

"It is something like psychological cleansing"

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Dan ATTOE interviewed by Sabine Weiner

English translation

The American artist Dan Attoe prefers to work in a small city in Oregon rather than New York. Why he works better in a more natural environment, you discover in our interview with him.

Dan Attoe's painting "Ancient Things" and his large neon installation "It's All the Same" are being exhibited until September 25th as part of the group show "Secret Societies" at the Schirn Kunsthalle. The American artist is in Berlin at the moment, although only for a short time. Such a big city is not for him. His gallery proposed that he might move to an art-centers like Los Angeles or New York, but he would rather stay in a small city in the state of Oregon, where he can look at the rolling landscape and work in peace. From September 9 to November 5, his new paintings can be seen at Peres Projects in Berlin. Sabine Weier met him before the exhibition opening for an interview.

Two of your works are being presented in the exhibition "Secret Societies". One is a painting depicting a group of motorcycle riders, riding through a mountain pass. The other is a symbolic neon installation. Are there secret societies that have influenced your work?

I am really interested in motorcycle gangs. I've represented this theme before in a few paintings and have read a bunch of books about these gangs. In the US, there are really a lot of them - for example, Hells Angels, the Mongols, or the Outlaws. Some dominate an entire state, others share the territory.

What fascinates you about these gangs?

Maybe it has something to do with this "Cowboy-Indian-thing" that interests me - this sense of adventure. I used to race motorcycles and have gotten to know a few of these gang members. They have this mysterious aura about them.

Can you imagine yourself as a member of one of these gangs? They don't really have the best reputations.

I imagine that all the time (laughs), but couldn't really do it. These groups are almost militaristically organized; the internal dynamics are really hierarchical. And you have to spend your life with these people from dawn till dusk. You are traveling on motorcycle together the whole time.

You founded the artist collective "Paintallica". Your work came out of a "short series of rapid-fire all-night work sessions" and you surrounded yourselves with these mysterious symbols. Are you also a little bit like a secret society?

Oh yeah. Somehow everyone of us has an interest in motorcycle gangs. Half of us have

our own motorcycles. At the core of every secret society and also at the core of "Paintallica" there is something valuable that we all treasure. Something fragile that we all protect and love. We protect it, by shutting out outsiders. Every person that joins the group is kept at a distance. We test the new members a while, before he can get our tattoo. Most of us have this tattoo. We also have a tattoo artist in the group. The motivation comes from the same place that our work does: we work with signs and they grow piece by piece. Then, we decide, whether that sign, for example, will become a sculpture or even tattoo.

This process sounds a bit like the methods of the Surrealists. Were you influenced by them at all?

The Surrealists definitely shaped Pop culture in general. But I wouldn't say the influence was so direct for me personally. We certainly share this work with the Absurd, because overall we like to bring humor into our work - something funny. That could be the same with the Surrealists. At its core, what we do is a form of psychological cleansing. A lot happens to get these demons out. The dialogue with each other helps us to work-through the world. That is really valuable.

Some of the members of your group are war veterans. Have you had any similar experiences?

For me it never went beyond my time in the boy scouts (laughs)! My father was in Vietnam like many other fathers in a lot of other small towns, in which I grew up. That is also a very meaningful American reality that one just knows who was in the military and who wasn't. Two of my friends from "Paintallica" were in the army because of 9/11. You just got the feeling after 9/11 that you wanted to take some responsibility and do something. I was actually in the final stages of my art degree and wanted to stay to continue working. But there was this sense that if you didn't go to war, whatever you were doing instead had to be important.

9/11 changed the art world. How was it for you?

I spent a lot more time painting afterward. I felt I had to give something, if I couldn't directly support the boys over there.

I read that you were also a bull fighter? Is that true?

No that is not true (laughs). A friend of mine is a journalist and hates Wikipedia, because anyone can just put anything in. When I all of a sudden had a page on wikipedia (I have no idea who put it up there), he simply snuck lies in there. He is also a member of "Paintallica", by the way. I do a lot of things, but not that.

You make paintings and neon installations. What do these different media allow you to express?

I always painted. That came first. I even spent seven years painting every day; that was a kind of psychological experiment. I became so fast that I could finish a painting in a day. At some point that just took up too much time, so I would finish just sketches in a day. Some were more serious, some less so. From the more serious drawings, I made

paintings. Other sketches were a more cartoon-like and became new themes for my work. They produced a new visual language - out of that came the work in neon.

Tomorrow your solo show at Peres Projects opens under the title "Lights Flickering in the Dark". What is it about?

My paintings still come out of these daily drawings. I usually don't take singular themes and make them into works; I keep it open. The paintings show a kind of development and speak about different phases of my life. When these paintings were created, I was thinking a lot about my daughter who was born last year. I have personally reflected what it means to bring a person into this world with all the problems that there are. There are a lot of dark things in these paintings but hope and humor also have their place, like lights in the dark.

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