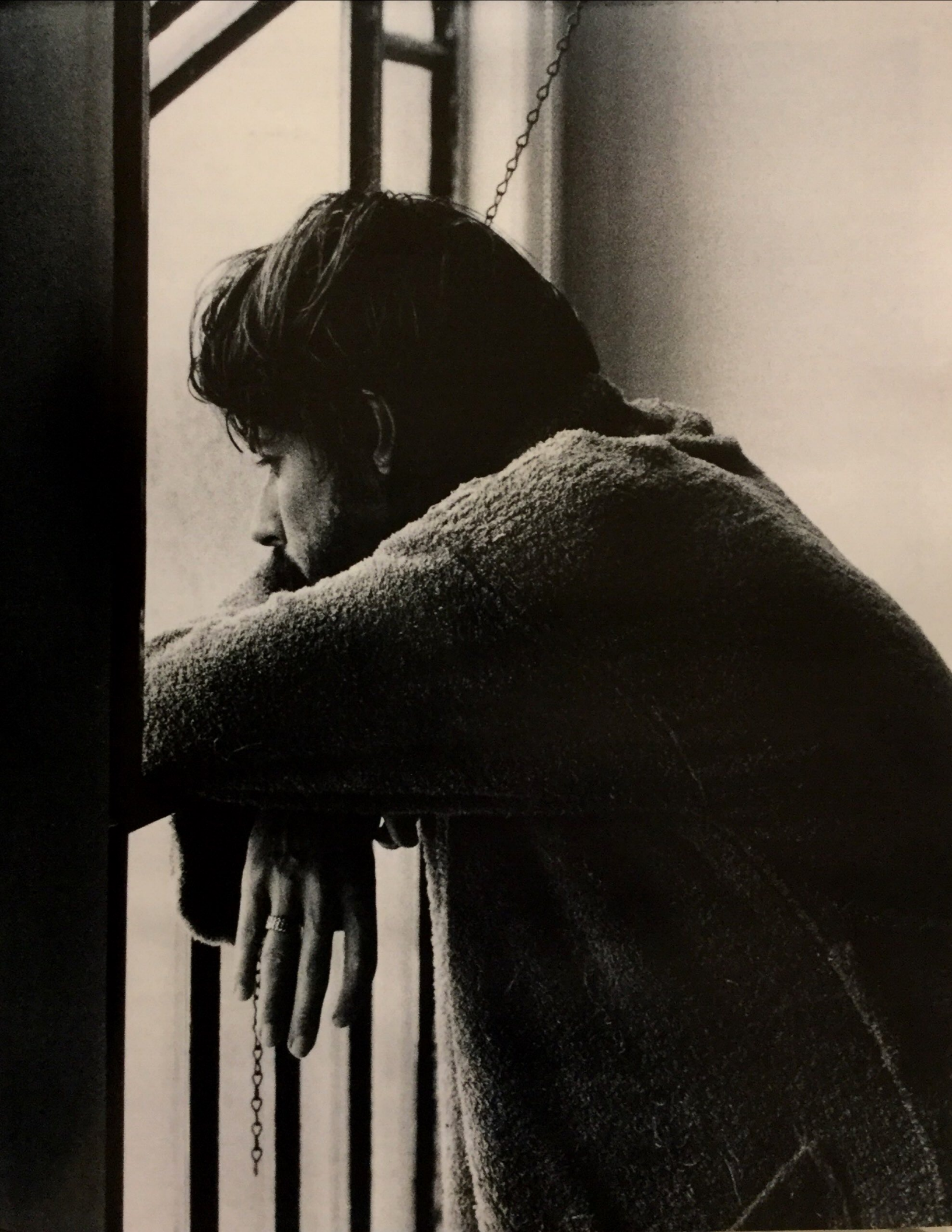


Danny Fox

The Beast Within

Interview by Jesse Michaels Portrait by Kingsley Ifill



Danny Fox is a painter from the UK who has been working in Los Angeles for the last few years. He has achieved a rare feat among contemporary artists, penetrating the art world and showing at established galleries while eschewing standard practices such as signing an exclusive deal with one particular gallery, or producing high-minded artist's statements. He speaks plainly about his work, dismissive of lofty theoretical ideas. Although he is young, cool and a bit of a heretic, his influences strongly recall twentieth-century icons such as Matisse and Basquiat, and his palette is subtle and restrained. Also present in his work is a rich conversation with folk and outsider art, engaging a wide variety of ideas discovered in his personal studies and Cornwall upbringing. His paintings never look overworked but instead vibrate with a spontaneous, vernacular energy, depicting the human form with guileless and humor. The magic trick that Fox performs is that, although these figures and the iconography surrounding them

seem playful at first glance, there is timeless gravitas and psychological complexity under the surface. Here is personal history, violence, tragedy and the mystery of the human soul caught out in Babylon, all communicated in the street level terms favored by gritty maestros like Bob Dylan and Fox's friend, the LA portraitist Henry Taylor. I wanted to talk to Fox to unpack the ideas and processes behind his incredibly effective pictures, rather than go too deeply into his practices, which have been amply covered elsewhere.

Jesse Michaels: I am curious about some of your personal classics. Your love for folk art is well known but is there anything unexpected that you visit again and again? Books, movies, artworks, bars, humans, whatever?

Danny Fox: I always arrive late to the classics. I have to finally see the greatness in something after years of not understanding why people like it, but then once I do understand, it's usually a different aspect that I'm drawn to. I recently discovered Elvis Presley, but it was because

I read *The Last 24 Hours*. Hearing about him as such a broken down glutton, so full of pills and self loathing that he had to kill himself, just to kill the "King," made me listen to the songs in a different way. Thinking about him as a 24-year-old soldier seducing a 14-year-old Priscilla, there's a menacing darkness to it; when you mix it with the bubblegum plastic pop American image of Elvis, you get this contradiction that is classical in a very human way.

