Longing, Sweat, Roses
John Brooks

"*The world is little, people are little, human life is little. There is only one big thing — desire,*" wrote American author Willa Cather in her 1915 novel *The Song of the Lark.* Desire, in all of its complexities and diverse forms, profoundly shapes the course of human lives, human history, and even the very world itself. Although it can be shared collectively, the primary essence of desire is highly individual; it can neither be fully explained nor compelled to exist where it does not do so naturally. Desire is a force, all its own. Some desires, such as those having to do with conquest, dominion, and power, can have dire and destructive consequences, but following the paths kindled by our appetites doesn't necessarily have to ruin or diminish us. On the contrary, such pursuits can broaden our experiences and connect us to some of the deepest mysteries of what it means to be alive. It is exactly this kind of expansive, experiential desire with which the paintings in Berke Doganoglu's *Longing, Sweat, Roses* are concerned.

The impetus for beginning these works occurred approximately two years ago when Doganoglu was reading Anne Carson's *Eros the Bittersweet* and *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho,* her translations of surviving work by the Archaic Greek poet born on Lesbos in 620 BCE. In the former book, Carson analyzes the relationship of eros and the concept of *glukupikron*, a word of Sappho's own creation that means "bittersweet." Carson also writes of eros being "*organized around a radiant absence*," or as a "*lack*." If asked, most people probably would not define eros in this way, yet so much of what constitutes eros and desire is born from hunger and stems from a deep sense of longing. Longing, inherently, is precisely that: a lack. This lack, this absence, is even more pronounced for Queer people, most of whom come of age and live in cultures that are, in ways large and small, riddled with obstacles and impediments hindering accessibility to the fulfillment of our desires. Everyone has to fight for love, of course, but members of the LGBTQ+ community have to fight harder for it, because our desire — even our very existence — is seen by so many others as fundamentally transgressive. To live and love as a Queer person is an act of bravery, and to make art centered around such subjects is an extension of that courage. No matter whether that courage comes easily or is hard-won, many artists feel compelled to make work that reflects their own reality. Doganoglu's series *Longing, sweat, roses* started to take shape when he realized, with the help of Carson's scholarship, how Sappho's understanding of desire — and specifically Queer desire — mirrored his own. Touched by the distance, in terms of time, between himself and Sappho, as well as the wistful disunion between the poet and her lovers, the artist describes reading her surviving fragmented poems as "an almost bodily experience."

This palpable, poignant bond that spans centuries is reflected in Doganoglu's compositions; so, too, are the formal qualities of Sappho's poems, only one of which survives entirely intact. Like her verses, the bodies depicted in Doganoglu's paintings are incomplete, broken in pieces, with their heads or other limbs and appendages missing. The artist presents us only with partial views. This loss of specificity lends the works an air of anonymity; paradoxically, this anonymity has the potential to make them all the more compelling because we, as the viewer, are keenly aware that something is missing, but we don't know what it is. We know not who was desired or how, only that they were. That tension — the gap between what is depicted, what is said, and what is held back — is one of the most powerful ways works of art can continually hold our interest. Doesn't desire function in the same way? Nietzsche famously said "*Ultimately, it is the desire, not the desired, that we love*." While that contention is debatable, both desire and love are unquestionably incomprehensible. They cannot be wholly dissected or diagrammed. Their workings are as mysterious as the life-force itself, and no matter how much we love and are loved in return, we cannot ever fully possess another person. There is always a fundamental separation between ourselves and our beloved; a profound, existential sadness is wrapped up in this fact, but is also a simple reality we must all learn to accept. The pull of desiring, possessing, is perhaps, as Nietzsche suggests, part of what keeps us coming back. As evident in *fragment 105 (a),* translated by Anita George and published in the June 1994 issue of *Poetry,* Sappho herself knew this:

You: an Achilles' apple
Blushing sweet on a high branch
At the tip of the tallest tree.
You escaped those who would pluck
your fruit.
Not that they didn't try. No,
They could not forget you
Poised beyond their reach.

