

My conversation with Brian Dickerson took place over several weeks via email and telephone calls as he prepared for an exhibition of 'The Helderberg Paintings' at Mangel Gallery in Philadelphia. In some ways this conversation began many years ago while we were in graduate school. Even then the region of New York State where he grew up was an important component of his work as was music. He brings to the work a variety of experiences that he has continually cultivated over these many years.

Whether looking at the formal issues of a nearly monochromatic palette, the scale, surface or structural elements there is also and equally important such influences as the physical region, music and memory. In addition to all that, there is the working process which is in itself an important element of the work. Our conversation touched on all of these things and more.

Archaeological references as you will see are certainly fitting here. The dictionary defines archaeology as a systematic study of human antiquities as revealed by excavation. This systematic exploration is what I think Brian has pursued. He has studied and explored the region and his own experiences creating a vocabulary of images which are at once deeply personal yet they move us far beyond their references. He relayed a story to me that when he was a teenager he longed for and challenged himself to "find a way to capture the essence of what one sees and senses in a way that goes beyond how landscape is typically handled." I think he has certainly met that challenge. Following are excerpts from our conversation.

Judith Perry: The first thing that came to mind when I saw these pieces was that, to me there was a whole world in these images.

Brian Dickerson: I think a good place to start is with the titles of the work. Each one is named Helderberg with another title that follows. i.e. "Helderberg – Vroman." The word Helderberg refers to the mountain region in upstate NY where I grew up. It is largely an agricultural community and I was surrounded by the rural architecture of homes, barns, sheds and outbuildings. I always found the rough quality in those structures appealing. They reflect and record the seasonal changes of weather, encroaching vegetation, animals, and the ongoing struggle to coexist with the forces of nature. Even if one is not a farmer my sense is that people there have a

much stronger connection to the land and the forces that shape it than do most. Economically the area has always struggled. It's not unusual to see expansive homes and abject poverty side by side.

JP: Could you see the mountains everyday?

BD: I grew up in the Schoharie Valley of upstate NY which is right in the middle of the Helderbergs. So whether walking to school or looking out the window, winter storms, floods, camping with friends, or sledding on the cemetery hill, all those activities took place under the watchful eye of those mountains.

JP: This notion of 'place' is something we should talk about. 'Place' for you goes beyond the landscape to memory. It seems as though the Helderberg Mountains served as a kind of 'container' that held your experiences growing up, the fact that your paintings are now constructions seems fitting.

BD: I definitely agree on the importance of place and also the connection to childhood. There are many events I feel free to comment on but others that are private. What I can tell you is that the loss of someone, especially someone very close to you at an early age gives you something that you can't get any other way. There are other experiences worth mentioning. One is the excavation of an Owasco Indian settlement site near my home that I witnessed as a young boy. I remember watching the archaeologists uncover artifacts from burial pits and how the site was marked into grids of wooden stakes and string. I also remember the different colors in the layers of soil and wondered how they knew where to dig to uncover the artifacts and locations for the longhouses.

JP: What is it about the Owasco Indian Settlement you think that has so captivated you?

BD: I was a young boy growing up in a small town and the discovery of this Indian settlement was big news. At that time there was no grave repatriation act. It didn't occur to anyone to ask how they would feel if someone started digging in the local cemetery looking for "artifacts" of their ancestors. I had

gone through a period of trying to understand the death of my older brother and seeing this excavation brought a level of consequence and reality to that. I was the first time I became aware of my own mortality. It was my starting point.

JP: Do you think you are on your own 'dig' in a way-- digging up your own memories?

BD: I don't think I'm on my own personal dig as far as memories go. My memories are pretty clear and in some cases quite vivid. I'm not sure I'd want to remember more even if it were possible. But definitely would agree that I'm on a dig in terms of trying to uncover a means to express the sites, memories and emotions that the landscape there holds for me.

JP: The titles and the 'found' components are often a direct connection to memories, the references are not something the viewer would have any idea about but it is that personal reference that gives the work its power. I'm thinking of the piece you call "Gilboa" for example, there is a story there.

