

## WES HEMPEL *Tied to the Past*

SAN FRANCISCO  
SEPTEMBER 3 – OCTOBER 17, 2009  
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NEW YORK  
PROJECT ROOM  
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Wes Hempel, *A New Beginning*, 2009, oil on canvas, 44 x 44"



Wes Hempel, *Sye's Dream*, 2008, oil on canvas, 72 x 44"

Jenkins Johnson Gallery in San Francisco is pleased to announce the third solo exhibition of recent paintings, *Tied to the Past*, by **Wes Hempel**. The exhibition is from September 3 to October 17. There will be a reception for the artist on Thursday, September 3, 2009 from 5:30 – 7:30 pm in San Francisco and a selection of new works will also be shown in the Project Room in the Chelsea, New York gallery.

Wes Hempel is a realist painter working with a revisionist's narrative. His ability to combine modern concepts and social issues with traditional styles is proven time and again. Placing the contemporary figure within the pages of art history, his narratives are staged with an appropriated or referenced backdrop that heightens the drama between the two juxtaposed worlds. Hempel's new renditions of classic paintings bring introspective and cultural criticism to the work. Tension and psychological drama exude from these scenes, becoming as much of a force as the figures themselves.

The internal struggles and intimate moments that Hempel captures in his work add to the monumentality of his compositions. Heroic and idealized figures are posed in ways that challenge the stereotypes and muted realities of the past. Using the young male body to highlight issues of identity, preconceived notions of masculinity and the vilified nature of homosexuality, Hempel carries the viewer away from the painting and into a more conceptual realm of understanding. Hempel poignantly inserts a homosexual male or storyline into an otherwise heterosexual rendition of recorded history; stating, "I'm trying to imagine what a gay art historical past would look like". As Hempel defines a non-recorded past, these nearly immortal looking figures are faced with very tangible and contemporary issues.

Trained first as a poet, Hempel's compositions present defined scenes with vast room for interpretation. Every detail relates to the theme of the piece and delivers small clues into the narrative, while his work reflects elements of personal experience integrated with art historical references. In Wes Hempel's paintings, *A New Beginning* and *Sye's Dream*, the artist presents a strong setting for a narrative yet allows the viewer to experience the works very personally. *A New Beginning* balances mythological elements of the angel and the ancient ruins with the contemporary figures. The kneeling youth offers a prayer to what one can suppose is a new start, a break from the past. The juxtapositions of the ancient past and the present, as well as images of heaven and earth, are echoed by the tornado in the distance, physically created from two opposing forces. In *Sye's Dream*, Hempel draws strong compositional references to the renaissance painting, *St. Sebastian*, c.1480, by Andrea Mantegna. Both Mantegna's and Hempel's paintings feature a single male figure in front of a vertical column, a detailed landscape in the background, two figures in the foreground, dwarfed in size compared to the central figure. Hempel restages this religious scene with a contemporary subject and storyline as he simultaneously connects his painting to the past.

Wes Hempel's work is currently on view in the group exhibition, *The Old Masters Re-Masters*, at the Fort Collins Museum of Contemporary Art, July 30 - October 24, 2009. His work is part of several permanent collections: the Denver Art Museum, Colorado; Arnot Art Museum, Elmira, New York; Columbus Museum, Georgia; Microsoft Corporation, Seattle, Washington; Styskal, Wiese & Melchione, Los Angeles, California; Hyatt Regency Hotel, Denver, Colorado; Borgen Investment Group, Inc., Denver, Colorado; Leslie Lohman Foundation, New York, New York; and, First Western Trust Bank, Denver, Colorado. He has been written about in such publications as *American Art Collector*, *Art Now Gallery Guide*, the *Denver Post*, *Art in America*, as well as winning a place on two separate occasions in the highly influential *New American Paintings* magazine.