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Front Cover:
Deborah Dancy, *Easy Rider,* 2012, (detail), oil on canvas, 60" x 60." Courtesy of N'Namdi Contemporary, Miami.

“IT’S A CONSTANT STRUGGLE TO KEEP THE ‘THINGNESS’ AT BAY”

An Interview with Deborah Dancy

Although her art is thoroughly abstract, Deborah Dancy’s paintings, drawings, and works in other mediums are intimately bound to the world of concrete objects and the ephemeral perceptions and feelings of everyday life. On her website (deborahdancy.com), she comments on her fascination with “the poetic terrain of the incomplete, the fragment, the ruin and residue of ‘almost was,’ and ‘might become’” that she’s encountered in the zone between abstraction and representation. In the following interview, Dancy talks about how this notion has influenced her artmaking; the wide and ever-expanding array of thoughts, impressions, and situations that have shaped her artistic practice over time; the interaction of different mediums in her creative process; and ways in which the commonplace and the near-at-hand have often had a profound influence on her most abstract work.

BY JEFF EDWARDS

Deborah Dancy, *Midnight Bloom*, 2015, oil on paper. All images are courtesy of the artist and N’Namdi Contemporary, Miami.

Jeff Edwards - I'd like to start with a quote from the artist statement on your website: "I am interested in investigating the region that exists between the abstraction and representation." What do you mean by that, and how does it play out in your paintings and other works?
Deborah Dancy - For me, the space between abstraction and representation feels like an intermediary region full of potential and trepidation. I try to reconcile how to make an abstract painting interface with this quality of "about to become"- that thingness where an image begins to take on too much specificity by defining itself; that's the space that excites and unnerves me—because it's a constant struggle to keep the "thingness" at bay. So when I make a painting there's always a little battle of controlling all these elements that attempt to dominate the space within the painting. It comes down to making those features ambiguous enough and the space unstable enough so that they exist just on the verge of becoming, but don't.

J.E. – Is your process mostly intuitive and spontaneous, or do you have some kind of plan in advance for things like color, composition, and imagery?
D.D. - I work pretty spontaneously and definitely intuitively. My process is almost always the same—my paintings start out what I call a beautiful mess—I put paint on and scrape it off, back and forth until I find that something that holds my interest, and then expand it until it begins to announce itself with some authority. Over the years my palette has become lighter—but even then, but I usually find myself gravitating toward the same colors and tonalities. Every now and then I force myself to grab some really off base color that I have no real affinity for to see if I can make it work in a painting, and my current palette really is a reflection of the wooded terrain around my home.

J.E. – What other elements or aspects of yourself are embodied in your paintings? Do your personal history or your ongoing relationships with the people, places, and things around you show up in the imagery that you paint?
D.D. - Yeah, relationships, space, place, and history—personal and social seem to end up in the work. They permit me to examine my feelings about relationships or surroundings or even respond to events that unexpectedly catapult into your life and knock the work in a completely new direction. It can be very exciting and a little unnerving at the same time because quite often it's immediate, entering your work right away and other times, it gets tucked away and you forget about it until one day there it is, and you wonder how it found its way into your consciousness. It has taken me years to learn to accept and embrace that concept and not question its legitimacy.

J.E. - I've noticed that over the years, specific forms appear in your paintings at certain points only to disappear later, such as the cartoony legs and feet that appear in your canvases from 2011 and 2012, or the linear forms that look like distressed geometric solids that were in many of your late 2012 and early 2013 paintings. Is there a language to these different kinds of shapes and images that you're exploring?
D.D. - That's an interesting thing about my process, the older I get the more I welcome unexpected life events into my work. The tangled, intertwined legs and feet in the 2011-12 paintings point to a new relationship. The physicality of paint echoed that and the paintings became an extension of what was happening in my life, whimsical, colorful, and erotic. Prior to that work I was concentrating on the interior world of self, which defined itself in my painting as awkwardly constructed structures in which perspective was askew.


