

THE MYTHOLOGY OF D & ME

Note: I will be employing the letter 'D' as a substitute for "Damien Flood" for personal reasons. (Thank you to Alain-Robbe Grillet and Franz Kafka for the permission.)

THE invitation to write an artist's monograph essay is a strange invitation. Stranger when the artist and writer have been friends since art school, when and where they were both painters, one year separating them, equally determined, although only one would continue on as a painter, Damien Flood, while the other became everything but a painter, James Merrigan. Stranger again when *this* writer feels and believes the monograph essay can only be one of two things: one, an exercise in flattery where words like *extraordinary* *unique* *seldom* are thrown like confetti, as if the writer and the artist have crossed the threshold and are on their way to the bedroom, candle-lit and rose-petal strewn, for the love fest (shivers); or two, an exercise in evasiveness, ducking and diving to submerge in one's clothed subjectivity to discuss the artist's work by not discussing it, the writer breathing on their own gas tank, avoiding the drowning artist's puckered lips that forever wait for an oxygenated metaphor that might include them and their work in some way... anything... something... nothing. And strangest of all is the whopping big context that shapes everything now and for the foreseeable future: writing about art vis-à-vis the pandemic. The pandemic has dampened everything since I started writing this essay. Just before it hit I met D in his studio after a year of not meeting. That day, on the car ride home from his studio, I dictated notes into my phone, 50-minutes worth. Usually I dictate to expel the shit before I can begin to write with something that has girth and violence; something of importance to the artist and the writer that is not just empty flattery or evasiveness. I never followed up on those 50-minutes. Yesterday, months later, the itch came to write with two directives: one, no flattery! Two, it had to be biographical, for our art lives have been intertwined since the beginning. Anything else would be pretend.

See, I have been looking over D's shoulder ever since I first caught him working up a to-scale oil sketch of Caravaggio's *The Taking of Christ* in art school. A year ahead, he was someone I immediately felt I could bounce off, not just in terms of talking paint, but competition. He was as intense as me about painting, which I needed in art school, to avoid feeling the intensity in me being so abnormal. We compounded our respective intensities; we mutually justified and assured our shared ambitiousness. After Caravaggio and what would be the first phase of art school together, we literally painted over each other's shoulders in my family home when we worked on three-metre copies of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. Why? Don't ask reader! You could say the crumbling mural painting, which has evolved into an accidental abstraction with time, was a possible excuse and impossible execution. What was certainly going on was ambition, a dual determination to *become*, and our shoulders and the shoulder of an artist from the historical canon was as good a place to start as any. We were also lost after art school. We wanted to exhibit and to be part of something bigger than ourselves. Painting together was an excuse to figure out bigger questions around what to paint, and why paint it when you found what to paint. For painters to paint together under the style and subject of

another artist seems absurd now but it didn't back then. It made sense. It was like painting without clothes on. We saw each other's flaws and powers with paint. We argued over the use of white spirit vs turpentine. We had dumb opinions that crumbled as we searched for distinct voices in the tautology of togetherness straight after art school. Our love for painting however was equal. This was the beginning.

Beginnings are easy, endings not so. D's paintings have had dramatic exorcisms over the years. The first time I saw his paintings in public was his degree show in 2003. They were small, random appropriations from the internet. There was a burnt-out car (I think). The grain of the canvas came through. Then a solo show at Signal Arts Centre, Bray. Small again, McDonald's golden arches brand my memory. Then there were the dilated eyes of prepubescent girls, what the author of *Lolita* Vladimir Nabokov termed "nymphets". We showed together. We asked our art history lecturer to write an essay. I recycled the monstrous Da Vinci canvases and painted miniature 1980's catalogue models against vast Americana. We were both influenced by American painter, John Currin, who was contemporary but still referenced the weight of painting history with a light and ironic touch. Out of what looked and felt like a concrete bunker on a back alley in Bray, a small seaside town on the east coast of Ireland, 40-minutes from the capital Dublin, D painted an angel amongst a white PVC back door, chrome pedal-bin and black and white diamond lino. You could feel and smell the windowless-studio damp on it. We talked for hours in that windowless bunker, discussing painting and the art scene. Talk, talk, talk, but with purpose, unpacking our naïveté and doubts as to what was good painting and what was valid to paint. We were still lost but when I look back, we were found.

