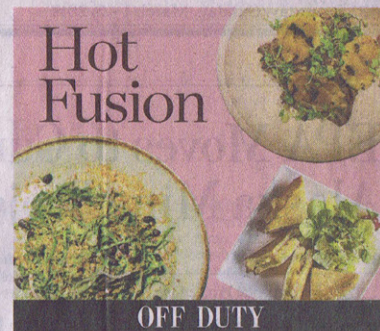




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DAMIAN LOEB sits in front of his 2014 painting 'Hoth' in his studio in New York last month. At bottom, Mr. Loeb's 'Whittier,' 2013.



An Ex-'Bad Boy' Looks to the Heavens

BY ELLEN GAMERMAN

DAMIAN LOEB is a space geek with a paintbrush.

In a new show opening Saturday at Acquavella Galleries in New York, the artist relies on high-tech gadgetry to capture pictures of the cosmos, which he then translates onto canvas with the meticulous approach of a classical painter.

The new pieces are light years away from Mr. Loeb's last series—intimate portraits of his wife's body, often naked and close up—and instead explore the idea of being alone in the vastness of the universe.

Collectors don't like to call the work photorealism, a style many consider gimmicky, but the pieces clearly aim for astronomical accuracy. On a recent day in his Manhattan studio, the 43-year-old artist sounded a bit sheepish about tweaking one detail in a painting of the night sky to make a bit of space dust appear brighter than it actually is. "The NASA people would notice," he said.

That's not to say that Mr. Loeb painted exactly what he photographed. He spent months in his below-ground studio sitting at a command station filled with computer screens and keyboards, fiddling with exposure, contrast, light, shadow and

other variables to dramatically alter his original photos. When he started painting, he supplemented his own digitally altered images with additional pictures from the Hubble Space Telescope, switching out the photos on multiple screens next to his easel to make sure he didn't miss a star.

"It could be somebody's whole solar system—I don't want to be casual about it," he said in a half-joke about his procedure for painting outer space.

"I don't want to be like, 'Oops, I don't have enough paint on the brush, somebody just disappeared from our existence.'"

Works in the series—called "(Sol)d," a reference to an obscure astronomical name for Earth—sell for \$50,000 for small studies to \$250,000 for large paintings. The gallery show has already sold out, with pieces going to prominent collectors such as Andrew Hall

and Mortimer and Jacqueline Sackler.

It took Mr. Loeb more than two months to paint a large canvas—work that often left him with headaches as he tried to recognize patterns among the stars and replicate them. Along the way, he continually checked and rechecked the photographs so he would remember his place in the universe.

It isn't a bad exercise, metaphorically speaking, given Mr. Loeb's past. More than a decade ago, he was a rising art-world phenom who hung out with celebrities, painted shirtless in his studio and romped through tabloid-worthy romantic exploits (including a broken engagement with the writer-socialite Plum Sykes).

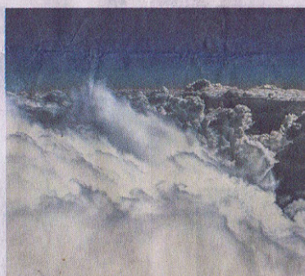
Not much seems to remain from his bad-boy period. Mr. Loeb said he rarely goes to big parties—he said groups of more than six people panic him—and

added that he and his wife are so intent on raising their two young children themselves that they hardly ever leave a baby sitter in charge unless the kids are already asleep.

The wiry former chain-smoker, whose apartment is filled with homemade gadgets, books and Lego "Star Wars" sets, is a high-school dropout and self-taught painter. He has weathered career turbulence, including several claims of copyright infringement against him, which he disputed but later settled. The battles left him in debt for a decade, he said, and he still owes two lawyers paintings as payment.

Mr. Loeb's life hasn't completely shed its glamour. When he wanted to paint landscapes and cloud formations for this series, he joined friends who flew in private jets that reached the soaring altitudes he needed for his photos. And when he was trying to test images to determine which ones were the best to paint, his focus group included pals like the actor Mike Myers and "South Park" co-creator Matt Stone.

"There are a lot of casualties along that road to get to a place where Damian is," Mr. Stone said. "The fact that he's a fully formed artist with a family, that probably informs his work too—it's got a real human touch a lot of artists probably miss because they're so busy rebelling."



(C) Sasha Malina for The Wall Street Journal/Damian Loeb