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ATTOE**

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CYRUS W. SMITH OF ART TALK AM IN CONVERSATION WITH

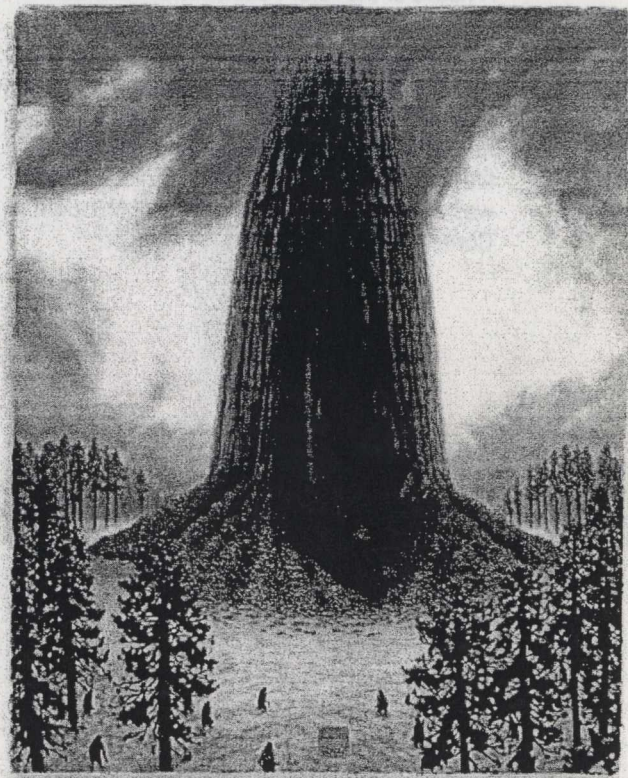
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DAN ATTOE

JULY 7, 2008

Dan Attoe

A native of the rural Pacific Northwest, Dan Attoe now lives and works in Washougal, Washington, just outside of Portland, Oregon. Attoe's paintings, drawing, installation and neon combine visions of the romantic American landscape with the seedy underbelly of rural life. At the time of this interview, Attoe's work was on display at the Portland Art Museum's Contemporary Northwest Art Awards.



CYRUS SMITH So, I was hoping to start with the Contemporary Northwest Art Awards. You were born in Bremerton, Washington, and now live in Washougal, Washington just outside of Vancouver, not far from Portland, right?

DAN ATTOE 'Bout a half an hour.

CS And you've gained quite a bit of attention outside of the area, with shows in London, Berlin, Spain, Los Angeles, Chicago, all over the place. Now you're starting to get recognition right here back at home. I was hoping to see if you could talk about that a little bit.

DA Well, I love that the Portland Art Museum has included me in this show. And I'm really happy to have my work nearby for everybody to see. I'm really happy to share with the people of Portland and all my friends who live here. In some ways I think a lot of the work speaks more clearly to people here than it would to people

But, most of the work does sell overseas or New York, or Los Angeles, so I've had some anonymity here, which I kind of enjoy, and I hope to maintain somehow.

CS Why is it, do you think, that the rural Northwest atmosphere, the backdrop for a lot of your work, might be sought after outside of here?

DA I think it's probably for the same reason that when we pick up a National Geographic, we want to see pictures of somewhere we're not familiar with. We want to hear stories about somewhere else, and be able to relate to someplace a little more alien. And there is certainly a romance still in Europe and in larger cities in the US. That romantic idea of rural America. When you go overseas and you go into a CD store, you don't find as much, say, Nine Inch Nails albums as you do tons of Bruce Springsteen and Johnny Cash. It's kind of interesting.

