rapid-fire ideas and today's image economy at large. The painting *Miffy*, 2016, retains its preliminary sketch underneath the lone figure of an engorged plush rabbit, as if Shimizu had no time to finish the work before sending it off.

Besides himself, Shimizu directs a painterly gaze at subjects both traditional (nudes, landscapes) and modern (commodities, cultural figures). His flat, drippy renderings evoke peers such as Shimon Minamikawa and Ken Kagami, and art-historical precedents such as Willem de Kooning, Joyce Pensato, and countless "bad painters" of the past fifty years. Bob Dylan comes to mind; not only does Dylan's graceless brushwork resemble Shimizu's, but both artists are defined by a hip self-consciousness, an awareness of how they—how all artists—are perceived. Shimizu's output duly occupies an expanded field of self-portraiture, one that includes cultural projections like *Molly Ringwald*, self-portraits-in-negative like "Groupies," and exercises in creative self-reflection, such as the eleven romanticized landscapes of the artist's recent solo exhibition at 47 Canal. His first show there, "Late Work," in 2012, registered a similar note of reflexivity, with

"Shimizu" is reduced to the all-caps signature and crude objects, clipped from modern life, that adorn the canvases.

wispy paintings of women dated "c. 2052" suggesting the lascivious handiwork of a future, older Shimizu. Two subsequent shows at the gallery pictured him in different roles: as a suit-and-tie-clad yuppie in "Again" (2014) and as a doting father in "New Work" (2016). In the latter exhibition, the painting *Domesticated Man*, 2016, presented its subject as a blank slate: a barely there doodled face, wearing a collared shirt, a ball cap, and an empty grin. "I looked in the mirror and made a face that I thought a domesticated man would make," wrote Shimizu, then a new father. Elsewhere, there were images of toys, childcare products, parental activities, recurrences of the "domesticated" face. A TV monitor broadcasting golf further articulated the terms of man's domestication, rendering Shimizu as something like Vito Acconci's "male cartoon," "where maleness was made so blatant," Acconci said, "that it . . . could be targeted, it could be analyzed, it could be pilloried." But Shimizu's cartoon lacks Acconci's virility: It's a beta version, aligned more with precedents like Michael Smith or contemporaries like Antoine Catala.

In *Memoir*, 2005–17, a text-based video relief, Shimizu recalls his upbringing in Sebastopol, California.

The video's monitor fills a hole in a monochrome canvas, affirming the connection between screen and painted figure. More than a window into the artist, the piece establishes the codes—like drug slang and slacker heroes affiliated with the town—of its particular time and place with a meandering story that underscores the influence of Shimizu's particular local culture. Jean-Luc Godard insisted that his own memoiristic film, *JLG/JLG* (1994), was a self-portrait, not an autobiography, because a self-portrait "has no 'me.'" Instead of a fleshed-out narrative, a self-portrait presents a screen; the figure is projected on by the viewer as much as the figure projects itself outward. Art historian Kaja Silverman thus posits Godard as a new type of author: a "receiver" rather than the modernist "producer." Shimizu takes a similar position: Shrouded in images and identities, he is concerned less with materiality than with semiotic play. Despite a relationship to real life, *Memoir* and *Domesticated Man* refer not to any unconscious or physical "I," but to what renders that "I" comprehensible (in effect, the superego). "Shimizu" is reduced to the all-caps signature and crude objects, clipped from modern life, that adorn the canvases. If the artist sometimes pokes fun

at flaccid artistic or social types, he mainly responds with a mixture of fascination and resignation, granting the signs of fatherhood (ball cap, golf) a quasi-mystical inevitability. In a rare surreal flourish, *Girlfriend Wants a Baby*, 2010, and *Girlfriend Still Wants a Baby*, 2013, show a painted newborn appearing—genie-like— above a couple's bed.

If only it were so simple. If only social roles, much less *children*, manifested in a puff of smoke. Shimizu's trick is to make it look that way, a sleight of hand aided
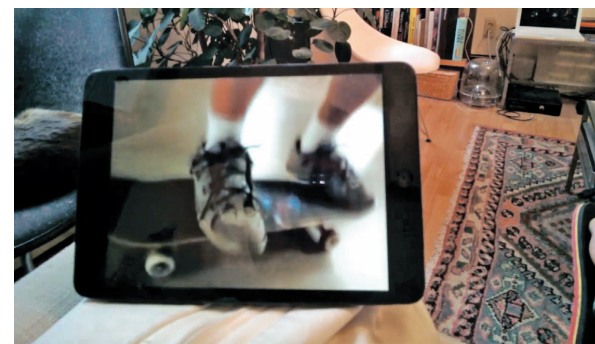
by the confessional tone—*this is really me*—of his paintings and, especially, videos, a medium tuned to confession. Although the first of his shows to focus on video opened in 2017, also at 47 Canal, his work in the medium dates to adolescence, to a fourteen-hour compilation of cable-TV porn called *Spice*, 1991–2013. Early 2000s works, meanwhile, offer DIY fidelity and character-based humor, filling a gap between Alex Bag and the rise of YouTube. Shimizu often riffs on life casting: A fuzzy figure will come on-screen and sit around, playact, watch something in a bare apartment, typically in silence, making public the dull, sometimes embarrassing activities of private life. His decision to cast himself as the star of these videos hearkens back to what Rosalind Krauss called the medium's "narcissism," the attempts by foundational artists like Acconci and Peter Campus to realize subjectivity in visual and cultural fields crowded, not least, with their own images. If those artists initiated a feedback loop with the apparatus, though, amid processes of subject formation, Shimizu pulls himself *out* of the loop. In *The Lonely Loser Trilogy: Skate Videos*, 2014, 2014, he enforces a double mediation. Viewers see silent internet videos of skateboarders and musicians ("cool") through the artist's Google Glass ("loser"). Neither quite disappearing (as Acconci said of video's effect) nor appearing, Shimizu claims the position of an outsider—but tries to bring you inside with him.

Shimizu's self-presentation as a flexible receiver, couched in irreverent commentary, fits with prevailing tendencies of twenty-first-century art (not to mention personhood). Yet if people today often program alternative identities or wield the Web's promise of anonymity, Shimizu points to the futility of self-construction.

A self always materializes in social, cultural, or political activity, even if only for a moment. The video slideshow *Club*, 2002–12, composed of the products of Shimizu's tenure as a party photographer, marks a transfixing entry into the canon of photo-archive artworks. We see tightly cropped, harshly lit images of New York clubgoers; a Jacques Greene song blares in the mix. Twenty seconds in, Shimizu shows up, looking at the camera—deadpan, holding a drink, a blonde woman clinging to his neck. He reappears throughout the four-minute clip, often sporting the same look, sometimes with a smirk, sometimes displaying discomfort. The image of his face functions like a test card, amplifying the overwrought poses of his fellow subjects. As *Club* progresses, Shimizu accordingly loosens his authorial grip, shifting between the role of anthropologist and that of what scholar Anne Anlin Cheng might call a racialized object of "fascination," like Anna May Wong in the silent film *Piccadilly* (1929). Cheng describes Wong's character in resonant terms as "suspended between being seen and self-seeing, between spectacle and reverie, between being an object on display and a subject hiding in plain sight." Era, gender, and Chinese heritage condition Wong's suspension, and the same might be said for Shimizu's investigations into the image world of his time, his masculinity, his Japanese roots. Though the artist often overdescribes, or removes himself from, his "self-portraits," abstracting or typifying his identity, certain facts shine through. Near the end of *Club*, when a lone man pulls at the corners of his eyes, slanting them at the camera, the hidden Shimizu has no choice but to enter the frame. □

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