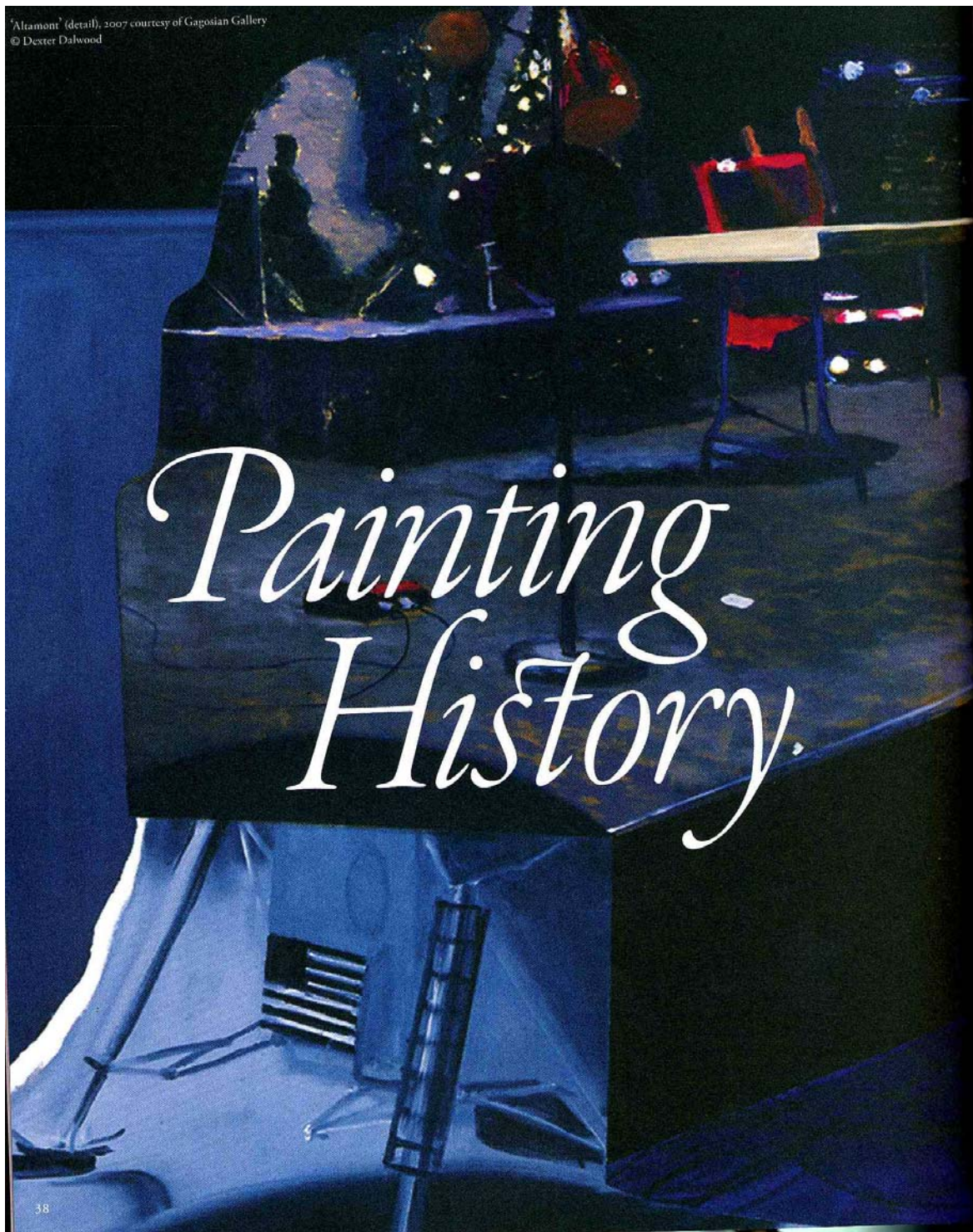


Art & Music
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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

'Altamont' (detail), 2007 courtesy of Gagosian Gallery
© Dexter Dalwood



Painting History.

Dexter Dalwood's paintings are often described as mixing art history with real history and, superficially, that's easy shorthand for what he does. But why do some historical events and painting styles interest him more than others, and why has he chosen to make a series of work based on suicides and homicides? On the eve of his fifth solo show, at Gagolian LA, Gemma de Cruz met up with him to find out

Getting round to see Dexter Dalwood has been a bit of a mission. He's been on holiday, on work trips; we spoke on the phone, we did Facebook messages. His studio is literally opposite my house but, somehow, it was epic. So here I am, chez Dalwood, two weeks before he jets off to LA. The new paintings have already been shipped but the studio still feels like a creative hub. When I arrive he is organising loan forms for a museum show and has just seen out a photographer.