The apple is the object of desire, but its ultimate inaccessibility makes the object impossible to forget. Likewise, Doganoglu's paintings urge us to return to them time and time again. Despite the fact that we do not see the faces of his subjects, we still long to know who they are; they *have* names, we just don't know what they are. It is with the next look, we hope, that we will be brought closer to an understanding that satisfies our curiosity. The spectrum of Queerness contains multitudes, but Doganoglu's figures read as traditionally masculine; they are robust, taking up so much space that they spill beyond the confines of the canvas. Endowed with an erotic power that lingers, like an old flame, their presence, their existence, is undeniable.

Doganoglu counts the American painter Marsden Hartley (1877-1943) among his strongest influences. Hartley had a long and varied career but is probably best known for works steeped in homoerotic eros and loss, particularly a series of paintings such as '*Portrait of a German Officer*' (1914) which memorialize the death of his lover Karl von Freyberg, who was killed in battle at the beginning of World War One. While not adorned with the gilded laurels of a fallen lover, Doganoglu's atmospheric, elegiac paintings nonetheless feel as if they are commemorations of meaningful connections. The two artists also share some aesthetic similarities. Hartley's '*Madawaska Acadia Light Heavy'* (1939-1940) is called to mind by the muscular, hirsute chest in Doganoglu's '*Blue Jeans*', and the colors of the bodies populating these paintings — pinks, peaches, whites, and mauves, with vermillion underpainting — are reminiscent of the shirtless male figures in Hartley's '*Christ Held by Half Naked Men*' (1940). But whereas Hartley's figures are stylized and expressionist, the shape and form of Doganoglu's men more closely resemble reality. The degree of tenderness with which he has approached his subjects — a methodology having to do with brush technique, conceptual intention, and a disposition of the psyche — makes them seem as if they are impressions of specific men, despite their namelessness.

Paintings exist as singular physical objects, but the act of painting can be seen as a means of intimately familiarizing, even communing, one's self with a subject. At its best, the endeavor also connects the painter to the lineage of the discipline. Doganoglu's work quietly and respectfully builds upon his influences, including Paul Cezanne, Philip Guston, and Walter Sickert. Even where there may be clear aesthetic and material differences, Doganoglu's paintings align thematically and conceptually with the work of so many artists who have contributed to the rich history of 20th Century Queer figuration, including such luminaries as Peter Hujar, David Wojnarowicz, and the aforementioned Hartley. But the work is, of course, being made now, in the 21st Century, and thus reflects both contemporary Queer life and a shared Queer history. As part of his painting process, Doganoglu often conducts photo sessions with live models, recreating poses and compositions inspired by vintage gay pornographic magazines like *Honcho*, *Mandate*, and *Drummer.* In the 1970s, these nude and semi-nude men were virile, masculine paragons of erotic freedom; fifty years later, if they are indeed still alive, it isn't only the passage of time that has changed them. The men in the original photographs were living in an era before the AIDS epidemic; in subsequent years, if these men weren't directly affected by the virus themselves, they no doubt witnessed the decimation of great swathes of their community. It is impossible to look at and think of these men without imagining the pain they endured watching their friends and lovers suffer immensely. When we consider that their anguish was born from pleasure, from *desire,* their plight is even more heartbreaking. It wasn't divine retribution that saw some men afflicted while others continued to live unscathed — because this simply isn't how diseases work — rather it was

chance, bad luck, or even what can be loosely defined as *fate.* It is only by chance and fate — and modern medical science — that Queer men like Doganoglu (and myself) are living in a time in which an AIDS diagnosis is not a death sentence. Reckoning with the loss not only of youth, beauty, and strength, but also the loss of individual lovers, brothers, sons, and friends, Doganoglu treats his source material and his subjects with poignancy and tenderness despite the fact that their origins are pornographic, because he knows that any one of us could be any one of these men.

Whether desire and love lifts us up or weighs us down, our lives are adorned and colored by their residue. Canonizing the memory of such feelings, Doganoglu juxtaposes floral still lifes and landscapes as a means to remind us that we are part of the tumult and ephemerality of the natural world. Everything we have ever known is impossibly fragile. Our lives are finite; nothing — not even Sappho's blushing apple — really lasts. Through art, however, we can reach into the past and into the future, learning from those we never knew and hopefully touching those we never will know, ensuring that the sweetness and bittersweetness of desire, which is far bigger than we are, remains fragrant and evident beyond the length of our little lives.