

## Daniel Dove: Reviving the Ruins of Mid-Century Modernism

Sarah Linn | May 22, 2016



If there's a label Daniel Dove is leery of, it's "ruin porn." The term, the San Luis Obispo artist says, is associated with urban explorers who venture into forgotten places -- abandoned subway stations, desolate diners, moldering movie theaters and the like -- and snap photos of them.

"There can be something very moralizing about it," the Cal Poly art professor said, citing an approach in which a contemplation of manmade structures becomes "a contemplation of our excesses." "The position from which that judgment is made, if that is the only operative thing in the artwork, is one of wagging one's finger and *tsk-tsking* us, scolding us for having felt confident. It casts all of our ambitions and confidence in terms of hubris."

Dove's paintings seek to sidestep that "moralizing squint" by finding a melancholic beauty in the artifacts of one of the art world's most optimistic movements: high modernism. Picture a scuffed abstract sculpture plopped in the middle of a nondescript industrial park, a sinuous swimming pool covered in graffiti or mid-century Danish furniture dumped in a haphazard pile.

“Even if it’s melancholic and even if it’s ruined, I want there to be a possibility of something hedonistic too,” Dove explained, whether it’s “the optical pleasure of color or surface, [or] my commitment to beautiful form.”

That attitude is evident in Dove’s self-titled solo show, running May 1 through May 29 at Left Field gallery in San Luis Obispo. The exhibition features a couple of full-sized, finished works as well as a series of smaller studies and sketches that offer a glimpse of the painter’s detailed process.

“I wanted to show Daniel’s work because he’s one of the best -- if not the best -- painters we have in our region,” said Left Field owner Nick Wilkinson, an abstract artist based in Los Osos. “First off, the guy is smart as a whip. He not only knows his role and his place in the contemporary art world but he [also] knows about art history... What sets him apart from other painters is his knowledge, his seriousness about painting.”

Moreover, Wilkinson added, “He’s just a master with paint. The way the guy makes paint move is a real thing.”

Dove may speak in the measured tones of a born academic, but his path as an artist wasn’t always assured. “I didn’t grow up in a family that cared about art. We didn’t have any. We never looked at it. We never talked about it,” said Dove, who grew up in Austin, Texas. “I didn’t understand the ways that living life as an artist could possibly be viable.”

In fact, he entered college as a chemistry student. “After a year of this and the attendant unhappiness that comes from doing the wrong thing with your life, I decided to switch to being an art major,” he said, and started painting.

Dove now holds a bachelor of fine arts degree from the University of Texas in Austin and a master of fine arts degree in painting from Yale University. He spent five years as an assistant art professor at the Cleveland Institute of Art before joining Cal Poly’s faculty in 2005. (Sick of the “murderous” winter weather, “I did a faculty search from Cleveland just for places based on the amount of sunshine they had,” he said, and discovered California’s Central Coast by chance.)

Dove recently sat down in his San Luis Obispo studio to chat with Artbound about his work.

### **Where did your fascination with ruins come from?**

It’s always been part of my life, and was part of my life as somebody in high school who’s driving around at night [in a late-1980s Chevrolet Monte Carlo] and finding empty parking lots and just sitting there thinking about life, listening to Depeche Mode...

My introverted nature made me feel much more comfortable being alone as a child, and therefore I was always seeking out places where I could be alone -- which naturally puts you in situations that are useless to other people. It’s after the party has ended, once the utility of the place is gone or once the commerce has stopped...

