

A Conversation: Greg Drasler and David Humphrey

DH:

I ask myself this question a lot; what is the meaning of the labor? Painting is a craft and there's labor that goes into it. Many artists thematize it, or it becomes unconsciously sedimented into the meaning of their work. Sometimes it's a devotional labor, as in the case of your bus stops. Sometimes it just wants to show off mastery. But when I think about your hats, and you've been making them for years, I feel like the meaning of that labor is slightly different. I feel you're more in the position of the milliner, as though you are in the business of manufacturing new hats. They're more important than the guys who wear them and are arrayed with the kind of care one would take if they were in a shop window. So, I guess my question is, do you feel like you're a bit of a hat maker?



Mixed News, 2009, 50x70 inches, oil on canvas

GD:

Well, I am a hat maker felting the brim and a phrenologist who studies the bumps depressions and symmetry of the skull. In this case it is the crown of the hat. There is something that is different about how the hats paintings are painted. There is a scattering of attention in the process. The touch and move strategy that comes into play as I'm finishing one of these paintings is a dance. They are more collective in that the hats enter the painting first as an arrangement. Then the heads are screwed in like light bulbs underneath them. This person's face is positioned in the direction dictated by the tip and the angle of the hats.

So yeah, they're very different than other paintings of mine. You are spot on in identifying that difference. In many paintings I'll start with almost the whim of an idea. Then I'll invest in this process of finishing it almost as a religious painting, devotional if you will. And so there is that gap between the starting line and then this operatic finish. And I think that that's something that is scattered or dispersed a little bit more evenly in the labor in the hats paintings. The labor is in building a crowd.

DH:

I'm also thinking about your labor in the light of repetition; you've made an astonishing number of these hats over the years. When I first saw them I remember thinking, "It's about gender, dressing for a role and masculinity." But there's very little content on that level. You've been using the same body of hats and could swap in a painting from many years ago with a painting now. It leads me to think that it's really more about your behavior, about the fetish of making a hat over and over, than about the construction of contemporary masculinity. I remember even once talking to you about Lacan in the early Eighties, when he was newly translated and a fresh flavor in the art world. He presented a challenging way to think about gender but I feel like the quantity of repetition has altered that conversation.

GD:

It's certainly has in my mind though the numbers of these paintings since the identity conversations of the '80's. I am concerned with the conformity and individuality within a crowd. Facing the construction with the dispersal of hats and watching a social organization emerge in a painting, the crowd pictures inclusion but postures suggest exclusion. I'm usually positioning the view from above and behind. This position allows me to follow how the crowd gathers but keeps the crowd at arms length. I don't think I've ever finished a hats painting that I thought of as the final crowd.

DH:

So, you're doomed?

GD:

Or pre-occupied. I don't know.

DH:

There's a strange temporality to these crowded scenes that might have been common in the 50s or 40's. Crowds today are messier and more heterogeneous. These guys are outside of time, outside of today's workplace complexity. I think your image of the serialized worker, though, rubs happily against the image of you as the worker who cannot stop making hats.

GD:

Right. It's a middle management costume drama staged sometime between the 30s and the 50s. The repetition of that feels strangely unending. Other themes that emerge through the painting mark them as sidelong glances at a historical event. At a certain point in painting a hats painting a title emerges. The crowd murmurs back. It jostles. It's a

way to locate these paintings for me. My memory of every man in public wearing a hat recollects a variety of contexts from celebration to mourning. Entering the crowd there is a regard of this conformity that recalls collective events more than predicts future occasions.

I do think they have an echo. That's why I keep making them. I have not continually made them, but I usually have one in the studio that I'll occasionally bring out and work on. They give me an opposing context for the lonely absence of figure in most of my other work. They've become a singular category unto themselves; 'the hats paintings.' Topics, and subjects stirred by them have a privacy. They respond to topical events, whether it's a market crash or whether it's the Pope's visit, or as some kind of political rally. The openness to interpretation is part of my engagement with them. Here they are again, they're gathering again. What happened?

DH:

That's cool. I feel like there's also some showbiz formality to them, like those Busby Berkeley or Esther Williams numbers, or the June Taylor dancers from the Jackie Gleason show. It's like the dance of the hats; they all tip and turn at choreographed angles and seem detached from any lived life or actual job.



