

Interview: Dan Attoe

By Bill Donovan
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Dan Attoe in his studio

When I met Dan Attoe we were both starting the MFA program at the University of Iowa. I've known him for eight years now, and even though Dan lives in Washington State and I live in New York we have maintained our friendship through collaborations, especially with the art group Paintallica.

While at school we became friends – I've noticed Dan sort of collects weirdos like me. Before coming to grad school Dan had created a studio practice that involved making a painting a day, and was already working on paintings that have a relationship to his current work. While in school Dan wasn't stuck on some notion of an ideal practice, he just worked while everyone else was talking about how to work, he wasn't terribly concerned with theories; he has a background in psychology and knew to trust his own creative faculties.

While everyone else was screwing around with their identities, Dan had already settled into a kind of self-knowledge. I don't know if his gnosis came from growing up in the deep woods with a forest ranger for a father, or from one of the experiences he had growing up that caused him to study psychology and art.

Being alive you meet a lot of bull shitters and have to play a lot of stupid games, but rarely do you meet someone as genuine and considerate as Dan.



Dan Attoe, The Scrape, Oil on canvas

Dan, can you point to any one experience that pointed you towards becoming an artist? There aren't any other artists in your family are there?

No, there're no other artists in my family, but my mom has always been into crafts, and gave my brothers and I interesting projects, and lots of materials to work with. I was one of those kids who always drew on his clothes, and before I had regular paints I used spray paint on my clothing, my skateboard and various ramps that I built. When I was fourteen, my parents got me a set of acrylics with the intention of redirecting my impulses. The result was that I started making more meticulous paintings on paper and canvas as well as clothing, but still maintained a fondness for spray paint.

I suppose that growing up in rural and remote places had something to do with my interests too. There weren't many activities for kids in the towns and ranger stations that I lived on, unless you were into sports, which I wasn't. There was a lot of trails and things to explore, which was pretty formative for me, but there was a lot of time spend indoors too, because winters in Minnesota and Idaho could be long and cold. In addition, about half the time my family didn't have television, so that wasn't an option for entertainment. I couldn't always read, because I liked to listen to fast and loud music. It's hard to concentrate on a book at the same time as Metallica or Ministry lyrics, so I used to make things.

I got whacked in the head a few times too as a kid, so that might have had something to do with it.



Dan Attoe, Good Smells, Oil on panel

What is it about your paintings that other people relate to?

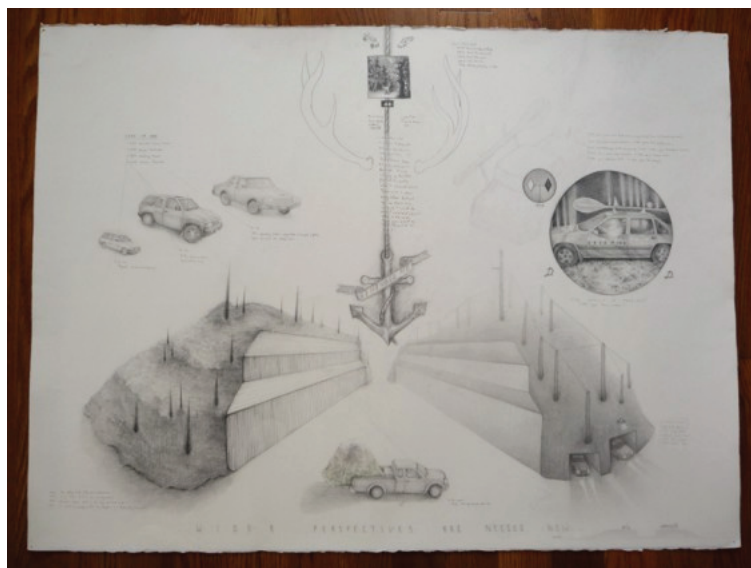
This question is deceptively short. The short answer is – I don't know. But, I've got some theories on what it is that people relate to. The first thing is that it's a very simple question that everybody who's an artist, and probably much of the larger population has asked themselves at one time or another that I'm working on, and that is "What would I find if I tried to come up with a new picture every day?". Beyond that, I try to use elements of a visual vocabulary that are pretty easily understood to address issues that most people have involving philosophical questions, psychological development, cultural concerns, historical, biological and social issues. I try to come at these things with the sensibility that I've gotten from living in some culturally rich places in this country, from ranger stations in rural Idaho to Minneapolis, Minnesota; I feel like I've absorbed some of the character from each place I've been, and maybe that gives some folks something to relate to.