We applied for an MFA at NCAD as painters. I knew that I would venture elsewhere when I was accepted; I knew D wouldn't (except for a few dalliances with installation. Terrible things, but the trigger for his future work, in particular a painting that would soon afterwards be accepted to the prestigious John Moores Painting Prize in Liverpool). At NCAD, D started from the ground, flirting with a shy figuration. Still shy in colour and application, plants and organic life peeked through a feathered, bone-dry and monochrome formalism that grew and grew, layer by layer into a "new geography". D would get noticed internationally when one small painting—the worst way to describe it would be 'an insect sprouting from a cloud'—was selected for the John Moores Painting Prize (the first of two times), and then came Green on Red Gallery through dealer Jerome O'Drisceoil, who had a proven and uncanny ability for picking up good, obstinate and self-driven painters, like Fergus Feehily and Paul Doran. I was fucking jealous but happy it was D. I bet everyone was (envious) in what was a very competitive MFA cohort. It was a huge nod from one of a handful of respected commercial galleries in Dublin. It was another beginning but also an ending.

The months that followed our MFA were long with uncertainty as our graduation coincided with the financial crisis of 2008. I remember Sundays being strange—the shops were closed for financial not religious reasons, streets deserted like today during the pandemic. Everything seemed grey, dull, atrophied. I remember rain. D had a small studio in a

village south of his hometown of Bray, just off the motorway. On the first visit I got lost. The studio was small and sheltered from civilisation, as were D's paintings *small and sheltered from civilisation*. That's all I remember. We were in the middle of something. I was desperate, trying to wriggle out of despair, making nothing, just waiting, waiting for something to happen. It did. It would. D was producing like always. A second gallery came knocking—Oonagh Young. He had a solo show there; he wound up with Green on Red Gallery. He's still there, over a decade later, with successive solo shows and publications (like this one). Words and painting have become a mainstay of his production. When I think back to those formative years of exhibiting, his work has never settled. D's exhibition-making has been a fillip for change. His working process is to build towards an exhibition, creating a mythology around the work, fundamentally believing in that mythology as someone who has lived and worked as a form of penance under its push and pull for two to three years, to finally expel that mythology in the gallery for the public to believe. They didn't always believe. The presence and proliferation of writing and conversation sometimes suggested a concern, or at the very least anticipated the public not believing. How do you describe D's work to someone else? I've tried. In his MFA show there was a skull against black that bookended a series of small figurative abstracts where figuration was failing under a flailing abstraction. I call up that skull against black because I can't exactly find the words for the others. (The other week D sent me an Instagram message with an image of a new skull he is working on for the RHA show—this show. We are thinking the same things, digging down in the past when everyone is digging down). D was also painting on small photographs back then—like he paints bare-backed on linen today. Their mood is quiet and minimalist; abstraction forming bridges in landscapes that are forested, mountainous or cellular. It's hard to know where we stand in terms of scale. His small paintings have a tendency of exploding outwards like a galaxy, a universe in your mind. D's abstract mark-making and form-making has always had a purpose, to reach around (like a first date) and through (like a bullet) flat figuration, as if a tree or mountain or island could not activate the painting by themselves. Nature needed a helping hand; paint becomes agent or insurgent. There's something violent or sad in D's scaffolding of nature and the marvellous and paradoxical fantasies that undergird it all. (I'll get to that.)