Deborah Dancy. Courtesy of the artist.

J.E. – Your canvases from the beginning of this year (2015) are generally more muted in tone than a lot of earlier works, while your most recent paintings are much more colorful, but with a flat, medium-gray background that seems new to your work. How do you think your use of color has changed over time?
D.D. - Yes, this year my palette, both in paintings and drawings, shifted from winter, spring and into the summer. I think this may be the first time I painted in a kind of visceral response to the seasons and the shift in-between the seasons. It's about really being aware of when light starts to shift and changes color and intensity, and you feel the air more and smell the dirt and things awaken in you. The drawings done during the winter, because of being housebound—were about starkness and contrast and the geometry and architecture of bare trees. In spring, because as I was walking my dog a lot I began noticing the space between forms, the warming tones of bark, and emerging flora—back in the studio, it translated as nuanced tonalities. The most recent paintings you refer to are 36" x 36", a series

Deborah Dancy, *A House is Not a Home,* 2013, acrylic on canvas, 60" x 72."

Deborah Dancy, *Look But Do Not Touch,* 2015, oil on canvas, 36" x 36."

Deborah Dancy, Giotto's Blues, 2012, gouache and watercolor, 22" x 30."

I call, "Pernicious Beauty." I was thinking a lot about Manet's last flower paintings—where marks and flicks of color speak volumes. I began taking photos of the fungi I found on my walks and a connection was made. I wanted make the beautiful grotesque nature of fungi the singular object and subject of the paintings so I toned the ground to a warm grey and allowed the shape to dominate the space. The flatness of the field and the agitated form of the fungi become perfect counterpoint to each other and there developed a wonderful way in which the space became the object as well.

J.E. - What's your relationship to earlier abstract painters? Certain comparisons seem inevitable: for example, I occasionally think of Philip Guston's Abstract Expressionist canvases when I look at the way you build up and manipulate paint, and his later work when I see some of your more cartoony or whimsical imagery (such as the aforementioned legs and feet). I've also thought about Grace Hartigan and several of the post-WWII European abstract painters at times.

D.D. - Well, the connection to Guston is pretty on point. And I feel like there's at least a surface connection to Joan Mitchell and Cy Twombly. I have always loved Diebenkorn. I respect the work of these artists and have obviously been influenced by them all, and yet other than making a linkage through obvious formal connections, we have operated out of pretty different experiences.

J.E. – Are there any other painters—either abstract or representational—who have had a big influence on you, or whose work you've found particularly inspiring?

D.D. - I love the way Judy Pfaff combines painting, sculpture, drawing, printmaking into an installation event, Brenda Goodman's quirky, powerful paintings, Stan Whitney's bold, abstractions, Nick Cave—just because, Arturo Herrera's—wonderful absurd works, full of tension, Amy Sillman's abstractions and color, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's sublime figurative work and Vincent Hawkins spare abstractions. These are some of the people I look at because I want to see what they're doing.

J.E. - In a 2012 studio visit that's on Vimeo, you speak at one point about the idea of "missed opportunities" in your work: moments when something is about to emerge as you're painting, but then it gets lost and can't be recaptured. How important is that sense of sudden creative anticipation to your process, and how many of those thwarted opportunities are you willing to let remain visible in a canvas?

D.D. - It's a moment you can't get back, it's kind of a really direct, pure gesture that you have to be willing to trust is genuine. Sometimes you are alert to its potential and other times you aren't so you kill it by over-reacting to it or embellishing it—and then it's gone, you can't get it back, you just have to move on. It's a gift those moments, those opportunities—you have to be awake at the wheel to see them.

J.E. - The topic of humor also comes up in the video (for example, the words "goofy" and "goofiness" are raised in reference to some of your imagery). I'd love to hear you speak a little about that aspect of your work.

