

TM Davy on being a painter



February 15, 2017 - TM Davy is an artist who lives and works in New York City. His most recent show of paintings, "Horses", opened earlier this year at 11R Gallery. The gallery is located at the same spot where Davy's great-great-great grandfather once had a livery stable.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 1710 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Painting](#), [Focus](#), [Process](#).

In addition to being a painter, you also currently teach painting. How does it feel to be a part of this artistic tradition while also helping other people find their place within that same tradition?

It's interesting and sometimes very odd. It's a tricky thing. Being a teacher, sometimes you see the ego of certain kids wanting to be an important painter, but they don't have a sense of what that even means, you know? I think the idea of being an important painter is something that can't easily sustain you, but the idea of loving painting is better. When you do it for the right reasons, the work and the process remain interesting.

These days, even famous painters are not really famous. I'm sure there are painters still getting rich out there somewhere, but most of the people I know—artists who I consider in my world to be famous—I don't know if they make any money, frankly. That being said, I never want to discourage anyone. I think there's always room. I believe that if any of my students—any artists in general—who devote themselves, really truly devote themselves, with the same energy that I have or my friends have who are working in this world, then I think the world makes room. I just tell them the truth as I know it. It took me years to figure out how to really make my work, but once I finally did, people eventually came to it. Now, can I count on that for an income? Not really. Sort of.



I tell my students the realities as I have experienced them. I try to give them insights into funding for the arts and working in the art world to make connections. For me that means to really and truly make friends with people who are going to inspire you and be lasting inspirational forces in your life. I tell them to go to galleries, but not with this idea of simply networking. That will exhaust you very quickly. I tell them: go to the galleries that you are naturally drawn to and spend time with work that you happen to like and artists that you admire. Find them. It's pretty simple. Follow the bliss.

The art world is so slow. Painting is so slow. The idea that you're going to go to a few openings and just take power somehow is ridiculous. It's pretty easy to fall into these traps of feeling like nobody really gets you and that can throw off your whole relationship to everybody around you and to your work. I think I'm always on guard about that a bit. I'm pretty

good about keeping things in the right perspective regarding my own life, but I've seen this happen to people I know. I have sometimes tried to reach out to people when it seems like they are being swept up in that feeling. When you get fixated on the idea that, "Oh, New York is not a community," things can get out of control really easily. It's easy to fall into circles of negativity. The trick is just finding the right circle, finding people that make you feel supported and inspired. I was thinking about that at my most recent opening. I was looking around the room and realizing that it was a room full of mostly artists, which felt good. I felt lucky.

I know that you make music as well. Is there is a certain pleasure to having creative pursuits that don't have to be for anybody else. We get focused on the purpose of making things, when often it doesn't need to be about that.

I'm a pretty firm believer that pleasure is a way of organizing your mind. In some ways, creativity is like meditation. Painting an old piece of furniture can be a way of just being with an object in your world that's just purely about being with an object in the world, you know?

I don't think there's anything wrong with realizing that you are really good at painting old furniture or that you could make money by selling it in some way, but I think if you don't find the bliss in that space first, you're in for a really hellish road. For me, making music is the same as the painting, except I can make the hours disappear in a much more strange way when I'm making music. I can paint for 16 hours straight and an entire day will vanish, but if I let myself I could probably make music for a week without stopping and not even realize that a day has gone by. It's so strange.



You make paintings that are often very large and incredibly ornate. What is your typical way of working? Are you a person who needs to go into the studio every day?

I'm a real, organic flow kind of guy. I live where I work, so I kind of wake up above my studio and look out into it. When I start something, I kind of can't stop it. It's like the work is calling me to do the next thing. I get into real loops of work where I'll just wake up, paint, barely eat sometimes during the day. I can paint all night some days. Then there's other weeks when the painting is just not calling to me and I have to drink coffee for four hours and sit around and feel guilty and go on Facebook and just feel like, "Come on, get back to that painting." When I think of work, I think of actual painting, but at least I make myself go to that guilty "thinking about the painting" space every day, you know? It's part of the process.

Your earlier work focused largely on portraits of people, but your new work is all focused specifically on horses. There is a certain specificity to a portrait of a person that not everyone will be able to relate to, but somehow these paintings of horses elicit even stronger reactions—they are these very generous signifiers that people can attach meaning to.

People respond to them in a very strong way, much more than I had expected. I had felt that maybe that would be the case, just because once I started painting them, I realized wow, they can hold onto a lot. You're going through a lot being in these paintings because they're so slow. You think, "Oh, it's holding onto this hope," and then you think, "Oh, I'm feeling like maybe this horse wants to, I don't know, have more worry or something," and then you realize it can hold that worry but also the hope somehow. I think hope is necessary in art. If it's not there, then really what are we doing? I just kept hoping that people would be able to find all of these different things inside the images and it seems like they have. My work is so much about really finding the way that one image can acknowledge and subvert expectations of what an image is supposed to do... and horses are really perfect for that.



As someone who has made a career out of being a painter, do you feel like there are things you can say through the language of painting that you can't in any other form?

Yeah. I think to continue the music analogy, at the heart of music, there's poetry in the lyrics and those can often be inseparable from what the music is on a certain level, but underneath that there is this totally abstract thing that you can't really put it to words because it's just like a brain math that is beyond our understanding what that mathematics even is. It somehow opens up some mysterious space in our minds that I think we have no idea how to name or explain, except that our feelings know it, get it. Images can do that too.

Having spent the past year or so focused on these horse paintings, do you have a sense of what you want to do next?

I have no idea. I know I want to get back to just painting some people. There's always those people in my life that, when I look at them, I think I could really paint them. The fact that I'm lucky enough to be alive with these people, to be truly able to have even just enough time to make a painting of these people is a total gift. I never want to shy away from that.



Recommended by TM Davy:

Art shows not to miss: [Paul Sepuya](#) at Yancey Richardson, [A.K. Burnes](#) at the New Museum. I'll recommend their deeply connective art always and forever.

Shopping in the creative community: [Otherwild](#) and [Pacom](#)

TV: [PBS Eyes on the Prize](#) I can't recommend all 14 parts of this documentary on American Civil Rights highly enough. Devotion to justice is inspiring.

Podcasts: [The Bowery Boys](#) After learning my gallery address was once my family horse stables, I got deeply interested in NYC history. These guys are a joy to listen to, and the stories are awesome.

Music I listen to all the time in studio: Cocteau Twins, Sinead O'Connor, Nina Simone, Joni Mitchell, Eartheater, Colin Self, Frank Ocean, Fleetwood Mac, the new Kid Cudi. Also, Carnatic vocal master [M. Balamuralikrishna](#) who died in November. I've spent so many late nights painting to his longest ragas. Slow building waves to the chest.

With the emergent uncertainty of the American public education system, I'll also be crying to "[Landalide](#)" and other heartbreakers sung by the PS22 Chorus. Feels good.

Place: Jesse and Gary, a very old friend and his husband, run a [queer welcoming cabin resort](#) in Lost River, West Virginia. It's where I sat in a field for many days and drew horses. I love that place.

Name

TM Davy

Vocation

Painter

Fact

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