

Oli EPP

*Artforum,*  
*Oli Epp: Critics' Picks*

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Oli Epp, *Surrogate*, 2022, oil and acrylic on canvas, 75 × 89"

## NEW YORK

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Striking high-contrast images of art seem to be in vogue, especially on social media, where they frequently gain more “likes” than works that are quieter, murkier, oblique. Enter Oli Epp, whose paintings undoubtedly shine on Instagram because of their slick, detailed facture. Indeed, Epp’s canvases are a shining example of this phenomenon—yet their physical presence and technical virtuosity stand out and deserve careful examination.

In *Surrogate* (all works cited, 2022), an agglomeration of nine white kittens forms a ghostly unified whole under a black Siamese cat with five large distended teats. This feline’s hyperdetailed head is attached to an elongated cartoonish body—dangling from its posterior is an

emerald. The gradated background is a cloudy subtle blue, which makes the gem, as well as the mama cat's green eyes and soft-pink nipples visually pop. If you fetishize such scrupulous handiwork, you'll get lost in *Engaged*, a closely cropped picture of a woman's face, whose skin is a field of modulated pinky beige, accented by a lemony horizontal fringe of hair. She's applying red lipstick to her giant wet lips, both of which are the same hue as the analog telephone handset she's holding. All three of these components, photorealistically rendered, provide a sharp contrast to the work's flatter, more stylized parts—it's as if the subject's skin and bangs are a stage for the work's trio of bright-crimson components. Perhaps the most compelling detail is the bloodred streak of lipstick that misses the mouth; its flatness becomes a comment on the illusionism of painting.

Blue-denim jeans can be seen through a perfect circle on the crotch of a cyborg cowboy's chaps in *Dead Center*, whose titular direction indicates where in the canvas this peep-show punctum is located. A nasty yellow gunk is visible on the subject's oversize teeth, likely the result of frequent tobacco use (a few cigarette butts are strewn along the ground). A red-velvet drape in the background creates a theatrical effect, as though we are viewing a futuristic vaudeville routine. This image would certainly be satisfying as pixels, but Epp's meticulous brushwork is best experienced in the flesh.

— Chris Bors