

An Interview with Daniel Dove

April 16, 2020

Philip Martin: How do you start a painting?

Daniel Dove: Most of my painting ideas start with an in-person encounter with something in the Midwestern Rustbelt or Southern California landscape, often a place that exists in an “edge condition:” the early stages of abandonment or decay of an architectural structure or an unmanaged boundary (like the outer remnants of city transitioning into desert, where both urban detritus and outlier experimentation accumulate). If I can, I photograph this place in as many different light conditions as possible.

I then go online and build a collection of images that are relevant or adjacent to the thing I witnessed in real life. This often leads to internet rabbit holes: impressive dusk skies lead to “mothership” cloud formations, odd arrangements of found objects become a tour of the world's best “outsider” sculptures, and the like. I'm looking for images that conserve my original feeling of the physical place, but perhaps in a more clarified form: a collection of hundreds of virtual locations that resonate with a singular, specific chance encounter.

Afterward, I draw in my sketchbook, trying to find a heightened version of my original idea by combining elements from my accumulated images. All of my painting ideas are substantially hybridized, like an Anthony Caro-meets-Burning Man sculpture, set in a stormy desert populated by Slab City-style ad-hoc dwellings. I often invent forms with the help of 3-D modeling software, small physical sculptures, and art historical references.

I will draw until an idea locks together, roughly meaning that it depicts something plausible (although almost never actual) while possessing a pictorial integrity independent of the subject matter. This often means that my compositions affirm tenets of Modernist painting (frontal orientation, all-overness, hyperconsciousness of support edge) while also picturing a vista suffused with pre-modern romanticism. If I can get Mondrian, Caspar David Friedrich, and Bernd and Hilla Becher into the same image - while still capturing my original feeling of place - then I might have a workable idea.

PWM: Once you have organized an idea in sketches, how do you introduce color?

DD: Once a graphite sketch is ready to advance, I need to work out the color world. This tends to derive from direct observation of natural sunlight or artificial colored light, sometimes in combination with invented color schemes influenced by period-style design and abstract painting. When using sunlight (cast on small, simple models), the entire painting tends to lean toward naturalism: direct observation of color relationships as they occur in nature.

For the works in which I use artificial light in combination with an invented color world, I have a small stage-box that isolates adjustable LED bulbs from my ambient studio light. This allows unusual optical combinations, such as the effect of blue light on an object backlit by intense

warmth. I often paint the interior of the box to create an ambient color that connects to the atmosphere of my fictive landscapes. Given the near-infinite combinations offered by this method, I sometimes look to Modernist design and abstract painting palettes as a departure point.

Once I have a plausible lighting situation on my stage, I paint small studies on primed heavyweight paper. At this point, I can start to improvise color relationships. Sometimes, the study establishes the color world and the entire painting directly follows; in other cases, I alter the study to test ad-hoc shifts while the painting is being made, so the study evolves as a working draft alongside the painting.

My hope is that color establishes both a convincing sense of form - volume, texture, material surface - while also heightening the feeling of place, atmosphere, and time: for example, an almost-lurid smog-inflected desert sunset or ominous cool dark neutrality of an impending midwestern storm. The lengths to which I go in this attempt betray my distrust of standard photographic color, which is so ubiquitous that it seems merely factual instead of psychological. Good photographers can avoid this trap, of course; as a painter, I utilize direct observation while attempting to discover expressive malleability.

PWM: Would you agree that in today image-driven society, image is everywhere, and increasingly realized through digital, non-analog process? Where does painting and its inherently material nature fit into that?

DD: I agree that digital imagery is ubiquitous. I remember the concepts of "image overload" and "cultural schizophrenia" being popular in the 80s, sometimes described with the metaphor of surfing cable television. Too many shows, networks, and unplanned juxtapositions of images and meanings resulted in a loss of coherence and connection between signifier and referent. If scanning 100 channels can produce this condition of overload, what are the consequences of a billion websites and high-definition digital cameras always within reach?

Painting fits into this situation by being its antithesis: a slowly produced, physically unique object of a fixed size, often with the imprint of the artist's presence via overt evidence of process. Painters often talk about the value of slowing down and sensitizing viewers, but paintings posted on Instagram can be swiped through at the pace of selfies, brunches, and pet pics. Painting can't command attention on the terms of digital pop culture, and in my opinion, it probably shouldn't try.

Painting is an offer to those who want what it can do. It has socioeconomic value, capable of conveying status to its collectors in a way that most forms of culture can't. But its real value as a foil to pixel-bound pictures lies in its relative repleteness of intention and its ability to simultaneously be fictive and actual, making one kind of appeal to the mind and another to the body.

By "repleteness," I mean that every square inch of a painting is often the result of human

decision instead of technological process. Painting doesn't have exclusive claim to this; sculpture can be just as intention-dense, as can digital imagery (although as the latter approaches its most replete form, it becomes a kind of digital painting). It's just that painting is naturally suited to a highly sensitive connection between form and content: very small variations in one can produce highly nuanced shifts in the other. Herein is the value of slowness: to forsake distraction and focus attention with the hope that close looking keeps changing and deepening the viewer's experience.

In the condition of being simultaneously fictive and actual, the latter is the exceptional aspect. Convincing visual fictions thrive as never before, the power of CGI seeming limitless in certain ways. But immaterial images tend to neglect or negate our bodies, as we get "lost" in their gorgeous, seductive effects. We are ourselves objects of a particular size which we scrutinize, looking for signs of improvement or inevitable decay. Painting's ability to conjure a fiction is nothing special, but the fact that it is embodied - evoking both the maker's and viewer's matter - provides momentary resistance to being lost, even if what one finds is a reminder of the perils of mortality. Until we can upload our consciousnesses to The Cloud, this awareness is essential to any real wisdom, and painting provides complex, pleasurable grounding.