

# On not commodifying your art



Visual artist Cynthia Dagnault discusses expansive idealism, rejecting market-driven art, and finding strategies to keep creating.

December 2, 2021 - In 2014, the artist Cynthia Dagnault took a year-long road trip around the border of the United States, stopping every 25 miles to paint what she saw. The final piece, *Light Atlas*, includes 360 paintings. She's also a banjo player, prolific collaborator, and writer (who likes to write Star Trek fan fiction).

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 4139 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Writing](#), [Music](#), [Independence](#), [Anxiety](#), [Inspiration](#).

**You make large multi-panel painting works that take a long time to complete. What's your interest in working that way?**

I think of my work as long-form painting. If a single canvas is like a photograph or poem, then those pieces are more like a film or novel. I'm interested in narrative and time-based work, and I'm experimenting with bringing those concepts and histories into painting.

Beyond my interest in time-based art, there's also a market answer. Going to galleries, I began to notice that a disproportionate number of painting shows felt the same: 10 medium-sized, stylistically-similar paintings. A lot of galleries seemed to be supporting that type of work, showing those kinds of painters, and pushing forward that one narrow idea about painting. When viewed in a gallery setting, it was difficult for me to experience those works apart from their commodity status. A gallery is a showroom after all, and that kind of work centers so heavily on brand/artist, trend/style, and commodity/object.

No doubt there are economic reasons why I was seeing so much of that kind of painting around, but the prevalence made me want to do something different, to explore some other forms of painting. No shade—I'm not knocking that kind of work or the market component of painting. It's just that I began to see that approach to painting as overly dominant, and as a reflection of the disproportionate influence of the market in art. I just wanted to try something different, if for no other reason than to take the path less-trodden.

To me, it seemed that in becoming the cash-cow for the gallery system, painting had ceded a lot of its freedom to other media. Scale, monumentalism, immersion, serialization, collaboration, innovation and interactivity—everything that undercuts salability seemed absent in painting, though still prevalent in sculpture, film, and installation. I worried painting was sacrificing some of its cultural relevance for the easy payout, or more likely that the gallery system was only tolerating that kind of work.

Regardless, I felt that those new-media concepts could be reintroduced into a painting practice. This is what I've been trying to do over the past 10 years with my work. To me, they're like experiments. Scale was one such experiment. Most of the time, I just want to see what would happen, to see how working differently might make a painting mean differently. Like in the works you are asking about, the initial question was something like: What would a monumental, immersive, installation-based painting be? Could I make a painting that felt more like an experience and less like a discrete salable object?



