Art in America
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IN THE STUDIO
DEXTER DALWOOD
WITH DAVID COGGINS

Dexter Dalwood's paintings reside at the intersection of art history and the pop-culture imagination. That sounds straightforward enough until you're confronted with a painting that references both Ed Ruscha and O.J. Simpson. It's a jarring sight. White Bronco *(2001) posits a view—O.J.'s view—from the front seat of the notorious SUV, in whose rearview mirror one sees the Hollywood sign before a smoldering sunset à la Ruscha.*

*Over a career of nearly two decades, the English artist, born in 1960 in Bristol, has often painted imaginary versions of historically significant figures' domestic interiors, from Mao's study to Bill Gates's bedroom. He also paints sites of tragedy, for instance the road where the writer W.G. Sebald died in a 2001 car accident (*The Crash, *2008), or pivotal locations from literary works, such as the swimming pool where the body of Jay Gatsby is found (*Gatsby, *2009).*

What makes Dalwood's paintings so arresting, however, is the freedom of his stylistic borrowings. Style, in fact, is one of his principal themes. His work is rich with citations, whether from countrymen Francis Bacon and David Hockney or from continental masters like Matisse and Manet. When Dalwood quotes Bacon in creating a background, the history of painting snaps into the foreground. At first this obvious copying might strike the viewer as too obvious, as though a musician had sampled a little too much of a Beatles song. But it also places the quoted material firmly in the past, reminding us of how inflexibly styles are associated with specific historical moments. Looking back over the "history paintings" he began making a dozen years ago—and Dalwood does think of them in the category of history painting—it becomes clear that the artist is reminding us that the style which vividly evokes an era will also inevitably underscore our distance from it.

Dalwood lays out his scenes somewhat in the manner of a stage set or diorama. Because the paintings are large and rarely include full figures—occasionally we come across a cropped pair of legs suggesting some unseen menace—we feel invited into these spaces, where we can compare the way Dalwood has envisioned things with the way we might have done so ourselves. He welcomes the friction between our imagining of a place or event and his own.

And there is friction—of many kinds. Take Diana Vreeland *(2003), which is closely based on Matisse's* Red Studio *(1911), but in which that room is furnished with additional drapes and overstuffed furniture and a grand vase full of tulips. After the initial shock at the audacious reconfiguring of Matisse's masterwork, we warm to this ode to visual pleasure, the lush setting worthy of the iconic fashion editor who reigned decades after Matisse painted his own realm. The world of painting is a fundamentally physical one, accessible to all, the artist asserts, and he has no qualms about rearranging what came before him. Dalwood insists that our relationship with historical painting be immediate and visceral.*

Though it refers to previous painters, Dalwood's work remains very much his own. His citations shift and yet the end product is instantly recognizable, not unlike that of a cinematic auteur. When Dalwood quotes Matisse or Bacon, we feel an instant familiarity with the resulting images. That makes his elisions, insertions and changes in scale all the more jarring. He calms us with recognition and then shifts the ground beneath us. In the end it is defamiliarization that makes Dalwood's work so distinctive.

A resident of London, the artist has had his chief success with shows in that city, appearing in "Die Young, Stay Pretty" at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (1998) and "Neurotic Realism: Part Two" at the Saatchi Gallery (1999), followed by a solo show at Gagosian (2000). He was also featured in "The Triumph of Painting" at the Saatchi Gallery in 2005. When we met, he was preparing for a midcareer survey at Tate St. Ives, in Cornwall.

In his third U.S. solo exhibition, "Endless Night," recently at Gagosian in Beverly Hills, Dalwood showed 13 new paintings, all representations of the place where a historical figure or well-known fictional character died. After walking through the show, we talked in a spare, white room at the back of the gallery that featured Sustaining Light *(2007), an installation by James Turrell that emitted a purple glow.*

DAVID COGGINS What is on your mind as you prepare for your upcoming show at Tate St. Ives?