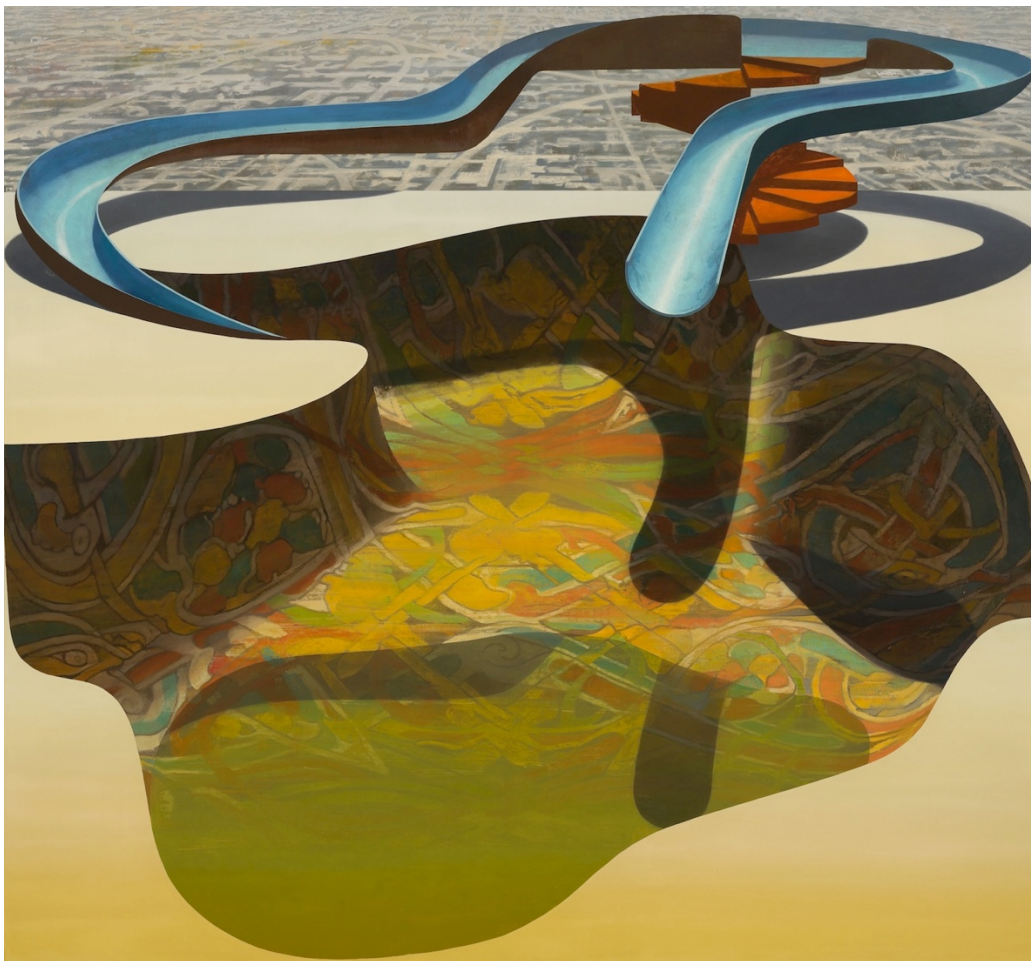
The way I view the beauty is when I am physically present in one of those spaces. This can be triggered by something as mild as being in an empty parking lot at night. It doesn’t even require ruins. It just

requires perhaps an experience with a public space that actually feels very private. The beauty and the sadness of that, the loneliness of that [is] intertwined.

### **Is that why there are no people in your paintings?**

The things I paint seem to be on a human scale or larger, and also seem to have been designed for human pleasure or human contemplation in that they are of the built environment. They were made for people. And it's a curious absence that there aren't any people in them...

One's confrontation with a modernist painting is oftentimes about one's physical body in front of a thing. This is definitely true of minimalism; because it's so reductive in its form, it activates the space between the viewer and the object. When you look at a Pollock or a Rothko, it is this one-to-one relationship between an object and the body of the reviewer. I think I'm trying to call on that.



### **Why high modernism?**

There is an aspect of my work that always has to do with abstract structures that come out of high modernism. I may be depicting the artifacts of high modernism as if they are ruins and therefore implying that the game is up historically, that what we thought was going to be this apex of our culture

might someday be something that is abandoned, that seems like evidence of some primitive phase in our past.

High modernism and its abstract structures provide the compositional ideas for a lot of my paintings. My paintings would want to have their cake and eat it too -- present modernism as a ruin but also be an exemplar of modernism in composition.

**Why is painting especially suited for this subject matter?**

Being a painter, I'm somebody who uses a medium that is highly sensitive to tactility. Really painting's physical index is something that separates it from photography and from jpegs -- the evidence of physical touch, which is like a moment of "I was here." It's a kind of primal announcement of the existence and presence of a human being... In that sense, a painting has a very subtle advantage over the disembodied nature of digital imagery...

What happens to things as they become ruins or as they fall into disrepair is literally their surfaces cease to be managed. They start to accumulate rust or graffiti or vandalism, all the impacts of weather. You have this movement of a managed surface, which tends to be kept uniform and perfect in a way, into a surface that becomes highly irregular.

That somehow corresponds to the advantages that a tactile medium like painting offers.



**Describe your artistic process.**

It almost always starts with ad hoc drawing in a sketchbook with the minimum of risk and the minimum of formal commitment. You're just moving through ideas, and these are not images that you ever show anyone. It's like a visual diary. [That's] combined with combing through images online.

If I lived in some place other than San Luis Obispo, it might also include driving around...

