

Geoffrey Dorfman

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Artist Q&A with Geoffrey Dorfman

In a time when the centrality of painting has been questioned and abstraction appears to have exhausted its possibilities, Dorfman maintains his commitment to oil and brush on canvas. For him, the Abstract Expressionists were a starting point, not an ending point.

Dorfman's approach is not goal-oriented movement toward some idea or vision. Rather, it is an identification with with the properties of paint, understanding what it can do, and from there to the painting. For Dorfman, the edges of the painting are very important, and his works tend to move out beyond the canvas. At the same time, he puts small "stop signs" in his works, so as the eye pauses and contemplates before it continues on and outward. His strokes tend to "flutter," in a way similar to the Impressionists, further generating movement and at the same time, anchoring the eye in the moment.



"Zoroaster", oil on canvas, 42 x 46 in | 107 x 117 cm, 2020. Courtesy of Lawrence Fine Art.

How did you become a professional artist?

Most artists are ex-art students or teachers. They're still practicing the lessons they learned or else they get diverted into something peripheral, but call it art anyway. I myself didn't know any different. I had been working summers in the movies as an electrician. I had an 'in' through my mother's brother. In the late 1960's I worked on several commercials and a few features, including *Midnight Cowboy*. (I and one other guy lit the set for Sylvia Miles' bedroom.) Anyway, in 1971 there were openings in the scenic design union. You had to take a test and there was a \$2,000 entrance fee. My uncle, who always drove a new Cadillac El Dorado, told my parents he'd front the money and I could pay him back when I started earning. These men — the scenic designers and artists — were making extremely good money, but the price was steep. You were always on call. The union would call you at 5am and you never said no. And the hours were long and that business time is money. My parents said, 'take it. It's lifetime security and you can still paint on weekends.' I knew that wouldn't happen. The weekends you do your groceries, your laundry, and on Sunday, relax and wait for Monday. I didn't want that. I wanted an open life. I said no. That's when I think I became an artist, though I was not conscious of that at the time. It was what they call an existential moment. A test of sorts.

Many have said that Abstract Expressionism played out a long time ago. Yet, you continue to paint this way. What is left to discover?

It's the sort of question that puts you in a defensive posture. I was taught that perspective was a century long obsession that played itself out by 1580, but no one thinks to ask Anselm Kiefer why he still relies on it. Sean Scully and Stanley Whitney still exploit stripes and rectangles as if no one had thought of that before. No one asks why. Damien Hirst stipples as if his immediate British forbear, Andrew Forge never existed. Even shaped or cut-out canvases are not virgin territory. Cimabue did that six hundred years ago. There's one hanging in Arezzo. Why go back there? I guess what I'm saying is that everything is played out, until it isn't. If a vein has been haphazardly mined, there still may be treasure hiding there. Nothing in this world comes from nothing.

For fine artists, painting has in a deep sense been the same thing since its beginnings; an agreement between what you see and what you feel. There was certainly more to it at times, but it was never other than that. 'Abstract Expressionism,' like its antecedents 'Impressionism,' 'Fauvism' and 'Cubism,' were appellations concocted by writers. They were never accepted by the artists of the day. The abstractionists working in the tradition of Mondrian thought the Expressionists were sloppy, undisciplined and sentimental. As Ad Reinhardt said,

‘Anything goes, and anyone can do it.’ Expressionists in turn thought the abstractionists were merely fabricating décor for modern living rooms. Thomas Hess’s idea of amalgamating the two terms was a head scratcher, but it was a useful method for obscuring the self-evident fact that de Kooning, Pollock, McNeil and Rothko were really very different artists doing very different things. As a matter of fact, to this day I have never met an artist who described himself as an Abstract Expressionist.

To directly answer your question, what I’ve distilled for myself is a sort of general essence; the notion that a picture ideally ought to sit on a knife edge; that the unity ought to be precarious. Also whatever epiphany it might offer ought to be indistinguishable from the unity of the whole. When the emotion and the formal coherence become identical, you have a picture. Nothing captivates the viewer like the mysterious yet self-evident.

Is it true to say for you that the medium—oil on canvas—is the message?

Art is firstly a confrontation between mind and medium. Any artist who treats the medium as somewhat incidental to his/her intentions is going to end up a minor artist. The first duty of an artist is to invest fully in the chosen medium’s capabilities. In my case, it’s fine oil paint. My work is inconceivable without it. I don’t insist on anything in a picture, at least not until very recently. I’m more of a filter through which the paint passes. It gets ‘dorffmanized.’ There’s a sort of transubstantiation that takes place that I don’t understand fully, but recognize when it happens. To put it as plainly as I can, the paint has to look right. The color and surface have to agree with each other. The transitions from one area to another on a canvas have to be felt.

When is a piece finished for you?

