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Downes, Annabel: *Sergey Kononov's Tender Tributes to Friendship*

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Advisory Perspective

## Sergey Kononov's Tender Tributes to Friendship

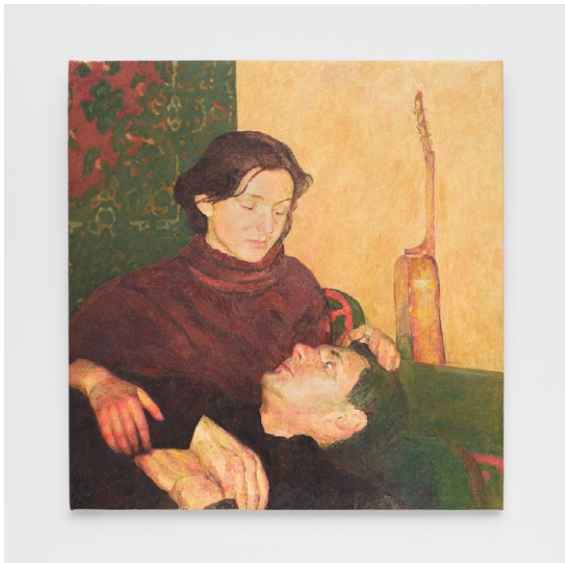
By [Annabel Downes](#) | *London, 20 September 2024* | [Exhibitions](#)

**I**t's the first time I've shown in [London](#) and the first time I've been to London. This show gave me the freedom to experiment,' says Sergey Kononov.

By experiment, the Ukrainian painter means to ramp up the detail. Unflinching renderings of naked or semi-clad individuals have replaced the expressionist and fiery brushstrokes seen in the sketchbooks of a young Kononov.

On view at Jeremy Scholar, in Marylebone, from 18 September to 19 December, seven recent paintings feature the intimate clutches of those closest to the artist, hashed out in a delicate web of diminutive marks.

Kononov grew up in Odesa, a major Ukrainian seaport in the country's southwest that has been the target of Russian shelling and airstrikes since the day Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022.



Sergey Kononov, *Untitled* (2024). Oil on canvas. 83 x 81 cm. Courtesy Jeremy Scholar.

'Even before the war, the art scene back home was very small; everyone knows everyone,' said Kononov. 'When I hear artists in New York say that the scene in their city is small, I laugh.'

Kononov moved to Paris at 19 years old to attend École des Beaux-Arts and has since settled in the French capital, occasionally heading back to Odesa to visit friends and family. It is from his studio in Paris that he calls me today.

'Moving abroad gave me the chance to experience new things and to integrate freshness into my practice,' said Kononov.

Of note was a trip to Florence in 2021, where Kononov sketched the silhouettes of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (c. 1485–86) in the Uffizi and the buff marble torso of Michelangelo's David at Galleria dell'Accademia and on every tea towel and mousepad in the city.

'I left Florence thinking, if I am able to paint at just ten percent of Botticelli's capability, I'll be happy,' he told me.

Botticelli—alongside his Renaissance contemporaries—perfected the art of using drapery as a means to map out the silhouette beneath. Half the magic of *Primavera* (c.1482) lies in tracing your eye over the luminous bodies of the Three Graces, made possible by the sheer gowns that hug every twist and turn of their curvaceous anatomy.

Kononov's figures are mapped out with similar dexterity. In *August 2021* (2024) the squat of a lunging man stretches over a woman delineated by the taut wave of ripples that travel down his trouser leg. In another, titled *The Fountain* (2024), a boy sits on the edge of a fountain, his trousers creased around his thighs mimicking the rough limestone brickwork behind.



Sergey Kononov, *August 2021* (2024). Oil on canvas. 81 x 143 cm. Courtesy Jeremy Scholar.

Botticelli's Venus is likewise characterised by her unruly golden mane: a physical attribute that does not pass Kononov by in approaching these seven paintings.

A metre-wide portrait of two unclothed women in an intimate embrace foregrounds their near-identical brunette mops. Set against a dark, flat background, each kelp-like strand is brought to life with Kononov's fastidious strokes, down to the silver gossamer wisps that pronounce his figures in a haloed glow.



Sergey Kononov, *The Dream* (2024). Oil on canvas. 60 x 67.5 cm. Courtesy Jeremy Scholar.

Lucian Freud is clearly an influence on palette and framing. The abiding ochre—a tone adoringly nurtured across so many of Freud's studio portraits—has been harnessed in a number of works here. The fawn colouring of two dogs nestled against a girl in *The Dream* (2024) disappears camouflaged within a mound of unkempt bed sheets, bringing to mind the British painter's glorious portrayals of his whippet, Eli, curled up in his West London studio.

A thin unwavering contour charts every fold and limb in Kononov's paintings; a level of detail that often seems at odds with their size. The largest in the exhibition—that double portrait of a topless man over a woman—measures around one-and-a-half metres wide.

'The biggest canvas I've ever done was two by three metres; it took up my whole studio apartment,' said Kononov. 'For this show I came to my senses.'

Despite their size, what's striking is the quietness of these paintings: figures are wrapped in a tender embrace, eyes closed, seemingly unperturbed by the artist's scrutiny. Even the dogs seemed to have understood the assignment.

Freud once wrote that 'the simplest human gestures tell stories.' It seems Kononov agrees.

I wondered whether this sense of peace, which Kononov so skillfully evokes, is in defiance of the horrors taking place back home in Ukraine.

'After watching what's happening in my country on the television and catching videos on social media, it made me wonder how painters such as Otto Dix were capable of recreating the terrors they had witnessed during World War I,' Kononov said.

'Painting about the goings-on back home would be too hard. Rather they're a subtle tribute to the youth—my friends—who've stayed in Ukraine,' he concluded. —[O]



Sergey Kononov, *Untitled* (2024). Oil on paper mounted on canvas. 75 x 105 cm. Courtesy Jeremy Scholar.

Main image: Sergey Kononov, *Untitled* (2024). Oil on paper laid on canvas. 71 x 95 cm. Courtesy Jeremy Scholar.