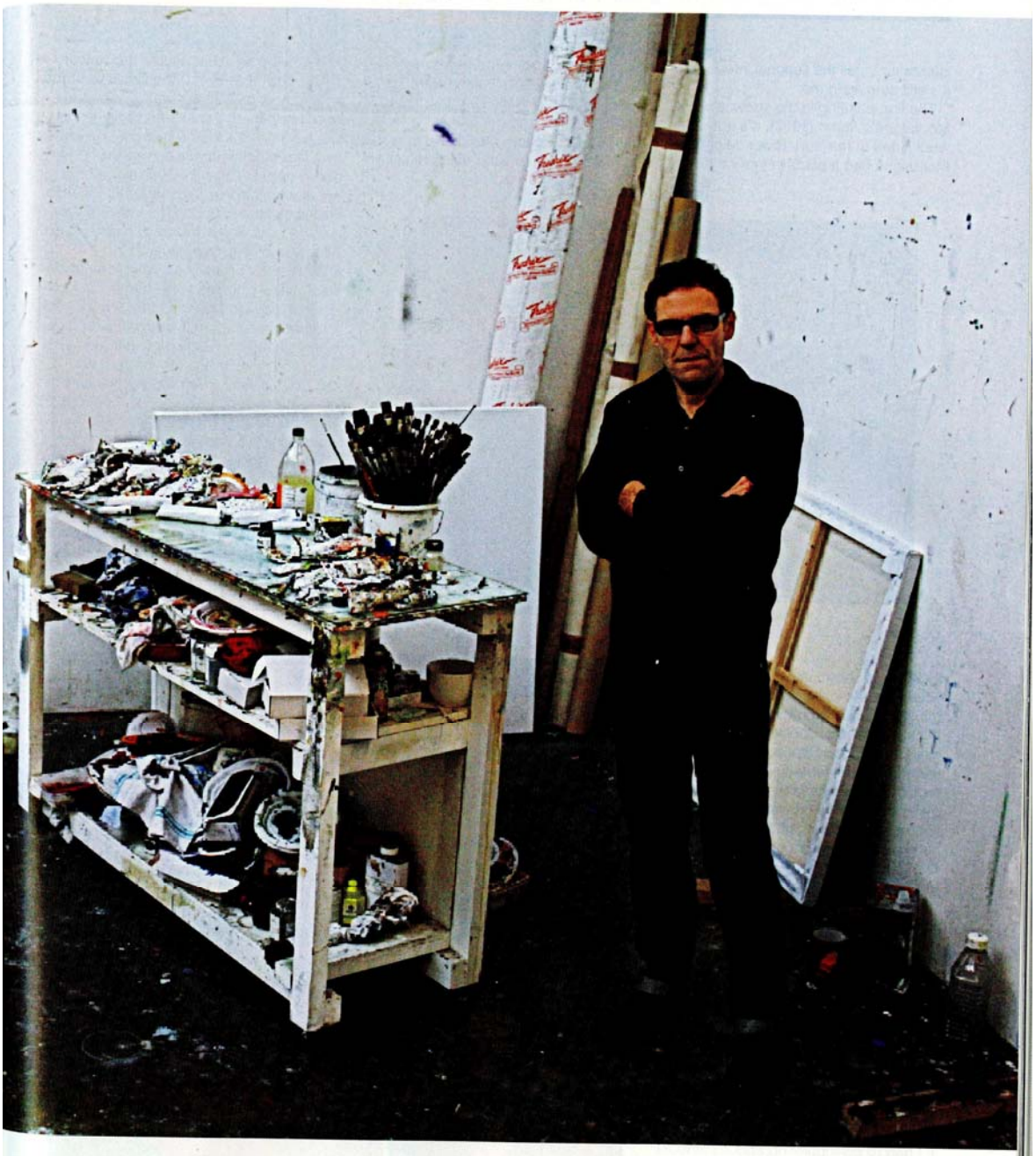
DEXTER DALWOOD There's the idea that a midcareer survey is very difficult for an artist. There's a sense of looking forward to it, but also a sense of loathing, because it might throw you off on a downward spiral.

