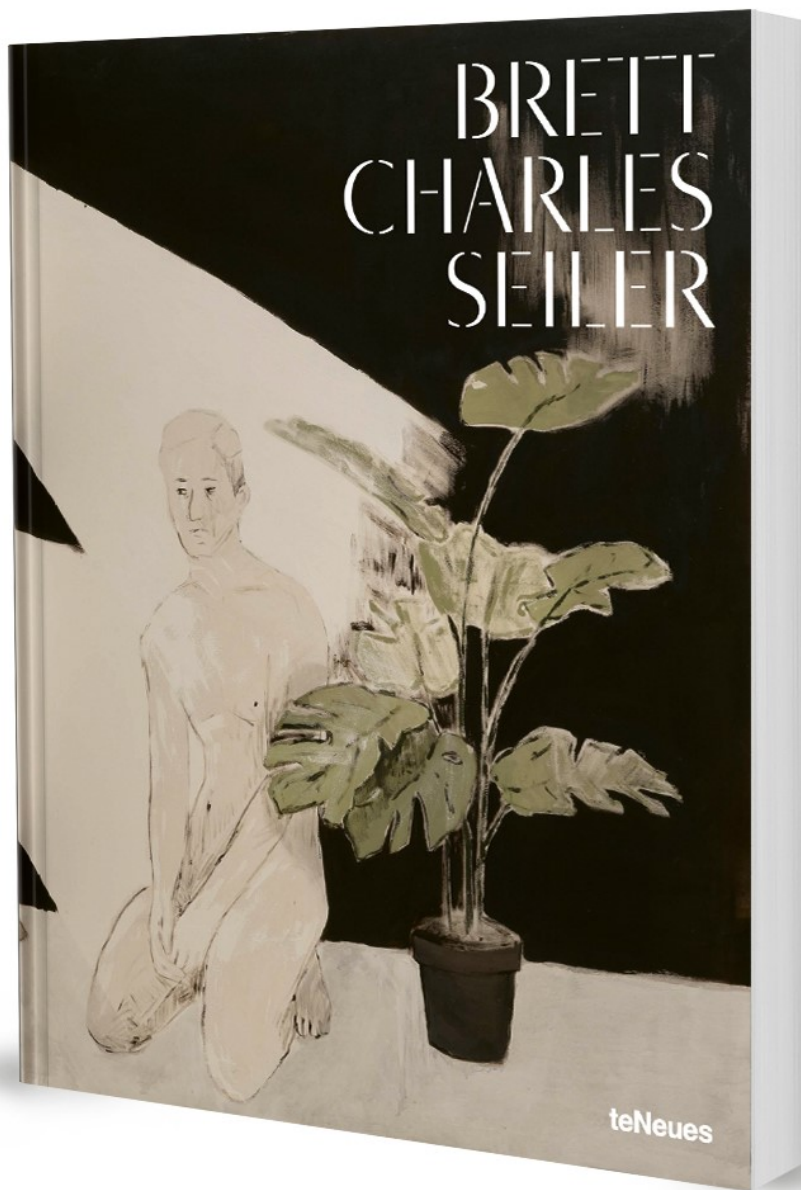


BRETT
CHARLES
SEILER



teNeues



Sean O'Toole

NOTES ON BRETT SEILER'S FUGITIVE SENSIBILITY

Brett Seiler is best known for his casual yet emotionally resonant paintings of male figures rendered using cheap materials, notably roof paint and bitumen—a black, sticky form of petroleum used for waterproofing. These flatly-painted compositions generally fall into two types: head-and-shoulders portraits of individual subjects, and tableau paintings featuring tangled groups of men in sparsely detailed interior settings, sulking, embracing, kissing and loving. Whether portraying subjects alone or in groups, his sketchy depictions wrestle with notions of subjectivity and anonymity, personality and type, irony and intimacy, torpor and action. Sometimes the artist will include an additional textual element to defuse or amplify a composition. “Cock” instead of Coke as branding on a soft-drink bottle, for example. A memorable work from 2019 floats the caption “A HOMOSEXUAL WITH BAD TEETH” over a generic portrait of a young man.

This habit of writing into and over his compositions dates back to Seiler's student days, when he often overlaid text onto his photographs, many of which were self-portraits. It survived his student infatuation with Cuban-American artist Félix González-Torres, which saw a marked turn to installation and sculpture in Seiler's work as well as a growing political awareness around his queer identity. It ultimately led to the production of a remarkable body of text-only paintings that are an important counterpart to Seiler's figural work. These text works register the terms of the artist's queer consciousness and the centrality of language as an aesthetic and political tool. I'll unpack this statement further in a moment, but first I want to focus on a recurring prop in Seiler's figurative paintings and related installations of the past few years: the printed book.

Seiler has consistently referenced books in his work. His breakthrough 2019 solo exhibition, *How I Forgot the Colours of the Rainbow*, included two works paying homage to queer authors. *Reading List* (2019, p. 23, bottom left)

shows a set of pine shelves in the shape of hands bearing crude replicas of books by, among others, James Baldwin, E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf. *A Single Man* (2019, p. 23, bottom right) is a text-only painting invoking Christopher Isherwood's 1964 novel of the same name. Isherwood's frank portrayal of an aging gay man is also referenced in a recent painting, *Afterparty with Fabio and Nic* (2022, gate-fold, pp. 31–33), the book serving as the base for a houseplant in the left panel of this ambitious triptych.

Afterparty with Fabio and Nic is notable for its expansive scale, camp cinematic style and bold use of narrative. It is also unusually detailed in comparison to Seiler's earlier figurative paintings, which tended to float subjects in unspecified space. Seiler painstakingly details the inlaid parquet flooring of the interior space and includes three houseplants, their number corresponding to the three male figures. The composition also features a rudimentary trompe l'oeil device in the form of a painting within a painting. Nonetheless, the overall mise-en-scène of *Afterparty* is generic, with houseplants and parquetry recurring across many of Seiler's recent paintings.

A parquet grid was central to an installation the artist produced for the group exhibition *We Who Drow* (2021) in Cape Town, for instance. A kind of reimagining of his shabby, paint-splattered studio in Salt River, the installation showed off his basic aptitude in carpentry and set-design, skills refined assisting artist Kemang Wa Lehulere in 2018. Seiler's untitled installation developed across two planes, horizontally on the floor and vertically on a wall. Atop a large painting laying out a parquet grid on the floor he placed a can of green paint and an old suitcase with a portrait of a stubble-faced man inside. (The suitcase is a recurring motif in his painting installations and gestures to Seiler's itinerant early life.) Leaned against a wall in the corner was a painting turned backwards, against which was balanced a 64-page book reprinting an early essay by the American critic Susan Sontag.