Nail Biter II, 2009, 58 x 52 inches, oil on canvas

GD:

Or any particular story. They jump the track and they become a film extra's opportunity on the film set. It's a crowd scene. "Everyone gets hired today. Here's your hat. Go stand over there."

DH:

So the painting I want to talk about, one of my favorites, is *Trojan House*, 2018. I know you used to do interiors and this reminds me a little bit of those, but there's something almost horrifying about the plushy anthropomorphic character of those seats, but also that this is a car that's been taken apart with no violence at all. It's a very pristine fragment of a car in a strange artificed diorama.



Trojan House, 2018, 50x70 inches, oil on linen

GD:

Well, I was trying not to make it horrific as if it were an accident scene. It isn't the product of an accident. It's like a product of necessity. It imagines a last remaining shelter on the edge of civilization's reach with a color-coded property map landscape. Hollywood prop cars designed to accommodate the bulky film cameras of the day inspired this car. The interior aims at being body-like, sensual, displaced and preoccupied. The sky has a pattern pulled back to the crease of the horizon. This automobile remnant or prop is foregrounded as a driverless car several decades from now. It is a remainder.

DH:

It sure is a remainder to the extent that there are no wheels or side to the car. It looks relatively well kept but there's no sign of any life having been lived inside; it's completely functionless as both car and shelter.

GD:

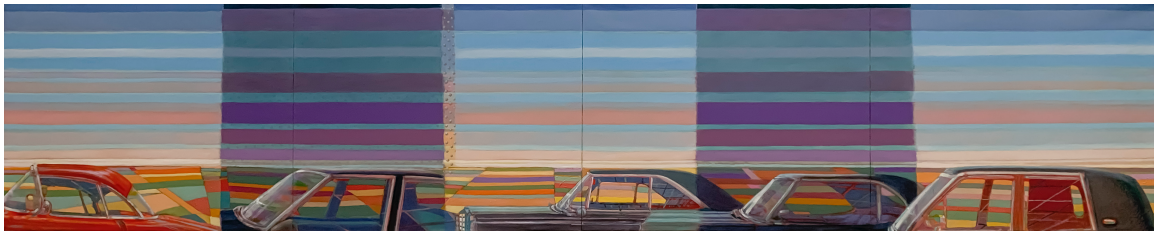
Right.

DH:

And there's no explanation as to how or why this thing has come about; it's a marvel! I love what happens in the rearview mirrors and in the windows on the other side; the car has become a lens that frames abstractions. And, of course, cars are always the lens to the world when we drive around, but no movement is possible in your Trojan House. It's a monument to arrested potential.

GD:

Absolutely. Well, that idea of the automobile as a camera has been with me for a long time. My interest in constructing landscapes happened through previous paintings looking out from of auto interiors. This painting is a return to the vehicle as a strange leftover contraption for getting somewhere.



Driverless Car / Occasional Rain, 2020, 22x112 inches, oil on canvas

DH:

So I have a question about driverless cars because now we have actual cars that drive themselves. Your cars feel like they're period cars without drivers.

GD:

Well, yes. I mean it, of course one and both ways. But I do like the idea of the historical model for transportation as a kind of romance. On the other hand, I think that the idea of the driverless car as it exists today is hauntingly intimidating to me. That one could get in a driverless car, all the doors locked, it's very tight, it starts driving, then it starts driving in a direction you don't want to go. And then it drives out to the edge of town, it just stops and you're trapped. You have nothing. You can't get out. It is a kind of nightmare of entrapment.

DH:

I saw a fragment of a science fiction movie on television the other night in which some pernicious agent was able to command control of all the cars in New York City and cause

them to swarm the streets or rain down on the good guys from parking lots.

But I think your work has a gentle friendliness that offsets any anguish or anxiety over its dystopian features. In some way these landscapes harmonize the cultivated land and patterned sky into a kind of prismatic midwestern utopia.