There's an area on one wall filled with cut out images from magazines pinned up amongst reproductions of old paintings. Next to this are printouts of designs for the invitation to the new show. There are lots of work benches piled with tubes of oil paints and a bookcase full of art books. "I've read all of these," Dalwood jokes, although I don't think he *is* joking.

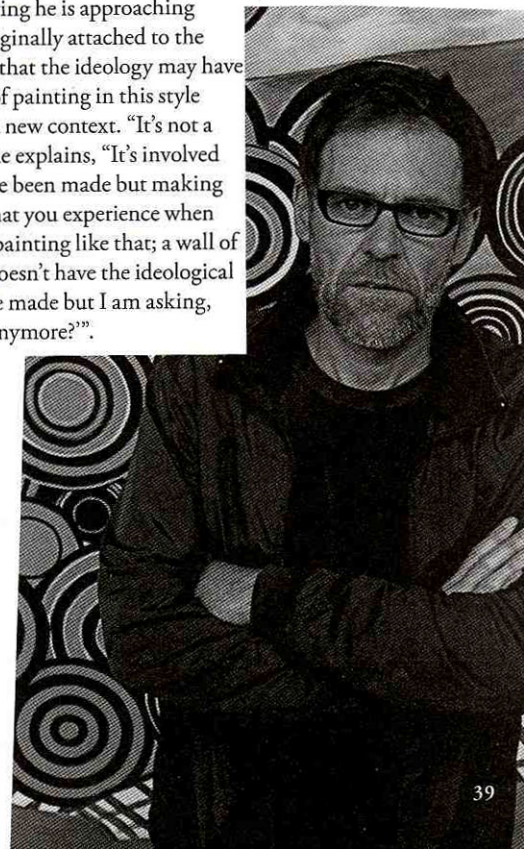
Dalwood's knowledge of art history is so in-depth that it's addictive to listen to him talk. Everything he tells you about an artist from Giovanni Bellini to Morris Louis, Patrick Caulfield to Damien Hirst, has an angle I've never heard before. He will talk about a painting by Vermeer and make it sound like the latest, most happening thing without even putting a spin on it. His own paintings are a visual extension of this; they make you re-look at artists you'd written off and question what you think you know.

When I ask Dalwood why all the paintings in his new show *Endless Night* are based on suicides and homicides he says: "I was interested in doing a series of paintings depicting the actual demise of someone without actually depicting it..." This is not the first time Dalwood has used a controversial death as a subject. In 2000 he made a painting called 'Brian Jones' Swimming Pool', but the only reference to the one-time Rolling Stone, is in the title. The outline of an empty pool takes up the majority of the canvas and is filled with a Clyfford Still-style colourfield painting. There is nothing to suggest anything sinister; quite the opposite, it is an idyllic view of rock star suburbia, but one that could easily turn. A bare tree and lone golden leaf suggest autumn has kicked in and technically the reflection of the house in the pool wouldn't be possible; likewise the perspective is deliberately awkward and the viewpoint of the spectator is ambiguous – it could be from the bottom of the pool looking up, or it could be front on. These conflicting elements gel to form a sealed axiom and hold your imagination long enough for you to believe in the scene, even if they always hover on the

verge of dissolution. When I first saw this painting Dalwood explained how he came to fit Clyfford Still's painting with Brian Jones's death; "I was thinking he [Brian Jones] died at the end of the sixties and how that period of time is over. I thought of collaging in a Clyfford Still painting which at that time had great currency as grand, sublime, abstract painting. I liked the idea of bringing that back in and using it within the context of the painting to say something about the sublime; an empty swimming pool has great pathos. There is nothing like it for evoking a feeling that the summer is over or something tragic has happened."

Now, nine years after he made it, I wonder how he feels it has aged. If an actual Clyfford Still painting remains attached to the period in which it was made, what happens to a painting that is attached to the failings of that period? I ask Dalwood about the notion of using painting genres as 'graphics' that he literally lifts up and places in his own work. How does he feel about working in this way knowing he is approaching it without the sentiment that was originally attached to the genre of painting? While he accepts that the ideology may have expired, he sees the physical action of painting in this style as a separate thing that can exist in a new context. "It's not a take on painting for the sake of it", he explains, "It's involved with the ideals of how paintings have been made but making it have a new language. It's about what you experience when you walk into a space and you see a painting like that; a wall of paint made with a palette knife. It doesn't have the ideological thump of when those paintings were made but I am asking, 'does this language have relevance anymore?'".

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More recently, in 2007, Dalwood made what could almost be a partner painting to 'Brian Jones' Swimming Pool', called 'Altamont'. Again, he borrowed the painting style of another abstract art giant, Mark Rothko. "With 'Altamont', I was thinking about Mark Rothko making his grey and black paintings. He was obsessed with the moon landing; he was watching the Apollo moon landing on television [when he made the grey and black paintings]. When you know that about him you see all those minimal paintings, which are principally grey and black, in a different light. They are not just an abstraction; they are an abstraction from an actual event. If you think of them as moon surfaces, they become very literal".

