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VOGUE

Magazine

Inside the Artist Sam McKinniss's Magical, Maximalist Retreat in Rural Connecticut

By Chloe Schama
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January 3, 2025



DISTANT FRIENDS

McKinniss in front of *Monica Geller, Ross Geller, Chandler Bing, Phoebe Buffay, Joey Tribbiani, and Rachel Green*, 2024, oil on linen. His solo show, "The Perfect Tense," opens in January at the David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles. Photographed by Stefan Ruiz. *Sittings Editor: Michael Reynolds. Vogue, Winter 2025.*

The first thing to know about the artist Sam McKinniss is that he loves a fake. Or maybe it's more precise to say that the 39-year-old painter, who has made his name by turning ubiquitous images from pop culture into lush canvases, loves the disquiet caused by something that seems about five degrees off. His oil paintings of celebrities are instantly recognizable—subtly seared into our subconscious by a thousand impressions—and also disarming, evoking the way we relate to those images with empathy, scorn, affection, disdain.

And then there is his house in Kent, Connecticut—an artistic project of a different order but with a metacommentary of its own. With its long, low profile and rough-hewn beams, the house seems as if it might have had a former life as a 17th-century cabin, pipe smoke suffusing its wooden panels and subtle rippling in the window panes. It's early fall when I



GREEN DREAM

McKinniss's *Sam's Sweater*, 2014, oil on canvas; below: McKinniss's *Cow* (study), 2022, oil on canvas.



SUNNY DAYS

Light streams into the downstairs "apartment," a guest room and parlor in one.

visit and the trees have dropped their leaves; cords of chopped wood are piled chest-high out front, ready for winter. It's easy to imagine a lesser member of the *Mayflower* staking out a homestead on the site.

"It was built in 1969," McKinniss tells me, opening the door, dapper but casual in Brooks Brothers slacks with a white oxford shirt, red Charvet slippers, and a black Pringle cardigan draped over his shoulders. The home, which he shares with his partner, Michael Londres, is a maximalist concoction of McKinniss's own making, a riot of color and pattern, from the canvases (his own, his friends', artists he admires), to the exuberant wallpaper, to the cut chrysanthemums. The house, says David Kordansky, whose gallery shows McKinniss's work, reflects Sam as a person: "It is the mash-up of pop against a backdrop of something mundane, ubiquitous," says Kordansky. "It really is this amalgamation of ornate boredom."

Born in Minnesota, the third of four kids, McKinniss was raised in Hartford County, Connecticut, where his father was a local reverend. "Watching him every Sunday, I learned a lot about rhetoric and public speaking," McKinniss says, "and about composure." He took art classes in high school—seeking out extracurricular sketching sessions with live models—and earned a scholarship to the Hartford Art School. After graduating, he followed a boyfriend to Boston, where he worked retail jobs he disliked and one great job at



COLOR THEORY

McKinniss's painting *Charlie Fox*, 2022, set off by wallpaper from Rifle Paper Co.



SWEET DREAMS

The bedroom, with a Dorothy Draper–esque checkerboard rug.

the storied Brattle Book Shop. He was selling a few paintings a year at that point, mostly through word of mouth and mostly images of his friends, modeled after the work of Nan Goldin and Jack Pierson, artists known for gritty yet celebratory depictions of queer life.

McKinniss moved to New York in 2011 to enroll at NYU, “and try to be charming and do my best to get lucky,” he says. His classmate the artist Lily Stockman, whose studio was next to his, describes a “cool charisma and intellectual confidence that immediately established him as a leader in the group.” McKinniss, Stockman says, “suffered no fools and had no problem being disputatious. He loved banter, debate, and good argument. He loathed laziness, sloppiness, and people eating while walking on the street. Sam has beautiful manners.”

McKinniss went out a lot in those years, to the GHE20G0TH1K parties organized in Brooklyn warehouses and downtown clubs, and he started dating a DJ. Meanwhile he was developing a devoted following, showing his paintings at Team Gallery in New York and then at Jasmin T. Tsou’s Tribeca space, JTT. “Sam has been able to focus on this one particular human behavior,” says Tsou, “which is essentially to project our desires through a parasocial process onto a celebrity. There’s certain imagery that sticks with you, and you don’t really realize how much until Sam paints it.” At the same time he started painting canvases in the mode of the 19th-century French artist Henri Fantin-La-

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HOUSE PROUD

McKinniss outside the home he shares with his partner, Michael Londres, in Kent, Connecticut.



STAY GOLD

Another view of the downstairs "apartment." Painting by Sam McKinniss, *Mother and Calf*, 2022, oil on linen.

tour. "His flower paintings were so anodyne that the punk kids were outraged, which of course Sam delighted in," says Stockman. "He has truly catholic taste—to Sam a gay Fragonard is the same as a TMZ shot of Lindsay Lohan in her car."



FACE IN THE CROWD
Fiona Apple, 2024, oil on linen.



RED ALL OVER
A nook in the kitchen, decorated with photogravure prints by Carsten Höller. © 2025 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

In 2015, McKinniss turned 30, and it became a lot "less appealing to stay out doing drugs all night long," he says. He had only ever lived in "dumps," but after a series of well-received solo shows, he felt financially stable enough to take on a floor-through apartment in Greenpoint in 2019. (He had also become, for a while, suddenly famous for painting the cover of Lorde's 2017 album, *Melodrama*. "We have a mutual friend," he says of Lorde.) The Greenpoint apartment was the nicest place he had ever lived, but the glow quickly faded when the claustrophobia of the pandemic closed in. He began buying up home goods and antique furniture to pass the time, until he realized he'd better find somewhere to put it all. Friends helped him find the house in Kent in 2021; buddies from high school, Joshua and Jesse Kellam of Kellam Carpentry, put it in working order.

