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Ordinary Permanence

By Joshua Chee Sanford



Installation view, *In June Park and Andrius Alvarez-Backus: Ordinary Permanence*, MAMA Projects, New York, 2025. Courtesy MAMA Projects.

As you step into the single-room gallery, Andrius Alvarez-Backus's yellow thorned ladder confronts you immediately. It leans against an air vent that is about seven feet above the gallery floor, a red herring that taunts the visitor with a beguiling escape. Tiny claws protrude from the rungs and side rails, sticking out between folds of latex that tightly bind the sculpture. To its left, In June Park's *Adam* (2025), the newest work in the exhibition, depicts a closeup of an uptilt head. A jaw casts a darkened arch across the top of the figure's throat. As a pair, the works' shared verticality

Andrius Alvarez-Backus & In June Park: Ordinary Permanence
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drums up a sense of reaching, a pass into a space distributed into the imagination of the viewer.

The show brings together two bodies of work from the Columbia University MFA peers who graduated in May of this year. Park's paintings hold the perimeter around three of Alvarez-Backus's sculptures, two standing stainless-steel surgical-cart readymades and an off-green floorwork. Spanning three back walls, Park presents stoic views of isolated body parts: two jacketed backs, two sets of dressed-up legs, and a close-up profile set with glasses and crow's feet. In *Suit* (2025) and *Winter Tragedy* (2025), Park centers a torso that is turned away from the viewer. Their formal obstinacy is offset by carefully rendered folds and wrinkles that allay the rigidity of each body's orientation. Patches of glowy white, deep turquoise, purple, and yellow sweat through the surface. The exacting crop in each of Park's compositions sustains the question of what lies outside of our view—what is being kept close to the vest, so to speak. In *Winter Tragedy* (2025), the few bits of down filler that hover across the image are a weightless instantiation of this mystique.



Installation view, *In June Park and Andrius Alvarez-Backus: Ordinary Permanence*, MAMA Projects, New York, 2025. Courtesy MAMA Projects.

The banality embodied in what and whom Park takes on as his subjects is destabilized by Alvarez-Backus's unorthodox sculptural works. What Alvarez-Backus refers to as "excisions," his twin surgical carts, inherited from his grandfather who was an orthopedic surgeon, display a folded beeswax shirt in one and a pair of shoes in the other. These objects are placed above their respective lower shelves that are filled with treated natural materials (preserved reindeer moss and lacquered pine wood). Despite their separation, the modified wood and moss let on the irreversible impression left on natural environments as a result of contemporary life. Precise as it may be, the operation of removal, as Alvarez-Backus suggests, is more or less ineffectual.

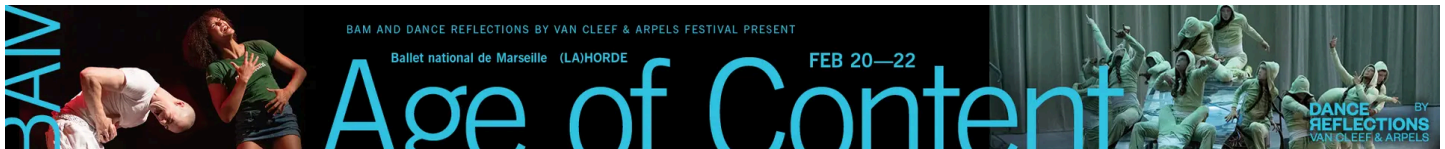


In June Park, *Sunday School*, 2025. Acrylic on canvas, 24 x 48 inches. Courtesy MAMA Projects.

The artists' familiarity with one another allows the curatorial logic of the show to unfold organically. Take Park's *Sunday School* (2025), for instance, which crowds the canvas with rows of pews. Park singles out the central bench, adding color block pigments that delicately ooze between a wood grain pattern. The liturgical setting is held in relation to the uncanniest works in the show. Park's painting, a child's knees stamped with soft squinted faces, peers over Alvarez-Backus's eerie sculpture *Meet Me in the Middle* (2025), a nearly 7-foot floorwork made up of wooden fence boards with two openings on either end from which realistic feet project. The posts and epoxy-cast feet are patinated in a cool verdigris, calling to mind weathered copper of statues and other oxidized metal facades. Conversely, visible veins, meticulous wrinkles, and splotches of muted pink almost retrieve the fake flesh from inanimacy. Hidden from view, the imagined pair of bodies under the hood of the fence is disturbingly intimate. Completed during the artist's current residency at Smack Mellon, Alvarez-

Backus conceived of the sculpture upon seeing *Sunday School* (2025), which, at that point, was only nearly finished. To make the feet, Alvarez-Backus remained in a kneeling position, as if in prayer, for an extended period of time as the mold set. In this way, the works in the show inform one another in both predetermined and spontaneous ways; Park's wooden subject spills into the material of Alvarez-Backus's sculpture before overflowing into the latter's process. Returning to the former's *Talking Knees* (2024), the painting acquires an even more direct relationship to its surroundings with this consideration. While the sprawl of connections that emerge in the show enriches the viewer's encounter, the works are sufficiently alluring and substantial in their own right so as to not rely on their relationality.

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Andrius Alvarez-Backus, *I Can Almost Remember (Excision #1)*, 2025. Shoes, acrylic, lacquered pine wood, dried leaves, beeswax, colored pencil, artificial sinew, stainless steel surgical cart. 36 x 16 x 14 inches. Courtesy MAMA Projects.

In the exhibition text, authored by Samuel Anderson, Anderson slots Alvarez-Backus into a lineage of queer artists. This lineage includes, perhaps most aptly in the context of this show, Robert Gober. Gober is recognized for his unnerving reconfiguration of familiar objects and stranded body parts. The most relevant examples, Gober's disembodied leg and lower half, *Untitled Leg* (1989-90) and *Untitled* (1991), are fitted with slacks and dress shoes, a detail that also brushes up against this series of paintings made by Park. Alvarez-Backus and Park realize "the ordinary" through similar methods of abbreviation and recontextualization. Albeit additive, they form independent conclusions. In shuffling things in and out of view, the pair considers the ordinary, not as something that simply appears as commonplace—or even appears at all—but

rather, as an abstract set of expectations. The interplay between the paintings and sculptures is a gallery game of cat and mouse. Playful, frustrating, and undeniably gripping, *Ordinary Permanence* swaps answers for more questions, pulling the viewer into a composed study of ritual anticipation.

Joshua Chee Sanford is a writer based in New York.

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