BD: When I was a teenager I worked as a dishwasher and cook at the local diner. The diner served as a kind of unofficial communications center. In the spring when the water was high from snowmelt and constant rain, a call came in to tell us that the water was over the dam. The dam in question is the Gilboa dam. It's a very large dam about 30 miles away and serves as a reservoir for NYC water supply. Needless to say if the dam ever failed it would be the end of our town. And even with the dam intact floods are not uncommon. I used to walk down to the bridge in the village and watch the water along with other townspeople when it was approaching flood stage. It's an amazing sight-that power and force when the water runs heavy and fast. I was also able to hear the rush of water in the smaller streams behind our house when they would flood. There is also a definite smell to high water. So, that's part of the background information I 'experience' in doing this work. Not in a conscious way but definitely in the mix. **"I hope the work prompts the viewer to contemplate their own experience leading to a kind of introspection that touches on much deeper questions and meaning."**

JP: Tell me about your working methods.

BD: I rely almost entirely on intuition. I responded once to a similar question " I just do them." The paintings are constantly being reworked. Even the structural or carpentry part of the work is disassembled later in favor of a composition that works better. So things are always being rediscovered and reconfigured. I've used the analogy of archeological methods for my working process. Of digging out or excavating the surface underneath. But I also use another method, that of planting/harvesting. Its not lost on me that while I might be picking strawberries at one of the local fruit farms, the original native American settlers were doing the same thing. So in some sense nothing really changes. And I suspect someday my little town will be excavated by some future generation.

JP: So, lets talk about Autumn's End and the process it went through.

BD: This particular painting began by enlarging the size of an earlier painting. I wanted to see how the size of the work might change the composition. So I had the basic forms and structure in place. While I sometimes make a very small sketch it undergoes a lot of changes as the work is built. I use pretty standard materials including birch veneer panels or mahogany, pine supports, wood glue, finish nails etc. Once the construction of the work is complete I might study it for a period of several days, weeks or months. I use the tools my dad used when I was a kid including an old Homecraft bandsaw, table saw-even a nail set. Not that it makes any difference to anyone looking at the work. I mean how would they know? It's just a nostalgic way to stay connected to those earlier times watching my dad or brother work on projects of their own. I sometimes have a preconceived notion of what the finished work will be even in terms of color. But it usually ends up going into a different direction. For example this painting started in very bright yellows and reds. I then work on top building up the layers and textures. Inevitably things go badly and I'll scrape the underlying paint layers away. Sometimes I just use paint scrapers, but at other times I end up having to use a heat gun or sander. At first I was very frustrated by this as it signaled to me an inability to create what was the

vague image I had in my head. But I realized later that its all part of the process and in spite of removing (sometimes very large quantities of paint) the residue is still very much a part of the work and it speaks directly to the cycle of planting, harvesting, and excavating. As the work progresses the initial shapes and forms begin to change visually because of the addition of color. I also tend to reconsider some of the shapes I first started with. So it was with this one I ended up sawing through different pieces, taking apart certain sections and reassembling others. It's not a precise exercise. For instance when something that has been glued is removed I'll cut it with a utility knife and then hammer it out. Sometimes the wood splinters or breaks but that is all part of the process, and to me reflects the kind of harsh treatment the land receives as in plowing or the effects of a flood on the soil. So it's not like building furniture. The found objects or what I call "artifacts" are added early on. In this work the horizontal piece at the top and bottom came from the sides of a window frame from a house that burned down years ago. Its off a narrow seasonal dirt road and is now almost completely overgrown and hidden from view. The placement of these artifacts is very important to the composition of the work. But it's also a way for me to mark the painting by using an object that comes directly from the land in the Helderbergs. Once again it's not something that the viewer would be aware of let alone care one way or the other. I mean it might as well be a piece of wood from Home Depot. But it's physical identification to the land and the exposure over time to the elements is what makes them important to me and the work.

JP: What about the recessed areas?

