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READER

Jake Troyli contains multitudes

The Chicago-based artist implicates the viewer, and the art world, in his self-referential work.

by [Kaylen Ralph](#) April 11, 2023



A new painting by Jake Troyli, inspired by Delacroix and made during his Paris artist residency, will be on view in Monique Meloche's EXPO booth. Credit: Courtesy the artist

Jake Troyli moved to Chicago in September 2020, the same month "Don't Forget to Pack a Lunch!," his first-ever solo exhibition in Chicago, opened at Monique Meloche Gallery.

In the exhibition's titular work, Troyli puppeteers a small army of cloned characters through siloed loops of never-ending labor—physical, emotional, and otherwise. Small firefighters ascend a burning building while a group of mourners attends a funeral for a construction worker below. The deceased's colleagues carry on at a project site immediately adjacent to the service. The weather seems fair as nude workers paint clouds in a

blue sky from which small propeller planes hang from visible tethers.

Much has been written about Troyli's consistent use of his own likeness in his work, which is as identifiable by its self-portraiture as it is by the intensity of his palette, a chroma swath of oil paint in primary colors and flesh tones. Troyli's consistent appraisal of his own corporeality, both as a creator and a self-referential commodity, struck a chord in

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the art world—especially in Chicago, where the contemporary art scene exists thanks to artists of color.



In *Don't Forget to Pack a Lunch!*, Troyli puppeteers a small army of cloned characters through siloed loops of never-ending labor.

Credit: Robert Chase Heishman

“Since I’ve been in the contemporary art world, I’ve heard people say these things while looking at my work—talking about Black figuration as a trend,” Troyli says. “Like literally people say that unabashedly, fucking openly, and I think in a lot of ways, sometimes it feels like it’s meant to undermine.”

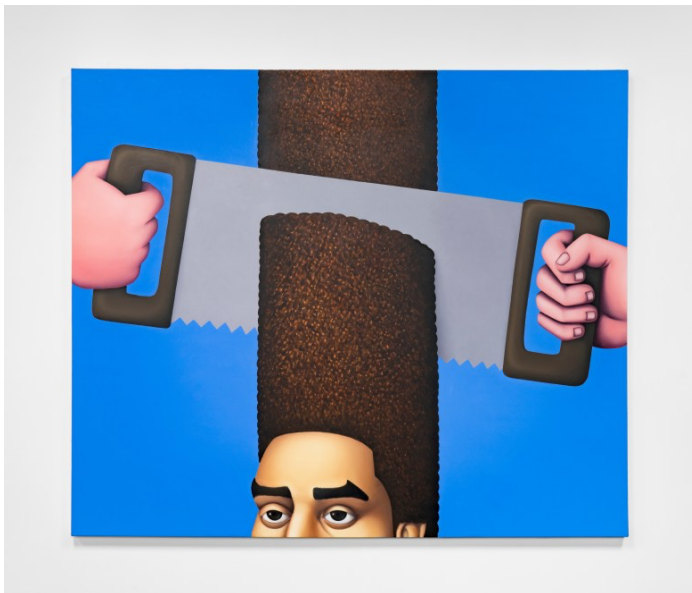
When Troyli was in his first semester of graduate school at the University of South Florida, Tampa in 2017, his professors sent him to New York City to see Kerry James Marshall’s retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art.

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A detail from *Don't Forget to Pack a Lunch!*
Credit: Robert Chase Heishman



As a young artist who arrived at his MFA program by way of an undergraduate career tethered to his D1 basketball scholarship, Troyli says Marshall's work changed the way he understood what painting can do, particularly *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self*.

"Coming from a basketball background, I just thought, 'I like to make paintings,' [but] I saw that work, and it moved me in a way I had never been moved by contemporary art," he says. "I had no context." Now, Troyli says he likes to make work that understands its position.

Troyli's painting *Down to Size* was made into a site-specific vinyl installation, for the group exhibition "Skin in the Game" in 2022. Credit: Robert Chase Heishman

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Coming from what he calls the “spectacle” of basketball and now being in the spectacle of the art world, he says that the idea that his identity can exist in the same sentence as the word “trend” is a scary thing.

