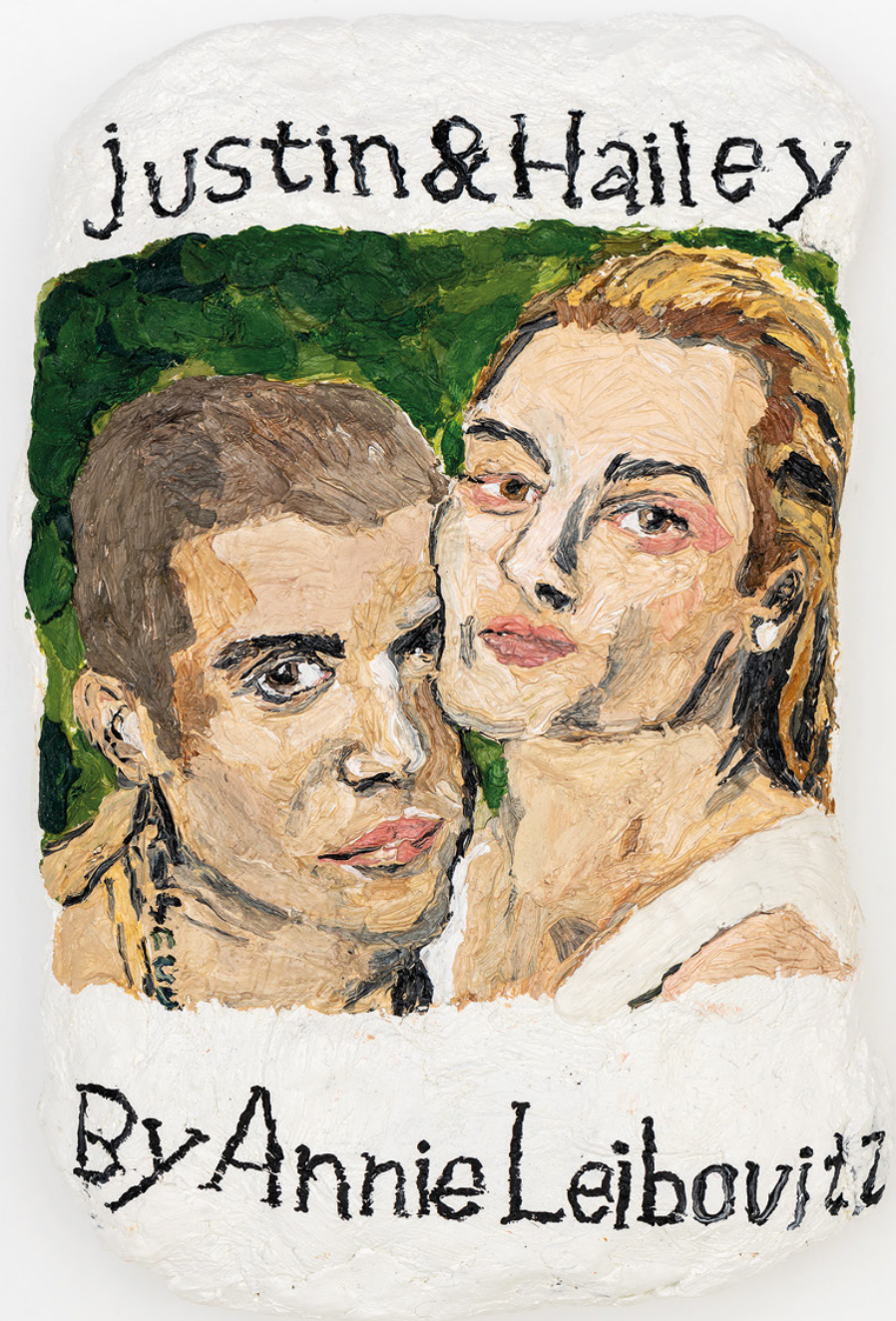


CERTIFIED LOVER BOY
Becky Hemus on Sophie Barber





Installation view, Sophie Barber, *Kim and Kanye kiss without tongues*, Chris Sharp, Los Angeles, May 2021. Courtesy of Chris Sharp Gallery, Los Angeles and Alison Jacques, London

There are photos of cat's paws circulating online. Splayed and bald. When they don't have fur they are usually Sphinx cats, pink and a little dry. It's the first time I've realised they have webs that run between their paw pads like bat's wings.

Sometimes I don't know if artists have eyes beyond the real. They'll send through a picture of a painting or sculpture where the surface is half there, not a motion shot or something impressionistic but a photo without detail or interest. This is how I would like you to represent my work, they say.

I once had a boyfriend with very glossy beautiful hair. It was jet and shone a rainbow in the sun. He never went to the hairdresser, which is (arguably) why it was so long and gorgeous. When we ceased to be a unit I was stranded with him in a city that did not feel like our home. Perhaps afraid that he would not see, for a while, anybody else with whom he felt so comfortable, he asked if I would cut his hair. I combed it into straight lines down his back and snipped it off in large chunks. Two of these I slipped into my bra in memoriam.

Much has been said about the poor image, the one that is faulty. It swarms and circulates online, allowing access to ill-begotten fruits. It's a thumbnail of a thing, squeezed and ripped; it dips in and out of context and pops up bleary, a crystalline sign of the now.

The paintings have warbled edges and are the size of jumbo tarot cards or large iPhones and the men have a lot more verisimilitude than the women, who are possibly melting. They're so heavy, so dense like bricks. Photos of

celebrities by artists sometimes published by conglomerate magazines, shrunk and sketchily reproduced, with so much care like little shrines. The pixels are at their peak, it is the painting that is poor.

I asked my mum if she wanted to see something really scary. She declined. "You'll still be able to sleep, it's not macabre or spooky, it's just scary." She passed me her hand to take my phone. On the screen was the picture of the cat paw. "Oh that is scary. Take it away, no, I want to see it again. Is

that really what they look like?"

"And can you guess what this is?"—I had snapped the phone away and was pinching the screen. "A kiwifruit?", she proffered. Thousands of ash blonde hairs, short and downy like a velvet pile, sprawled over a perfectly shaped vessel. "It's Justin Bieber's head," I said. "Seen by Annie Leibovitz." We looked at the screen for a moment, then I swiped to the painting by Sophie Barber of *Justin and Hailey in someone's really nice garden*.

It's lovely being able to carry such a thing in your pocket.



Facing: Sophie Barber, *Justin and Hailey in someone's really nice garden*, 2021, oil on canvas, 17.2 x 11.2 x 5 cm. Courtesy of Chris Sharp Gallery, Los Angeles and Alison Jacques, London

Sophie Barber, *no Billie, I haven't done that since my wife died*, 2021, oil on canvas, 14.7 x 10.3 cm. Courtesy of Chris Sharp Gallery, Los Angeles and Alison Jacques, London