

James Bantone

*Axial Desire*

TUNNEL TUNNEL, Lausanne

by Eleonora Milani

Images carry an intrinsic vulnerability, a fragility rooted in how they are made and in their ability to trigger an immediate, almost primal form of knowing. This sense of immediacy turns the image into skin — exposed to the promiscuity of contemporary circulation, fragile and porous yet compelling. Nothing ever fully matches what we see; images are layered cultural surfaces shaped by material and affective processes.

I see James Bantone's images as living surfaces that absorb and return, forms continually reshaped by creative processes that evolve with his gaze. The image has always been at the core of his practice, informed by an almost anatomical obsession with collecting postures and gestures. What began as an exploration of bodily mannerisms through popcultural formats — from videos to photographs mimicking glossy fashion editorials — gradually shifted toward the use of prosthetics and mannequins, allowing him to test the authenticity of the image and its commodification. His visual archive has become a tool for rethinking the body as a device and the economy of the gaze. *Axial Desire* emerges from moving beyond the mannequin and replacing it with the artist's own body. In the new works — all 2026 — his body becomes the operative tool, shifting the process toward selfobjectification. He reenacts gestures and poses, photographs his own body, transfers the image onto metal, and activates a controlled oxidation that consumes and partially reveals the surface, before intervening with paint. The body is no longer the subject of representation but its vector, its *axis*.

*Axial Desire* does not merely speak of the body as identity but as a sensitive surface, as perceived skin, as an image in transformation that is never complete. It is reductive to define it as a study of the nude because his research is based on the state of the image itself — on its fragility, on its exposure and on its capacity to desire and be desired. In this sense, the skin is a medium, a surface, and a membrane that records what passes through it: light, pressure, memory, desire. The skin is already an image insofar as it is a living, vulnerable, porous surface. The bodies we see are also vaguely reminiscent of classical statuary, which was the first attempt to define and promote the Western canon of the body and one of the earliest regimes of visibility of the male nude. It is not just a technical process, nor an exercise in style, but rather a gesture of exposure. An echo of what Anthea Callen identifies in the genealogy of the modern male body: a body that history has sought to make legible, measurable, disciplined, dissected, idealized, trained to embody a norm.

The skin functions as a threshold where the body becomes surface, and each layer added or subtracted is a form of contact, a memory; each erasure is a cultural reference. The artist actively accepts that metal, an industrial material resulting from a precise formal and historical choice, resists oxidation, allowing the image to be embodied in the support in an unstable and open way. Metal does not meekly accept the image; it causes it to lose pieces and re-emerge, renegotiating its form. In *Atlas*, the bodies have erased faces and concave areas such as armpits and genitals, as in *Inguen*: a body sitting on a chair in a three-quarter position, a pose standardized by Renaissance portraiture. The deprivation of identity by obscuring the face removes the nude from consumption and prevents it from being deciphered, offering itself instead as a posture and a condition in which the body is exposed but irreducible. The history of the male nude is a history of exclusions, norms, and disguised fears, and James enters that history with a physicality that has never found a place in it: far from the Western canon (formal and gender-based), fragmented, not seeking to adhere to any model but to show its fragility.

The works on display seem to indicate a tension that runs through the body rather than representing it, whose axis is not only anatomical but also emotional and perceptive. In *Fascia*, a diptych where the silhouette fractures into a layered, tensile membrane, the body seems to lose its axis and appear as imprint and residue. A similar shift occurs in the large nude *Matrix*, where the body stretches, the axis drifts, and the gaze is pushed sideways. The smaller works introduce a more intimate register: fragments set into oxidized metal, minimal apparitions holding the tension between exposure and protection. They act as microthresholds, dense points where the body reveals itself only in parts.

However much the axis may vary, this new series of works expands the same questions about the representation of the image, questioning the criteria of self-objectification. *Axial Desire* stabilizes James' research on a type of image to be traversed which, far from being epiphanic, constitutes itself as an epidermal device capable of empathizing with the gaze and with that immediacy I mentioned at the beginning of this text. And vulnerability, after all, is probably the only possible way to look at ourselves in the world.