GD:

Well, it's inviting. It is deeply Midwestern to me. I've never been able to shake that from who I am. That's where I'm from. Niceness is the machismo of the Midwest. I keep coming back to it. I sometimes feel like I've eclipsed it, but then it comes rolling back. It is about a kind of attraction and pleasantness and seductive trap. But there is a general tendency in my work to provide a "space available."

DH:

I love these new bus stop paintings. I feel that they speak in a different voice than your other works in this show; they have the simplicity of a Morandi or a Hopper. I feel you have humbled yourself to the task of describing these architectural structures in a way that identifies with their charming modesty.



Bus Stops and Check Points #7, 2020, 11x14 inches, oil on linen

GD:

Thank you. I didn't really think of it as humbling as much as squeezing myself in these much smaller canvases than I normally like to paint. And so, the simplicity of how they're articulated is more available to me.

DH:

I guess when I say humble, I mean that you have submitted to the task of describing the object without a lot of jazzy editorial or thematic content. You let the thing itself do that work.

GD:

Yeah. Well, they are stops between here and there in this cycle of road works that I've been working on.

DH:

There is also something in the direct approach that causes me to believe you, that you're telling me the truth about this marvelous thing out in the world.

GD:

It's a series of paintings titled *Bus Stops and Checkpoints*.

DH:

So what are the checkpoints for? What are they checking?

GD:

They're border patrol. Many of these were found on the web, from conflicts zones and Eastern Europe. There are boarders where roads need checkpoints for moving from one side to another. None of these are from the United States; most are from Russia. The bus stops in particular.

I recognized them in the tradition of Russia's elaborate public transportation design. Their subway stations are very elaborate. This seemed an extension of that desire to make the public transportation intriguing. It has little to do with the function.

DH:

Bus Stop/ Check Point 6, 2020 reminds me of mid-century visionary architecture along the lines of Brasilia.



Bus Stops / Check Points #6, 2020, 11x14 inches, oil on linen

GD:

I know. Someone had their moment with their design, had a budget and went for it.

DH:

I also feel like there's a kind of a relaxing of your depiction control in the loose way you articulate the surrounding landscapes.

GD:

I agree. It is something that I think about quite a bit. I don't usually allow myself to simply choose and depict in such a direct way as happens in these paintings. Smaller canvases have taken over my studio with their direct conversation between things and paint. This is their first outing really.

DH:

In Bus Stop/ Check Point 12, 2020 the building has the translucent quality of something in the process of being conjured. It's not entirely materialized, but you've laid down enough information to identify it. It's an everyday apparition.



Bus Stop /Checkpoint #12, 2020, 11x 14 inches, oil on linen

GD:

It's the ghost checkpoint. You are right on. It continues to engage me because it indicates a half-conscious half-dream, there and not there, dynamic. Which to me is very much about my process of painting.

DH:

I was going to say if the process of painting has to do with the desire to establish a bodily connection to an image, then this painting speaks to and frustrates that desire by rendering the representational image ephemeral.

GD:

In that sense it feels like I'm being more open. The ephemeral condition is part of the process I experience in painting. I'm being more direct and generous with that process

than normal.

DH:

It also engages your process as a theme; a partially conjured architecture for waiting. I'm sure you mean something very specific by generosity, but for some people, and artists, withholding can be a source of power. Stinginess or opacity become aesthetic operations, strategies with a social function. Artworks in galleries seem both needy and generous.

GD:

Yes. Well, I think that's a nexus of seduction that I've always been engaged with in my work. To bringing you in and lay something down making no particular sense of it. Maybe that's where withholding comes in for me. Connecting the dots is not a given but an occasion in looking.

DH:

Do you care about Morandi?

GD:

Oh, absolutely. I mean he's brilliant. In that repetition of the forms, the infinite varieties and insinuations that he's able to stage, build, present and tease out of those jars and dishes. He's fantastic in the most humble way.

DH:

But you're more powered by Google.

GD:

Yeah, absolutely. I can't go back. I often do my research on Google Street.

DH:

You've done a lot of driving. My sense is that a lot of your work has been irradiated by cross country treks.

GD:

It is. I've made some. It is a production of flying someplace and renting a car and then driving back to that place, making these navigational loops. What I really enjoy about the road is its loneliness. That 60 mph isolation seems particularly and increasingly haunting to me over the last couple of years. I don't know why exactly, but I'm attracted to the idea that another road trip would corral something that stops me again and catches my attention.

