

Steven Shearer Looks Beyond the Veil

At The George Economou Collection, Athens, the artist's approach to death and dying is refreshingly unsentimental



BY CHLOE STEAD IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS | 19 JAN 24

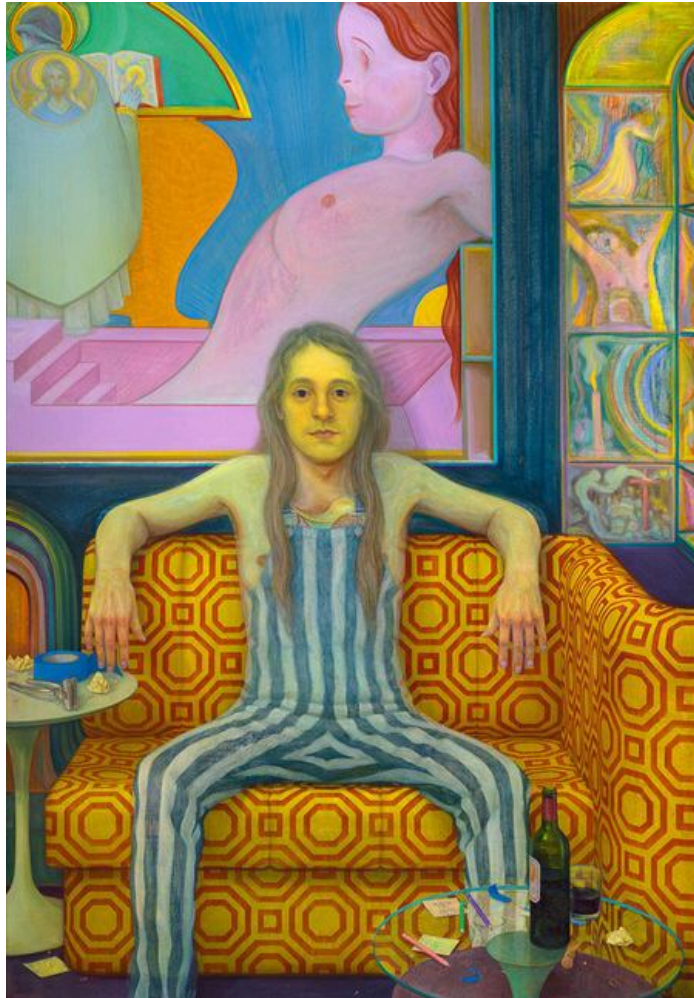


I've never had insomnia, but Steven Shearer's paintings are a good indication of what it must feel like. Red-eyed, his protagonists stare pleadingly out at the viewer or hide from their gaze under veils of lank hair, shoulders hunched, cigarette in mouth. Rendered with luminous blue-, yellow- and green-tinged skin, these men – visually coded as artist and musician types through their personal style and twilight activities – are clearly in need of some quality shut-eye.



Steven Shearer, 'Sleep, Deaths Own Brother', 2023–24, exhibition view. Courtesy: © Steven Shearer and The George Economou Collection, Athens; photograph: Natalia Isoukala

Curated by Dieter Roelstraete in collaboration with the artist and Skarlet Smatana, 'Sleep, Death's Own Brother' brings together works from the holdings of The George Economou Collection under the 'transgressive thematic perspective of the lifeless body', according to exhibition materials. These include several oil paintings for which the Vancouver-based artist is best known, such as the magnificent *Working from Life* (2018), which shows a cadaverous young painter at an easel. Rendered yet more sickly looking by the heavy weave of the linen canvas – which lends his face and hands a prickly, rash-like texture – he nevertheless retains the foppish elegance shared by all of Shearer's sitters.



Steven Shearer, *Atheist's Commission*, 2018, oil and ink on poly canvas, 1.8 x 1.3 m. Courtesy: © Steven Shearer, Galerie Eva Presenhuber and David Zwirner Gallery

Less aesthetically pleasing (and therefore, arguably, more in keeping with the exhibition's transgressive aims) is *Sleep II* (2015), a large-scale collage comprising thousands of JPGs of people sleeping. Culled from the internet and painstakingly pieced together, these images are unflattering and, in some cases, downright humiliating. In one photograph, an unseen person has scrawled the words 'BALLS' and 'PUSSY' across a man's forehead and drawn an ejaculating penis on his chest. In another, red and black felt-tip pens have been used to give a sleeper the red face and goatee of lucifer. Childish pranks aside, what connects all these people is how corpse-like their bodies look while they slumber.