CS Maybe this would be a good place to explain how your work takes shape. You're

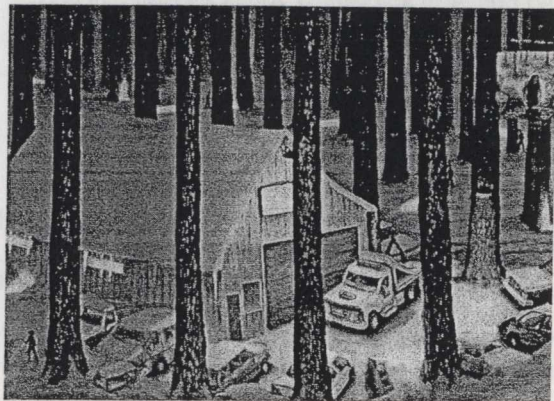
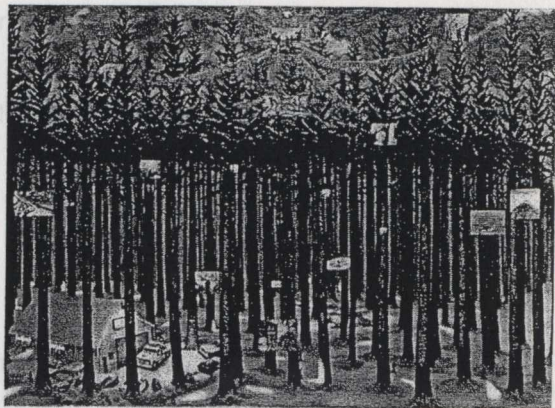
using this wooded backdrop as a setting for your paintings in a way right?

DA It varies a lot but I do tend toward rural, woody, mountainous scenes.

CS With a little bit of murder mystery?

DA Yeah, usually some kind of a strange thing happening. I was raised in rural environments, and I think I'm just far more comfortable in the woods. I live in a cabin on a river, I have some beavers in my backyard, so that's just going to make it into my work. That's all there is to it. But the original mission statement of the work came when I was a psychology major actually, and started doing paintings, a painting a day, and continued doing that for seven years, with the intention of them being as varied and different and experimental and exploratory as possible. But, gradually I found myself being far more attracted to certain things.

CS So the Dailys went on for some time.



DA Yeah, the Dailys went on for a long time, and I still do a drawing everyday. They are little tonal drawings usually of landscapes, in a kind of traditional manner with graphite every morning. But, I had to quit doing a painting a day when they started taking close to fourteen hours every day.

CS That's a long day.

DA Yeah, it's just kinda limiting.

CS So, some of the paintings are getting a lot larger now with the "Accretion Paintings." I wasn't sure of that word 'accretion,' so I looked it up, and it had an interesting definition. It's growth by accumulation?

DA Right, yeah.

CS So, like the way a tree grows, that slow kind of building on of rings, right?

DA Yeah, similar. I guess it's more like kind of the way a comet grows or the way the

earth grows, accruing space dust. I got the name originally from an experimental psychology class. An accretion experiment is defined similarly... the example that was given to me was that somebody wrote some graffiti on a bathroom wall and then kept track of all of the graffiti that responded to it. This was their version of a psych experiment.

CS And one other way you work that we haven't talk about at all yet is the neon, which is something that is relatively new, right? And definitely different from how you were working before.

DA Yeah, it is relatively new. It kinda had a funny start, there's this story to it. Two years ago I had this show in Germany, my first solo show in Berlin. I was showing in Peres Projects Space over there, which is a huge space and I, at that time, only painted really small paintings. Other than my accretion paintings, but I could only do two accretion paintings in the time I was given, because it takes so long to do them. So I had to fill space, and in order

to do that I turned part of the gallery into a bar, and I just decided to take some of my kinda goofy cartoonish drawings that happen around these daily formal drawings and turn them into neon signs... like bar signs. They were so popular that I was asked to do a show solely of neons, and continue to show them with my paintings now.

CS So that is the source, that bar sign?

DA Yeah, definitely.

CS Which is another setting that comes up maybe as often as the woods, right? The seedy underbelly, or the smoky bar.

DA It certainly does. For a while it permeated my consciousness a little more than it does now. While I was living in Washougal, at first, my brother was living with me and so we had regular bars out there that we would go to, which was around the time that I did this show in Berlin. I don't necessarily go out as much anymore but I certainly do enjoy the atmosphere.

Particularly of this one bar in Washougal called The Big Foot, where all the light inside the bar only comes from the neon beer signs.

CS One thing that we haven't mention though, is just the subject matter of the neon. You said the crude drawings, but they really are actually very crude right?