It’s resolved when I feel that anything I might do to it — any further adjustment — is more likely to deflate it than let it rise higher. The interesting thing about a balloon is the more you blow it up, the larger it gets but also the tenser the surface becomes. It’s an apt metaphor for a picture. You need this tautness, even if the expressed mood is one of languor. Consciousness of the perimeter is paramount whenever you make a mark. It exerts the pressure that creates significance.

Which artists to you look to for inspiration? Do you have a favorite?

Over the years my wife and I have been to many museums, both here and abroad. We’ve missed some things too: Berlin, Vienna, and Athens for instance. I have a

hankering to see Mycenae and Tiryns before I'm too old. My interests have changed over the years. Of course there were always the usual suspects: Sassetta and the Lorenzetti brothers, Giotto, Titian through El Greco, Rubens of course, and naturally Cezanne, Degas, and de Kooning. I have had minor infatuations as well: Ravier, Monticelli, Marquet, Bellows, and Auerbach come to mind. Marquet is an excellent teaching tool, by the way. He could elicit an awful lot from a little.

But I think it might have been Jake Berthot who said that what happens over the course of your life is you begin to substitute your own history for art history. You become much more interested in what you are doing and where you might be headed, than anything you see elsewhere. If you're lucky, your own studio becomes more fascinating than any museum.

The last time I spent many hours in a museum was when I went to visit the Chicago Art Institute. She had never been there. I have an excellent memory for paintings; the lovely Renoir acrobats with the oranges, the Morrisot female portrait with a riveting impasto so unusual for her, the magnificent suite of Monet Haystacks, etc. But most exciting was their collection of Zuni pots and Native American basketry. The same is true of the Barnes, by the way; their collection of indigenous pottery is small but breathtaking in quality. So many times in museums I find myself wandering among the ancient or tribal artifacts: the Etruscans, the Minoan vases, the Roman busts, the ancient Chinese equestrian statues. Forty years ago it was painting, painting, painting. Nowadays it doesn't have to be painting.



Geoffrey Dorfman. Courtesy of Lawrence Fine Art.

You were very close to Milton Resnick. What does he mean to you?

Milton was only 53 when I met him. He had acquired a new dealer, Max Hutchinson, and was about to enter the most impressive leg of his life's journey, from my point of view. He was a man of total commitment, with an indefatigable capacity for work, and for a young impressionable artist he was a pole star, a fixed mark, by which you could measure yourself. He was also for that reason (and others) someone people shied away from. He was a troubled man who triumphed over a hardscrabble life; an immigrant from the Ukraine at 6, a runaway from a dysfunctional family at 16, a survivor of the Great Depression, a conscript that fought in three campaigns in Europe, the five-year stint leaving him with PTSD, underweight, and with poor teeth. He was extremely intelligent, but without higher education. A gifted poet, well read, his view of the world was idiosyncratic, as you might expect from an autodidact. He was a fierce, unprocessed person, also generous and tender at times. But it's a distortion to say we were close. Milton did not have male friends or buddies. If you

were interested in him, he was interested in you. It was a bit transactional in that sense. He was the hero of his own life, and you had to understand that, and make the sort of allowances you might not extend to a regular person. We clashed several times.

I had never met anyone like him. I came from a good home, loving parents, and had a limited experience of the world, mostly from reading. My name was my own since birth. A neighborhood kid with a love of sports and a talent for drawing, I had not known suffering. I had a state-of-the-art art education, but after it was over, something vital was missing. That was true for all of us. I was not looking for 'normal.' Actually no young artist is looking for 'normal.' We were all looking for something special; a singularity. If you don't think you're special you'll never get anywhere. So you seek it out in others. There's an amusing side to it. The most run-of-the-mill artists think they're special. Self-absorption is both a sickness and a necessity. If you don't think you're special you have no choice other than to be successful in the marketplace. Success reinforces your initial decision to pursue art. But if you're not successful, you'll eventually give art up, and go the career route with the attendant wife, kids, mortgage and vacations. The only way out of that dilemma is utter self-belief and utter belief in your art, come what may. That was the example Milton Resnick set just by going about his business the way he did.

How is your work different from everything else out there?

My work stems from my understanding of what art is, what painting as an activity is, and what 'a painting' is. If someone tells me their artwork is 'personal,' I take that to mean it's none of my business. Significant art is only tangentially personal. It's only personal in that a person made it. On the contrary, painting must aim for the universal; transsexual, transcultural, and transracial; something that — at least potentially — addresses everybody. We're all immersed in existence, and we all know it will end someday for each of us. We can start with that.

Having said that, I do accept the limitations that are built in to the discipline and its history in the West. Whether you're a Paleolithic painter, or Titian, Turner or Matisse, or a nobody, what you're doing is spreading oil and pigment on a surface. The surface should be flat, blank and neutral in shape. That generally meant a rectangle because the rectangle merely echoes the wall on which it hangs. Had our domiciles been globular, cylindrical, serpentine, or free form caves for that matter, painting could not have developed as it has. By ceding to the limitations that circumscribe the activity you bend yourself to the Western tradition that places you in competition with the painters who've painted before you. You're part of something bigger than yourself.

