

**Painting****Interview****Mike Silva: 'I wanted to paint with the viscerality of Black Flag - but I can't do it'****Oliver Basciano**

Raised on punk, the artist tried to channel that aggression into painting - but instead found himself arriving at a quiet, reflective style that has more in common with Nick Drake

Wed 12 Jul 2023 12.09 BST

Mike Silva's paintings are steeped in melancholy. Painted in oil, the defining motif of his latest exhibition is windows, each with the London light pouring through them. In Owen's room, long swathes of orange curtain do little to keep the room dark, though the sky outside is gloomy. In Window sill with plant and camera, the dappled shadows of the foliage outside cast shadows over the ledge on which sit a mug (the tea or coffee drained), a

succulent and an SLR camera. The last object provides a clue to Silva's source material: a huge photographic archive of old homes and former lovers, which the artist keeps haphazardly stored in boxes and uses for inspiration.



📷 'We were always moving' ... Mike Silva. Photograph: Courtesy The Approach

“I moved around a lot as a kid, I was saying goodbyes to friends, and taking photographs was always an acknowledgment of that,” Silva says. He was born in Sweden to a Sinhalese father and an English mother, and the family moving to Canada when he was very young. Mike and his mother arrived in south-east England after his parents split up. While studying art at Middlesex University in his early 20s, Silva flitted between the local punk scene and the gay scene in London. “It’s not that gay relationships are inherently less stable, but for me everything was very fluid,” he says. “There’s cruising, saunas, and that kind of thing. That informs how you meet people and how you view relationships, and the transient nature of those relationships.”

After art school he gravitated towards antifascist and anticapitalist activism, eventually becoming part of a housing co-operative that guarded empty properties. “It was like a legal way of squatting, so we were always moving, so again I was habitually documenting the places I lived in before they were sold off. It was an era before gentrification took over.” This current show was conceived in his studio in Elephant and Castle, an area of south London where Silva has worked since 1996, but which is currently being transformed by rampant property speculation, with new builds displacing older, often immigrant communities. In this context, his paintings seem like postcards from a lost time. “The co-op was great for someone like me, because it meant I could leave college without the pressure to make big bucks,” he says. “I don’t know how people can survive now.”



