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Melanie Daniel

IN PAINTING, SCULPTURE ON 02/12/18



Can you tell me a bit about yourself?

I'm from British Columbia, Canada and have lived in Israel for a long time. I'm now in Michigan. Slowly, over the years I developed my own artistic language and "look", although I've never clung to any signature style. I'm too restless for that and I don't think it reflects the age in which we live. I've discovered however that even though I make visual shifts from one body of work to the next, that my own kind of mark-making is always present because I'm always present. In terms of an art career it's not necessarily a smart move because you don't end up with a signature look, But, as artists, what do we have? We basically have our freedom, so if we don't use it then what good is it?

When did you first discover art, or realize you wanted to make it yourself?

Much of my academic career, interesting and fulfilling as it was, in retrospect was also a long process of elimination. During my first year at university, I was convinced that I would go into medicine, so I studied science and minored in English Literature. I soon realized that the health and safety of humanity would be better off without me in the medical profession. Then I shifted my focus to a combination of Literature/Philosophy/History. After four years of studies, (I still didn't have a degree) I took a break and travelled to India for a year then came back to British Columbia to tree-plant for the season. All the while, I painted pictures when I could, and it never ever occurred to me that I might pursue a career in art. If DNA determines what aptitudes a person enters the world with, then the decision was made for me on a visceral level. Painters have been in my family for generations.

One year, I travelled to India and met the person who I would later marry — another traveler who happened to be Israeli. In 1994, I moved to Jerusalem, Israel, and applied to a school I had heard much about: the renowned Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem and I was accepted. It's a fantastic art school lead by teachers who are themselves the best in their fields, all artists of international acclaim. I actually ended up teaching there for several years. The move to Israel was the moment that I really understood what I wanted to do with my life – that I wanted to make art. I discovered that it not only made me feel alive, but that I was not bad at it.

What do you like most about working where you do?

Right now, I live in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where I'm the present Padnos Distinguished Visiting Artist. I was hired to introduce BFA students to a more rigorous and conceptual approach to art-making. Nothing happens in Grand Rapids, and so there are absolutely no distractions when I'm in my studio. Life is so utterly different here from the non-stop chaos and sensory overload of Tel Aviv, where I lived before this. Life in Grand Rapids doesn't insinuate itself into my imagery the way it did in Israel.

I will say however that my present studio is in my basement and I believe I am sharing the space with a benign ghost, the man who used to live in this house. It sounds creepy, but it is actually comforting in a strange way.



What ideas are you exploring in your practice?

Right now, I'm making crowded narrative paintings in psychedelic colors. Most of the scenes are desolate sun-drenched utopias in the near future, where people try to reconnect with nature and rebuild their post-cataclysm world. These are characters I would hang out with in real life, people whose goals I identify with. These mostly young homesteaders go through digital detox, keep bees, compost, recycle grey water, capture plant species and bottle them in terrariums, and perform nonsensical or futile functions, absurd yet poignantly necessary. Some paintings have them engaged in guerrilla acts, scenes that celebrate their attempted resistance to a world gone wrong. The paintings are all-over, treated from top to bottom. I want to keep the imagery fresh, urgent and spontaneous, but still coming out of a deeper, reflective space, true to this feeling of fear and vulnerability.

The objects I make look like part of the landscape extracted from the paintings but now tangible objects, freak specimens, with very DIY aesthetic. You can stand in the flora of the landscape which already exists in paintings. I try to repurpose as many materials as possible: wood, aluminum, plastic, anything.

What is your process like?

I read a lot. Most of my art comes from an intuitive impulse.

Is there any subject or theme you've been particularly interested in lately?

Anything related to our ecological footprint on this planet and how creative people and scientists are fighting for real change and not just talking about it.

Do you have a day job or other work that you split your time between?

Yes, I teach and I'm a parent. More below...

Do you have a mentor or a piece of advice that has influenced your practice?

About four years ago, I met Daniel Richter in Tel Aviv after he gave a talk. He was very candid, down to earth, and in my opinion, he's one of the best painters alive. Daniel spoke openly about his success and how fickle fame can be. One year, (he said) you're on top of the world and on every art magazine cover, and the next, you're dumped because of a change in direction. Collectors want the old stuff you used to make. Richter is pragmatic about it. But he also knows that he must keep pushing himself, playing with new ideas, imagery, or there's no point to making art anymore.

I think also of Philip Guston, when he said, "a dialogue isn't enough, that is to say, there is you painting and this canvas. I think there has to be a third thing, it has to be a triologue. Whether that third thing – it must be, to reverberate and make trouble, you have to have trouble and contradictions, it has to become complex because life is complex, emotions are complex, – whether that third element is a still life of something, or an idea or a concept, in each case it has to be a triologue and above all has to involve you...The real thing that matters is how involved you are in that."

I'm always happy to host people in my studio and think it's important to listen to everyone, including people who have absolutely no background in art. Often, laypersons see things in a more brutal light than art colleagues. Kids are the harshest critics and also often the best. Most advice I take with a grain of salt because I'm the one ultimately who must put it to the test.

Is there any advice you'd offer to others?

Never fear being the fool. Be ridiculous. This is the root of risk-taking and making important discoveries.

What does it mean to you to be a part of a "community?"

Being part of a community just means giving back.