BD: When I first did them I was reluctant, almost afraid to consider their "meaning." The very first painting of this group, which was started about ten years ago, included the first recessed area. It was obvious to me that it needed to be there but I didn't have a rational explanation for it. Of the few people who have seen them I got different responses. Usually in the "door, window, hidden, altarpiece" category and one with a sexual reference. I wouldn't argue with any of them. This particular recessed area was re-cut a few times and elongated to almost the bottom of the work. Initially I would say it has something to do with burial. It may also a way of entering the

interior of the work and perhaps an invitation to contemplate those things that are hidden or revealed. That leaves the surface areas. Painting those is chaotic at times. It's not pretty. It tends to be a very long process. As the colors are applied I begin to think of particular events, seasons or times of day, specific senses like smell (manure on fields, smoke from burning leaves in Fall). But I have to stress that while painting I'm not that specifically aware of those references. In fact when the best painting occurs it's usually a pretty frenzied state and outside influences or references seem lost. It's only after that process is over I begin to see the associations. I have had paintings where the color was quite interesting but seemed disconnected from what I know or are familiar with. So I'd move away from it by scraping it out or painting it over. There is a point at which I know the work is coming to a close. It's here that I'll spend days or months contemplating the work and begin to make small sometimes imperceptible changes. This all takes place within the formal construction of the work. So there is a quiet sense of conflict. But in the end I hope they compliment each other. At times significant changes will present themselves in a rush....even after studying it for a long time. I'll also work into areas that might not be noticed in a slow and deliberate way. At that point it's a more nurturing approach to the painting. One reason I use wood is that the painting process is pretty aggressive. Canvas would not hold up. There's also the ability to work the wood into different shapes and forms. I also carve into the surface to reveal the different layers of paint. As for the title, I didn't begin expecting to see something associated with Autumn. But the period of time between Autumn and Winter is one of my favorites and where some of my fondest memories lay.

JP: There are other influences to touch on -- music, I know plays a big part but what about your art historical influences?

BD: My early art education was pretty conservative. As a teenager I studied with a wonderful man--Mr. Jahnke. He introduced me to art history as a means to discover solutions to my own work. "See how he did that? He had the same problem you're having. Now go fix yours!!" His favorite painters were Thomas Eakins and John Singer Sargent. He never spoke of DeKooning, Kline or Pollock. I copied paintings from an art history book I kept taking out

from the library. The usual--Rembrandt, van Gogh, Monet. It was on my first trip to Philadelphia that I saw the work of Ad Reinhardt and Franz Kline. It sure threw me at the time. I knew then things were never going to be the same. I remember reading Art In America in high school art class (ignoring the project at hand) and the impact of seeing the work of Agnes Martin and Brice Marden's oil/wax paintings for the first time. Of all the influences the one I've spoken of least is probably the most important. I grew up surrounded by music. Both my parents were music educators. We had access to just about any instrument imaginable and all of us played at least one instrument. My dad taught instrumental music and could play anything. There were dozens of recordings available to us as well. The first time I recall making a direct connection between art and music was as a teenager listening to Debussy's "La fille aux cheveux de lin" - The Girl with the Flaxen Hair. I did several drawings and paintings of this imaginary girl. Another composer, Gustav Mahler -- I don't know how I could begin to describe the effect of his music on me. I think the darkness usually associated with his work is also very hopeful. The darkness is more obvious. The hopeful takes a little digging.

JP: It is no doubt that we all carry our experiences and bring it to whatever we do. Brian's images are not easy, they will not tell you what to feel, in fact you might have to dig a little but that is their challenge and their gift. Looking at this work I step into this world and find that for a moment we have a shared experience. I don't have to have grown up in the Helderbergs to know that we are all deeply bound to a place and that the themes of planting, harvesting and excavation are relevant to my own experience as well.

Brian Dickerson resides in Rensselaerville, N.Y. and Philadelphia, PA. He is an associate professor in the College of Media Arts and Design at Drexel University with teaching affiliations at several colleges and universities.

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