📷 Owens Room (2023) by Mike Silva. Photograph: Courtesy of the Artist

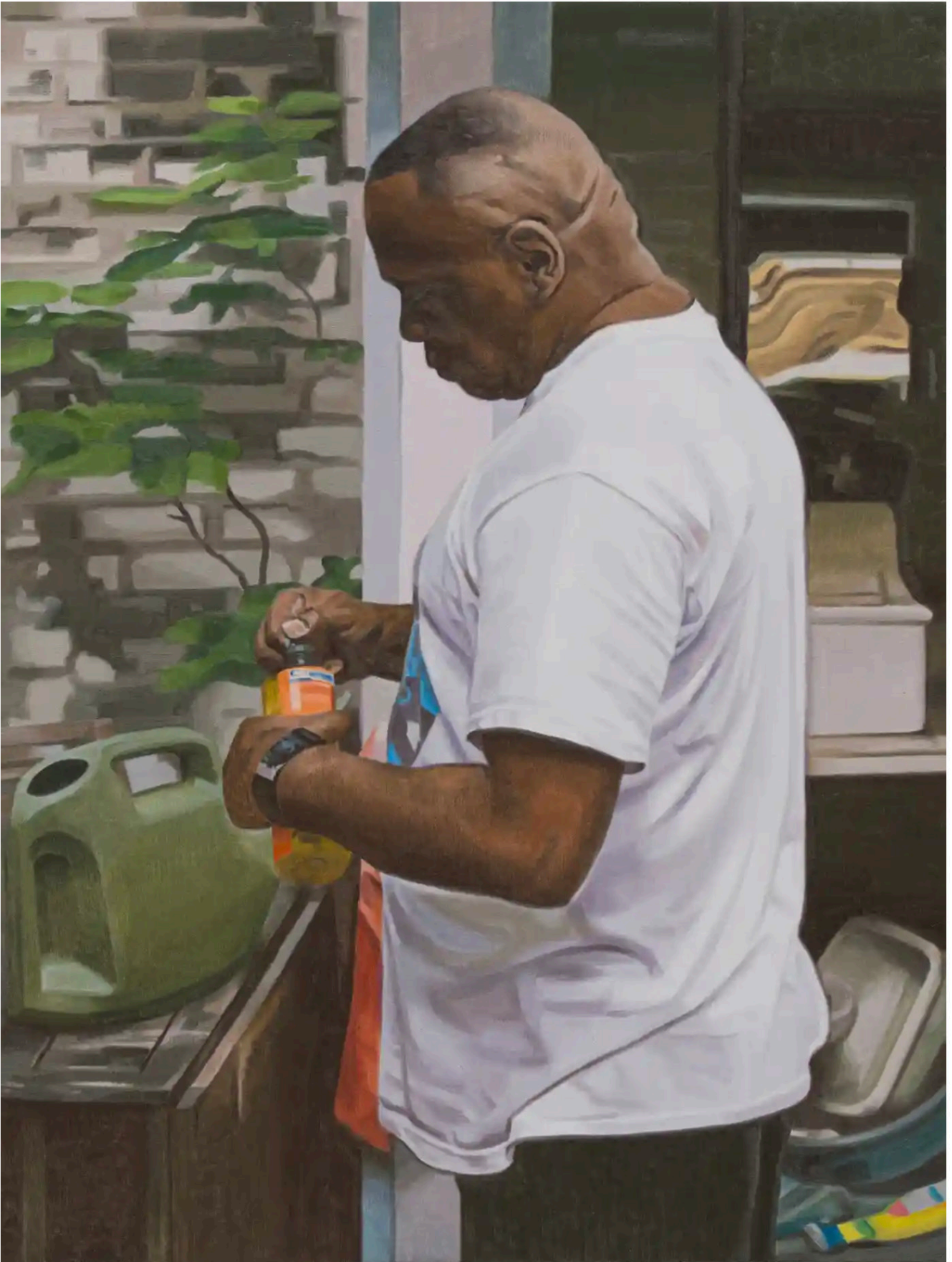
Most of his interior scenes are empty, but the figures that do appear in his work tend to be the lovers with whom he has remained in contact. He says the painting with orange curtains is based on a photo taken at the home of a friend in the 1990s: “We had a fling, I was taking photos and my camera temporarily moved away from him to the window.” Here, the motif seems to represent the exterior self and the interior self, and the moment one begins to open up to another person, however fleeting that bond is. In *Red*, pictured at the top of this article, a man (who turns out to be the artist’s current boyfriend) is seen from behind washing up in the kitchen, his head turned towards to the afternoon sun as it dips through a window above the sink. It recalls the pathos of Caspar David Friedrich’s *Woman at a Window* (1822). The light bounces off his bare shoulders and carves out shadows in the creases of the white-and-blue striped vest top he wears.



📷 Gary (2023) by Mike Silva. Photograph: Courtesy of the Artist

Silva describes how he lost friends during the Aids crisis, and another work, titled *Gary*, shows a man asleep on a mattress on the floor, his face again turned away, obscured by the white duvet. It’s reminiscent of Félix González-Torres’s [photographs of empty beds](#), the absence in those works symbolic of the deaths in the gay community. Silva’s figuration was partly catalysed by his own health scare.

“I had a blip a few years back. I was showing at another gallery, feeling really deflated and trying to reinvent my language. I was doing these [Albert Oehlen](#) or [Christopher](#)



📷 Mark 5 (2023) by Mike Silva. Photograph: Courtesy of the Artist

Silva says he relishes working on backgrounds, as it gives him a chance to exercise his inner abstract painter. The central figure of Mark 5 is a man in a white T-shirt, a former lover and regular muse, pottering around the garden door of a house. Mark is made out in Silva's precise brushstrokes, but in the foliage and brickwork behind him, the brushwork and palette is looser and more expressionistic.

"I still really love those heroic abstract painters - not just males, people like [Amy Sillman](#), too. I really wanted to paint with the aggression of punk, but I can't do it. I love the hardcore bands Black Flag, Discharge, Dead Kennedys. I wanted to paint with the same viscerality that they perform with. But instead the works express a sensitivity, delicacy, a vulnerability to my character that I've always been a bit embarrassed about. More Nick Drake than the Clash."

● [Mike Silva: New Paintings](#) is at the Approach, London E2, until 5 August