D.D. - A number of years ago I did a series of works on paper in watercolor and gouache in which disembodied images floated across the page interacting, abutting and mutating with each other. The titles were full of double entendre and innuendo. Some of my favorites were *Miss Muffet's Tuffet*, *Humpty's Last Dumpty*, and *Cleopatra's Big Bad Hair Day*—they were lighthearted and fun, but at the heart of it was still an attempt to make a good painting even if it seemed silly. The images always came first, and then of course the titles put a final twist on things. The same idea extended into paintings like, *Thou Swell*, and, *Yes, I Know the Muffin Man*.

J.E. - Your works on paper often parallel what's happening in your canvases at around the same time; for example, when quasi-geomet-

Deborah Dancy, *Stump,* 2015, oil on canvas, 28" x 46."

"Deborah Dancy: Lush Life," installation view at N'Namdi Contemporary, Miami, October 10 thru November 14, 2015.

Deborah Dancy, *Opus Incertum 6,* 2012, acrylic on paper, 22"x30."

ric "wirework" forms appeared in your paintings around 2012/2013, the same kinds of shapes were showing up in your smaller acrylic pieces too. What's the relationship between these two bodies of work? Are the works on paper something like sketches for the larger works, or is there more of a cross-influence going on?

D.D. - Usually I'm working in the two mediums simultaneously, drawing/works on paper and painting on canvas and there's almost always a shared language and conceptual framework running through both—though occasionally one medium will shoot ahead of the other. I find that when I'm stuck in big oil painting, I decide to draw or work in acrylic. Not that's it's easier…it's just faster—it's somehow in my head feels more forgiving in many ways and it gives me time to think and tease out how to tackle the larger oil paintings. I don't think of the smaller acrylic works as 'traditional' sketches for the larger paintings—they're often the forerunner for things to come.

J.E. – In 2012 when you were living in Florence, you did a series of works on paper titled "Dear Giotto." The most obvious relation between your series and Giotto's frescoes is the bright colors they share, but I suspect that there was more to your inspiration than just that. How did Giotto's work inspire you, and how is that reflected in your work?

D.D. - The series "Dear Giotto" ended up being about the seduction of Giotto's frescoes and the abstractions I saw in them. Those elements of flattened out space between figure and architecture and the abutments of color created such sublime juxtapositions I couldn't get enough of them. I also envisioned the scaffolding that was built to hold the artist and his materials, and I imagined the complexity of those structures in space, the negative spaces between them, and flat shapes of his draped fabric in the frescoes; it all became all encompassing and inspirational for that work.

J.E. - That same year you also did the series* "Opus Incertum," *which was inspired by the ruins around Palatine Hill in Rome. What was it about that spot that appealed to you as an abstract painter, and what effect did it have on your art?

D.D. – "Opus Incertum," an early Roman construction technique, involved placing irregular stones randomly in the construction of buildings. Seeing those ancient ruins in Rome allowed this sense of understanding of one history built on top of another for centuries and centuries inspired that works. So the works became a response to what felt like an accumulation of architectural histories, fragments of which lie on the ground scattered about. They became built drawings—about built histories, time and space.

J.E. - You've also done semi-abstract photographic work based on landscapes, objects, and the human body, and a few video collaborations with composer Earl MacDonald and videographer Ted Efremoff. How do those other bodies of work relate to your painting and to one another, and what were your inspirations, intentions, and processes for each?

D.D. - My photographic work and the collaborations have been so exciting and stimulating. It's like having the permission to play with and explore ideas with different media as a way to see another side to my paintings. I've discovered in my photographic work my other voice is one that allows me to examine a narrative about beauty and the sublime that isn't far from my painting but seems more accessible. The collaborative works with Earl MacDonald and Ted Efremoff have been so amazing… getting out of my private studio head and cross pollinating with these amazing artists has forced my artistic vision to expand and develop while creating something so different.

J.E. - Finally, is there anything emerging in your work right now that we don't know about yet? What are you up to in the studio right now, and do you have any hopes or plans for where you'd like to take your work next?

D.D. - Right now I'm feeling a real need to see where the "Pernicious Beauty" series will take me… I'm excited about what seems like an open landscape of potential. ■