

the rural renegade

[dan attoe at peres projects mitte]

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english

Though Dan Attoe's paintings may seem to focus on the apocalyptic—the background of "Accretion #40" certainly suggests as much—his preoccupations are rather more immediate. The paintings in his exhibition *Lights Flickering in the Dark* at Peres Projects Mitte, opening September 9, indicate an ever more self-reflective shift in his work: large canvases depicting subjects torn between two worlds replace neons of starry-assed pinups.

Seemingly emerging from a minor quarter-life crisis, a peculiar serenity breathes throughout the works with phrases such as: "This is all you get, a satisfied mind, take time," inscribed on "#40." Here, *berlin art journal* editor Alexander Forbes speaks with Attoe, discussing his Bukowskian practice, the plight of repressed rural adolescents, and walking on hollow ground.

deutsch

Deutsche Version folgt in Kürze.

Alexander Forbes: For a while you were making a painting a day, then a drawing a day, is that still a part of your practice?

Dan Attoe: Yes, it is. I still do a drawing every day, which I've been doing for the last six years, ever since I stopped doing a painting every day. It's my way of maintaining some flexibility in my subject matter.

AF: How has having that huge amount of material to work from affected the paintings themselves?

DA: I have a lot more images that I want to paint than I have time to. However, there are always some drawings that stand out in my mind as things I want to paint more than others. I feel like having the practice of daily drawing helps the paintings, because there's a dialogue happening in the drawings that can move more quickly than the paintings. The drawings are sensitive to changes in me and my daily life, and reflect that in ways I can understand. I then use the ones that have the most significance as the basis for paintings. Similarly, Charles Bukowski wrote at least five poems a day, and a lot of them have recurring subject matters with little nuances, but every now and then he would write something that really reached higher levels of meaning.

AF: You often deal with a sort of ugliness or "closed doors" topics that are rarely explored outside of an urban context. Do your rural settings, both personally and in terms of the setting of the works themselves, alter the conversation, perhaps attempting to expose something culturally rather than cultivating this recurrent urban bad-boy stereotype?

DA: I hardly ever think of the "urban bad-boy stereotype" with my work, partially because all of the places I grew up were very far from cities. I recognise that there is a sort of cultural recontextualisation that happens when I make people in my paintings do "edgy" things in rural settings, but those are things that I grew up knowing, or imagining, to be happening. Now, I'm also familiar with urban life too, but for some reason it doesn't capture my imagination in the same way. Maybe this is partially because there is a clumsiness and desperation to people's urges way out in smaller towns or rural areas, and there's a repression there that comes from religion and social pressure that doesn't exist as much in cities. I graduated in a class of 29 people, and most of them had never had sex or done drugs other than alcohol. In addition, I'd venture to guess that about half of them are married now to the same people they were dating in high school.

The thing is that these are complicated people who have the same urges and curiosities people in the cities have, but there are no outlets for many things. So, as a result, sometimes those things come out in strange or sort of goofy ways. The funny thing is that even people who are college-age in places like eastern Idaho, Minnesota and Wisconsin (which are the places I grew up in) mostly adhere to very traditional ways of life. I don't often think of the things these people are doing as "ugly," but more as clumsy manifestations of deeper psychological meaning translated through the objects that are available to the characters at the time, which are often drugs, sex, violence or machines.

AF: Is there a particular arch to what you've been working on for the Peres Projects exhibition?

DA: I think that much of it has to do with the birth of my daughter last year. There's a little bit of meditation on fear about what the world will be like for her as she grows up in "Accretion #40," which was the last painting I made before she was born. Also, there is a lot of thought about sacrifices I'll have to make in committing to raising a child—similar to the little man tethered to a tree in "Sundancer"—and things that I'll have to give up, or restrain in myself. However, there's also a pervasive humour and enjoyment of being human that shows up through all of the work.

AF: Your work has this tension of being visually mystical, detached even, yet it feels very intimate. With "Desert Cave," I think this really comes through. I'm constantly torn between wanting to examine the subjects in the upper portion of the canvas yet am always unwillingly drawn to the cave's black abyss. Are you mimicking some sort of subconscious phenomenon?

DA: When I choose the drawings to paint, it's because I feel there's some significance to them, and this may be what you're seeing here, too. I can't always put my finger on all of the meaning, but I just know that something important is there. I come upon the images through daily meditation, just from jotting down ideas throughout the day, and the best ones are often those I can't completely explain. "Desert Cave" is certainly two distinct worlds that are inextricably linked and are both just as meaningful, separately and together. The top image of the two hikers—who are both me—is set in a very early-American style painting of Death Valley National Park, and the lower image is similarly painted, but has this transcendent meaning with the dark abysmal cave, with all the skeletons of dead hikers around. The literal meaning is that the men above—particularly the less careful one—are treading on a thin crust and could easily fall through and never be seen again. It's an image that comes from an experience I had hiking in Death Valley about ten years ago, and the ground I was walking on had a hollow sound in places, like there were caves below me, but I had no way of knowing how deep they went, or how strong the ground I was walking on could be. —**Alexander Forbes**

[Image: Dan Attoe in his studio, courtesy of the artist]