I remember something Malcolm Morley said when he saw one of his early paintings. It threw him completely—he thought his most recent work was no good. I feel that I'm very connected with my early work. It's only '97 until now that the balloon went up in my head that I could paint like that—paint what I'm

Dexter Dalwood in his London studio, 2009. Photo Sophie Ioannou.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

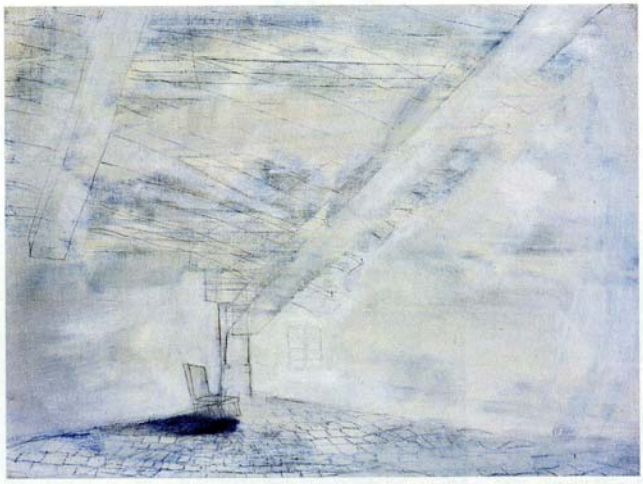
A midcareer survey, "Dexter Dalwood," Jan. 23-May 10, at Tate St. Ives, Cornwall.



"WHEN I DID THE GATSBY PAINTING I WAS THINKING MORE ABOUT A DECADENT, END-OF-THE-'60s CHARACTER. THAT'S WHY I THOUGHT OF THE HOCKNEY POOL."

interested in, all the fictional interiors. It's still burning in me.

The first painting in the show is called *Montaigne's Room* (1997). It's about the whole idea of the ivory tower. Michel de Montaigne had a place in France that



I visited—a room where he spent his whole life. It's where he wrote everything. It's just a room. Then I started thinking how disappointing the reality is after seeing the space. Much more intriguing is the fantasy of what that would look like. I suddenly found myself doing a painting that was equivalent to history painting. I'm interested in how you revamp the genres.

DC The canvases in "Endless Night" depict the sites of the deaths of various real and fictional figures. *Gorky's Studio* (2009) represents the scene of the artist's suicide; *Under Blackfriars* (2008) shows the dangling feet of banker Roberto Calvi, who was found hanging under London's Blackfriars Bridge. How did you come to this body of work?

DD Often I think, "What do you want to see?" Why don't I see paintings that have an urgency about the real themes—like death or sex—that isn't gratuitous? Why don't I see something that has a little bit of grist to it? If I had to do a painting about someone being assassinated [referring to *The Assassin*, 2007, which treats the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi], how could I do that and not make it gratuitous? I'm not into blood and gore, I'm after how to make a deliberately disrupted image that makes the viewer think about that event, the violence of the image, how that image was made, and how it relates to the history of painting.

DC A continuous theme in your work is history, including the divide between art history and history at large. You've said people are always surprised to learn that Picasso was still painting during the Vietnam War. Can you talk about your relationship to art history and history in general?

DD Art history runs in a current alongside "real" history but isn't linked to it. I'm interested in how you pull an artist's work back into the period when it was made, and how you can connect painting to something you're involved with, not just art.

DC Do you think when we go back and make these connections—say, Edouard Manet painted at the same time the American Civil War was raging—that it helps us understand the artists better or to understand the work better?

DD I don't think it makes you understand Manet better. It makes the work jump. History, just like art history, is a construct. You always wonder if the titans are going to last.

DC In the Gagosian show some of the paintings are based on fiction and oth-

ing you have many different reference points—you quote a lot. You can tell a Dexter Dalwood painting in its entirety, but not necessarily by looking at the mark of the hand.

DD It's quite exciting to play with styles. There's also a slightly worrying aspect to it. What is a natural style? I'm very interested in that. Stanley Spencer went to the Slade School of Art and felt that he'd contracted a virus that took him 20 years to get out of his system. When you start painting you may paint a particular type of way—but what is that? Is that a way that people paint at that time? My natural style is probably an early '80s sub-expressionistic painting which has no more relevance than anything else. I've tried on so many different ways of painting—you find a path through that. I've managed to find a style that's genuinely mine.

DC Hunter S. Thompson is supposed to have typed passages of Hemingway to feel what it was like to write his words. Do you learn anything about an artist by quoting him?

