

Interview with David Stewart - July 21, 2020 - by Eric Tschaeppler

ET. Where are you from and where have you studied?

DS. I was born in 1987 in Saskatoon. Didn't live there very long though, moved to a little town called Okotoks just outside Calgary Alberta when I was one or two. In the late 80s Okotoks was a really small town of about 3500 people, I remember you had to drive about 25 minutes to go to McDonalds because they didn't have one, but like any good Canadian town we had two hockey rinks. So, they had their priorities straight.

ET. (laughs)



Okotoks Alberta

DS. Yeah, a very small farmer type town with a catholic elementary school, but then we moved away to Vancouver when I was eight, the Summer of '95. That was a big change for me that I still remember quite a lot - just how different life was in a different province. I grew up in the suburbs of Vancouver - Port Coquitlam, hometown of Terry Fox. I went to Terry Fox High School.

I did my first semester of university at University of Victoria. I knew next to nothing about art programs or what was good and what not. I think the main reason I went to university and not an art college was that I really wanted the university experience. My parents actually met in the dormitories at BCIT (British Columbia Institute of Technology) so they thought living in a dorm was great for you, and my sister was living at UBC. I wanted to go to a different school and get off the main-land, so I went to Uvic my first year. I still remember being so confused that first year of art school, just the general concept of art school - expectation versus reality was just this massive chasm. I remember having a meeting with the head of the painting department and saying I want to learn this, this and this, and the recommendation was: you should consider transferring to an actual dedicated, specialised art school. I took that advice and went to Emily Carr for three years.

After Emily Carr I stayed home for about a year and a half. I really wanted to travel but my father was having some health problems, so I stayed home for a bit. Then it was a lot of living abroad - in Seoul, South Korea, Guangzhou China - saving money, travelling, being broke again, a little couch surfing, going back, teaching again... I did that for a few years, it was fun. I kind of miss those days, but you know, all things must pass.

ET. How do you feel about studying art at university?

DS. I think that people can have different ways of thinking about art and it's really difficult to make concrete statements about what art education should be, because it's so open ended. For me personally, I do find the idea of art programs at university problematic for a couple of reasons. One being the socio-economic pressures they put on art communities, they kind of create the idea that a person needs to have an education or a diploma to be considered an artist. In Europe for example they often use a pass/fail system for arts. Why would you say this is an "A" painting or a "B" or "C" painting? It's such a ridiculous way of thinking about art. You are basically taking a system of education that was meant for factory workers of the 19th century and trying to apply it to something as abstract and non-concrete as art. But at the same time, we use that system because that's how we allocate things like scholarships and grants.

It's also kind of problematic because if there ever were an auto-didact type activity, it would most definitely be art.

Another thing I find kind of strange is that the most teachable and vocational aspects of art making are not taught anymore. Schools focus almost exclusively on the conceptual aspects of making art. I see people coming out of art school after four years and they don't really understand how to use their materials. It reminds me of an episode of the Simpsons where Mr. Burns has a thousand chimps trying to write the novel of the century, he picks up one copy and it reads "It was the best of times, it was the blurst of times..." The system is kind of Darwinian, some people learn on their own and thrive in it, a lot of people don't. It's a strange system that's meant to support the people at the top of it. Art in a university context loses any notion of being subversive. How are you supposed to be subversive within this power structure that is very bureaucratic, very centrally controlled, very much funded by the government?



The Simpsons
Matt Groening

ET. Has painting always been your art form?

DS. Yes absolutely. When I was a kid I would do more drawing and I used Conte pastels when I was around 14 or 15. I was lucky, I came from a middle class family and we went to Paris when I was 16 and that made a huge impression on me, getting to see some of those big old paintings like *Raft of the Medusa* or seeing a Van Gogh for the first time. And having this sense that there was this massive universe of creation that you could be part of if you chose to be. It was more about commitment, if you wanted to do this you could do this. I also remember being in a Chapters bookstore around the same time and opening up a Salvador Dali book (laughing) which is a very high school thing to do - getting into Dali, but I remember looking at all these paintings and just thinking that these were made in paint and that just perplexed me because everybody has some kind of interaction with paint - at least when they were a little kid like with finger painting - so how could this mucky substance that's so hard to control be transformed into something so precise and specific and illusionary? That was a question I had for a long time. A unique thing about painting is that it has such a long history.

ET. Is painting still your source of inspiration or are there other sources for you at the moment?

