

Simon Lehner: *Of Peasants & Basterds*

6 June – 22 August 2025

Opening Reception | Thursday 5 June, 6 – 8pm



Edel Assanti is pleased to present Vienna-based artist Simon Lehner's first UK solo exhibition, *Of Peasants & Basterds*.

Working across sculpture, painting and installation, Simon Lehner's practice interrogates the relationship between the image-onslaught of the information age and psychic inner life. Lehner's research probes algorithm-accelerated echo chambers as they evolve into mainstream social doctrines.

Of Peasants & Basterds introduces its theme with a sculpture of the word *Community*, 3D-printed and dripping with silicon. This word resonates squeamishly with a generation who were spoon-fed utopian visions of a diverse, borderless community interconnected by benevolent Tech Giants. As a harbinger of societal polarisation unleashed by this revolution, the sculpture is irony-laden; a relic of vacuous corporate advertising, dissolving into oblivion.

Lehner's interest in internet subcultures first emerged from a desire to come to terms with his own psychology and childhood experiences. His enquiry addresses the construction of identity occurring in these spaces: unattainable ideals are magnified; individuals are marginalised from the group; alternative communities are formed, grounded in a reversal of the proscribed value system.

Lehner's focus on groups that proliferate toxic ideals of hyper-masculinity is a case-study in the weaponisation of images, and the power imbalance between the individual and the technologies that now drive collective consciousness. *Of Peasants & Basterds* expands Lehner's inquiry into the role of pictures as instruments of manipulation, beginning with a reference to the history of painting. From the 16th to 19th centuries, "peasant paintings" were commissioned by the ruling class as a pre-photographic means of visualising the lives of ordinary people. Lehner's most recent work observes that today's kings are a coterie of male tech CEOs, whose surveillance tools amass an infinite datascape representative of our collective psyche; in this analogy, the peasants are their users.

Lehner's new works pivot on compositions derived from historical paintings, supplanting peasants with avatars summoned from the depths of the manosphere. In this world, Patrick Bateman – a regularly transmutating protagonist in Lehner's oeuvre, seeded from Christian Bale's portrayal of the character in *American Psycho* – is an aspirational male archetype, both aesthetically and behaviourally. Bateman's character has evolved from an internet meme into a symbol and role model within the incel communities, embodying their ideals of how a man should treat women and navigate the world around him. Members of these online subcultures not only strive to physically resemble him, but also to adopt his behavioural traits – embracing stoic character ideals and, often, misogynistic perspectives.

An animatronic humanoid sculpture inhabits the middle of the exhibition subtly breathing as it presses its face up against the wall. Sitting on a prison cell chair whilst peering through a keyhole, its silicone body is marked up, annotated with cosmetic corrections as though prepped for plastic surgery. This uncanny individual is what Lehner refers to as an *Image Basterd*: a product of image indoctrination; a member of a different kind of community to the one we were promised, in which radicalised young men coalesce in celebration of misogyny and violence. Self-image is submitted to communal critique in forums where consensus is driven by a stream of idealised masculine icons.

Lehner's series of paintings are made through a unique process developed by the artist: compositions are created using thousands of images aggregated from both Lehner's private and collective archives to construct interactive 3D digital spaces populated by avatars. Within these environments, the artist assumes a puppeteer role, limitlessly manipulating his characters and props before translating them into films, animatronic sculptures or paintings. The paintings materialise Lehner's scenes through a collaboration with an adapted robotic router, carving out a topographic surface disrupted by painterly gestures where the artist's hand and the machine's meet. Emblematic of the technological era in which they are made, the sophisticated layering of Lehner's paintings complicate our ability to distinguish depth and authorship, real from simulation, truth from falsehood.

ABOUT SIMON LEHNER

Simon Lehner (b. 1996, Wels, Austria) received his Mag.Art in Photography and Time-based Media at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna, Austria. Recent solo exhibitions include *Of Peasants & Basterds*, Edel Assanti, London, UK (2025); *Clean Thoughts. Clean Images*, Foto Arsenal Wien, Vienna, Austria (2025); *My Mountain Has No Summit*, KOW, Berlin, Germany (2024); *I love you like an image*, Kunstpalais Erlangen, Erlangen, Germany (2023); *I'm a liar, but a good one*, KOENIG2 by_robbygreif, Vienna, Austria (2021); *To cut a blind spot*, Fotohof, Salzburg, Austria (2021); *Men don't play / Men do play*, Westlicht Museum, Vienna, Austria (2020); *The mind is a voice*, Bildraum 01, Vienna, Austria (2020); *How far is a lightyear?*, Art Genève, Ruinart Prize exhibition, Geneva, Switzerland (2019). Recent institutional group exhibitions include *On the New*, Belvedere 21, Vienna, Austria (2024); *yours truly*, Museum Morsbroich, Leverkusen, Germany (2023); *Zeit*, Kunsthau Zürich, Switzerland (2023); *Expect the Unexpected*, Kunstmuseum Bonn, Germany (2023); *Photolux Festival*, Lucca, Italy (2022); *Pattern Recognition*, Kunstpalais Erlangen, Erlangen, Germany (2022); *Ars Electronica Festival*, Salzamt, Vienna, Austria (2021); *How far is a lightyear?*, Rencontres d'Arles, Arles, France (2019). Lehner's work is in the permanent collections of Vontobel Bank AG - Urs Stahel, Wiener Städtische Insurance, and Oberösterreichische Landesmuseum.

In 2025, a monograph of his work will be published by Spector Books (Leipzig, Germany) to accompany his solo exhibition at Foto Arsenal Wien.

ABOUT EDEL ASSANTI

Edel Assanti was founded in 2010 by Jeremy Epstein and Charlie Fellowes. Having been located in London's Fitzrovia since 2014, in 2022 we opened our 4,000 square foot gallery in a renovated Grade-II listed building on Little Titchfield Street.

Edel Assanti works with international artists whose practices engage with the complex realities of the moment in which they live. The gallery stages 4-5 ambitious, narrative driven exhibitions per year, tending towards interdisciplinary, research-led work. Biannual, expansive group exhibitions provide a platform to bring together non-represented artists in explorations of emerging themes of artistic interest.

The gallery's premises play host to a dynamic events programme in parallel to gallery exhibitions, encompassing performance, talks and live music. The gallery's digital presence includes a series of short films and artist interviews published to accompany exhibitions.

In 2021 Edel Assanti founded London Gallery Weekend (LGW), an annual celebration of London's diverse gallery community bringing together 130 contemporary commercial galleries. Now in its fifth year, Edel Assanti remains at LGW's helm. Chief amongst LGW's initiatives is a wide-ranging partnership with Art Fund, enhancing the relationship between London's galleries and regional museums across the UK.

We are proud to support several public arts institutions each year, and are currently members of Modern Art Oxford's Director's Circle, Gold Patrons of the Royal Academy of Arts and Patrons of Camden Art Centre.

CONTACT US

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Image: Simon Lehner, *Of Peasants & Basterds*, installation view, Edel Assanti, 2025. © Simon Lehner. Courtesy the artist and Edel Assanti. Photo by Tom Carter.