

What to See in Galleries in October

CHELSEA

Lamar Peterson

Through Nov. 8. Fredericks & Freiser, 536 West 24th Street; 212-633-6555, fredericksfreisergallery.com.



Lamar Peterson, "Lunch on the Lawn," 2025, oil on canvas. Lamar Peterson, via Fredericks & Freiser, New York; Photo by Cary Whittier

Lamar Peterson was way ahead of the curve in the recent Black figurative painting boom. For more than two decades, he has perfected an approach to painting the figure that combines classic portraiture with graphic arts — comic or cartoon-style figures — and explores a range of psychological states.

Immensely pleasing and often funny, Peterson's canvases focus on mundane rituals like washing dishes or watering the flowers. In "Lunch on the Lawn" (2025), which harks back to Manet's landmark "Luncheon on the Grass" (1863), the artist (or his painted doppelgänger) lounges on a picnic blanket in a ready-made pose, with the historically resonant title ensuring the reference in case the image alone does not.

What was groundbreaking in Manet's painting was to show bohemians relaxing (one of them nude), in a park in Paris. What's groundbreaking in Peterson's paintings is their shifting and uncertain affect — the underlying emotional and psychological states suggested by the work. He is specifically exploring these realms in relation to Black men, and that too is something typically overlooked in Western painting.



In Peterson's work, the sun is shining, the flowers are blooming, the colors are absurdly bright, and the artist smiles directly at the viewer. He is living the good life as a suburban art professor and gardener in Minneapolis. But no one's life is consistently serene. A rain cloud edges out the sun; our artist-hero stares with existential dread into his pillow in "The Worrier" (2025) or undergoes a mood swing in a pair of collages, "Fretful" (2024) and "Exhilarated" (2025).

Peterson's paintings are like a dream (and occasionally depict dreams). They may be the American dream, the artist's dream or some kind of hallucination. The narrative that grounds them is a life rooted in ritual — cooking, cleaning, watering the plants and painting — and the idea that, for ambitious painting, that may be a radical subject.

MARTHA SCHWENDENER