Today there is no lingering evidence of any disruptive transformations. In the foyer a William Morris print covers the walls, while around the corner two dozen baseball hats hang on pegs in a precise configuration. McKinniss shows me a tucked-away laundry room painted a cheery tomato-soup red, where a strange soffit, lined with exterior siding,



DOG DAYS

The emerald color of the living room was inspired by George Washington's Mount Vernon. A porcelain canine friend, named Molly, stands sentry at the fireplace. Artwork on the mantel, left: Luke O'Halloran, *Card Flourish*, 2019, oil on paper.

emerges from the ceiling. The man who built the house, Roger Gonzales, "used to tell people that this was its original corner," McKinniss says, "and the rest of it was all an addition." An assortment of brass candlesticks appear timeworn; McKinniss tells me he buys them online for \$5 apiece. The windows *are* antique glass, but they were purchased secondhand. The high-gloss walls of his living room are a lacquered green—inspired by a parlor at Mount Vernon. The color seems both Colonial homage and how the Emerald City might appear if you were watching *The Wizard of Oz* while just a little high.

"I wanted the house to look like Dorothy Draper," McKinniss tells me, whose crisp colors—acid green, flamingo pink—paired with classical details defined a certain kind of midcentury baroque. Draper's design for the Greenbrier resort—the famous 14,000-acre West Virginia property, where each room feels like a Kodachrome ad—was a reference, as was the movie *Holiday Inn* (1942). "I wanted to do the house in what Hollywood used to call the American Colonial Revival style, but put back in New England," he says. We step into a sunny sitting room with a ceiling the color of lemon curd, the walls covered in a graphic floral from the Swedish wallpaper company Sandberg—a warmly enveloping pastiche. It would be hard to be gloomy in a room like this. "What I really wanted was a proper home out of town," McKinniss says.



STAR POWER

Painting above the fireplace by Sam McKinniss, *Angela Lansbury*, 2014, oil on canvas.



OFF THE WALL

Painting above chair by Sam McKinniss, *Chris*, 2014, oil on canvas.

“I wanted the house to look like Dorothy Draper,” McKinniss tells me

On first glance, McKinniss’s studio, housed in the renovated barn just 100 paces from his front door, offers a more austere aesthetic: The drywall behind his paintings is optic white, save for the halo of colored slashes where McKinniss has wiped his excess paint. The track lighting is fluorescent. Functional storage lines the walls. But in another way, it’s of a piece: McKinniss’s canvases, like his house, radiate a deep awareness of how visual culture alters the way we perceive the world. New paintings are inspired by the cover of Fiona Apple’s 1996 album, *Tidal*; an image of the characters from *Friends*; a picture of the diver Greg Louganis, upside down with his arms outstretched in a Christ-like configuration at the 1988 Seoul Olympics. These images have all been rendered on canvases that will ship out the following day, bound for the David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles, where a solo show titled “The Perfect Tense” opens in January.



HARE AND AWAY

Artwork by Landon Metz, dye/canvas. © 2025 Landon Metz/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

The new paintings are in the same mode as his earlier work, McKinniss says, "which you could describe as entertainment as usual." But he also wants there to be evocations of loss and mourning. "I was trying to make a show that developed the idea of a private experience of grief that could then be experienced in the public domain," McKinniss says, "so a lot of the notes that I'm trying to hit have to do with a demise or imminent danger." (Apple has gone through mental health struggles; the *Friends* image is haunted by the death of Matthew Perry; Louganis later found himself ensnared in controversy when he revealed that he had kept his HIV status secret.)

In his rural idyll, McKinniss might be moving into a more contemplative mood than that of his 20s and 30s. He is at work by 9 a.m., breaking for lunch with Michael—"the gentlest, most decent person you'll ever meet"—reading voraciously (on his nightstand



PAN TONE
Sam McKinniss, *Fawn*, 2022, coated bronze.

are works by the art critic Dave Hickey, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and Kazuo Ishiguro), going for long walks. But he still surrounds himself with vivacious friends. (And he knows everyone—at one point I offhandedly mention the children’s artist Richard Scarry; Scarry’s granddaughter is, of course, an acquaintance.) The weekend before my visit, some 40 people swirled through the house, playing the grand piano in the living room, eating the gingerbread and apple cakes that Michael had baked. McKinniss makes time to visit the city too, where he and Michael keep an apartment in Tudor City.

Have the rhythms of his new life changed him? He explains the story behind his more recent large cow paintings. The canvases emerged from an urge, he says, to just “take pleasure in art” after a period when he was overstretched with gallery obligations. They are less like his previous work, and more like “a fantasy of what I thought painting would’ve been,” he says, “a fantasy version of an artist in New England.” McKinniss



WARM WELCOME

McKinniss with his partner, Londres.

was at that time new to Kent, and intended to befriend his local dairy farmer, to “trot onto their property with a portable easel.” Instead he finds himself painting cows from images he prints from the internet. Nature rendered in pixels and transformed again, the uncannily familiar, made strange and new. “The first one I did literally was a thumbnail image of a dairy cow,” he says. “From Wikipedia.”

Produced by Boom Productions.