Dan Attoe, Done Worryin' About Shit, Oil on panel

Making a painting a day was a big part of your studio practice when I first met you, but now you are taking more time with each painting. How has that changed your relationship to your paintings?

I think about the paintings more. The images I paint are still arrived at using a daily image making practice – I still do a drawing every day, but I don't have time to paint all of them because my painting process has gotten gradually more complex. As a result, the paintings don't have the "momentary fragment" properties that they used to. Now that there's a huge backlog of images to choose from when I start a painting, I tend to pick images that have the most meaning for me at that moment. In doing so, I think about layers of meaning, and ways that images can unravel, and blossom. The text that goes on is also usually equally considered. The paintings are more like writing a book or short story, as opposed to writing a daily poem.



Dan Attoe, Travis Head, and David Dunlap, Collaborative Drawing of All the Cars They Have Ever Owned, Pencil on Paper

Drawing has become a bigger part of your studio practice since moving to Washington state. Recently you had some drawings shown in Berlin at Max Hetzler, who was Martin Kippenberger's gallerist, and Kippenberger was the ultimate satirist. I feel like you are coming from a mostly sincere place when you make work, but that your humor is so dry that I don't always know when you are joking either. Anthropologically how would you relate your work to someone like Kippenberger?

Being in the drawing show at Max Hetzler was a huge honor for me, and was largely due to my friendship with one of their artists – Arturo Herrera who I had worked for several years ago. I admire Martin Kippenberger's work, and have even installed some of it when I was working at the Walker Art Center (the same place I worked for Arturo) in Minneapolis. Since Martin's death, and I have a lot of respect for him, it's hard to answer this question in terms of sincerity. I think he was sincere as well in many ways, and I think that we both share a love of mischief, but I think it's safe to say that he may have exhibited through more of a persona than I do. Also, I think he and I inhabited two pretty different worlds culturally – much of his work has to do with urban living, and mine more rural. In addition, I think he was decidedly more involved in discourse with the art world, whereas, my work is concerned with psychological and cultural things primarily in other areas.



Dan Attoe, Everything That's Profound is Dumb, Pencil on Paper

You have been making a drawing, or adding a small completed drawing to your larger accretion drawings, at a rate of one drawing a day. What are the qualities that come from having a daily practice, and how did working with a daily goal of one artwork influence your development?

Some of the things that I've noticed that I gained from this process are attention to detail, being able to more accurately represent imaginary images and lots of formal things, like being able to create a semi – believable space or figure using color, geometry, tone, perspective and a growing visual vocabulary. Some of the things that might fit under this category, but also start to answer the second part of this question are: a broadened attention to the basic physical qualities of things, I more easily break down things in the world into visual compositions and overall, I just look at the world differently since I've started this project.

The second part of this question wasn't just about converting the world into paintings, though, so I'll try to summarize what I see as the psychological aspects of this project:

First and foremost, it's given me a way to see what I'm deeply interested in. I can never lie to myself for too long before I get bored. It's also given me a way to work through things; it gives me a way to explore the more complicated aspects of things that may be a passing phase. Another great thing is that I grew to see the world and my activities more anthropologically, because I was recording them or using them to make something for others to look at in the future. It has also challenged me to be able to keep myself interested in the world. If I'm bored and being lazy, my work will be boring, and I'm forced to think of ways to bring life back to it. This has required me to think about things in my life that influence my work, and has required me to expand my personal activities in order to maintain vitality and growth in my images. This daily process has, among other things, helped me to slow my drinking, which was resulting in too much repetitive imagery and content, it's reinforced the value of other hobbies such as motorcycling, surfing, astronomy and it's impelled me to read things that I might not have otherwise. In its most basic sense, my daily practice has given me a game that requires that I pick up clues in the world and bring them back to it in order to keep moving.



