

'A Southern Edge.'

By Julyan Davis

I attended a talk recently by the painter Jerome Witkin. I liked his approach: his easy way with anecdote, his digressions and amusing epigrams about our profession appealed to me. I am to speak only briefly at the gallery, and plan therefore to keep that talk light and breezy. However, I did want to address, as Witkin was able to in his hour-long lecture, something of more weight.

Some people came into Helena's gallery last Fall. They looked around and finally spoke to her. We don't like Julyan Davis' work, they told her, why does he paint such depressing things?

This comment interested me. Am I such a painter? I have always thought of myself as a cheery optimist- hopefully not too blithe a spirit, but armed with enough naivety and expectation to have helped as I set out to live by my art alone.

When I am asked about the scenes and interiors of the sort featured in this show, I say my work is a response to the beauty to be found in overlooked places- the way that muted colors, an abstract composition, or an effect of sunlight bring a rarer emotion to the everyday. I don't think of them as unhappy paintings. Wistful, perhaps, but not melancholy. The opinion offered on my work by this couple, though, makes me wonder, not only about my approach to painting, but also about the painter's role in general.

Because my first response to those not to be patrons would have been "Is all art meant to make you happy?" I was educated by the Jesuits. In their rather severe way, they taught me an important lesson: that this life can be a vale of tears. We are all bound to one day be orphans, we are all bound to one day have to rise from the table and bid adieu to the party. You don't have to read 'The Prophet', or Frankl, or have memorized Hamlet's list of fortune's inevitable projectiles, to know that life will have its downs as well as its ups. The more we feel, the more we are open to feeling pain.

I love all that expressionist angst in art- Goya's horror, Munch's despair, the cheerless world view of England's own recent painting heavyweights- Francis Bacon and Lucien Freud. The world would be much diminished without their soul-bearing contributions.

In my own work, I am currently painting a show for the Greenville and Morris Museums that would be considered very dark indeed. It sets the passions of Appalachia's old murder ballads against today's South. On very large canvases, I have painted young couples in graffiti-covered ruins or beside wintry rivers, caught up in love's stormiest moments. Why paint such a subject? I grew up on that music. It is part of me. I have lived in the South's Scots-Irish 'honor society' half my life, and I see from the police reports that passion is still passion, and that love can be dangerous. Most of all, whether as therapy or meditation, these paintings address

my need to return, after twenty odd years, to this narrative thread in my work.

But this is not to say all art has to be difficult, or even challenging. I think an artist should paint their experience. Our art should reflect our lives. The artist's job is to draw attention to the world- whether internal or external. Good art changes the way people see a thing- a forest, a myth, or a coat hung over a chair. Better art makes other artists curse and say, "I wish I had thought to do that." The very greatest art alters in some way the path of every subsequent artist. The artist's opportunity to interpret his or her own experience is the generous reward for whatever trials this difficult career brings. Somerset Maugham put it well:

"Everything is grist to his mill, from the glimpse of a face in a street to a war that convulses the civilized world, from the scent of a rose to the death of a friend. Nothing befalls him that he cannot transmute into a stanza, a song or a story, and having done this be rid of it. The artist is the only free man."

But notice this is not saying all art needs to be confessional, agonies wrung from the heart. It does not have to always shock, or cast aside previous forms of art, or topple social mores. It is not required to take political sides, or expose the underbelly of society. It can be quiet and steady. It can be 'the scent of a rose'. It can celebrate beauty and tradition. It can, and should, reflect joy as well as tribulation.

I am realist painter because it best suits what I choose to paint. My style- realistic at a distance, playing with paint and abstraction up close, allows me the broadest range of subjects. A part of me has always been drawn to lose myself in paint, to plunge into complete abstraction. I love painters like De Kooning, but I love life's odd details more. When I paint a landscape- a beach on Kiawah, for example, the subject will allow me room for more abstraction, but if I choose to paint the way the light hits a row of abandoned washing machines outside an Alabama Laundromat, well, I need people to be able to see what it is!

That last kind of subject makes me wonder also. A lot of things I paint in the South are run down, kind of trashy. Perhaps this offended those people who commented on my work. I don't believe I am making a social commentary. It is more that I paint what I find intriguing and different. I don't think it is judgmental. I hope not. If I have painted Moon pies and cars on blocks, I have also painted waterfalls and bayous, palm groves and cotton fields.

As members of the Gibbes, and as aficionados of art, I hope that you discover art that is not mere decoration, repetition, or imitation. Every painter is glad to find a subject that he thinks will also sell, especially in a trying economy, but the past few years have taught me it is best to paint what you really want to paint. It shows. Aside from that, as in many art forms, a painting you can't wait to create seems to paint itself. Your role as enthusiasts and collectors is to look for a painting that says something different- either in approach, or subject, or both. We can all tell a good painting- it has a presence, a distinct voice. It is not sitting on the wall to accentuate the drapes. It catches the eye of your guests, and every morning seems new to you.

Our role as painters is to paint what we must paint, and hope that something in it is new, that we have added to the conversation.

To close, I want to include this excerpt from the short story 'Emergency' by Denis Johnson. American literature brought me to the South twenty three years ago, and this description: two strung-out misfits stumbling upon a place they do not at once understand, beautifully encapsulates what I seek in my work- the sublime hidden in the familiar, the revelatory moment that comes at us without warning.

"The road we were lost on cut straight through the middle of the world. It was still daytime but the sun had no more power than an ornament or a sponge. In this light the truck's hood, which had been bright orange, had turned a deep blue.

"Do you realize it's going to snow?" Georgie asked me.

He was right. A gun-blue storm was shaping up. We bumped softly down a hill toward an open field that seemed to be a military graveyard, filled with rows and rows of austere, identical markers over soldiers' graves. I'd never before come across this cemetery. On the farther side of the field, just beyond the curtains of snow, the sky was torn away and the angels were descending out of a brilliant blue summer, their huge faces streaked with light and full of pity. The sight of them cut through my heart and down the knuckles of my spine, and if there'd been anything in my bowels I would have messed my pants from fear.

Georgie opened his arms and cried out, "It's the drive-in, man!"

"The drive-in..." I wasn't sure what these words meant.

"They're showing movies in a fucking blizzard!" Georgie screamed.

"I see. I thought it was something else," I said.

We walked carefully down there and climbed through the busted fence and stood in the very back. The speakers, which I'd mistaken for grave markers, muttered in unison. Then there was tinkly music, of which I could very nearly make out the tune. Famous movie stars rode bicycles beside a river, laughing out of their gigantic, lovely mouths. If anyone had come to see this show they had left when the weather started. Not one car remained, not even a broken-down one from last week, or one left here because it was out of gas. In a couple of minutes, in the middle of a whirling square dance, the screen turned black, the cinematic summer ended, the snow went dark, there was nothing but my breath. "

Julyan Davis, February 2012