*Equinox Clock/Solstice Clock, 2014/2016, installation view*



*Equinox Clock/Solstice Clock, 2014/2016, day and night*



*Equinox Clock/Solstice Clock, 2014/2016, individual zoom*

**Why do you want painting to be more of an experience than an object?**

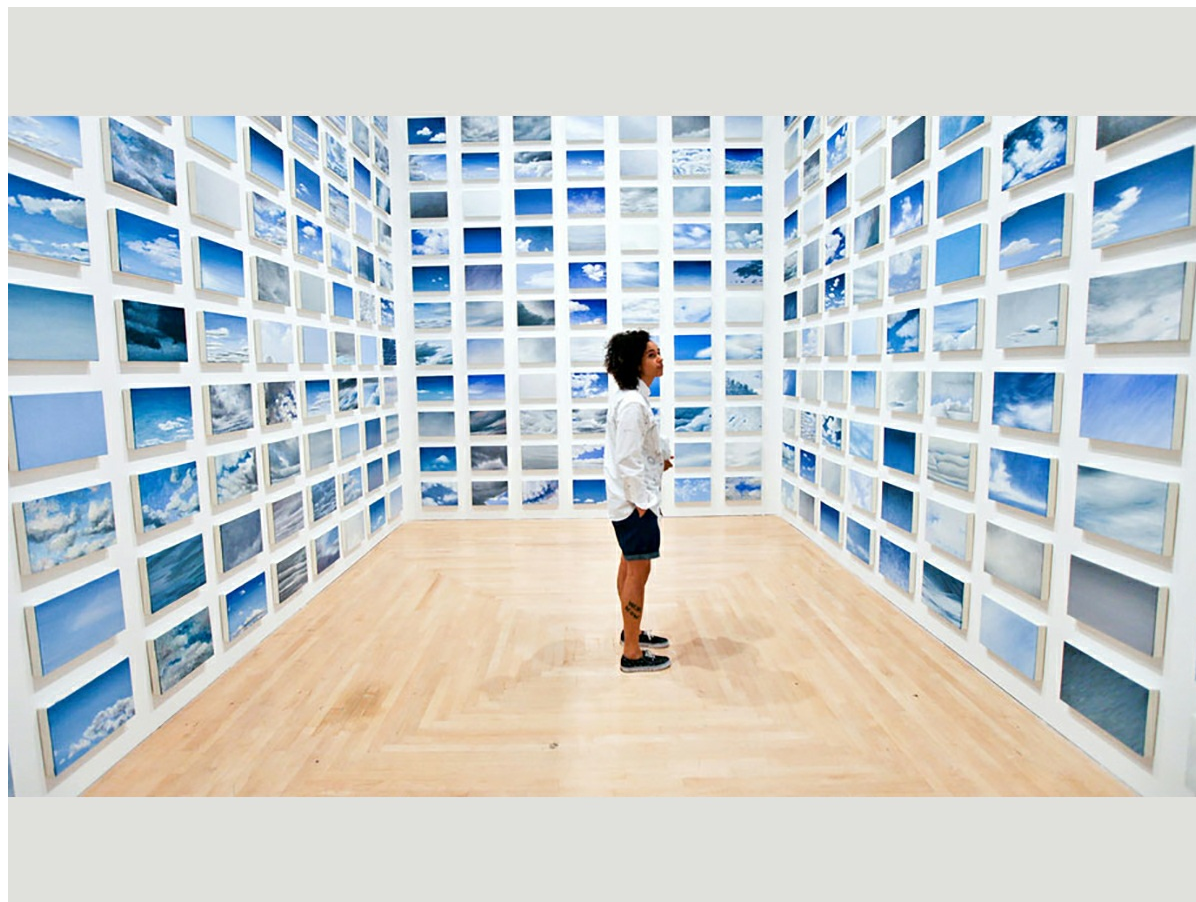
Honestly, I think I'm a delusional idealist. [laughs] Uncompromising, to the point of stubbornness-but optimistic that art can mean something. It can never be about the money. It's not about the money. Demographics is destiny.

I grew up in the '90s, in Baltimore, watching John Waters movies and going to \$7 Fugazi shows. I've watched myself over the last 25 years sabotage any opportunity for profitability in favor of better work. I bet you could trace that entire trajectory back to some primordial moment in my bedroom listening to *Bleach* on tape, full volume in headphones.

Maybe that's why I became an artist. I mean, Kurt killed himself. At the time, I didn't read that suicide vis-a-vis pop-psychology, as the result of drug addiction or depression or early childhood trauma. I saw his shooting himself as a brutal indictment of the market and as a bloody defense of artistic purity. I don't know. Maybe I do have some kind of '90s aversion to my so-called "selling out." And to be honest, I would have thought that by now, I would have sold out. For the house, the yard, the kids; but instead, for better or worse, I seem to have chosen a life without those things.

For me, the long-form works come from a desire to create something that's shaped more by expansive idealism, and less by constricting pragmatics. More about the blinding sublime and less about the muddy muck of earth. There's never enough time or money. We have to work in this life. We all die. Basic human truths. Those factors are inherently uninteresting because

they're givens. Like how expensive it is to live in New York, or that I wish I had a savings account, a steady income, or a yard. For me, I wanted my work to live in a world where none of that exists. Aesthetic purity. A place I call the clean zone.



*I love you more than one more day., 2013, installation view*

Take the piece you're asking about, *I love you more than one more day*. In the real world, in that year I could have made a lot of other, more practical work. I would have made a lot more money, my gallery would have made a lot more money. But I would never have made that piece. It wouldn't exist in the world, and honestly I think that would be a loss. I don't think that the 50 more practical, smaller works would have aggregated to equal the meaning of that one work. Here—I'm getting at the thing that is most important to me in art and in life: Meaning and mattering. To de-emphasize painting as a material salable market object is to re-emphasize feeling, caring, meaning, change, possibility, epiphany, empathy, humanism, and affirmation. I truly believe that art can mean something, that it can matter.