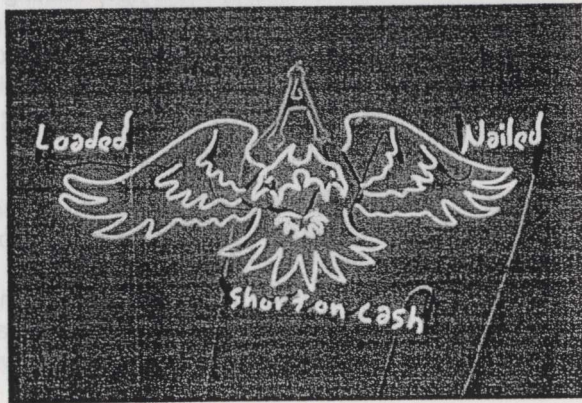
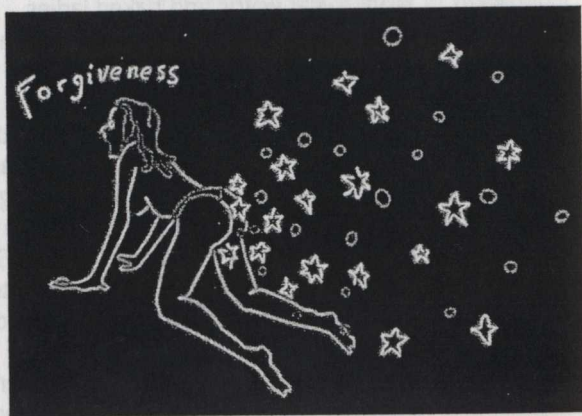
DA Yeah, they are. I guess I always have these little critical demons in my head and they're just as important as the more serene, or more lucid thoughts. So when I make something that I think is beautiful, it has an equally cruel counterpart making fun of it the whole time. And I think that's where the neons come from. They sort of keep any lofty ideas that may be in the paintings, which do occasionally happen... a way of keeping them grounded. And it also opens up sort of an interesting chasm when you're viewing one with the other. There's definitely a relationship there, and one is just as important as the other, this one is just far more crude and rude and full of swear words and naked ladies.

CS Yeah, swear words and naked ladies, things we can't even say on the air. What's the one. Called... *Forgiveness*?

DA Correct, yeah. There's a neon called *Forgiveness* with a scantily clad, or not-clad woman bending over with stars coming out of her, in a suggestive manner with the word "forgiveness." And then Charles Saatchi also has a few others on his website which are possibly equally or more crude.

CS So, we are talking about this all very seriously but I mean there's definitely humor involved in all this, in the neon relating to the bar signs, and the words you're using, and even with the paintings, there's a lot of humor in that. I was hoping you could talk a little about how that's functioning with the work and why.

DA Absolutely. I mean I think humor, for me, is just a way of trusting something deeper than what my brain would immediately understand. If I'm laughing at something it's usually an indication that it's important, even if intellectually I might not agree with



it. So, these nervous peripheral reactions are more important to me in guiding what it is I'm interested in, and what it is I want to present. I had a professor in UW Madison who just told me one time, after I had spent half an hour trying to describe to him all these convoluted existentialist ideas of why I was painting these non-objective forms, and he just said "Well if you don't love it, if you're not laughing or crying, don't do it." And it made a lot of sense. It just happened to concur with reading Søren Kierkegaard's *Sickness Unto Death*, and that's a lot about the importance of anxiety, how that informs our everyday life. So it seemed to me that the most sensitive anxieties are sometimes those that we can't immediately explain; which would be the same things that make us cry or laugh.

CS I'm a novice when it comes to psychology, but I've heard that crying and laughter are actually closely connected in our brains, right?

DA Probably yeah, I don't know neurologically where they lie. It's an interesting thing. I try to keep up on psychology, because I was a psych major for three years. Originally that's what I wanted to be. I didn't see art as being a tangible thing to follow.

CS And have you changed your mind?

DA I have changed my mind. I knew when I made the decision, to follow my heart, that it was going to be hard. I wasn't just going to land a job right away after school. It was hard. But it came about after long hours of putting numbers into computers on the psych research teams, and trying to revise my own experiment to be published, and it just was boring.

(laughter)

CS That's no good.

