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## Berggruen Gallery Interview with Darren Waterston

**BG: I like to begin these interviews with a brief overview of the artist's process. How do you approach making a painting or a body of works?**

**DW:** The physical architecture of building the painting, the process of beginning the work, really informs every layer and every part of the process along the way. I studied a lot, from college on, early Renaissance painting and materiality and the history of paint itself. I worked in restoration for a while, doing illuminated manuscript restoration. I think that's how it really began: how process becomes such an intrinsic part of departure for the work.

For me, it's the painstaking preparation of the wood panels and it's the making of the rabbit skin glue and it's the gathering the right marble dust and it's the making the gesso, it's the particular clay bole for the underpainting, it's all these things that become a devotional act. It's because there's so much repetition, so much care in the underpainting that it begins my relationship with that object.

So, in the beginning, it's really a call and response with the materials. Because I'm so immersed in art history and looking back to look forward, I feel like, as a contemporary living artist, I'm so activated by feeling part of a much longer story of the history of painting. I'm just one spoke of the wheel, but I really do find this deep connection to particular movements, periods of time, and places. As of late, I've had a preoccupation with Hercules Seghers, an unbelievable sixteenth-century artist. He has this kind of early Chinese landscape aesthetic, but it's total surrealist fantasy, and it's also just like, how does he make these marks?

I look at aspects of artists' work like that, where I'm trying to figure out how to conjure built-in contradictions about how space is represented. In my own work, as I'm starting a painting, I'm always thinking about those contradictions and destabilizing the pictorial space, so that as I work, I'm never really fully grounded in a world of absolutes.

After all those years, we still rely on paint to...we expect so much of it! I never feel like I've mastered anything. It's always very humbling painting a painting, and I always feel like I just started as an artist.

**BG: You take inspiration from a diverse set of art historical references, balancing between Flemish art, the Symbolists, and the Surrealists, just to name a few. You not only use visual motifs from places as disparate as Byzantium and interwar Paris, but also incorporate Renaissance and historical techniques into your painting—for example, your use of rabbit skin glue and bole underpainting. Do you feel that you're paying homage to these art historical traditions by replicating their processes, or were these techniques adopted for practical reasons?**

**DW:** I think it's both. Like I was saying earlier, it's about feeling part of a longer narrative and feeling that it connects me with these long histories. So there's definitely an aspiration to be part of

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the canon of those artists who used these particular materials and to actually work in some way with subject matter of the sublime or of the fantastical or surreal. With painting, there's this expectation that it's a transformative, or potentially transformative, object in some way—that the viewer is changed or affected in some way as is the maker. And so it's both practical and philosophical for me.

But the practical part is that I really like interacting with materials in this way. There's real pleasure in that.

**BG: Do you feel that by using those materials that you're building a relationship to these movements? Do you feel you're forming a bond with those histories in the present?**

**DW:** Totally. When I see a particular painting that I've visited throughout my whole life, or I come across an artist that, you know, that I have a great affinity for, it's a physiological response. It's a recognition. It's sort of like dancing with ghosts, a little bit. You're conjuring and creating the memory of an artist, or imagining what they must've been thinking or feeling.

**BG: We talked a bit about this particular body of works being “palette-driven.” How have you been experimenting with color and glazes in the artworks for this show?**

**DW:** I think part of it is I tend to work in the shadows, so-to-speak. I'm always painting representations of, you know, 'in the shadows,' 'in the twilight.' And I was so like, "I'm not doing that for this show!" In this body of work, I want to find this saturation of palette that still feels like colors coming out of a dream sequence. It was just about this kind of sensuality that I wanted to explore, and music—music is always at play with me, with the work.

I was feeling like bringing out all these colors that I'd never used before, everything much more jewel-like, much more saturated. Once I gave myself permission to do that I was like, okay, "here we go. Get out the cadmium yellow!" It's been really exciting for me, just in the process of doing it, to feel this initial resistance of, "Woah, this is a lot." Where I feel comfortable is much more kind of denser, more muted colors, but once I felt that it was okay to let the color *be*, then the color becomes object in a certain way. I've really been thinking that it's not just representing a particular quality of light or a particular illumination, but the color itself that becomes the object in these paintings in many of these paintings.