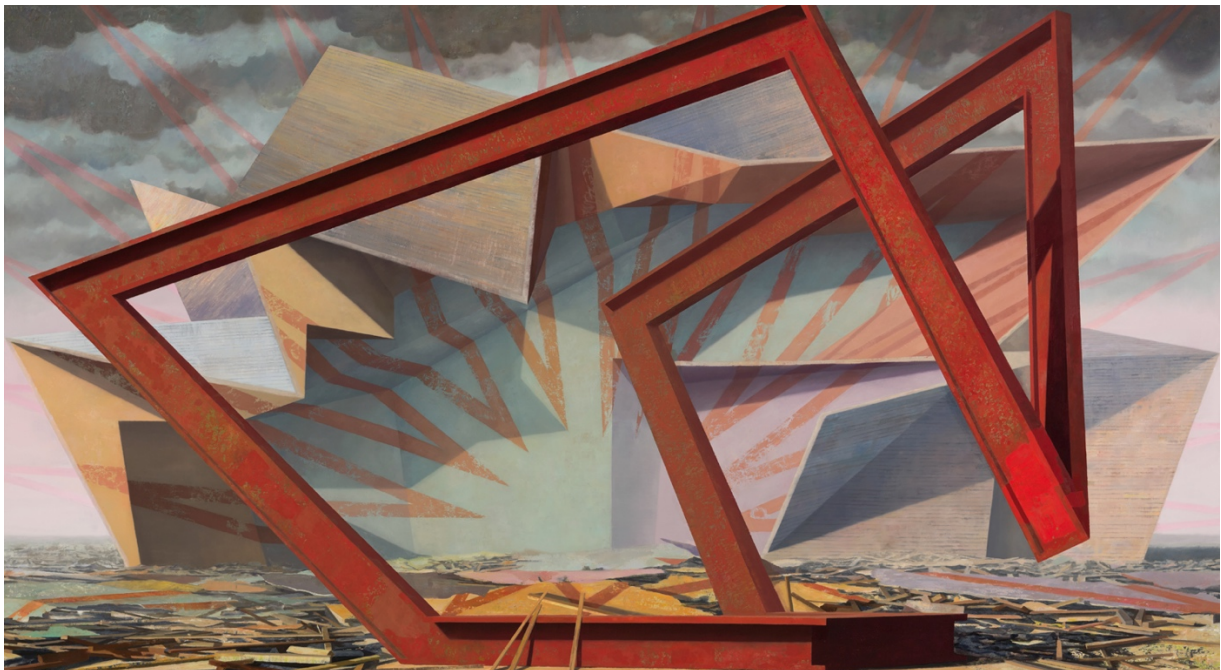
Then, when you hit up on something that seems to be interesting, then it's usually a movement to a painted sketch... If a painted sketch seems to have any life in it, if you look at it and feel something, then you start building the source material for it -- which can include physical models, virtual 3-D models and downloading [images] or going and photographing anything that is like it...

From a photograph you can get ideas for structure. From 3-D modeling you can get at the structure from any angle you want and understand the value pattern, the lightness and darkness of the shadow. But the physical model is there for color. Neither photography nor virtual 3-D modeling can give you color that the sun in your eyeballs can.

### **How has living in San Luis Obispo influenced your art?**

One of the interesting things about moving to San Luis Obispo is that my paintings were sort of forced to become much more fictitious in their nature... [This city] fits so perfectly into the idea of picturesque already. You move to San Luis Obispo and you see a painting already. It doesn't have to be redeemed into representation because it's a kind of "life follows art" experience...

My paintings have been a lot more fictitious, invented scenarios that are based on archetypal ideas [such as] the idea of a large, anonymous, minimalist public sculpture in front of a building.



### **Where does the idea for the furniture paintings come from?**

That's predicated on a structural idea -- a very sad one -- of what happens when people get evicted. Everything that's in the house gets put outside. It's kind of a dark joke, hopefully not at the expense of the class of person that gets evicted.

To be an artist is to have a profession that is addicted to the anxiety of change, and yet for some reason creatives have decided that 1960s Danish is just where we need furniture to be. It's like there's a classic in furniture. We don't have the same kind of wanderlust [as in other media].

You can't make a mid-century sculpture or painting without being taken to task about what your debts are, artistically. Mid-century furniture has this interesting position of being a stable, iconic thing within a culture that is always seeking out the next thing.

### **What about your paintings of sculptures?**

The shapes are derived from the sculptures, which tend to be abstract and reductive. I often begin the painting with a disdainful attitude toward a certain kind of anonymous public art, which [James Wines] simply referred to as "plop art" because of its insensitivity to site... I actually would hope that derision is gone from the painting when it's actually finished.

Baked into the cake is this idea that if something is going to be pursued formally with this degree of concentrated attention, then there had to be some kind of affection motivating it. If sustained, close attention is a version of love, and I think it usually is, there is a love there.

There can be love for the sculpture in discovering its complexity, but really [for me] it's a love for painting.



