

Hidden Boys, Open Blue | Phoebe Leech | 12th November – 13th December 2025



Phoebe Leech, *Havana Crest*, 2025, Oil on linen, 217 x 163 cm

JD Malat Gallery is pleased to present *Hidden Boys, Open Blue*, the debut solo exhibition by emerging British painter Phoebe Leech (b. 1999, Yorkshire). The exhibition introduces a distinctive new voice in contemporary figuration, one defined by psychological depth, painterly instinct, and an unflinching sensitivity to the body.

A young boy gazes into the distance, seemingly unaware of the viewer's presence. His slightly smiling open mouth, tousled hair and rounded cheeks are the picture of innocence. He is framed by a bright blue sky. But the longer you spend with 'Hotel Dinal', the more the surrounding marks bleed forwards. Slices of colour punctuate his face, and semi abstracted forms which could be read as parts of bodies spill out behind him. Like all the paintings in Phoebe Leech's 'Hidden Boys, Open Blue', this initially idyllic painting reveals and conceals psychological pain. Leech builds her works up in layers, featuring foregrounded young boys against azure skies, with abstracted, energetic marks bursting through in slivers. These interruptions signify trauma and hidden emotion. They appear as slices of fuzzy memory into another realm, functioning in

the same way the past might impose on a seemingly tranquil present. These murkier layers contrast with the inherent optimism of the broad, clear skies. Their slices of visual information highlight a fragmented sense of self that might remain after a traumatic childhood, as we attempt to erase, reshape or disconnect as we grow up. They also reflect the raw snapshots of visual information that remain long after a traumatic event; split second visions that act as windows into more detailed memories.

As a painter, Leech takes a step back from her own memories, observing the works while making them as we might look back on our own lives from one place removed. The paintings are deeply informed by her childhood, watching how her brother was trampled by a domineering father. They mirror both siblings' trauma, one hurting when the other does, and mull over her brother's process of turning into a man. She takes on two positions within the work: as the child who was traumatised directly, and also made to witness someone close to her being hurt. There is a sense of being frozen as an onlooker and a guilt at the powerlessness that goes hand in hand with this. As many of the boys in the painting look away from the viewer, we are in a position of witnessing them too, wondering who they might be and what they will turn into.

Amongst these works, the eye contact held by a slightly older looking boy in 'Terrific T Saber' feels more confrontational, perhaps a sign of more assured masculinity. The boys in the works are painted from a series of documentary photographs that Leech previously took in Cuba. She noticed a stark contrast in the freedom these children seemed to experience compared to her brother's reality growing up. They are shown as playful, perhaps less impacted by the media and more connected with the outside world. The colours of Cuba enhance the at times artificial feel of the palette, inspired by the country's highly saturated natural tones and 1950s design.

These paintings are full of both potential and dread, asking how we can connect with a softer side of masculinity. Together, they capture a moment of boyhood on the cusp, before her figures are hardened by social and familial expectations of how a man should feel and behave.

Words by Emily Steer