Fitting Mark Rothko to Altamont opens up a new channel of discussion. Rothko was a painter who believed that art could 'change the world' and after sustaining a monumental level of success throughout the 1960s he committed suicide in 1970. Similarly, Altamont sits in history like a convenient bookend to the '60s, a sombre full stop after a period defined by protest and idealism. In his painting, Dalwood positions the Altamont stage in the centre of the composition, revealing a section underneath depicting a shaky rocket lifted from a Volkswagen magazine advert from 1969. By including something so throwaway and approaching these historic references in such a playful way, he somehow diffuses the weight attached to them while retaining the importance of what each individually represented. All three events were happening in parallel: the first successful moon landing, heavyweight abstract painting being outmoded by pop, and the hysteria around epochal music festivals crashing to a close. Three completely disparate subjects that, in retrospect, are somehow equally representative of the exaltation and disappointments of a generation, come together in this painting to form one view of a moment in history that was both a beginning and an end. Dalwood's painting is about the collision of these events and their meaning, but it is also about looking back at them forty years on. When I asked Dalwood why he used an advert as an image source for the rocket in the painting he tells me: "I feel that



'Gatsby', 2008, courtesy of Gagosian Gallery, © Dexter Dalwood

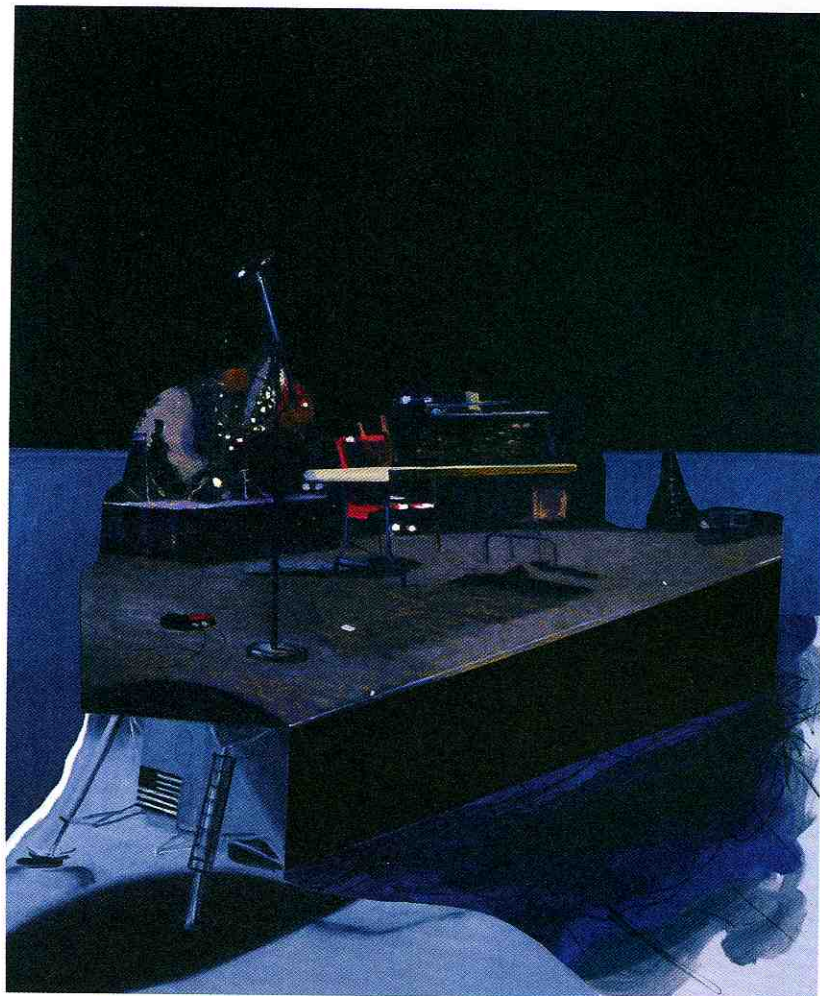
generation (and you can count me in as an Apollo kid) were all looking to the future. I am still disappointed in the slow advance of technology. I thought we would be inhabiting space by now." It's as if the promise – of the future of space travel – that's celebrated in the advert is sealed in time and by using the image from that source he's keeping that association intact rather than being cynical about it. The advert is optimistic and that is what he embeds in the painting.