**With those larger immersive rooms, when someone buys one, would they need to buy the entire piece?**

Yeah, they're one piece. They have to be. It's essential to the meaning of those works that they remain together. It's funny, but people are always trying to break them up... I mean whenever I say it's one piece, I seem to annoy the people who wish to possess some smaller version of the work. That would never happen with long-form works in other media, like a novel or a film. Can you imagine trying to break up Kubrick's "2001" or Joyce's *Ulysses*? Like imagine if I said, you can watch 30 minutes of "2001" and get the whole idea, or here's the first 10 pages of *Ulysses*, you get the point. It's just ridiculous to me. As if the *Reader's Digest* version could still mean the same thing as the novel, or that a fraction of an experience could be equivalent to the whole. There is no way to parse an experience... a truncated version would only ever be a different thing.

I actually got into a cringe-worthy quasi argument about this recently. It was right after my last show, in which I made the *Light Atlas*. For the piece, I drove around the outside border of the country, stopping every 25 miles to make a painting. The work is a grand portrait of the US, consisting of 360 paintings total. After the opening, a very important editor/art writer dug into me, taking me to task for the work being one piece. His point (and he's not wrong) is that the piece is anti-commodity and anti-market. That it's completely unsustainable and unrealistic to make a painting of that scale, and that I would make more money for myself, for my gallery, and for my collectors if I broke the work up into four to six smaller works.

He's assuming I'm trying to make money. He thinks that my work has some kind of responsibility to the solvency of galleries, collectors, art magazines, or museums. He thinks I'm naive. I think he's cynical. Who ever said the point was to make money or sell the piece or get famous or distribute the maximum amount of work to the maximum amount of collectors? The point for me was to make something good, something important. It was a gesture for myself and for the public.

The piece wants to be one work, and it's in the vested interest of the public that it be one work. Who cares if I lost money on the piece; I knew that going in. Plenty of great artwork doesn't monetize, and was never designed to monetize. Can you imagine an important music writer yelling at a free jazz saxophone player for not monetizing her practice more? This is what I'm actively trying to fight against in painting. This is why I keep making the work I'm making.

**How do you approach making a project of that scale?**

As an artist, I don't have a boss. I spend all of my time alone. This could be crazy making. The studio doesn't have the structure of a desk job. It doesn't have a time I go to work, or a time I come home. It doesn't have other people. It doesn't have days off. And it doesn't have success markers like when a boss comes in to tell you "Good job Cindy." For some people, like myself, that's a highly uncomfortable space. I needed strategies to break up the time, benchmarks. Those kind of larger works are one of those strategies.

For *I love you more than one more day*, I knew that there would be 365 paintings. I knew that in order to make the whole piece, I just needed to break the work up into the task of making 365, one at a time. One foot in front of the other. I don't have to start from scratch each day, but am carried from the momentum of all the days before. I'm not lost in the middle of an



ocean, shoreless and directionless, surrounded on all sides by water and death. I can always see the shore. The numbers are a lighthouse.

Really, it's a capitalist assembly line. Henry Ford. The Amazon fulfillment center. Number goals. And like Amazon, I usually set impossible goals for myself. I'm always behind. The "boss" is always pissed at me and I'm always stressed about not meeting my numbers. Shit, I'm 10 paintings behind. Shit, now I'm 20 paintings behind. But that's pushing me. Maybe it's masochistic, but it works.

Usually, the numbers I set require working 16 hour days to meet them, and that's impossible, and that's probably the point. I think every artist races against time. There's only so many days before your next show. There's only so much art you can make before you die. You're chasing the clock. I'm always trying to find ways to motivate myself to make as much work as possible in the short amount of time I have.

To be honest, just like the Amazon worker, I can be pretty miserable while I'm in the middle of a shift. I work 80-hour weeks. I get incredibly lonely. I physically break down from the receptive stress on my shoulder and neck. And yet in the end, I look at what I did and I am often stunned. I never could have done a piece like that without those daily benchmarks. It's funny, becoming an artist, I always thought I was choosing a life outside of corporate America. Yet, here I am telling you that I'm basically an Amazon Fulfillment Center employee. Well—that's how the sausage is made.

It's probably true of all tasks in life—the journey of 1,000 miles. All of this gets into that deeper zen answer about the daily practice of painting. There's something really beautiful about going to the studio everyday and taking a little at a time. About seeing the story of my entire life reflected in the iterations of the daily. If I looked at the trajectory of my paintings, all produced one day at a time, in a myriad of moods, I could see the course of my entire life. That's a wonderful thought... You know there are a ton of worms in an acre? That's a wonderful thought, too.

