

Steven Shearer *Profaned Travelers*

February 22–March 30, 2024
533 West 19th Street, New York



Steven Shearer, *Whiskered Sentinel*, 2024. Courtesy the artist

David Zwirner is pleased to present *Profaned Travelers*, its first exhibition with Canadian artist Steven Shearer since the announcement of his representation by the gallery in 2021. Across the gallery's 533 West 19th Street location, the artist will present a new body of works on canvas that engage with the subject of sleep—a motif prominent in the history of art, broaching themes of mortality, vulnerability, and ecstasy.

Shearer has developed a practice that weds canonical art history to the contemporary moment, specifically its more plebeian or subterranean expressions. His work, which includes painting, drawing, assemblage, sculpture, and installation, deploys a wide range of references as well as a vast archive of historical and contemporary found images. His compositions engage classical subjects such as the artist in their studio or the *Rückenfigur*, and they also incorporate his interest in the lo-fi iconography of underground music and the allure and alienation of participatory youth cultures grounded in these musical netherworlds. Shearer's sources range from metalheads and teen idols, the proto-modernist archetypes of Edvard Munch and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and the ambiguously gendered figures of symbolist Gustave Moreau to Renaissance masters such as Pieter Bruegel and Domenico Ghirlandaio. The archival impulse that unites these disparate referential systems is rooted in a rigorous, quasi-forensic interest in how images are made, and how the world is constituted by images, in both a symbolic and literal, bodily sense. Shearer's abiding interest is in making artworks that explore how we remember and idealize each other—in the romance of retrospection.

In this ongoing body of work, which Shearer began in 2020, the artist sources digital images, largely dating from the late 1990s and early 2000s, found online. The eleven exhibited UV prints on canvas are the result of Shearer processing the images and altering compositions to further enhance attributes that he deems sympathetic to each photograph's inherent qualities and perceived origin—such as the blue and pink hues of early digital imaging or the brightness seen in overexposed captures, as evident in *Blue Shroud* or *Terrestrial* (both 2024). The manipulated images are enlarged to spread across the expanse of

the wall, as if filling the apse of a cathedral; they appear hallowed, almost ecclesiastical—monumental to a degree that they might inspire awe or facilitate encounters with the divine—but likewise radiate the cool flush of contemporary digital imaging. In *Teresa's Trip* (2024), the head of someone asleep is covered in a kind of shroud. Their face tilts upward almost ecstatically, like a pietà catching rays of celestial light. The name of the exhibition is derived from the title of a featured work, *Profaned Traveler* (2024), which pictures the head of a sleeping man being crudely prodded by hands that enter from outside of the frame. Harnessing multiple symbolic meanings while alluding to the image's content and religious iconography, the title evokes the disturbance of the sacred, the passage of life and death, and disembodiment and the dream world.

The theme of sleep has been a throughline in Shearer's work since he began collecting relevant images in the early 2000s. Using various search terms in numerous languages and configurations, the artist amassed thousands of sleep-related images for figure studies and elements for larger groupings in works like *Sleep II* (2015; National Gallery of Canada). The resulting works in this exhibition are therefore a constellation of self-referential gestures that hark back to Shearer's extensive archive and his own exhibition history. A number of the images in *Profaned Travelers* were first shown in Vancouver's Capture Photography Festival in 2021 as public-facing billboards; however, the project was censored shortly after its debut, taken down after complaints emerged from members of the public who were unnerved by the nuanced boundaries between sleep and death explored in the series of outdoor images. *Profaned Travelers* continues to develop and diversify the subject of sleep and its other associations—death among them—and likewise ponders the power of photographic images and their circulation to unsettle established notions of presentation and propriety.

Steven Shearer (b. 1968) was born in New Westminster, Canada, and earned his BFA in 1992 from the Emily Carr University of Art & Design in Vancouver, where he continues to live and work.

The artist's work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at prominent institutions worldwide. A solo presentation of Shearer's work, *Sleep, Death's Own Brother*, is on view at The George Economou Collection, Athens, until March 15, 2024. The exhibition coincides with the release of a major monograph on the artist's work, *Steven Shearer: Working from Life*, which was published by DCV in 2023 with an essay by Dieter Roelstraete.

In 2016, the Brant Foundation Art Study Center in Greenwich, Connecticut, hosted a retrospective that included paintings, drawings, collages, and poems by the artist. A comprehensive monograph, which includes a fictional interview with the artist by author Jim Lewis, accompanied the exhibition.

In 2011, Shearer represented Canada at the 54th Venice Biennale with the exhibition *Exhume to Consume*, the title of which was taken from the 1989 song by British metal band Carcass. The presentation included a mural-sized work from his *Poems* series set upon a multi-story façade that fully obscured the Canadian Pavilion. *Double Album: Daniel Guzmán and Steven Shearer*, a two-person exhibition, was on view at the New Museum, New York, in 2008, before traveling to MUCA Gallery at the University Museum of Arts and Sciences, Mexico City. Earlier solo presentations of Shearer's work were held at the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, Toronto (2007); Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, United Kingdom (2007); and the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver (2004).

Shearer's work is included in prominent museum and public collections worldwide, among them the Kunsthaus Zürich; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; M HKA – Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen, Antwerp; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Montreal Museum of Fine Arts; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; Rubell Museum, Miami; and the Vancouver Art Gallery.

For all press inquiries, contact
Julia Lukacher jlukacher@davidzwirner.com
Erin Pinover epinover@davidzwirner.com