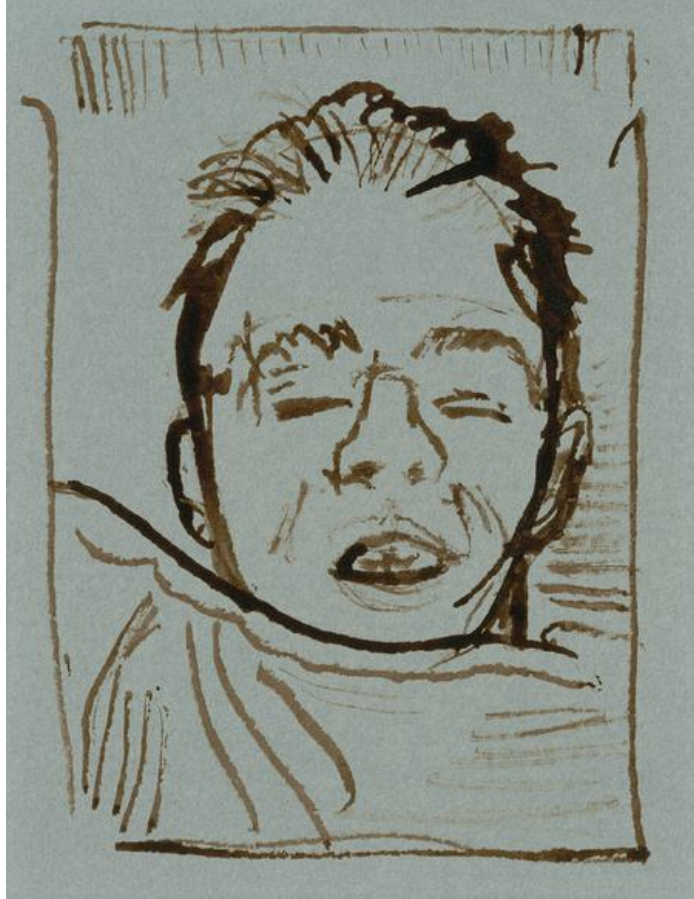
Steven Shearer, 'Sleep, Death's Own Brother', 2023–24, exhibition view. Courtesy: © Steven Shearer and The George Economou Collection, Athens; photograph: Natalia Tsoukala

Taking its title from a line in Hesiod's epic poem 'Theogony' (c.730–700 BCE), 'Sleep, Death's Own Brother' proposes that the threshold between the two titular states is thinner than one might like. There is an oneiric quality to many of the paintings on show, with Edvard Munch – who loved to remind us of our own mortality – an obvious touchpoint in works such as *Graceful Ghost* (2011), which depicts a jaundiced man with a band of red fir trees to his right and the outlines of two ghostly women and a child to his left. Here, nothing seems to be the correct colour except the midnight-blue sky. Are we witnessing a dream or are these the fantastical hallucinations of a dying man?



Steven Shearer, 'Sleep, Death's Own Brother', 2023–24, exhibition view. Courtesy: © Steven Shearer and The George Economou Collection, Athens; photograph: Natalia Tsoukala

Also on view are 27 pen and colour pencil drawings presented in a glass vitrine. A second, identical vitrine in the third-floor gallery is dedicated to a small selection of works from the collection: two etchings by Otto Dix, Rudolf Schlichter's watercolour *The Artist with Two Hanged Women* (1924) and Otto Müller's *Girl on a Lounger* (1919). It's a bold curatorial intervention, and one I would find preposterous in any other circumstance, but Shearer's untitled works on paper show that he is more than capable of going toe-to-toe with these German kings of the grotesque. His most gruesome contribution crudely depicts a naked figure with a shotgun jammed into his mouth: the man's determined face makes it clear he's about to pull the trigger.



Steven Shearer, *Napper*, 2019, ink on paper, 8 x 6 cm. Courtesy: © Steven Shearer, Galerie Eva Presenhuber and David Zwirner Gallery

In a final affront to the dead, a nearby wall is dedicated to a series of charcoal drawings, which quote lyrics and song titles from death metal bands in all caps (*Poems XXXIV*, 2013). Although these punny titles aren't big and they aren't clever – from 'ABORTION ABRUPTION' and 'MOLESTING THE DECAPITATED' to 'GIVING HEAD TO THE DEAD' – they do display a pleasing lack of sentimentality. In death, as in life, our bodies can demean and degrade us, Shearer seems to suggest, but that's no excuse to look away.

Steven Shearer's *'Sleep, Death's Own Brother'* is on view at *The George Economou Collection*, Athens, until 15 March

Main image: Steven Shearer, *The Green Collector*, 2021, oil on mounted linen, 46 x 34 cm. Courtesy: © Steven Shearer, Galerie Eva Presenhuber and David Zwirner Gallery



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