

Sam McKinniss

The Perfect Tense

January 11 – February 23, 2025

Los Angeles

Press Release

David Kordansky Gallery is pleased to present *The Perfect Tense*, its first solo exhibition of new paintings by Sam McKinniss. The exhibition will be on view in Los Angeles at 5130 W. Edgewood Pl., from January 11 through February 23, 2025.

McKinniss paints pictures based on pre-existing images found online, transforming visual building blocks of the public domain into open-ended—and paradoxically personal—documents of emotional life. In many cases, these images—which often encompass people and scenes from disparate corners of popular culture or art history—also pre-exist in the minds of their viewers. For McKinniss, the challenge is to re-invest these images with a material conviction that may re-establish them as sites of real feeling. Images that begin as relatively generic cultural products thereby become full-spectrum demonstrations of human experience.

As its title suggests, *The Perfect Tense* is oriented toward the past. The grammatical term refers to verbs that indicate actions which have already occurred, and the exhibition is accordingly taken up with themes of loss, even while it focuses on scenes that are, on the surface, defined by their hilarity, joy, or straightforward beauty. McKinniss creates the prevailing tension by juxtaposing various examples of outdated public relations, so that a painting of an open-mouthed, playfully surprised Julia Roberts might exist near a double portrait of Mark and Patricia McCloskey, of the so-called St. Louis gun-toting incident. Though each composition makes deft use of negative space, the contextual chasm separating one from the other alludes fundamentally to a brush with the void.

Each of the works in *The Perfect Tense* depends on its fellows to tell a larger story, a piece of an overarching syntactical structure encompassing the entire exhibition. This novelistic dimension of the work relies on each of the complex, even contradictory, shades of meaning McKinniss finds in images. This is true even for pictures whose notoriety or seeming accessibility means that they are passed over lightly by viewers who have already encountered them in their “natural,” digitally saturated habitats.

For these reasons, McKinniss paints his subjects in ways that foreground the intimacy of touch. The figure modeling that characterizes several works on view not only puts the experience of light front and center, but also calls attention to the viscosity of oil paint as a material, grounding the pictures in the immediacy of the physical world. The original context from which any given image is drawn, even when it is easily identified, therefore becomes less dominant. Inasmuch as cultural observation plays an important role in McKinniss’s project, it is a mode by which the artist describes what it means to live, suffer, and engage passionately in the contemporary world, even if that world is defined, collectively speaking, by its constant pull toward the superficial read.

The landscape and nature-oriented paintings in the exhibition represent a variety of moods, from the placid, autumnal calm of the small-scale *French King Bridge* (2024) to the expansive grandeur of *Cascade Pass* (2024), to the urgent, apocalyptic *Forest Fire* (2024). In each case, a sense of place roots McKinniss's more overtly media-oriented paintings in the physical plane. Scattered throughout *The Perfect Tense* are clues that point to the gravitas with which McKinniss is grappling, but tuning into the exhibition's open-ended, if melancholic, spirit means that each viewer can begin to find their own bursts of meaning and connection in likely and unlikely forms. In idyllic images such as waterfowl going about their lives or the pathos-gilded pictures of celebrities like Tiger Woods and the ensemble cast of the television series *Friends*, absence and longing become open spaces in which McKinniss cultivates a tempered, world-weary passion that brims with dear life.

Sam McKinniss (b. 1985, Northfield, Minnesota) has been included in recent group exhibitions such as *Get in the Game: Sports, Art, Culture*, SFMOMA, San Francisco (2024–2025); *Day for Night: New American Realism*, Palazzo Barberini, organized by the Aishti Foundation, Rome (2024); *Friends & Lovers*, The FLAG Art Foundation, New York (2023–2024); and *Pictus Porrectus: Reconsidering the Full Length Portrait*, Art&Newport, Newport, Rhode Island (2022). His work is in the permanent collections of institutions including the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami; New Britain Museum of American Art, Connecticut; Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut; and Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Massachusetts. McKinniss lives and works in New York and Kent, Connecticut.