We could talk for hours, D and me, around his paintings. I realised in his presence that I liked to talk about his paintings and painting in particular. We had several public conversations the following years. We talked and talked—talking was something we did around painting since the day we began to talk in art school in front of D's Caravaggio. I was exhausted following our talks. I was searching for meaning myself, for words; D was searching for the thing that words fail to hook onto but paint sometimes can. One day he said his paintings were split between “pop songs” and “big bangs”. I loved it. That was my experience of them in his studio. Some paintings were immediate, others worked on you after hours of being with them—a temporal intimacy that exploded outward and forever in every direction but sense. It was a special intimacy the public would never share or experience in the gallery, just me. Another “pop song” was selected for the John Moores Painting Prize. I remember the conversation we had just before he submitted the work.

He knew what worked. D was beginning to know what others liked in his work and what activated different contexts of reception. I think he got bored then. He wanted more, more challenging receptions. His paintings got bigger, more theatrical, more what I called back then “transitional”—breaking what had come before into a transitional space that was limbotic, neither abstraction nor figuration, just everything. I have a “big bang” in my home, one that broke through my reservations, my resistances, after a few hours of talk and sideways glances during another studio talk. D gifted it to me on the imminent occasion of the birth of my daughter, Lucy. I picked it. It hangs in my sitting room, always sitting on the periphery of my T.V. gaze, an unconscious mess of forbidden *id* never resolved. This word “transitional” has critique embedded in it, like ‘potential’. And the early bare-backed linen paintings didn't always work. However, I knew they were a way of working-through or working-over something. D is always working.

The word “transitional” first came out in a transcribed conversation with D in 2013, when I ascribed it to “exhibitions that are not decisive”. It was a general description of D's big paintings at the time. D was always good at activating small canvases but struggled with larger ones back then. His large paintings of that time are either layered with trial and error to ultimately emerge from a process of destruction, shift and empathy for drips or shapes that are allowed to survive the tumult of painterly assaults; or they are minimal, relying on the neutral noise of the linen to stop the destruction, to leave be, empty but inferring a presence that isn't everything, just something other than the white primer to hold shapes and drips in place. The paintings of this time seem artificially lit. Olives and browns predominate, while colour becomes a filter, lens, transparent, through which we see this world of clay and curtain. They are paintings of earth and theatre. Definitive drawn marks create an architecture for the painterly sludge. They are dirty dreams extracted from the grave of clay and stone. Body parts entangled in the roots. “The body is a landscape—I know that's a cliché, and I'm not going to start taking photos of my toenails or something, saying ‘they are a big mountain’. In the end it all comes back to the body, to death.” (Damien Flood, in conversation, 2013.) These dirty “new geographies” would give rise to a cleaner execution in the succeeding years, as if D himself had been extracted from the grave. Delicate gradients become part of his repertoire. Drips take on corporeal form, sometimes substantial, other times negative, as if the paint that once made up the drip had decomposed under some sun-drenched exposure, bright and relentless. He begins to love paint, to let paint *be*. But love, as Jean-Luc Nancy says, always ends in the grave.

Words, words, words, and paint; the dumb reality of words and paint. D has always invited words into the fray of his paintings. There is an arrogance in this invitation, but also a search for something verbal, however web-footed those words may be in his sloped world of mud and magnetism. He allows the writer to perform, to stand in the aisle and juggle—fumble—stumble—silly. *This* writer is now standing in the aisle where a red curtain hangs like a heavy fringe over one eye. Cycloptic, I see paint, cleaner paint than before, with different speeds and acrobatics in the absurd attempt to escape the frame through the knot of form and release of space, painted knots and releases. I feel

melancholia here, something that has always been here, since that year D painted an angel by a chrome pedal-bin. A melancholia—something that never reaches the resolution of mourning—continually being rejected and injected with paint like a drug to become effervescent, cloud-borne, weightless due to a gravity that levitates you off the bed, a bed that has been pissed on time and again in dreams. You wake up, bang your head and drift off again, flying and diving. This is the möbius-strip rituals of D's paintings, dreaming while pissing in the bed. The term 'dirty dream' implies the dream is usually clean, but the dream is always dirty until it is passed through language. D's paintings are dreams before they pass. My words are wet wipes.