I'm doing a bunch of ecological/sustainability projects with public school kids and also a community garden here in Grand Rapids. Forests and gardens are one of my best talents and loves and I always try to leave a place I've lived in greener and friendlier than when I arrived. It's easy to do and I've seen it happen many times: neighbors who've lived next door to one another for years and yet have never exchanged a word. They finally begin communicating given the right conditions. This, in my experience happens when there's physical work, outdoors is the best, or a technical task at hand, and everyone pitches in. People start chatting, and they become kinder, more relaxed, more open and human. This kind of community is essential for artists too. We need to be generous with one another and to share our networks and knowledge. There's nothing to be gained in being secretive or territorial.

Do you have any routines or rituals in the studio that help get you into the mode to create?

It sounds harsh, but I only enter my studio with the intent to work. I can't just stand there, contemplating life, listening to music and not actually work. I know many artists allow themselves that space to think and plan, but to me, it's too demoralizing or frustrating to know I've had time to paint and couldn't or wouldn't. I'd rather just go outside and dig in the dirt, or go to the sea for a swim. Or do laundry.

I work in the mornings and if necessary, will pull graveyard shifts when everyone has gone to bed. I find it impossible to work when my kids are home, and never do. Before I became a mom, I could work ten hours non-stop in the studio. Somehow, and I don't know how it happened, but I learned to accomplish as much work in far less time. I think people learn to become extremely efficient when they have kids and those glorious windows of studio time are relished. They're gold.

I have a great CD and vinyl collection, and an omnivore at that. If I'm down and want to feel less horrible, I listen to the blues: T Bone Walker, Memphis Minnie, Otis Rush, T Bone Walker, Koko Taylor. Love Motown. Jazz. I'm a big fan of house music, psytrance and can listen to hours to Infected Mushroom. I just keep the music very loud (my neighbours are loud too) and depending on how I feel and where I'm at in a painting, listen to The White Stripes, Interpol, Cerebral Caustic, Yeah Yeah Yeah's, PJ Harvey, Le Tigre, Smiths, Yacht – it's pretty random.



How significant has attending art school been to your practice?

If you want to be in the “game” you need to go to art school. These are the rules. Art school is where your networking begins and where you learn to think and defend the art you make. It's a place where you get feedback from peers. This largely disappears after you leave school because in the art world, no one will tell you what they really think. Call it a balance of terror. Everyone treads more carefully in the professional world.

I went to an Israeli art school, and it placed a very heavy emphasis on conceptual art. Figurative painting was shunned unless it could prove itself through the prism of intentionality. This school, the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, was a hothouse for ideas and ambitious projects. The professors, all well-known artists, were people we really looked up to. We weren't spoon fed the way I see art students are in America. I suppose part of that was the result of Israeli directness, but also because of strained resources – there are only a few truly good art schools in Israel and the competition is fierce. Most students go because they want to become professional artists and not because their parents want them to have a university degree.

What do you find most daunting, frustrating, or challenging about pursuing art?

It's hard for us to say ‘no’ to most opportunities even when the conditions or contracts are shitty. Organizers, collectors, curators all know this about artists. Pursuing a lifelong career in art-making is riddled with hardship, with financial strain as the greatest drawback.

How would you define “success?”

Success is a slippery notion. Good art is good art. People aren't stupid and know when an exhibition has been slapped together at the last minute by an army of studio assistants. This is just branding. I think measuring success by sales or Instagram followers is more a reflection of sharp business acumen. It isn't about art necessarily. Some artists are very accomplished at wearing both hats – making something great that excites them and also getting it noticed.

What is the most exciting thing you've done or accomplished so far in your work?

When I was accepted to the NARS residency in Brooklyn, I felt so fortunate to be able to work in NY and live there for a while. It's tough living there now. Last year, I moved to Michigan from Tel Aviv with my husband and two young kids after I was brought in as the Padnos Distinguished Visiting Artist. The position basically allows me to continue "research" (that funny university lingo) and I only teach a few times a week. The whole experience of being in the US has been a very positive experience so far. I think that any shift in perspective is good for artists.

What are you working on currently?

At the moment, I'm working like crazy for an upcoming solo show at the GRAM – the Grand Rapids Art Museum, Michigan. It opens in May 2019 and I'm stoked because it's my first US museum show.

Anything else you'd like to add?

Making art for art's sake is plenty.

Having said that, we're not born with this knowledge. It's learned.

Going to art school is about beginning your own practice: what does it mean to put time and effort in this field?

My role as an art teacher is not to say that one thing is right or wrong. Most of the time, I don't have anything big or profound to say. Because most of the time, there is nothing profound to respond to. But, that's not a bad thing. It's only normal because students are there to learn: to hone their skills and to develop self discipline. Who wants the pressure of already committing to a specific visual language so soon in the game?



I encourage students to be rigorous about the act of art-making. Not to be literal and not to work like a robot. I make them aware of what they're doing and let them find their own way. Although I want my students to be informed about art history and contemporary trends, I suggest they to avoid fashionable trends and to see what comes naturally to them.

In the class room I think it's important to remember that everyone comes from a position, has a background. It's wise to always to start with that premise. One of the most crucial things for me as a teacher and artist is to LOOK. PATIENTLY. To suspend judgment. This is very difficult and I must constantly remind myself not to draw conclusions too quickly. The process of looking is so important. Learn to look from far away. Zoom in and look close up. Don't judge. Don't shoot. Decipher.

Art school is peculiar place where you have peers and real, immediate feedback. Once out in the world, this access to real-time feedback vanishes. I tell students to make most of it and listen to anyone's opinion, even if they don't like it.



ABOUT KATE MOTHES

Kate Mothes is a curator and arts organizer currently based in the Midwest.