**BG: It kind of goes back to the financial value and objecthood of these pigments, historically speaking, like the blues and scarlets and violets.**

**DW:** For sure.

**BG: I was interested in the use of the clay bole underpainting. Historically, clay bole was used to warm gold leaf, but it seems the clay bole is used throughout the paintings, even the**

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**works that don't have gold leaf. Why are you attracted to that as a material for the underpainting?**

**DW:** In a lot of Renaissance paintings, they used [clay bole] to use gold leaf to gild on top of the clay. But then...they would adjust the tones of the clay to more lavender, to warmer colors, to cooler colors, and it gave this unifying surface that if [the clay bole] came through in any way, it would heighten the flesh tones, it would heighten the background and foreground.

That first layer, to me, the painting begins then. Often, depending on the drying time of the gesso, the bole will absorb differently, sometimes a little more bit splotchy or there'll be different values of the bole. I always wait for that, because that's the little backhanded gift of using the material this way. All of a sudden, there'll be formations that come true just in the initial staining of the panel. That particular beginning is revelatory because I'll respond to it. Certain shapes will come through in the bole that I'll be like, "This is interesting."

**BG: I'm also curious about the methods through which you've been choosing and pairing colors.**

**DW:** Certainly, [I'm] thinking about color theory and certain color vibrations that come together, but also the colors have a slight discord. You don't want it to be so harmonious. I'm always trying to find the acrid up against a color that we can all generally agree upon as pleasing to the eye. I want to put it against something that all of sudden makes you experience it in a very different way. I'm always looking for a slight discomfort in the color vibrations.

**BG: What's surprising is that so many of the influences you've provided are highly representational, at least at first glance—early German and Dutch artists like Albrecht Dürer or Hercules Segher, for example—even though your work is abstracted. It's a bit of a hackneyed cliché that abstract or nonrepresentative artworks represent the "emotion" or "psyche" of an experience (of course, this is an oversimplification of Abstract Expressionism, and not necessarily true of all abstract works), but it seems that you're more attracted to the psychological underpinnings of these representative painters than their subject matter—how they use a portrait, landscape, symbol, etc. to say something greater. How do you go about making an abstracted painting that still honors these artists' ambitions and traditions?**

**DW:** You know, certainly in religious paintings and Eurocentric devotional paintings, and biblical narratives and all the rest—there is still so much complete abstraction in them. It's either abstraction or the fantastical ways in which a particular pathos [is evoked]. Like, how do you create pathos? And it's not just that they're using representation or the body in some way to conjure that, but there's so much more in just pure, abstracted form and in line and in shape that you can kind of find throughout in a lot of early painting.

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More and more I find myself blurring the distinction between the abstract and the representational and that I'm kind of very comfortable in this sort of liminal space between the two. I rely on aspects of each as being in my toolbox as needed. It's certainly looking at artists like Tanguy or some of the surrealist painters that I admire so much—they're building representation out of abstraction. I find by watching what the mind is expecting as having something that's referential, or this object represents this thing, that you can actually create a narrative that feels almost like there's representation in it and yet there's actually not.

**BG:** That kind of goes back to this Symbolist inquiry of assigning a narrative or association to something that's already there.

**DW:** Yeah.

**BG:** I was interested in a line from a profile that your alma mater, Otis College of Art and Design, provided in a series of its "Outstanding Alumni." The profile reads: "Waterston admits that if he'd been slightly less interested in art, he could easily have become a naturalist or scientist." Can you speak to the role of nature and flora in your artworks? Do you see painting as a tool for investigation, just as research or experimentation is a line of inquiry for a scientist?