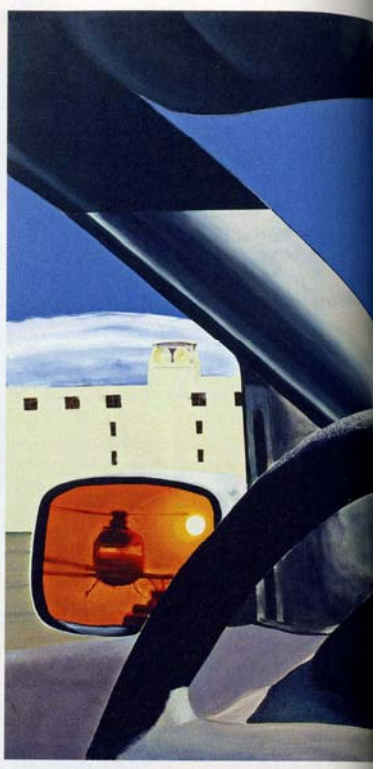
DD De Kooning—the energy you need to paint like him is incredible. You have to get buckets of paint and go like a bull. The idea that that would be your working practice, that you would go into your studio and paint like that, is amazing. You have to be like an actor: "here I go." I had to run at the canvas and fight with it. I wasn't going to be able to replicate it without getting into that physical frame of mind.

DC So you don't find it hard to successively assume different ways of painting?

DD Not really. My slight obsession—especially with this series—is flat color. How you can use one color that makes everything else sing. When I got the green in *Lennie* [2008, which refers to the main character in *Of Mice and Men*], it didn't sit and it didn't recede—it was just between. It did just what I wanted it to do, but I didn't know what I wanted it to do until it appeared. It's slightly intuitive. In a way that's not lifting another artist, it's just me being intuitive. Though it does come from my interest in Indian miniature painting.

DC When we walked through the show you talked about style having currency. Can you expand on that?

DD I'm concerned with how some ideologies have currency and others pass their sell-by date. In the context of a painting where you sample a style, you can give it currency by saying that this is one way of making this type of thing, or you say this is a moth-eaten way of doing things. I'm fascinated by what artists think they're doing compared to what they're actually doing. I'm sure it's the same with me in many ways.