“Having to navigate that . . . how do you exist past a trend?” he says. “You just have to make work that’s real and that’s honest and that’s examining itself. It has to be self-examining. Art-making is figuring out what the fuck it means to be a human. There’s this strange objectification that can happen, but yeah, I definitely like to just confront it myself.”

By the spring of 2022, Troyli was fast becoming a fixture of the Chicago contemporary art scene. That February, he opened a second solo exhibition at Monique Meloche entitled “Slow Clap,” an expansive, continued exploration of bodily commodification through the lens of self-portraiture. For EXPO Chicago that April, Troyli worked with the Blind Barber, a barbershop by day and cocktail lounge by night in the West Loop, to reinterpret his painting *Down to Size* as a site-specific vinyl installation, a public art component of the group exhibition “Skin in the Game,” in which Troyli had a second piece, *Easy Bucket*. The former piece features a flat-top hairstyle expanded to tree trunk-esque proportions, so fortified that we see it being cut with a saw instead of the expected shears. In *Easy Bucket*, the same flat top extends up through a basketball hoop’s net.

“I think of these figures as elastic, yes, but self-aware,” he says. “They’re aware of their position on this pedestal and [that] they’re being consumed. There is this tension between the viewer and the subject. You [the viewer] need to be aware of your position, as

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well, as you stand in front of this work and you consume."

Following EXPO, Troyli was featured prominently in *Dazed's* "[Inside Chicago's Booming Art Scene](#)" article. It was around this time he found out he'd been accepted as one of four visual artists in a residency program through the Academie des Beaux-Arts and Cite Internationale des Arts in Paris. Nearly two years to the date after moving to Chicago, Troyli and his wife, Jenna, moved to France.

Troyli's residency is the result of a new collaborative offering between the Cite and the Academie, made possible by the Academie's increased monetary commitment to the program. Two of the Cite's sites were renovated as a result, one of which is where Troyli works and lives. His studio, larger than most with plenty of wall space, is not the Parisian norm. I visited in January while spending time in Paris.

"I'm really lucky because . . . I always put things up on the wall, almost salon-style," he says. "I surround my paintings with my drawings. This is what my head looks like, it's swirling imagery and certain things materialize and have to be pulled out and made tangible."

Troyli consistently uses his own likeness in his work, appraising his own corporeality, both as a creator and a self-referential commodity.

Credit: Robert Chase Heishman

In addition to his own paintings and drawings, Troyli's reference images are also in the mix. His practice has always been a collaborative exercise in the graphic and classical. His earliest inspirations were *Mad Magazine* and Calvin and Hobbes comics. Whilst in Paris, however, he's leaning more into the classical side of things, particularly the work of Eugène Delacroix, one of the great French romantic painters. Delacroix's battle scenes, in particular, are fueling Troyli's practice right now.

"I'm building this body of work that circles around our obsession with and need for war and conflict and this idea of self-casting, and what it means to be a hero and what it means to cast a villain and why we have to create that duality," he says.

While the works of Delacroix depict historical, outsized battles, Troyli's interpretations train the lens of his self-portraiture on how the acrimonious hero-versus-villain dichotomy manifests through pairs of nearly identical figures at physical odds with each other.

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“That’s one of the things that I’m thinking about specifically with Delacroix, these figures that are twisted in battle that form this almost singular thing,” he says. “There’s this reliance on the other figure; there’s this weird choreography, and I’m just trying to figure it out. The studio is a constant battle, like you’re trying to figure something out.”

Troyli’s figures are recognizable in the physicality of their fluidity; they often stretch with cartoonish elasticity, a cornerstone of Troyli’s distinct style that lends itself to this new arena he’s entering in Paris.

“There is a fluidity of the figure bouncing back and forth from protagonist to antagonist, the figure being able to be used as object, or the martyr, and switching vantage points,” he says, gazing at his own work. “It’s super important to me, that idea of fluidity and elasticity and code-switching and role shifting. It’s central to my practice.”

A glimpse of this new body of work will be viewed in the U.S. for the first time at Monique Meloche’s EXPO booth this April. Troyli’s sending a piece he considers the “harbinger” of his new body of work, one he describes as a solitary figure outfitted for battle, ass exposed.

It’s a visual that can only be described as a Troyli classic, an overt ask to engage in the duality, and reality, of Troyli—the artist and the man—who is entirely himself.