Today the heavy curtain is gone from D's paintings proper but it still hangs in the aisle where I stand. What is different from before... before and before, is a surgical intention, wherein there is a dramatic up-lift as if all that was soiled before has become airborne, and the gravity from that height and heft more felt in the figurative minutiae that punctuates rather than swarms the misshapen mess of process, gradient, weave, drip, impression and squeegee—SQUEEGEE! what a hopeful and hopeless word in both D's and Gerhard Richter's painting vernacular. Now I see from the aisle, with a distance of a decade, that when D painted on photographs in the early days he was activating a space of mourning, the morbid quality of the photograph, with melancholia. That is why I have always felt, in secret, that D's paintings have always been a lively extension of the photograph.

I sit here, homebound during the first lockdown of the pandemic (April, 2020) leafing through the four splayed monographs that make up the Mythology of D. They are mostly words by others, by me. I look back on that first book from 2009, hardback and ambitious, as if seeing them for the first time. I'm nostalgic-sad, a time when we both had ambitions but didn't know what they were. They are good paintings, better than I knew then. I thought I saw them fully then, but I couldn't—the context that shaded *then* was too... me. Things were about to change for D. The world of dealers, art fairs and prizes would change my intimate relationship with them. Thing is, I saw D's paintings being made and destroyed, but perhaps never really saw them as complete as I do today. Looking back I feel I was always there, an over-the-shoulder witness before and after the galleries would take a gamble on a painting language that was rich but restless. What would have happened to D's painting if the dealers hadn't. Exhibition-making has been a fundamental part of D's process, his evolution. D would be still painting, no doubt, but what? He is a destroyer of paintings, a starter of paintings. With every body of work (*body* taking on a particular emphasis in D's mythology) he has exorcised some things and remained haunted by others. To interpret them is fucking dumb. They are dumb paintings, in that they either make you silent or, in my case, produce profuse sentences, so language gets curdled and goes to shit, a metaphor I have depended on and deployed in previous articulations of his work. D's new paintings and sculptures are too close to call, but they have come through the transitional corridor and are now knocking at the door, suspended before escape. Without getting profuse, they are an accumulation of things ventured over the last decade+. They profess maturity like the adolescent, craft and daft in a sticky

embrace. They are self aware enough to be beautiful, and anti-social enough to be experimental. They are melancholic but also comic in their incongruities. Picture this: thrashed Monet's and Bacon's in a spick and span skip. Some might call this sublime, others a case of performing postmodern permissiveness. I call it a 'dirty dream'.

I entered D's studio this year when the pandemic was a thing elsewhere. In the studio pouring over the paintings, I felt close to D's work again and enriched by the memory of a relationship, a friendship, what began as a dual assault on the art scene and will continue apace and apropos of D's new work. We both write and paint against the grain in our small art scene. We say that as if it's a problem, but I think we like that problem. I think our respective painting and writing are built around that problem. This last studio visit to D's I was unprepared for the small figure propped on a skeletal brass stand like something from the *Day of the Dead*—talismanic? commodity? psychoanalytic *fetish*? It accompanied a large painting that looked like it pissed on itself, linen drenched in a crotch explosion of what D refers to as "the shits" (spoilt turps and linseed)—D's best invention! He is once again fucking with painting, but also the perception of his painting mythology. After acclimatising to these little masculine deities—postures of belief or betrayal or punk—I ask D "Why place them off to the side of the painting, why not dead centre in front of the paintings, like artists would in New York. Two fingers!?" We talk for hours. Discussing what is vital about his paintings and its display at the RHA. I miss our talks. I had forgotten we could say what was on our minds. I realise that my attitude to writing as a critic was built around the critical openness I have had with D about his work. He has given me words that I haven't needed elsewhere. This is rare. Seconds into the last studio visit I notice a slip of brass slapped onto the edge of the same painting that pissed on itself. I'm excited. D responds to my excitement with, "That's for people like you."

—James Merrigan