

An essay by David Wilson commissioned on the occasion of Drew Bennett's solo exhibition at Ever Gold [Projects], September 2020.

Drew

Drew and I take a night-hike every other Monday. We walk the trails behind his house in the Oakland hills, in the dark, often for many hours. This 'werk,' as we joke, is a chance to connect and unpack; the movement through redwoods shakes loose whatever has been stuck in our heads since we last walked.

It is the latest iteration of many years of choosing works together that encourage a physical, spirit-heavy way of being in natural space. Much of this work has happened at a dear friend's property in Ukiah, making time to labor playfully on the land, trying-failing-trying to create a tipi campsite for people to use as a retreat. The No-Tipi site represents about ten years of working our way in a circle from an empty space on a hill to various attempts at a dwelling and back to an empty space on a hill with a bench and a flat spot to sleep. It never manifested as we dreamed it might, but in the working—often joined by friends, and always in joy—we found the meaning. Sometimes a project exists just to help you take time to be present with yourself, your community, your environment.

Lately, our night-walks are humbler pursuits in this tradition. Less aspirational in terms of building towards a communal goal, yet still filled with aspiration in terms of embracing the potential of finding time where you might forget it exists to draw support from a friend and feel the bigger feelings that are available in the woods. With the constant crowding and complicating of all of our time, creating preserves for spirit-time in our lives *is* the work. Spirit-time is a creative engagement with time, an effort to move towards experiences that remind us of wonder and keep us open to the unknown. This can happen by being more fully in our senses and reframing daily experiences, or by pointedly exiting routine-time with the intention to get charged up. How else can we face down this insane world that gets angrier, scarier, and more divisive each day? It is a way to feel available for the kind of personal expansion that gives us the confidence and inspiration to show up with positivity and support in our actions.

When I look at Drew's new paintings, I see aspirational moments of spirit-time. I see it in the figures who appear absorbed in their space, in awe or just inside that feeling where losing yourself and finding yourself can be the same thing. I also feel it in the practice of the painting. Drew's studio time is where he works out how he feels he is doing as a person. The paintings are exercises in finding the inner trust to resolve an image. Each painting tests him to put just enough down, to not overwork the surface, but to not let his aesthetic attraction to translucency prevent him from pushing into the deeper realms of discovery and challenge held in the course of a painting. In the images he creates, Drew seeks to find the fullness and energy of natural space through the technique of painting but not let skill overpower vulnerability, awkwardness, and chance. There is a quality of spirit that he hopes to feel in making the paintings, which ultimately reflects how happy he is with his work and in many ways with himself. In this aspiration, sometimes Drew can be hard on himself. His feeling of confidence to accept 'doneness' in a painting often mirrors bigger conversations towards self-compassion.

In our talks, Drew equates the practice of the night-hike with the practice of painting, centering both on the primary practice of stepping into the unknown. "I guess the point of art making is to give over to something outside your control, I don't want to be comfortable, rote or overly proficient, I want to get into hard spots I don't know how to get out of, that is what makes making the painting a worthy endeavor. The most rewarding parts are those that are furthest from any expectation of what they would be, are most surprising to me."

Our walks began shortly after Drew left his job directing the Facebook Artist in Residence Program, a necessary personal leap from security to spirit. This was driven by a yearning to re-establish a studio

practice after administering support for so many others' and to return to ways of being in family and in community more fully.

I witnessed—and walked and talked through—as Drew arrived at a moment of self-realization with his first post-job body of work shown at Ever Gold last year. Summiting that first peak in the endless stretch of peaks and valleys of self-trust, he seemed to answer his question, finding that actually, yes, I am a painter, and yes, I should be painting. Even a brief moment of clarity and resolve from that vantage stays with us through the subsequent dips and is enough to see a way forward.

So when I see these paintings, I see a fulfillment of nature and of personhood. In these paintings, I see Drew's hope to have and share the experiences of harmony with the natural world he has at times held.

Our walks lapsed by necessity in the first months of quarantine, and we returned—masked and distanced—to find ourselves dealing as individuals and as a society with the very realest of shit. In isolation, we are left to reckon with who we are. More than ever, this current moment challenges us to find the inner trust to examine what it is we do, why we do it, and ask if it's enough.

Knowing the scope of the work that actually needs doing, it can feel confusing and even unnecessary to be making art that doesn't directly address and affect change when facing the full spectrum of hurt in the world right now. So yes, to say the least, it's a confusing time to be making art, and to be making an art show. And yes, I'll add it's a confusing time to be writing about art. Just to contextualize this moment, I'm writing with one hand while holding a newborn baby in the other hand, listening to news of wildfires still raging in our backyard, hurricanes decimating homes and further reflecting our climate emergency, police nearly murdering Jacob Blake, an unarmed black man, in front of his kids, images of a heavily armed white man who has just killed two people and yet safely walks away, a US president lying lying lying his way towards re-election while people are all still isolated, suffering, and dying from a pandemic with no leadership... it's hard to not feel totally overwhelmed by the completeness of the doomsday atmosphere. But even from this stance of isolation and sadness, we do need to find a way forward, and at the core, we do need to be ourselves as best we can. To bridge the isolation, to feel movement, we need each other's work and hope. I think it is helpful to witness and appreciate each other's attempts to find and share meaning in life right now. This is Drew's. He is working his shit out as best he can, and I believe that's a good thing.

-David Wilson
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