

Preslav Kostov

*Soft Focus*

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Approaching the paintings of Preslav Kostov, an idea of space-time remains elusive—ambivalent, even. The figures contained within are fragmentary and fugitive, resembling bodies seen through a glass shower screen or caught behind a digital scrim. Rather than mimic screen aesthetics or digital tools, however, Kostov approaches them obliquely: as forms of atmospheric interference, or what he terms “perceptual noise.” As our own human bodies interface at multiple levels of contact and legibility up against the screen-surface, Kostov’s imagery pushes at the threshold between abstraction and figuration, remaining unstable there. This is a process of second-guessing, delay, and human friction in the visual field.

Lit with an artificial clarity, these images adopt a pastel-hued palette of blues, yellows, fleshy pinks, and greens, evocative of childhood naïveté. This, too, belies the ambivalence and collapse of supposed meaning contained in such cues. Throughout the work, Kostov takes up formal decisions like these as a kind of conceptual scaffold, repeatedly prioritizing distortion and partial recognition over narrative resolution. Each painting began with a horizon line: a faded green fills the bottom half, and sky blue furnishes the space above it. As a supporting structure that Kostov’s figures will later populate, this first mark also establishes a mutually agreed-upon world of above, below, and middle. Onto this, Kostov applies a large, undetermined smear of paint like a stab in the dark, which he later uses as a guide to steadily pull out the bodily forms now occupying the frame. The original smudge becomes a ghost mark, like a palimpsest that guides these figures in and out of visibility. This careful, adaptive progression takes place over weeks and months, and the image gradually settles as successive layers of oil are laid down to dry.

As figures emerge via this automatic process, Kostov inherently brings in his own observational knowledge of the body, in tandem with a highly technical command of his medium. But what he makes visible is less so a “subject,” or even a self-portrait, than a kind of perspectival figuration functioning as a navigational tool. In this, a distinctly *re-humanized*; image compression occurs: these spectral figures act as placeholders that reflect the incoherence of self-image under surveillance. The surface resolves into an apparently perfect finish, with any single paint stroke removed from detection. However, up close, a fine liquid splatter occasionally interrupts to form a visual noise like film grain. The effect is produced by the indirect application of a chemical solvent that cuts through the smooth surface of varnish and oil paint, rearranging rather than removing the image. Kostov calls this “soft etching.” I’d argue it’s also a perfect term for the social masking and collective performance of the human body as something perpetually embedded within a larger surface.

Preslav Kostov (b. 1998, Bulgaria) lives and works in London, UK. Kostov received his BA at Leeds Arts University (Leeds, UK) in 2020, and received his MA at Royal College of Art (London, UK) in 2023. Selected exhibitions include: “Soft Focus,” Tara Downs, New York, US (2025); “Between the five wells,” Tara Downs, New York, US (2024); “Notes Toward a Shell,” Tara Downs, New York, US (2024); “Softer, Softest,” Guts Gallery, London, UK (2024); “Beauty in chaos,” Hew Hood Gallery, London, UK (2024); “The Arcadian Dream, Spurs Gallery, Beijing, CN (2024); “New Now,” Guts Gallery, London, UK (2023); “Manifest,” SixtySix London, London, UK (2023); “Touch-a-touch-a-touch- me, Berntson Bhattacharjee Gallery, London, UK (2023); “From The Cloud,” Baert Gallery, Los Angeles, US (2023); “Skin Deep,”; “A consciousness harnessed to flesh,” D Contemporary, London, UK (2023). His work is included in a forthcoming solo presentation at Tara Downs, New York titled “Soft Focus”.