

MARTOS GALLERY

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Dan Asher

In the I of the Beholder

Organized by Bob Nickas

OPENING RECEPTION, FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 18TH, 6 - 8PM
September 18 – November 7, 2026

Adventurer/ethnographer, whether on the streets of the East Village or far afield—South America, Asia, Antarctica—a painter, photographer, sculptor, an obsessive draftsman, the artist Dan Asher (1947-2010) was a true force of nature. He possessed a restless energy, an elevated intelligence, well-read, well-traveled, always searching. An iconoclast, a mischief-maker, at times insistently impolite, the sort of figure today's professionalized art world can't easily accommodate, he slipped in and out of various scenes to which he was magnetically attracted. He could be alternately chaotic and hyper-focused, compulsive and meditative, all these dualities in the balance, and which also describe his art over five decades. He never conformed to anyone else's idea of what he should do, how he should behave, or followed a predictable path that would have led to an easier career trajectory. His active mind and mercurial personality were too alive for that, while the bumps in the road were, by all accounts, mostly of his own making. True artists are often their own worst enemies, and Dan was both. But true to oneself and one's art is what counts in the end. And here we are all these years after his too early passing, looking back on what he accomplished, the art, the artist present in all he recorded on a circuitous journey, yet purposeful in its twists and turns. Dan embodies something proposed by Paul Thek, another roguish wanderer who once, in a 1987 painting, would dreamily advise: "While there is time let's go out and feel everything."

Was all this art done by one person? Some may wonder as they make their way through this show. But then doesn't Dan Asher exemplify the idea that we are never only one person? Proceeding with the sense that we can, if we're willing, curious enough and not so easily satisfied, live multiple lives, interacting with and connected to others who may be thought of as unknowing extensions of our inner world, as we are of theirs, spokes on a wheel radiating out from our very limbs, the tips of our fingers. Dan once wrote: "I believe that drawing is the closest link of one's nervous system to the outside world." Clearly, he was drawn to energies emanating from many directions, and in simultaneity. With a tremendous sensitivity, it's tempting to identify him as a receiver, as all compelling artists are, open to whatever came his way and was pursued, often compulsively. He was too intense for some, but then he emerged from an intense time, one that appears increasingly distant to our own, a period inhabited by outsize personalities engaging in willful reinvention, the only recourse to limited options and inertia, or as punk reasoned: "Rip it up and start again."

In mid-'70s New York, in and around the East Village, where Dan lived, it was inevitable that he would react to the undeniable pulse of a new music scene. He picked up a camera and began taking pictures of the Ramones, Debbie Harry of Blondie, Richard Hell, Iggy Pop, and early on, before he became a worldwide star, Bob Marley, who Dan befriended and would go on to visit in Jamaica. The intimate portraits of Marley in this show are simply stunning. The tallest painting here,

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with a looming, totemic figure, features a Marley quote that Dan surely took to heart: "You're running, and you're running, and you're running, but you can't run away from yourself." The psychological aspect of Dan's art is inescapable. One work on paper, undated although likely from the mid-'80s, is captioned at the bottom with the word *Oubliette*. This is from the French *oublier*, meaning to forget. An oubliette is a prison cell from medieval times, with a trapdoor in its ceiling, the only way in or out. A person imprisoned there was left to be forgotten, a solitary confinement, escape all but impossible. Appropriately, the face Dan painted is nearly erased in swoops of chocolate brown, which some may read as scatological, their visceral physicality worthy of Artaud.

Dan was close to Jean-Michel Basquiat in the '80s, and Dan's now classic oil stick paintings and drawings, particularly the mask-like portraits, can be seen in relation to the raw expressionism of that period in downtown New York. (Basquiat's experimental no wave group, Gray, would title a song with Dan's name, an insistent instrumental that captures his frenetic side.) For all the agitation and noise in Dan's work, some are deeply poignant, soulful, haunting. He created, one after another, subtle line drawings that are quiet, contemplative. What connects them to the expressive oil stick canvases and drawings? Whether broadly gestural or subtle, slowly or rapidly rendered, the line has a life of its own. With the onset of the '90s, Dan's visual language was established in its abandon as well as its reserve. He made delicate pen on paper images, recurring figures mostly in profile, turned to the left, as sensitively felt as the '80s paintings pulse with unbridled urgency. While repetition is a hallmark of his work, as you move from one head or profile to another, each will reveal its own distinct personality. No one posed for them; the drawings seem to have posed for themselves. Dan's more minimal graphite images can be so tenderly rendered you might imagine them lost to a sudden gust of wind from an open window. Those rendered in oil stick are palpably inscribed, whether with a seemingly effortless touch or accrued density. His ink on paper works evidence a lyrical choreography/calligraphy. This is an artist who operated at different registers, with modulated and greater velocity, guided by his wavering temperament. But it's all Dan, just the same. He's there, hovering over an un-stretched length of canvas on the floor or fixed on a sheet of paper at his desk—persistently, patiently, impatiently.

Later in life, Dan was diagnosed with Aspergers, which for him explained a lot, his difficulties socially, and with himself, and it came as a relief he's said. What's important to consider in this respect is his photography, the way he was drawn to observe others with real empathy—people in the street, the elderly, a young boy with an emotional disability. His stunning photos of icebergs in Antarctica, from his travel there in the late '90s, appear to us today in a time of climate crisis as images of fragility as well as great beauty. While the iceberg photos seem at odds with those Dan took of amateur wrestlers, we can consider his motivations by way of a directive articulated in the late '60s by another highly intelligent obsessive, Lee Lozano, who said: "Seek the extremes." And yet for all the implied violence in the wrestling photos, and Dan was drawn to poignant moments at these events more often than not, his empathetic response to the world is just as present in them as when he captures an older, forgotten man curled up on a Tokyo street. For an artist who could be confrontational, he confronted his own life through his work, and it could be tender, it could be moving, and beautiful. Was Dan Asher always wrestling with himself? Aren't we all?

—Bob Nickas

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*The title of this text comes from one of Dan Asher's many notebooks, a selection of which was co-published by Shoot the Lobster and Rat Star Press as *Class Notes*, 2018, edited by Ryan Foerster.

"In the I of the Beholder" is written twice on a page of its own, dated *25 May 91, 27th st NYC*. This phrasing plays off the well known aphorism, "Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder." By changing *eye* to *I*, Dan asserts his central position, not only his vision but his mind and sense of self, first person, in all he does. Read by anyone else, as inevitably it would be, he makes a place for others to claim their agency.

Finally, I am deeply indebted to all the personal reminiscences of Dan's friends, fellow artists, curators and dealers collected in the book *Far From the Madding Crowd: Perspective on the Life and Work of Dan Asher*, edited by Brandon Johnson, published zingmagazine, 2015.