I come back to the first chapter of *Under Milk Wood* [the 1954 radio drama written by Dylan Thomas] over and over again. I listen to it most days, narrated by Richard Burton. It's a classic, written by a classic, and read by another classic. Think of Dylan's wife Caitlin throwing a knife at him in the kitchen, or Elizabeth Taylor putting out a cigarette on Richard's leg.

Painting is different though; with painting, I'm always looking forward. A painting can never be classic.

Guston said, "A painter's only duty is to be free," and Bukowski's gravestone says "Don't try." But at times, these things can seem impossible. Any thoughts on this topic?

Guston made some great paintings and Bukowski wrote some great poetry, but beyond that, who cares what they said? I think they would both agree with that.

There is a quality of naked honesty that occurs in some artists' work—outsider art, Matisse, your friend Henry Taylor's work and your own, that give a sense of what I am talking about. Did you struggle to find this in the beginning, or is it ever a challenge to get to that freedom? This is what I was trying to get at with the last question, but your answer there was great.

I struggled with other things, but I never struggled with that. I don't think that is something you have to get to, it's the only thing you have already. It's not always honesty though; sometimes it's just quality. Those great painters you mentioned, they can have you believe that what you're looking at and consequently, feeling, is a reaction to honesty, but it's shit.

I've heard you give this advice for struggling young artists: "Enjoy it while it lasts." Were you being ironic or was there a kernel of truth? I am thinking about how some of the great painters look back on their early years of struggle and poverty with fondness, even longing.
I meant it.

Can you share a bit about wanting to be away from people and work, versus wanting and needing to participate in the world? This seems to be a theme for a lot of painters I have met.
Where I'm from, the world doesn't care what you are doing or what you are making. I grew up around some great artists who chose that





isolation. They made their work, day-in, day-out, year after year, despite the fact that nobody was watching. When I was younger, I didn't understand; I thought that the show was part of the art in some way. I don't think that anymore, but it's too late for all that. Some artists want to say they lived; other artists want to say that they are living.

Is your poetry an urgent drive or just something that comes out of your left hand? Any interest in writing fiction or memoir?