'Altamont', along with the preparatory collages for 'Brian Jones' Swimming Pool' and 'Janis Joplin's Bed' formed part of a show earlier this year at the David Risley gallery in Copenhagen. Dalwood's bigger idea for the show was, he says, based around what happens when things break down: "A lot of my work is about failed utopianism or what happens when things suddenly run out of currency." This show, titled *There is no Darkness but Ignorance*, was the first time these works had been shown together; despite not being chronological in terms of their creation they sit easily together as a series. The themes in Dalwood's work may have stretched back and forward in time but they are united by his signature 'sampling' collage style.

What I find interesting in Dexter's paintings is that while he is attracted to what he calls "failed utopianism", he's also drawn to individual, personal failure, which is evident in the suicides that inform the paintings in *Endless Night*. It is particularly resonant in paintings based on the suicide of Dr David Kelly (who was found dead after being named as the possible source of a BBC story on the government's Iraq dossier. Conspiracy theories circulated, as did questions over the way he was treated by the government) and Roberto Calvi (the top Italian banker who was embroiled in a complex web of international fraud and intrigue before being found hanging from Blackfriars Bridge in 1982. His death was treated as suicide and then murder). Similarly, 'Gatsby' is based on the murder in F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*. Unlike most events in Dalwood's paintings this death is fictional. Although Gatsby is a fictional character, this is a book that chronicles an era of decadence (the 1920s) that was



'Janis Joplin's Bed', 2000, courtesy of Gagosian Gallery, © Dexter Dalwood



'Altamont', 2007, courtesy of Gagosian Gallery, © Dexter Dalwood

beginning to fade and focuses on a gilded character destined to fall. When I ask Dalwood why he chose the murder from this novel in particular he explains: "The description of *Gatsby's* murder in the book is removed from real time almost as if the murder itself happens off camera. We have the description before and after but not the moment".

This fits Dalwood's predilection for not wanting to have too much detailed information to hand to influence his interpretation. The painting features a swimming pool painted in a slightly mottled, washy, Hockneyish Californian tinge. The pool is outlined by sharp angles and warped perspective. A red lilo is floating on the surface of the picture plane as if it isn't meant to be touching the water. I can't help thinking there is more of a direct connection. There is a paragraph in *The Great Gatsby* in which the narrator rumbles the eponymous character; realizing that his life is a 'fabrication' he discusses the "unreality of reality". This phrase is so relevant to 'Gatsby' and in a way to all of Dalwood's paintings. To me, looking at Dalwood's paintings is never about re-viewing or being presented with a real description of a situation, scene or event. Rather, the paintings act as rhetorical portals – a potent, incongruous alignment of imagery and painting styles that together ignite the greater imagination.

As we're ending our conversation we talk generally about death: accidents, suicides, seeing the lifeless body, euthanasia... Dalwood says, "Before Hunter S. Thomson

committed suicide he wrote out a note; 'No More Games. No More Bombs. No More Walking. No More Fun. No More Swimming...' – all the things he couldn't enjoy anymore. He knew he didn't want to live, he didn't want to be old". When Dexter tells me this I get a different insight to his work; I instantly wish he hadn't told me about the note but at the same time I'm gripped. I feel a wave of excitement at the thought of Hunter S. Thomson tapping out something so honest on his typewriter and simultaneously distressed about him blowing his brains out. And this is the spark that Dalwood brings to the surface in his paintings. If they were literal depictions they wouldn't mean anything; it would just be an illustration attached to a controversy.

I see where the friction between him using these subjects without ever visually describing them comes from. I'm thinking back to what he said about "depicting the demise of someone without actually depicting it..." Of course, this leaves more to the viewer's imagination; it doesn't have to be tied to something literal or a perceived idea of what a literal 'depiction' is. I used to think he was hotwiring art history with real history and making something new out of something old and I thought that he used collage to create a visual and psychological edginess. He is, and he does, but now I think it's also about pulling the viewer into a place where they don't feel comfortable – a place where instinct is challenged.

On paper everything that Dalwood is interested in is grim: failed utopianism, flawed ideologies, political corruption, suicide, homicide... but his work is a jubilant celebration of painting. He decorates melancholic moments in history and pays homage to all genres of painting. Collectively Dalwood's work makes me think of something Vivienne Westwood once said: "I'm not trying to do something different, I'm trying to do the same thing in a different way." His subjects might be controversial but the process by which he makes his paintings is traditional and rooted in the most earnest genres of painting. The shock isn't the subjects; it's that he can use such a diverse range of painting styles without being insincere.

As we're walking out, Dalwood bumps into one of his studio buddies who comments on his new stubbly look, and asks him, "What made you grow a beard?" Dexter smiles and answers, "Because I can?" I think that if somebody told you a fuzzy-edged, black Mark Rothko painting was the surface of the moon and they were going to put the Altamont stage in the middle of it, painted in the style of a VW magazine advert from 1969, you might be tempted to ask them, "why?" If you asked Dexter Dalwood he would definitely say, "Because I can."