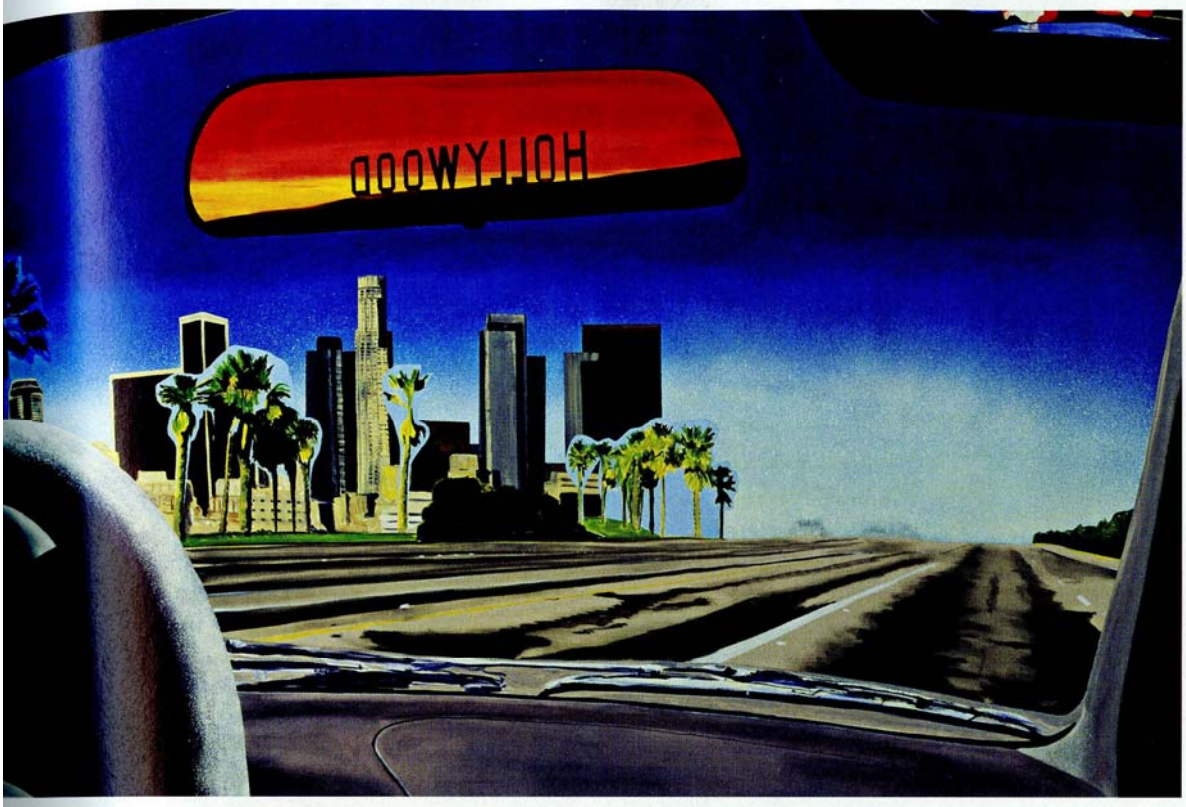


Like Clyfford Still's statements—it's just phenomenal what he thought he was doing, his self-belief and the idea that he was like Moses in the promised land, and that those paintings were going to change the world. It's unbelievable. That doesn't exist anymore, the kind of confidence that an artist is at the pinnacle and everything else is below him. It's a relief that it isn't that way any longer. There are so many possibilities to do all this other type of work.

So much of painting falls back into riffing on previous ideologies in a not very interesting way, or is stuck in a little tangent on modernism and doing a little take on that. I find it ungenerous. Why aren't painters a bit more generous now?

DC We've talked about history and art history. Your work remains very much about painting.

DD It's the reason that I'm not particularly interested in showing the preparatory collages, because the collages aren't the work. They're going



towards the work, but the painting is the point of it. The decision I make going from a source into paint is where what I do happens. Then it becomes a coherent thing. Then you stand in a room looking at paint across a surface. Basically, I want to look at something that makes me think. Surely that's how art operates: once you've gone away from it, it's still going on in your head.

DC How different are the preliminary collages from the paintings?

DD The collages of the interiors were quite intricate and compositionally were very close to the paintings. However, in making the paintings I was not interested in the photo "look" of the collages. In fact, I was thinking away from that, partly as a reaction to all the photo "Richter"-style painting that was prevalent in British art in the late '90s. I wanted to invent a bit of painting in response to the collaged element.

DC Are the collages just to set down the formal arrangement, and do the paintings change a lot as you go along—or are they quite similar?

DD No, the collages are more important than just getting the composition. The collages are where the literal tearing up goes on. In this last series of paintings the collages were looser, sometimes just a collaged element with a bit of flat color or drawing. The paintings change from the collage quite a bit in terms of color, and sometimes a reference can change. But what I don't want to do is to overwork the paintings. Hence their compositions are pretty much worked out before I start. To borrow a phrasing from Malcolm Morley, I think of myself as an artist who works in "oil on canvas, not oil on top of oil."

DC There's a conceptual aspect to this work. But there's also a sense of formal discovery on your part. Everything's still in play when you're dealing with the canvas.

DD Yes, to an extent. I'm not standing in front of a blank canvas, ape-man-like. I still like to have a bit of paint physically moved around—maybe that's a hangover from the '80s, but that's important. In the making of it I'm not just transcribing. I'm doing something where I'm involved with the physical making of the painting in a way that excites me. ○

Above, *White Bronco*, 2001, oil on canvas, 78 by 168 inches.

Opposite, *Hunter S. Thompson*, 2009, oil on canvas, 58¼ by 59⅛ inches.

"Dexter Dalwood" travels to FRAC Champagne-Ardenne, Reims, France, June-August 2010, and Centro de Arte Contemporáneo, Malaga, Spain, September-November 2010. "Dexter Dalwood: Endless Night" was on view at Gagosian Gallery, Beverly Hills, Sept. 17-Nov. 7, 2009.

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