What I'm getting at about the worms is that these larger projects are about the daily iterative experience of life, but there's something deeper too, something about censoring the self-critic or insecurity. Let me try to explain. Take the seriality of the work. I have a lot of conceptual reasons why I work with repetition: it expands painting outside of the singular frame, it references time, it allows works to be modular, it engages the architecture, it creates a narrative experience, etc. Yet beyond those formal reasons, there's also deep psychological reasons. To be honest, when I was a student, I found working on a single canvas to be incredibly difficult emotionally. I couldn't do it. Everything was make or break on that one piece of fabric; it could never be good enough. Yet, there's something psychologically forgiving for me about a work being made up of 360 paintings. Some of them will be great, some of them will suck. Just like days in your life. That's humanism. I'm making a case against the singular genius. I'm denying the importance of the one great man, in favor of the symbiosis of the whole. The sheer number creates an experience which is greater than the sum of its parts, greater than any single part. All are needed. All are equal in the transcendental whole.



*Light Atlas, 2016, installation view*



*Light Atlas, 2016, installation room*



*Light Atlas, 2016, installation detail*

If I was only showing one canvas and it had to be everything and perfect, I don't think I could do it. I know people who can. I just don't have the ego for it. I think a lot of art and life is finding strategies to deal with our own psychology. That's what therapy is, right? Learning your mind and building coping mechanisms around it. For me, creating a working method where the greater piece contained parts that could be flawed, was a way that I could live with my own failings and insecurities, mainly that I still think I'm a pretty shitty painter. I never vanquished my self-loathing, I just built a bridge over it. I mean that's not just a psychology that allows me to keep painting, that's also a psychology that allows me to sleep at night, to be at peace with my place in the universe. I don't have to be perfect or good, because I too am an integral part of some greater whole.

**And how does that relate to time? Are these representations of time passing? They seem to function as a calendar.**

I talk a lot about the depiction of time in painting, about painting as a time-based medium. This is a huge topic for me. Take *I love you more than one more day*, the sky room. On one level, there is conceptual time. One year. That piece is an abstraction of 365 days, like a calendar, a way to understand the unit of measurement by which we measure our life. Sixteen cups in a gallon. Buy how many years in a life? Then, there is also the specific time, depicted time. That piece was made in 2013, a very specific year. It is a portrait of that year, its specific light and specific weather. Indexical document. Then there is creative time, the time it took to make the piece, my time, performative time. Like the rhythm and tempo of all the brushstrokes that aggregate to a duration, 3 months. Think of the piece as a kind of live concert recording. Dicks Pick #69. A recording of a 3-month long performance that I did when painting the piece. Then there is phenomenological time, real time, the time when the viewer is inside the piece looking at it. The time it takes the viewer to see the piece, walk around it, experience it. Maybe 10 minutes. Then there is timelessness—the space above, outside of time, containing all of those timelines. There's a timeless space in the mind of the viewer where they can aggregate all those timelines into one multi-dimensional universe. Like different realities all layered on top of each other, like a stack of transparency paper, meta on top of meta. A Russian nesting doll. Inside the viewer—that's the god perspective, totally outside of time and space.

**And in your piece the *Light Atlas*. This idea of stopping every 25 miles. It struck me as meditation. You can't go that far. It slows it down.**

It's very short; it's frustratingly short. The whole trip I was like, "Oh God, it's already time to stop again."

**When you were doing that project, did you start thinking I should have made it 50 miles?**

You know what, there's always that moment—the reckoning. I guess I have different sides to myself. There's the idea side. I'm a conceptualist and I'm an idealist. The idea side dreams big and decides what the work should be in an ideal world. She doesn't think about the costs of making the piece, doesn't think about time, doesn't think about feasibility. The *Light Atlas* wanted to be 360 canvases. 25 miles was the right distance to capture the gradation of the color and light across the country. 25 miles was necessary. It had conceptual purity. But then there's also my real-life side, the body who has to enact the plans of an idealistic mind. I'm both the head of the company, but I'm also the laborer. So yeah—sometimes the guy on the factory floor is like "Fuck the boss."

Many concrete and steel workers have cursed Frank Gehry-like, why are we doing it this way? Why can't we just build a straight wall? I feel the same way. The architect says, "This is how it should be," but there's also always a moment in every project where me, the person doing it, says, "What have I gotten myself into?" That trip was about 20,000 miles in total. And I remember being about 7000 thousand miles into the drive and realizing, what have I done? My back hurt from sitting. I was exhausted from driving 14 hours a day. I was lonely and strung out. I remember looking at the canvases and thinking, "This has already taken months and I'm only at number 60. I still have 300 more to go... Fuck." That was a real moment of suffering. I'm not feeling sorry for myself. My life is cherry, but there is a moment in the middle of every piece when I'm like, "Why am I doing this?"