DA Well you know, there's a virtue to it.

CS That's interesting to think of your work of an experiment. I guess you kind of

manufactured your own experiment with the Dailys.

DA It's true, yeah, originally it was sort of about charting my own development and being able to share that, as sort of a selfish thing. But maybe no more selfish than the Rolling Stones writing songs about their lives and hoping that it relates to someone else.

CS Yeah, that idea of biography. I mean you're drawing a lot of this from your own life, your personal well of understanding of the world.

DA Yeah it's true. I allow everything to inform what I do, and my own experience pops up a lot.

CS Speaking of which, I read that your truck broke down right outside of Devil's Tower, which turned into the centerpiece painting for a show at Peres in Berlin right?

DA Yeah it did. The piece doesn't have my truck in it or anything... It's got these sort

of Neanderthal tribal people coming to the base of Devil's Tower in the morning in this very ritualistic way. But, my truck did break down right as I was pulling into the parking lot, it made it all that way and then died in the very spot that I parked it. The clutch went out. But it made me think that there was some strange kind of significance to this place. I don't really believe in these kind of things, but it had this sort of strange feel to it. I've never really gotten that out of the back of my head. So, I wrote the story on the back of the painting, and also on the wall next to the painting where it was being shown. I want people to know that.

(break for music)

- CS** So that music there got us to talking about the rural life again and how you can find these gems of music where you might not expect to find them. In the middle of nowhere, really. It's a life that you've chosen for yourself, but then I know you've been seeing a lot of the world with your shows.

- DA** Yeah, I just got back from a month overseas. I had a show in Berlin, Germany and two weeks later I had one open in Leon, Spain at a museum there. And boy that was fun, but I'm so happy to be back.

(laughter)

There's just such a narcotic beauty to the northwest that I'm so happy to come home to.

- CS** But, I would imagine growing up in rural places, that you might be trying to get out of rural places. Being a teenager, skateboarder and all those things.
- DA** Absolutely true. I mean, my father worked for the Forest Service, so we rarely lived in a town with more than two thousand people, until I graduated high school. And I always lived in different places, so I always had perspective, because I was never really a local. Even though I came to the rural lifestyle, I was never one of the local boys necessarily. And I was a skater, which set me out from a lot of people, and



also followed heavy metal and punk rock fairly closely through the late eighties and early nineties. So yeah, I was always wanting to get out of small towns but it wasn't until I moved to a larger city after college in Wisconsin, when I moved to Minneapolis and I realized that I wasn't completely comfortable there, and chose to live in a rural area.

CS You mentioned your father worked for the forest service. I actually read that on one of your paintings in the Contemporary Northwest Art Awards, and it said that he dressed up like Smoky the Bear, right?

DA Right.

CS Which I thought that was interesting, but I couldn't decide whether it was fact or fiction. It's interesting to find that this really is your biography, but there is also a lot of fantasy involved in your work too.

DA It's true. I mean a lot of my work is fictitious, but it's always grounded in some sort of experience in the real world. I think if you talked to Stephen King, he might say the same thing. Every experience you have in the real world has a sort of fictitious counterpart. You're imagining alternate ways that something can happen, and a lot of times that's what I end up painting. But yeah, I do weave the truth in sometimes. And it was true, my father was a forester. That painting is loosely based on him and his old office in this ranger station in Island Park. But, he's saying "Collect memories, everything lasts forever." My dad never said that to me, so that's a lie.

(laughter)

CS So there's a little bit of a lie, but with art I guess you can lie.

DA Yeah, you don't know. You don't have to know. But yeah, he did dress up as Smoky the Bear and usually a shorter person from the ranger station would dress up as Woodsy the Owl, and they would come to

my classes and do a little talk and hand out pamphlets and show us videos.

CS That's a bizarre thing. But I guess sometimes truth is stranger than fiction right?

DA Oh, I've been pretty privileged to have the sort of life that I have.

ART TALK AM /// ON THE RADIO

CYRUS W. SMITH IN CONVERSATION
WITH CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS
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This interview took place July 7th, 2008, live on KPSU, independent of the PSU MFA Monday night Lecture Series.

All audio available for download at arttalkam.blogspot.com.