**DW:** It's so funny. I don't even remember saying that, but it's true!

There's so many times where my partner Jason teases me. I'll just get in this mood where I'll get like, "Painting is too hard, it's too much, I can't deal with it anymore! I'm just going to become a botanist and I'm just going to build some greenhouses." It's like my seasonal threat. *(DW laughs)*

But I mean I'm so observant all the time, and every day there's something in the natural world that finds its way into the studio. There's been a couple of painting in this show that a certain light would hit the wall in the late morning would just hit this painting, this unfinished painting, in a certain way, and I'd be like, "Oh my god, that's how to finish it." It'd be phenomenological things like that, or it'll be like I walk by a mossy rock in the garden or something, and I'll be like, "Oh, thank you, that's the answer to this one little area of the painting."

So it's not observational in that I institute 'painting what I see,' but it's definitely more like something will come up in a painting, and I'll be like, "That's weird. How did that color combination get there?" Then it'll be like, "Oh, that's the stripes in those tulips, or something." Often, there's not really a distinction between what goes on in the studio when there's a brush in one's hand, and what happens in your quotidian life where things you might not even know are having an impact on you are kind of building up momentum in a certain way.

I think it's more about receptivity. The main thing is that I always want to be in a state of wonder. I just want everyday to have one thing that I am awestruck by. And if there's always wonder, then that's what goes on in the studio ultimately. I feel like I am kind of a novice botanist still.

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**BG:** In a meeting with us, you described these landscapes as “psychological gardens,” which is such a rich description for both the formal and psychological aspects of these works. Could you expand on why landscapes are a compelling psychological and emotional metaphor? What separates a dreamscape from a landscape?

**DW:** Landscape as a metaphor is so fecund with the ways in which our natural world is in some way...that we're part of it. It does reflect that the interior life and exterior world are so intricately connected, but landscape is a pictorial construct. Landscape is not a real thing in the world. Landscape is the way we want to arrange our perceptions of the world.

In that way, I feel there's more liberty to look at the idea of landscape as how we arrange ourselves in it and how we represent it. I still have this longing to come to certain paintings where I want to actually be transformed, I want to be taken somewhere, I want to look way big into the figure, into the field, into the landscape behind the Virgin Mary.

One of my favorite paintings is Giovanni Bellini's *The Ecstasy of St. Francis*. It's St. Francis on this rocky cliff, and he's in this totally ecstatic state and his eyes are slightly rolled back and he's feeling it all. But the real narrative is all in the landscape, it's all in the background. You're just like, what is going on back there? Just the way in which the natural world is depicted in this kind of like state of suspension while St. Francis is in this kind of ecstasy and epiphany. The way that Bellini depicted the landscape, there's more psychological charge, or equal psychological charge, in the landscape as there is [in St. Francis].

And because landscape just gives way to abstraction so quickly, so easily, it's very seductive that way as well.

**BG:** Ironically, it almost seems that in using history, you render this emotional space atemporal—the “landscape” is either absent of time or exists just beyond it, which makes the works feel purgatorial. The calligraphic style of painting, which has the antiquarian atmosphere of scrolls or illuminated manuscripts, furthers this effect. Do you think of these works as ahistorical, or of history and time as fluid in psychological “spaces” like memory or emotion? Can you speak about how some of the historical motifs and references (the oculus or evil eye, the “diffused” forms of your flora and fauna, even the alchemical richness of the gold, etc.) contribute to a feeling of timelessness in your paintings?

**DW:** Even though I have all these references to art history and painting and the history of landscape, I do want the experience of the paintings to be that the viewer feels untethered a little bit, not really grounded in a particular time or place. That all is simultaneous and contrary, that the sense of time and space is really ruptured in some way. I do think about that a lot as I'm painting. I'm not really interested in painting this sort of pastiche of representations of landscape. More and more, I feel as though I'm thinking about these psychological spaces than I am, you know, an actual [elements]. You know, there's a horizon line, foreground, background, middleground. There's this

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particular time of the day, there's this particular quality of light, it's this season. And these are things I've really been hyperobservant of. Certainly, using some of these somewhat timeless motifs as the emotive eye, or the disembodied eye in this case, or trying to depict refraction, or trying to think about how does something feel, if it's wet or dry, or there's a temperature to it, there's a moisture to it...through paint, how does that get articulated in some way?