I lack the concentration for anything long form. I've always written poems, which are a way to think, a way to live that allows one to process things through one's own specific lens and not feel so alone with it all. It's always been there for

me, a secret companion to share good and bad times with.

You once said there were a couple of things that you could have shown your 14-year-old self that would have saved years of effort. What were they?

I really don't feel qualified to give anyone advice, especially to young people. I recognize that some young art students might look at my work and read things like this in magazines and think they want that. They might think that they would take this deal if it was offered to them, but I would urge them to go way beyond this. If you're 14 years of age reading this, then you have at least 15 years before you need to show anyone anything you have made. Spend ten years thinking about color.

Spend a decade drawing in secret books and becoming a beast without anyone knowing it.

I helped myself to a tray, filled my plate and took a seat among the chefs and maids at one of the long tables. As I looked up to find everybody staring at me, one of chefs said "Hey white boy, you work here???" 'Cause we ain't about a be in no mass shootin'!"

Anyway, they threw me out after two months of the proposed three-month residency. It was a strange time, and to answer your question, yes, there was black magic and country music.

Does the mystical play any role in your process? I don't mean in a religious sense, but in the way



Matisse talked about uncovering a kind of light in things?

My latest show *Doped, Roped, And Horoscoped* tried to address the vague mysticism that is practiced by a lot of the women I have met. They all talk about star signs and the what their charts say and what Mercury is doing, and it ain't my fault, it's 'cause I'm a Scorpio and the crystals on the bedside table told me to do it. I met one girl who said she did the tarot cards on me, and I came up as the devil every time, and another girl who rubbed her own pussy juice behind her ears and on her neck to try to hypnotize me. I'm not a complete skeptic, though. I'm a dark dragon lord, really. That's why they go for me.

Much has been made of your titles, and perhaps they are best left unexplained. If not, would you care to talk about *Some Mornings Catch a Wraith*? It's taken from my poem of the same name. "Some mornings catch a wraith" means some mornings you wake up with a ghost of a loved one sitting on your chest and that's your day. Fucked.

*He won your limbs
In that summer auction,
I stood in this field
And listened
To you tell it,
Too late for the last Dog Rose,*

