

ArtSlant | Interview with Christopher Davison

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Christopher Davison's fantastical paintings and drawings excavate layer upon layer of meaning. Trong Gia Nguyen chats it up with the Philadelphia-based artist, whose first New York solo show, Tabernacle, at Nicelle Beauchene runs from July 30 - August 29, 2009.

TRONG GIA NGUYEN: You tend to be pretty prolific with your work output. Tell us about the selection for your solo show at Nicelle Beauchene. Was there a theme that you were trying to keep to?

CHRISTOPHER DAVISON: Most of the work in the show deals with specific and abstract notions of mysticism and religious spectacle. My previous work has dealt in part with these issues but I wanted to keep it as my central focus for this show.

TGN: There are all kinds of narratives going on in your paintings, from the magical to the fantastical. Are these spontaneous tales spun from the storyteller, or are you referencing other literature and art historical sources, i.e. Dante, Redon, Ensor, and so on?

CD: My initial impulse might be to reference a scene from a book or the forms of a figure I've seen in a painting but such references serve only as a starting point. From there I rely heavily on process and

allow the work to change radically in whatever direction the process dictates. If there is any mysticism to be found in my studio practice it involves my understanding that if the artist steps aside and allows the process to lead the way, new and unexpected things may result that are, at times, beyond the conscious understanding and awareness of the artist.

TGN: Have you ever made a work that in the end completely shocked you?

CD: I wouldn't use the word "shocked" but I certainly count on "surprising" myself in the studio. If an artist isn't creating work that surprises them they are most likely following a predictable and comfortable path to the completion of the work. If you complete a work of art by pulling the rug out from beneath your feet you will find your balance in the most unexpected revealing way.

TGN: There are recurring themes such as the devil and magical symbols, but then among this decadence also sprouts a thriving nature - flora, rainbows, etc. Please explain this duality and what it symbolizes for you.

CD: That's a really good question. I have to take a couple steps back to answer it. While I don't believe in the idea of a personal God, I do believe in a "high math" that underlies everything we experience in this world. To me this perfectly balanced equation is what God is. As such it is manifest in every ant, tree, cloud, human, planet and solar system we can or will know. With that in mind, my references to religion and mysticism represent the various symbolic ways humanity has tried to define and communicate with this supernatural force. Meanwhile in the physical form of dense vegetation and lush plant-life I see something much closer to the perfect beauty of God and our inability to ever contain its will. In nature I see pure beauty. It is in attempting to understand this beauty that opens the gates for mysticism. I think it's a great exercise to reflect on the perfect design that exists in nature in order to understand how that harmony resonates within us as well.

TGN: Are you a science geek then, and do you think that science theoretically will answer the many mysteries of nature eventually?

CD: I wouldn't consider myself a science geek because to be a true geek at something it has to be a core passion of yours. I feel very comfortable saying I'm a drawing geek. However, I do think that the more you know outside of the arts (science and math included) the more that knowledge will enrich your mind and in turn enrich your art. Regarding the ability of science to eventually reveal all of life's secrets to us, I think that there will always be some things best understood empirically, while others will remain better understood metaphorically.

TGN: I actually took Robert Rivers' drawing courses at the University of Central Florida too, albeit 8 years before you did. Anyone that ever had him for an instructor of course reveres his teaching. What did you take from him and what did you leave behind?

CD: The most important thing he taught me was that it was going to take a lot of hard work to get better at drawing. He challenged me in a way that I responded to with great enthusiasm. The challenge of drawing better evoked a passion within me that I've kept alive to this day. There isn't much of his wisdom that I left behind, though I have shed much of the life-drawing process we learned in class in order to develop my own way of constructing an image.

TGN: What does your first solo show in New York mean to you?

CD: I've shown work in various locations at home and abroad but the idea of a solo show in New York at a gallery that I'm excited to work with is really satisfying. Symbolically it's an important milestone for me and I'm really psyched to have the opportunity.