**BG: I'm interested in your examination of the psychological self and how it exists relationally to material things, to objecthood. It feels like you're focused on psychology as a material itself, which is really fascinating.**

**DW:** We're all trying to build meaning and we're grasping so often to live in a world of absolutes. There are times of discomfort if we don't have something figured out or something is unresolved or unsettled or evokes something without giving us that thing, or that there's just longing involved. Our contemporary culture is really, you know, we're really discomforted by the unknowingness of things, and because we all have this desire that we want to have structure and perceptions that need to be really clear. Maybe it's that first thing we were talking about, before we started the questions: what can't be captured by its physical boundaries, or even its emotional boundaries?

With every decision that's made for me moving through a painting, it's sort of like, what's lost and what's gained with every stroke? There's always this give-and-take where I have to reside in this total unknowingness, and sometimes it's really uncomfortable. Sometimes I want to have it all figured out, and I have to stay in the discomfort of something.

**BG: So it's about embracing uncertainty?**

**DW:** Yeah, I think the most stressful part in doing any particular body of work is, and particular painting these last...*(DW pauses)* I haven't even approached two months, and all this work has been done in less than two months, which is bonkers!

I get really stressed out in not knowing, by not having a clear path forward. There's an anxiety I've been sitting with, just because everything was so unreliable to me. I was so anxious because I was like, "what's the right thing? What's the answer?" And we all do that in however many aspects of our lives. So much of my discomfort has been what we've been talking about now. It was more than the timeline of trying to get these paintings done, like what am I supposed to do now?

**BG: You mentioned the word "solitude" during one of our meetings. It strikes me that interiority or a psychological landscape is a uniquely individual space, since emotions and dreams exist in an individual's experience—i.e., even if feelings of joy or despair are universal, they are experienced and processed by each person uniquely. Do you feel that these works are representative of a singular experience, or that they're speaking to a larger, communal confrontation with the sublime?**

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**DW:** I do feel that it's more collective than anything else. We talked about it before, how about paintings are perpetually incomplete until the viewer completes them and participates in that arrangement. It's like an agreement we make. [The paintings] aren't personal for me like, "Oh, here's this dream that I had." I try to tap in more to collective imagination or the things that unify our subconscious more than my individual, you know, "I had this dream, and the eye appeared and..."  
*(DW laughs)*

**BG:** This goes back to your earlier works, but I think it's relevant here, too. So many of your previous projects and exhibitions have represented the distress or corruption which exists alongside, or even within, beauty. Obviously, your reimagining of James McNeill Whistler's Peacock Room in *Filthy Lucre* is an excellent example of this, but you've also examined grief (*Splendid Grief*, the Cantor Art Museum) and climate change (*Forest Eater*, the Honolulu Museum of Art) through the prism of beauty and indulgence. Can you speak about how you see beauty and horror's visual relationship, how they inform one another?

**DW:** I guess I've always felt like beauty, like capital "B" Beauty, is always subjective and shapeshifting all the time. I'm thinking about our perceptions of what we say is beautiful, what are the impulses that we have that we need to say that, and what is the sensation that makes us think something is beautiful?

More and more, I'm thinking about how beauty is upended by its alignment with the grotesque, and what we consider deformities, or the breaking down of something, something that was animate returning back to dust. I think finding acceptance of certain ineffable aspects of what it means to live a mortal life, of expanding your perception of beauty [is important], because beauty is often about something decomposing. It's the beautiful corpse, it's the beauty in the hidden things that are maybe not so obvious.

And it's also the sublime, which we always think is like, there's something so beautiful that it's sublime. But the definition of the sublime is, like, it's the thing that's going to kill you. It's going to destroy you. What is that draw towards the sublime, because the sublime is about total obliteration. It overtakes you. There's really interesting things to think about in beauty, in that sometimes the beauty that we desire is also our own demise.