DH:

Do you just take off solo to the great horizon?

GD:

I have. Yeah. It's terrific to be able to just stop anywhere on two lane blacktop, and photograph to your heart's content not knowing why, often to figure out why. Responding

to what is striking, what brings me to a full stop from 60 mph, is often to look, at structures that are half building and half sign. There are ruins; there are aspirational new businesses and remakes.

DH:

That's cool, you do it as a dedicated act of consciousness. I like to think I can do that in the studio every day, but of course I could be a neurotic shut-in glamourizing desktop adventures.

GD:

Yeah. I'm sure my attraction to it mirrors my inspiration in making paintings. I make paintings that operate within a metaphor of where I am and what I am thinking about. Certainly the horizon at this point in my life is something that I find to be haunting and fascinating, a constant companion on the road. I'll never reach it, but it's always there. The horizon has become the connective tissue in a lot of my recent work.

DH:

Where is the horizon when you're in your studio? I think you use the studio, though, as a metaphor in a lot of these works - the idea that your studio is both the space of consciousness and a space you live in, a space for dreaming and production. Let's look at some of those patterned landscapes. They don't conform to any experience in the landscape I've ever had yet they are loaded with familiarities: festive flags, agricultural subdivisions, airport runways. But none of those particular associations seem to dominate.

GD:

Yeah. I'm building paintings that are difficult to see entirely from one point of view. It forces a focus back and forth across the painting referencing the movement of driving along a road. These paintings feel like road building to me. Because of the frame-by-frame construction, there's also a reference to cinematic sequencing holding them together.

DH:

Are these patterns connected to any cultural or historic forms? A lot of artists who work with patterns think of them as attached to different communities, let's say, or processes associated with gendered histories. How are you thinking about them?

GD:

I made them all as graphite drawings without perspective, as flat patterns collected from a variety of sources as templates. I was attracted to examples that have almost exhausted their meaning and reference. I further simplify them to a great extent. In *Border Land* the pattern on the right is from a Native American blanket pattern. Without all of the evident weaving, texture and specific color, it becomes a shadow of the source and for me, a cloud pattern.



Border Land, 2020, 11x84 inches, oil on linen

In the same painting on the left, I use plaids which are specifically clannish, for their structure without the identifying color. I take the patterns a few steps away from the original source. A shadow of a place remains as I hoist them into a perspectival atmosphere. The nature of being a pattern supplies an extendibility that reaches for orientation out of the frame. That's why they were so appealing to me in this context, they are extendable and shifts between them signal a time gap.

DH:

I guess it scrambles the terms under which we understand place.

GD:

Right. In many of these paintings I'm encouraging getting lost. It's the middle of nowhere. Or it is in the middle of a crowd. It's a bus stop from where to where? Check point with no obvious border. There is disassociation that I'm seduced into.

DH:

Your description reminds me of Turner, who could describe a space where the boundaries are dissolved and nothing is solid. Yours are different because everything is delineated. Maybe I'm thinking of the contrast between controlled delineation and placelessness as a way to approach the oddness of a Drasler landscape, to see it as having an argument with itself.

GD:

Very possibly. They came to me in a moment of impatience, starting several paintings simultaneously. It is a way of attaching these canvases together working on them and reshuffling them. The subtle changes in hand, and pressure, and gesture, begin to differentiate in the painting. The juxtaposed patterned atmospheres abut one another marking shifts in time and space. Just as various patterns sequence the rhythm of utility poles driving down the road, they begin a shadowy insinuation of other situations, places, and contexts. The landscape is a byproduct of my building with paint.

DH:

Do you think of this show as an opportunity to have three shows inside of one? Or are you working toward a synthesis?

GD:

Well, a couple of things. I think the show as suggested, combining hats paintings with current work, is a way of thinking that addresses social distance issues that we're all faced with right now, crowds and isolation. This is on the face of the show.

On a walk through the show with a friend, she turned to me and said, "This is a retrospective." This show has some of my earliest work and some of my latest work. I thought, OK, that it is.
Good call.