When an artist paints on an active shape, something that has assumed a sculptural presence, the paint becomes an appliqué, because you're coloring something that

already has taken on character beforehand. The same thing occurs if you attach something to the support, no matter what it is — a vulture or a radio — whatever it might be. Paint becomes an accompaniment, something along for the ride.

Picture making has always been taught as a composite of line, relief, composition and color; often in that order. Artists today, to avoid being sleepy and predictable, create much art that is piecemeal, conceived part by part. Think of how much modern art is cobbled into existence by means of dissociation and juxtaposition. This way of working has basically become the 20th and 21st century academy.

But if you make paint central so that it carries the full burden of sustaining emotion, you will find out that there's basically two ways it can be released on a surface. You can be expansive so that the paint is dispersed ever upward and outward until it reaches the perimeter. Or you can contract towards the center. You can also selectively contract so that, one way or another, you find yourself always dividing and subdividing. Line basically divides, and that feeds a mindset that manages color in lockstep with contour or border. Simply put, color halts at the line and changes itself on its other side.

There's another way. Start with the paint itself. Fine oil paint is a magical substance which can be by turns mineral, vegetal, opaque, juicy, parched, diaphanous, terrene, and celestial. These qualities can be infinitely adjusted by adding or subtracting pigment. That's all the variety you will ever need.

It ought to be pretty evident that I tend towards expansion; not the kind that's steady-state and inexorable, as you might find in a classic Resnick, but rather spasmodic and unpredictable, with some eccentric detours along the way. Still, in the end the only limit to the expansion — whatever character it might have — is the support itself. In other words, the perimeter provides a sense of containment that creates the tension necessary for art. What I'm saying is that expansion must be sensate; it has to acknowledge the perimeter, and handle the issue deftly. You can't just explode. And you can't over-determine or manage things either. There are a lot of traps. For instance, you can release energy that never expands far enough; it never reaches the perimeter. It just peters out. Or you can overshoot the perimeter so that the picture seems like something partial; a fragment. Some retreat into brittle crudities, or list into vapid flaccidity. The latter is a common defect of some color field painting wherein the perimeter is decided upon afterwards. To my way of thinking, cropping misses the point entirely. It's like first serving the tennis ball, and subsequently drawing in the foul line so that it's deemed fair. Why bother? How have you developed your game? Not at all.

So you have to be free and easy but disciplined, like a consummate athlete in control of the field of play. The analogy to 'play' is not by accident. Like painting, play takes place on a rectangular plane — horizontal of course — and its dimensions are paced out beforehand. Whether you're playing tennis, baseball, football or soccer,

you need awareness of the perimeter. Without foul lines there is no game. It's what makes you a player. Otherwise you're just hitting or kicking a ball. There's no significance to it. The same holds true when you're holding a brush or a palette knife. The perimeter contains the art activity and proposes it as a game rather than merely an activity. It makes of you a painter rather than someone just aimlessly moving a brush around.

Possibly all art is play; a suspension of the real, and a suspension of control of the results. In other words, if you knew how it would end, you wouldn't play at all. Why bother? The denouement has to be up in the air. That makes it interesting.

You're a bit of a Renaissance Man—a musician, a writer, an art critic—how do you juggle them all?

Painting is first among equals. The other activities are text-driven. Accumulation of wealth has never been the goal of my life. I've tried to accomplish the most I can at everything I set out to do. Art, music and contemplation demand first of all that you make time that belongs to yourself.

–What's coming up for you? What are you working on now?

Some of my recent paintings have incorporated a circular motif, which is very alien to me, although I remember having made one back in 1975. It's possibly lost in the basement racks, if it still exists. But I don't care for closed shapes, especially circles. They already are what they are — complete within themselves — and they don't play well with externalities. This uncongenial nature presents a challenge. Can I overcome this? Can I slice it so that it leaks its energy into what surrounds it? I've been interested in megalithic structures like Stonehenge. They're all over the globe, from Britain to Turkey to the mounds of Ohio. They all seem to have cosmological and ceremonial significance. I have a book of them with surveys. They're all roughly circular; sometimes nearly perfectly so, as might befit a timepiece.

What advice would you give to an artist just starting out today?

Find something that is nutritious for your soul and where your interest grows and grows. It must place ultimate demands on you. If it's easy for you, if you generally knock it off in an hour or two, then it's almost guaranteed that you're not doing anything significant. Make friends with the material you're working. Find out what it's capable of. Try to avoid working full time.



"Scarecrow", oil on canvas, 42 x 46 in | 107 x 117 cm, 2020. Courtesy of Lawrence Fine Art.

To learn more about Geoffrey and his work, please visit GeoffreyDorfman.com.