*Half a dozen winters
In my collar,*

*You said he knows
The name of every flower
In the forest*

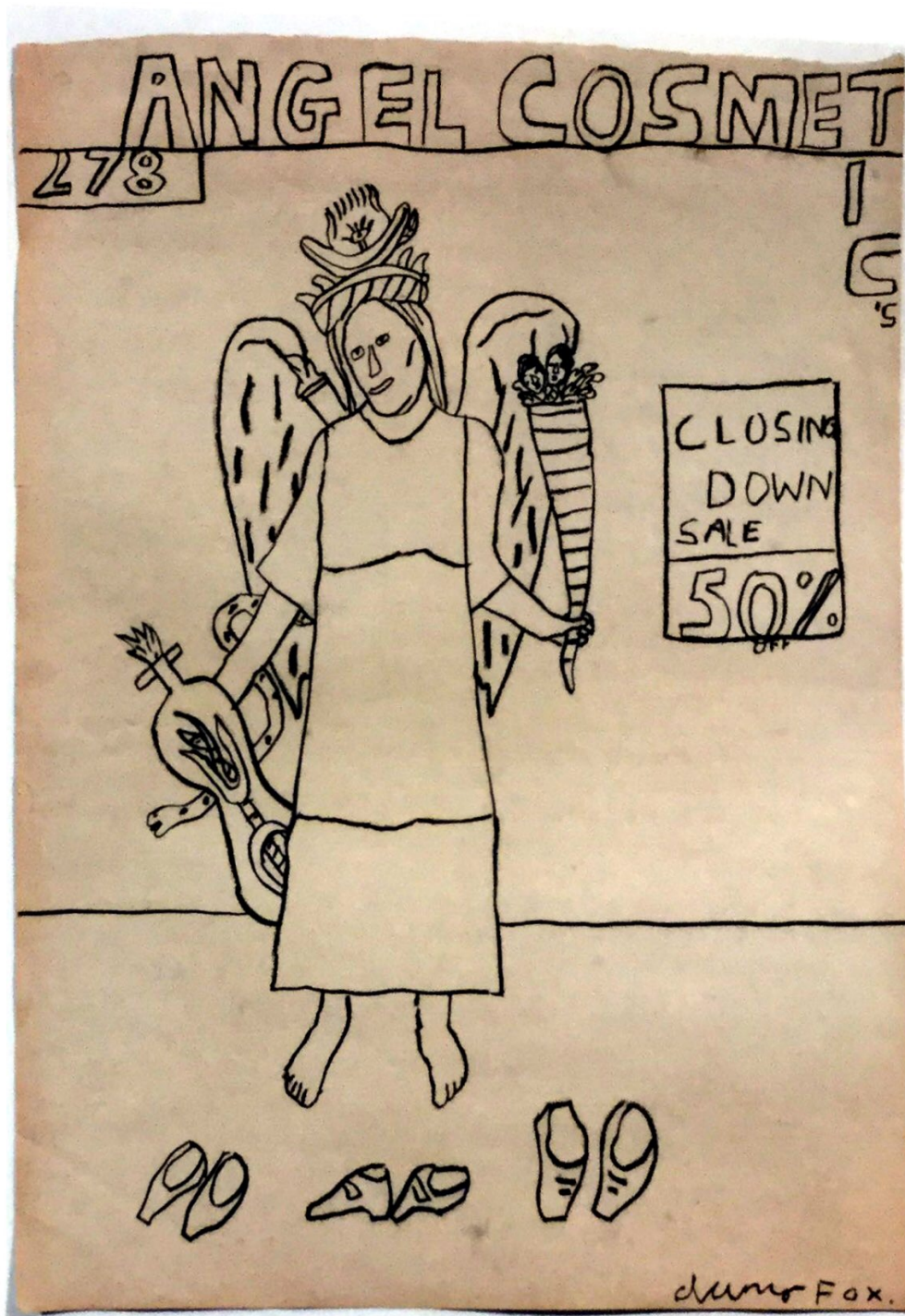
*Yet he has never climbed
the garden wall.*

*Some nights
you call me back
From blackened rocks*

*A dream,
Some mornings
Catch a wraith
At slumbers door.*

The notes about how the images were sparked when you speak of your paintings are fascinating. Can you share whatever comes up about a few of them? For example, *That's Not a Pipe It's a Horn*?

I was walking down Skid Row and I heard some crackheads talking about a crack pipe, "Hey, that's not a pipe, it's a horn!.. nahhh, that's not a horn, it's a saxophone!" I put my friend Jacob in the top right, but he's not a crackhead, he's a drinker. He came to LA as a refugee from Yugoslavia in the '90s, made it all the way to Echo Park, only to get stabbed 18 times in the back and chest by a Latino gang. He crawled for two blocks, then a gardener



stopped and threw him in the back of a pick up truck and dropped him off at the hospital.

***Onions Under Water*?**

When I'm making a painting, I put all these hidden little meanings in there, but, after a while, I forget what they mean. I remember there is a little faded baby horse in the corner. My wife at the time lost a baby and I put that in there for her, I think, or for the baby. It's like a little fetus on a scan. *Onions Under Water*: I was convinced for a long time that I was allergic to onions. I still am, but apparently it's just in my head. It's a made up lie that I have told myself. For what reason? I don't know. BK on there, Billy Keane, the boxing manager, he was taking me to the fights, so I put him in there, but also BK

is Benjamin my lawyer. At that time, I needed a lawyer every five minutes because the art world had started knocking on my door.

***Uninvited Guest*?**

That's just a seated male. I was living at the Figueroa and making hotel paintings. I was trying to stay good but, at the same time, beginning to understand that we are all good and evil simultaneously and constantly. So that's why I put the devil floating there beside him. That's BOSS UNIVERSE, OR 5'. A higher thing, life beyond our understanding. ■

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