Dan Attoe, detail from *Accretion 39 of a Gamer*

When reading the drawn or painted text in your work, it feels like you are giving us an uncensored look into your unconscious thought stream. You have a background in Psychology, and almost majored in it before switching to the art program at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. When you are choosing what words to use, where do they come from?

Shit. At first there was a lot of referential stuff in my paintings. Largely from psychology, existential philosophy, and Star Wars, which I saw as modern mythology. There was also a lot of random thoughts from my daily life, and jokes about or with my friends. Gradually the text started to lean more toward the random thoughts side of things, and it started to incorporate a voice that I saw as influenced by my cultural location. This was as a rural guy from the punk rock/heavy metal generation working at blue collar jobs to get through school and get by. I saw all of those psychological and philosophical things put to work in that voice in an anthropological sense primarily through metaphor and allegory, as opposed to a more direct way. Now, I don't worry so much about deliberately showing my culture in the writing. I figure it'll show if it's in me. I just write things that interest me. They come about the same way the images do – in the daily drawing process.

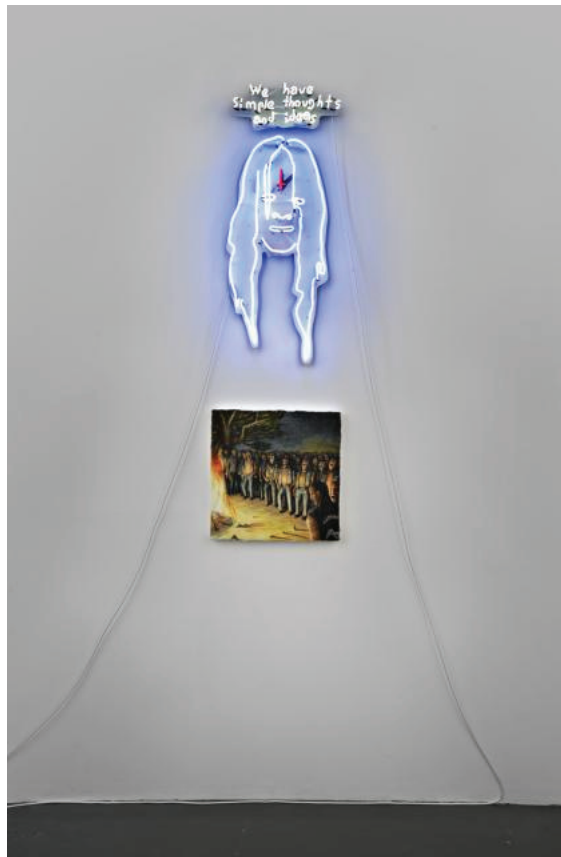


Dan Attoe, *Accretion 39*, Oil on Canvas

How do you decide what to exclude? To paraphrase Freud, thoughts which are too unpleasant can't appear to us in conscious form so they come disguised in a dream. Your paintings often have a dream-like quality, of being partial reality and partial magic symbols, and places appear as timeless archetypal settings and as very specific locations, people sometimes seem like symbolic entities. There is an edge to your work, and it's natural, but you are a polite person, so that edge doesn't cross over into your friendships. With your work are you revealing your thoughts partially disguised as symbols and partially through the inscriptions?

A weird thing happened to me recently – another book came out about my work through Peres Projects and OhWow publishing called “I Made Most of This Shit Up.”, and looking through it, I realized that if I didn’t know myself, I’d think I was a mean person. I choose paintings and phrases by what holds my interest the most out of all of the images I come up with in my daily drawing. In doing this, I figure that I’ll gravitate toward the stuff that has more vitality or applicability to the world as I see it. Ever since I’ve been showing my work professionally the world at large has been in a big mess – the wars started in Iraq and Afghanistan, we had a president that I really disliked for eight years, the economy has swollen, then tanked and the natural environment has been taking hits from many directions, and I’ve been more aware of it than I ever have. In addition, my own life has been a little tumultuous, probably just because that’s the way the late twenties and early thirties are supposed to be, but as a result, I gravitate toward more aggressive subjects.

