

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Beckett Mufson, "Elizabeth Peyton and Marching Church Put the Pain Back in Painting," *The Creators Project* (Vice), August 30, 2016

The Creators Project

Elizabeth Peyton and Marching Church Put the Pain Back
in Painting



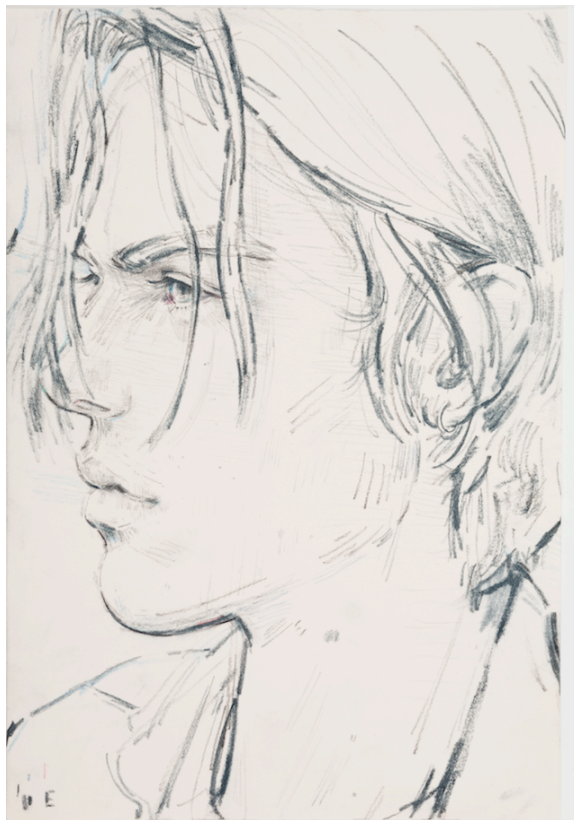
Elias Bender Rønnenfelt fronting for Marching Church at National Sawdust+'s Presented and Curated by Elizabeth Peyton. Photo: Jenna Putnam. Images courtesy National Sawdust+

I've never been to a music event curated by an artist, much less one who had made paintings of the performers, so I'm intrigued by *Presented And Curated By Elizabeth Peyton*. Peyton is known for her emotive portraiture of pop personalities including David Bowie, Kanye West, and Abraham Lincoln. She's also drawn composer-musician Nico Muhly—the youngest to get a commission from the Metropolitan Opera—and notorious Iceage frontman Elias Bender Rønnenfelt, both of whom she invites to National Sawdust+ earlier this month. The artists each provide a set at Peyton's behest, a lineup she tells The Creators Project she arranged, "Just to

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put them together... Not even like I have some idea of what that means. I just wanted to experience them side by side."

But her admittedly unscientific curation method yields a complex and substantial experience. Muhly's compositions are beautifully performed by violinist Jannina Norpoth and pianist Adam Tandler while Rønnefelt plays with his currently touring band, Marching Church, a solo project that evolved into a unique beast thanks to fellow Copenhagen punk and experimental artists Puce Mary and members of Lower, Choir of Young Believers, and Sexdrome. With Peyton's painting *Knights Dreaming* (2016) projected onto the background, Muhly's musicians unleash a volatile performance of compositions "Honest Music" and "Drones and Violin," oscillating between cool and collected bundles of harmonious notes and dissonant barrages of energy that could have been anger, ecstasy, or both.



Elizabeth Peyton E (Elias) 2013 pencil and pastel on paper 8 3/4 x 6 inches (16 3/8 x 13 3/8 cm) copyright Elizabeth Peyton; images courtesy of the artist; Elizabeth Peyton (Nico Muhly) 2016 Colored pencil and pastel pencil on paper 8.6 x 6 inches (21.8 x 15.2 cm). Images courtesy the artist

Before Norpoth and Tandler have even finished "Drones and Violin," Marching Church is on

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stage. Their instrument tests leak chaos into the end of the composition, and Rønnenfelt wastes no time directing his rancor at the casually-seated concert-goers. It's difficult to recall the moment the opening musicians leave the stage, as piano and violin march as seamlessly in formation behind Rønnenfelt as the rest of the band. The Dane brings a sentiment expressed in the official statement for Marching Church's first album, *This World Is Not Enough*, to the National Sawdust+ performance. "Though Marching Church might be a dictatorship, *This World is Not Enough* was very much a collaborative effort," Rønnenfelt says. As was *Presented And Curated By Elizabeth Peyton*.

As Peyton predicted, the artists pair well. Their contrasting backgrounds lead them to similarly moody and expressive styles. "I thought there was a real similarity between these pieces of classical music and the way that Elias sings in the band. It seemed like a good opportunity," she tells us.



Peyton's painting Knights Dreaming (2016) is projected onto the backdrop. Photo: Jenna Putnam

Within minutes of taking the stage, Rønnenfelt has sweat through his blue two-piece suit. Each member of Marching Church tells his own story, from the saxaphonist facing the back wall à la Jim Morrison, to the bassist in a sheer, bedazzled blazer, who shares a microphone with the guitarist, their lips all but locking. Rønnenfelt, however, is the undisputed center of attention, if only because of how he provokes a certain fight or flight response from his audience. Every word sounds like it was ripped from his chest—it's clear he relives the pain in his music every time he performs. I'm surprised the mic stand doesn't fly into the audience like a spear. He marauds like a bull in a China shop. Before the final note of the final song rings out, he storms out of the room. The applause is thunderous.

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Before the show, Rønnenfelt and Peyton tell us how they approach the idea of performance. Peyton offers, "As a member of the audience, performance is to connect somehow. Like, to feel connection somehow and have some transcendent experience." Rønnenfelt responds, "Yeah, or disconnect. You can do a performance to distance yourself from the people. I mean, it's communication. It's a way of passing something over to somebody else." His response is a good summary of how I feel during the show: disconnection can be as powerful as connection, when presented with Marching Church's fervor. Rather than empathizing with Rønnenfelt's pain as my own, I simply reveled in the rawness of its expression in every note and lyric.



Rønnenfelt collapses onto the floor towards the end of his performance. He later knocked that wine glass over and didn't even notice. Photo: Jenna Putnam

"Classical music; for lack of a better description—rock music; and painting are often described as exhausted mediums with no one expecting much from them by way of expressing their 'time,'" Peyton writes on National Sawdust+'s event page. "But these mediums have the ability of being so humanly immediate and communicative, the way they can express the 'now' (and every other feeling) in an alarming, beautiful, magic much needed way... a touch on a piano key, a stroke of a brush, a scream..... owwwwwww." These, and more, are out in full force at *Curated and Presented by Elizabeth Peyton*.

Hear Nico Muhly here and Marching Church here. See more of Elizabeth Peyton's work here. Learn more about *Curated and Presented by Elizabeth Peyton* on National Sawdust+'s website.