**When you have something like this, I can imagine being a number of months into it, and it almost feels like torture. I said meditation, but also torture, like the idea of waking someone up every hour so they have no idea if it's day or night.**

The weird thing is, I don't know what the psychology is. I don't think I'm a masochist or workaholic or agoraphobic, or not completely anyway. I really think it's just idealism. I want

the work to be the best it can be. Quality. I just want things to be meaningful, and that often involves working hard. I'm sure every person you interview can talk about this. Caring about what you do usually means working a lot of hours. I remember a Lil Wayne documentary where he described rapping about all the things he doesn't have time to do. Lil Wayne doesn't have time for parties because Lil Wayne is always in the studio. I feel that. I've missed a lot of parties, too. For instance, ironically, all those days I was painting the sky, I was inside a windowless room, not outside looking up at the sky. Or all those days painting America, I was just imagining the country, not out living in it. Or think of a great writer... every word describing an event is a minute not living one. Maybe that's why Hemingway kept his prose so frugal. He could only stand to miss so many bullfights. All I'm saying is that good art takes a shit load of time.

**Doing all these different things, is there any discipline that you favor? Or do you see them part of the same practice?**

To me it's all the same thing. I think I really voiced this clearly for the first time last week in answering the question of why I became an artist. The answer is this: I'm an idea person. I get excited by ideas. I studied humanities and literature and art history. That's my background—ideas, organized and expressed on a logical, linguistic level. When I was more of an academic, the sharing of ideas took the form of classroom discourse or essays. Now, it's painting, which is just a different physical manifestation of the same process: have an idea, share an idea. What was so special about art to me is that your thesis takes a physical form, one that can be experienced. I mean you can stand inside your thesis. You can feel it on a bodily level.

**Cynthia Daignault Recommends:**

Nancy Holt's [Sun Tunnels](#), Lucin, Utah

Javelina Crossing, Black Canyon City, Arizona

WG Sebald, [The Rings of Saturn](#)

["Mr Rogers Shows How to Make Crayons,"](#) YouTube

Joe at Putnam Auto Repair, 817 Bedford Ave, Brooklyn, NY

**Your multi-disciplinarity makes sense. The things you're doing feed off each other.**

For me, the same way that I was saying that I build strategies to deal with my insecurity in the studio, I also have to build strategies to deal with the repercussions of being a solitary painter. These other projects, or media, or collaborations—these are ways to keep going. There's only so many hours I can paint before I burn out. I need to find ways to see other humans and use other parts of my brain. Painting, to me, is at its purest a thoughtless experience. When I'm best at it, like when I'm really in the zone, my mind is totally empty. Like the TV at 2am, back when programming wasn't 24 hours. Remember? There was static and a crackling hiss, or that long beep over the color bars.

That "beeeeeep" is my mind when I'm painting. Programming is over. I'm off the air. I don't think about my day or where I need to be or my relationships or something I need to buy at the store. It's just drone. I'm sure there's some Buddhist term for this, but when I'm in that thoughtless state that's when I'm painting best. Consciousness is sublimated or gone. I'm just moving on some primal level, operating from some ingrained muscle memory that is the result of 20 years of doing this exact thing. Post-human. That's painting. The blank state or baby state. The ether state.

**You dissolve.**

Your ego—all of it dissolves. That nothingness is comfortable; it's a safe space. My life and its troubles and pains are just obliterated. But when I'm painting every day in that place, I'm not thinking or talking or interacting at all. I get lonely and dispassionate and aloof. I need some other stimuli to stay balanced and connected. This is why I play music, because it brings me back to my emotions. And this is why I collaborate, because it brings me back to other people. And this is why I write, because it brings me back to ideas and consciousness. They're all ways of coming back to a holistic self-mode. Painting for me is this grand effacing of the self. I need to erase myself to make good work, but I still need to be fully present to make work that can connect to the world. That's the rub. So writing, collaboration, communication, and conversations like this—this is where I regain some grounding. Balance is essential. After effacing myself for thousands of hours, part of me just still wants to reach out and talk to someone.

Name

Cynthia Daignault

Vocation

artist

Fact

In 2014, the artist Cynthia Daignault took a year-long road trip around the border of the United States, stopping every 25 miles to paint what she saw. The final piece, *Light Atlas*, includes 360 paintings. She's also a banjo player, prolific collaborator, and writer (who likes to write Star Trek fan fiction).