My mom told me a story once about how she used to eat match heads as a kid. She didn’t know why she did, but she couldn’t stop doing it. When her dad took her to a doctor, they found she had an iron deficiency, so, they figured she was eating the matches to compensate for it, because the match heads had iron in them. I choose images using this as a model. I figure that if I keep thinking about something after I’ve drawn it, there must be a reason, even if I can’t explain what that is. I think my intellectual brain is too dumb to know what’s best for it, so I let my monkey brain lead to the subjects that get painted, and put the intellect to work on the smaller stuff.



Dan Attoe, Heavy Metal Head Neon and Bikers, Neon and Oil on Panel Installation

Looking through your book published by Peres Projects, “You have more freedom than you’re using,” it strikes me that you use images and especially words that I associate with a tough guy who has a romantic streak. Knowing you, and having listened to music with you, how do troubadours like Nick Cave and Tom Waits fit into what you consider good writing?

These guys have an interest in the same kind of characters and landscapes that I do. I didn’t really find them until a few years into my daily painting project, and I was starting to mine some of the same territory that Tom and Nick both use, which largely seems to be about middle and lower class living. Around the same time I had rediscovered Mark Twain and William Faulkner and was thinking about the places and people I had grown up with in a new light. Ultimately, these guys, and a few others – Johnny Cash, Alabama 3, the writer David Quammen and numerous old guys that I worked with – helped me to articulate the complexities of basic living. The farm boy in Tom Waits’ song “Whistlin’ Down the Wind” who tries to leave, but stands “frozen to the ground” gave me a haunting image that affected my understanding of many people that I know.



Dan Attoe, Trans Am, Oil on Panel

In your 2006 interview with Chris Cook, you said: "...The town where I grew up Ashton/Island Park, Idaho, was heavily engaged in issues surrounding migrant employment and everything that came with it, from racism to drug trafficking. So rural culture at that time was full of bondage bracelets, heavy-metal paraphernalia, drugs, churches, switch blades, guns, boy scouts, paranoia, tension, and overall feelings of inadequacy." Later Chris says, "your paintings appear to be communicate something deeper than the bizarre scenarios on the surface, possibly suggesting truths about the human condition..." But then you blow him off "I guess that the human condition is in there somewhere..." Maybe you wouldn't describe it as truths about the human condition, but you have been interested in Anthropology, Psychology, and creative writing the whole time I have known you, and I think you have a humanist/scientist's eye for the detail that forms the underlying infrastructure of our lives. I think the way you described your home town shows an unusual way of looking at things, and that it is methodical, and might lead you to some profound insights. How do you respond to that?

I'm a specimen. This is an indication of where I come from, so that people have keys to be able to read into my work. I suppose this way of seeing my work comes from an interest in psychology and science in general. I think it has something to do with our point in art history too. We almost always have some information on the artists that we are interested in, and it often means something in relation to their work. Growing up in the eighties and nineties, all of the rock bands I was interested in had stories about them each month in magazines like Circus, Metal Edge and Rolling Stone. This information about the musicians always seemed important, even if it didn't have any bearing on the meaning of their work... but usually it did.

I suppose, at the time of that interview, I was still a little defensive with talking about my childhood, and brought up more romantic and negative things. If I was asked now, I might say more about the really interesting and wonderful people I know from these places and the earnestness in the way people worked and raised kids in the small towns I lived in.

Another thing that may contribute to this perspective is having grown up in two hometowns, Ashton, Idaho and Silver Bay, Minnesota (both with populations around 2,000). I went to school in Idaho for seven years and Minnesota for five, so I was never a local the way most of the people there were, but I was around both places long enough to get to know everyone my age, and many people in the towns closely. As both an outsider and an insider, I had a different way of looking at the local culture. This kind of perspective was a big part of my formative childhood, and I believe, it has something to do with the way I think about things still.



Dan Attoe, Lightning Storm Above the Timberline, Oil on Panel