DS. Yeah, well just talking to people. I think one of things that formed my more idiosyncratic viewpoints on the world is that for whatever reason, I kind of kept together this very odd grouping of friends from early childhood. I have a friend who is going to become a medical doctor, another who busks, digs ditches and rides trains, and many in between those two extremes. One thing painting can do is show different ways of thinking or living in the world. That has always influenced me, people's different viewpoints and opinions and how that might translate into art making. You might see a film or look at a picture or maybe I'll be out for a walk somewhere and right now something that really inspired me was when I went back into the V.A. building to work. Looking through studios I made the comparison to Pripyat (city next to Chernobyl) in how it looked like someone left yesterday. There's paper on the ground, there's paper on the desk, there's a canvas hung up ready to go and then you look in the background at the plants my classmate watered all year - just dead, they were the only indication of the passage of time. When I saw this, I thought - wow this is a painting, this is this image that has a narrativity that unfolds. I also do love looking at a lot of paintings. There's this youtuber that I've followed for the last five years called James Kalm (real name Loren Munk), he goes to New York galleries and just pans through with his own commentary about them. I've found so many amazing painters on Instagram too. It's kind of inspirational and demoralizing at the same time because you see how many amazing people are out there making such fresh work and they are half your age and you think - I can't do this, what am I doing? You just have to soldier on I guess.



Grey Table (2020) Oil on canvas
36x48, David Stewart

ET. Can you tell me what your art is about? What are you trying to convey to the viewer?

DS. It's a formal experience first and foremost. People look and have that experience and are going to make up their own minds about what they've seen or what kind of messages are being implied. The artist themselves does not necessarily monopolise meaning in a work. But as far as what I'm focusing on, I'd say right now; I'm working on a new series of Still Lives. I'm making these paintings off of photos. I'm trying to find new ways to tell stories, to have some narrativity that comes back to a psychological profile. I think there is a way of bringing back an expressionist way of thinking of the world in a way that is not mystical nor naïve but is actually informed by critical or psychological theory. Part of me wonders if any of this stuff is actually in my paintings (laughing). I'm thinking of things like cognitive dissonance or cognitive behavioural therapy that trains you to stop making cognitive fallacies in our minds that cause our own suffering. So, I'm wondering if some of those scientific concepts of thinking about the mind can be applied to painting? I think there is a way of bringing back an expressionist way of thinking of the world that is free of mysticism but also free of cynicism.

ET. Is your interest in the psychological new or has it always been a parallel research?

DS. I think it's always been there. The psychological impact of paintings has always entranced me. Something that I saw as a young person going through troubles in high school was that painting was this opportunity to take whatever shortcomings you felt about yourself as a person, and take that vitriol and that doubt and all those negative things and sort of trans mutate them into something positive, make something provocative or interesting. A lot of great artists had shitty lives. Edvard Munch had a pretty awful life growing up. He had four or five close family members die before he was 30, an abusive father, he battled alcoholism and depression. But there is a lasting cultural impact to his paintings. I think that that is an important thing for society to have.

ET. I can't help but wonder now if you had a difficult life, if there were particular obstacles you had to face, that have shaped you?

DS. Objectively speaking I would say no. I have never worried about where my next meal was coming from. I'm a white, cis gender male living in Canada. But I had a lot of anxiety with different things, and had mild depression growing up. Regardless of who you are or your objective circumstances, those are very powerful mechanisms that can generate misery. Kurt Cobain was a multi-millionaire with millions of adoring fans, the biggest rock band in the world, with a wife and a child but he still took his own life. For me painting has always been a coping mechanism.



It's Always Sunny on My Desktop(2020) 36x48 Oil on canvas, David Stewart



Smoking-Drinking-Overthinking(2020) 36x48 Oil on canvas, David Stewart

Do you have a recurring dream/nightmare in your sleep?

I sometimes get the teeth falling out dream when I'm stressed.

Best places to "accidentally" bump into you?

Walking to or from the VA.

What historical figure, living or dead, would you most like to have dinner with?

Salvador Dali.

If Hollywood made a movie about your life, who should play you?

James Franco.

If you could reincarnate as a plant, which one would you be?

Arbutus tree.

If you could be texture, what would it be?

Ricotta Cheese.

Which superpower would you like to have?

Flying.

Do you believe that alternate universes exist, and if yes, what universe are you currently in?

Absolutely. I'm stuck in the alternate universe from Back to the Future 2 (Biff is president).

Is there any artist that you would like to share your studio with?

I was going to say Francis Bacon, but that is probably a "monkey's paw" wish. I'll go with Peter Doig.

If a wizard ambushed you in the park and made you choose, what category of food would you give life and be forced to keep as your best friend?

Spaghetti. There is a Pastafarian religion, so I guess I'd be a high up in the pecking order if I were friends with the talking spaghetti.

What is the oldest piece of art that you have kept of your own creation?

My parents have an acrylic painting I made in high school hanging in their bathroom.

What is the most bizarre thing that you've ever done that most other people probably have not done? I spent 56hrs riding a train with no A/C from Kochi to New Delhi in India. I would recommend paying for the A/C.



Dave's studio with works in progress



Picnic Dream (2020) 36x48 Oil on canvas, David Stewart