

# PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY

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## All that glitters

### Jamie Vasta updates Caravaggio for the literary queer By Matt Sussman



**HAIRY EYEBALL** What happens to appropriation after camp? That's the intriguing question posed and answered by Jamie Vasta's glitzy and technically impressive homage to late 16th- and early 17th-century Italian painter Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, currently hanging at Patricia Sweetow.

Working from photographs of famous Caravaggio paintings playfully restaged by her circle of friends (maybe you've seen some of them out and about at queer and/or literary events?), Vasta painstakingly reproduces the images on wood panel using several Michael's craft stores' worth of colored glitter.

There's performance artist Alisia Waller as Judith beheading Holofernes with a butcher knife. Bacchus, whom Caravaggio famously depicted as visibly ill from too much drink, has been transformed into a cheerful woman who, champagne flute aloft mid-toast, looks no worse for wear on her living room couch. (Perhaps it's due to the empty pill bottles Vasta scattered in the foreground, along with the mountain of produce that supplants the original's modest ripe peaches and grape bunch.) A red swath of fabric and nudity are all that connect the 1602 St. John the Baptist to his contemporary, Chihuahua-holding female counterpart.

Vasta's most dramatic reworking is *Deposizione, 1602*, which transports the downward cascade of mourning figures in the monumental *Entombment of Christ* (1602) to a Northern California beach at low tide, and trades the original's obfuscatory black background for the shimmering blue mirror of sea-against-sky.

Caravaggio was as famous for his dramatic chiaroscuro as for his unprecedented naturalism, and Vasta pays as much attention to approximating the shades of black behind her subjects as she does their skin tone or the folds of the blankets they're posed on. It's doubly impressive that, while

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working with an entirely different medium, she is able to impart the palpable physicality of light falling on the lapel of a dark blazer or waves gently lapping over sunlit shoals.

Vasta's casting choices are undoubtedly a cheeky nod to Caravaggio's controversial use of courtesans and common folk as live models for his biblical subjects. But her paintings function as portraits in their own right of San Francisco's current queer milieu, as much as they are tributes to another artist. And despite their sparkling surfaces, they are not as campy in their methods or didactic in their aim as, say, Yasumasa Morimura's photographic interventions into the Western art historical cannon.

Caravaggio, however, is certainly no stranger to queer advances. After his rediscovery by art historians in the early 20th century, he became something of a cause célèbre for queer male artists such as filmmaker Derek Jarman, who were moved by — perhaps as the poet Thom Gunn was while gazing at Saul/Paul's ecstasy in *The Conversion of St. Paul* (1600) — the painter's recognition of some hidden sensuous reverse: "an alternate/Candour and secrecy inside the skin."

Vasta's subjects harbor no secrets. Appropriate to our time and place, they wear their desire on their sleeves (if they're wearing sleeves at all) and stand with the casual stance and relaxed mien of someone posing for a photo bound for a Facebook wall, or in the case of the full-frontal cupid of *Amor Vincit Omnia*, 1602, an Adam4Adam profile.

Perhaps it's simply for lack of wall space (or modesty concerns?) that you have to duck into the gallery's back office to see Cupid — once a pudgy adolescent with marble flesh, now a more well-endowed scruffy 20-something — in all his glory. Certainly there is no trace of the "unfathomable nature of the erotic" that contemporary art historians Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit flagged in Caravaggio's original. Vasta's glittering cherub isn't sending out any mixed signals: love has conquered all.