

MARTOS GALLERY

BOMB

Jul 1, 2010

Dan Asher by Ben Berlow



Untitled, 1980s, pastel on paper. 14 x 11 inches. All images courtesy of the artist.

Before I knew Dan, I knew him as the craziest guy at the 10th Street Baths. He would walk into the Russian room and immediately conduct the psychic energy of everyone inside, rocking with the waves of pheromones, voices, and steam in the air. Muttering to the nearest ear, he would say what a fucking mess it was, or just glare and wait for a reaction from whomever happened to look his way. For a long time I avoided Dan, but also couldn't help hearing his conversations, observing him observe others.

Once a guy at the baths sitting next to me was talking with Dan about the old days when a Hassidic Jew would bring a guitar inside and they would sing Bob Dylan's "Quinn the Mighty Eskimo (The Mighty Quinn)." We began singing it together; Dan went loud when the chorus came around. The other people in the baths just put up with us.

Not long after this, I was working for Kenny Schachter and Dan would come by from time to time, hustling his photographs and drawings for cash. I talked with him whenever he was downstairs waiting for Kenny to get off the phone. One night I visited Dan's apartment, mainly because of Kenny's warning that he lived in squalor and was too much for anyone to handle for more than a few minutes.

Eight years later, Dan was one of my best friends. Though we would be out of touch for months at a time as he traveled or was too depressed to see anyone, we hung out a lot. I watched as he photographed amateur wrestling matches in Brooklyn, heaps of barbed wire, flocks of birds, or anything that grabbed his attention. We sat and talked in the park, went to concerts, the baths, and the Strand. I bought him lunch or dinner whenever he was broke and tired of eating for free with the Krishnas, which was most of the time. Throughout our relationship I collected Dan's art, buying works I loved so that he could live.

Now he is dead, and I am left with these memories of Dan and his works.

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It is hard to put into words now who he was or what he was doing. I can only say that he was someone who felt things tremendously. He looked to spirits, he looked to nature, he looked inside humans, and he looked inside himself. He avoided calling himself an artist; art just happened as Dan was looking.

This conversation was recorded soon after Dan came home from chemotherapy at New York Presbyterian Hospital. Two months later, he returned with a fever, fearing his white blood cells were plummeting. I spent as much time with Dan as possible, bringing him fresh juices, rice pudding, whatever he wanted. We talked for hours and walked laps around the hospital floor. After a month of treatment, on April 23, 2010, his body gave up.

Ben Berlow

You were talking before about existing in the past, present, and future ...

Dan Asher

Well, a lot of people live their lives as if it were 30 or 40 years ago—or 2,000 or 4,000 or whatever. I guess that means they don't have to deal with the problems and situations of the present. It's a way of creating a space between them and reality. Having leukemia ... see, I don't know if I should say leukemia or lymphoma. More people know about leukemia, even though Jackie O and MrT had lymphoma. Anyways, I had lymphoma for some time, and then I got leukemia. The leukemia became transformed and much more serious, quite potentially terminal. I have the option of getting a stem-cell transplant after having intense chemo, but in a very short period of time this could just kill me. So I *needed* that chemo to happen and I *needed* a stem-cell transplant. I asked the doctor, "Can't I just get the chemo and then think about it?" And he said, "The chemo you did for six months? That helped you a little, and then the cancer started coming back two months later." That's what would happen if I don't get the stem-cell transplant. Finally I just said, "Let's do it."

This is all part of learning to take responsibility for one's own existence. Having Asperger's and having whatever kind of chemo-brain I have now just forces me to live in the present and to be more practical with finances. When I do the stem-cell transplant, it's going to be one to three months in the hospital and for months after I'll hardly be able to do anything; how am I going to get by? I supposedly have enough trouble getting by when I'm *not* laid up! Another good thing is that various people have come out of the woodwork, including my brother. A lot of stuff has gone down between us. Like I was describing to you, this book about the Amish just came out, *Amish Grace*.

BB

About their concept of forgiveness, right?

DA

Yeah. It's saying even if there can be *total* forgiveness, that doesn't negate the fact that certain things took place. Egregious things that violated ethical or moral principles—or just uncompassionate human behavior. So the book considers how much energy we should direct toward thinking and worrying about it. Spent mental energy affects the physical and spiritual body.

Having whatever I have, certain people—especially if they're not really on par with you intellectually or artistically—can get to you. People like to show that they're in control, see you squirm like a fish with the bait. The more my mind clears because I'm dealing with these heavy-duty issues, the more I'm understanding. Like seeing New York City and where it's at right now: the more I see it, *clearly* the uglier it is. Not that it *seems* uglier, it just fucking *is*. And I don't mean just some cheap-ass building going up next to an old building; I mean on every level, there's this complacency.



Untitled, 2009, tempera on paper, 18¼ x 12 inches.

BB

Complacency regarding what, the power structures of the city?

DA

It's like the Dylan lyric, "Too much of nothing makes a man feel ill at ease." There's a Vic Chesnutt song called "Mystery" that goes, (*hums, then sings*) "Complete lack of mystery ..." It's about a situation with no unknown factors. If you have Spencer Sweeney doing a performance, it'll be at Gavin Brown's, everyone will clap and smile, and eight minutes later it's fucking over. I'm illustrating a point: what I try to do—and hopefully also my friends and the people I try to influence—is to break out of that. But not just by criticizing. The Amish book says it's actions that matter. Again with my brother, I had to admit that I needed a donor, but I initially thought, It ain't going to be my brother! But he had stem cells I could use, and he immediately called the hospital and said, "I'll do it," without even thinking about it.

BB

It's an action, like how Emerson said we should judge men by their actions.

DA

It's an action, that's right. Just like some guy sent Gavin an email about my condition, and then Gavin got me on the phone and said, "I heard you're really sick, Dan. What's going on?" And he was totally serious. He wasn't bullshitting. That was an action. Gavin helped me in certain ways, immediately. The way he can help in a *real* way, before the transplant, in my art career, would be to organize a small show, even if for two weeks, in part of his gallery ... (*Begins crying*).

BB

You okay? You want me to stop?

DA

No, I'm fine. Just emotional. This all started because I couldn't pay insurance and it was due in a week. On one nice day, I just decided to have a fucking art sale in front of my house. So I brought the stuff out, dragged tables from the backyard. I put a big, messy, crazy pile there and it turned out really good, partly because I got off my fucking ass.

You may find this creepily weird, but part of the fun was that I got to insult Devendra Banhart. He was coming out of the baths, and I noticed his hippie garb and beard and the little elves around him. I'm a good friend of Josephine Foster, an amazing musician who was on some bills with him. I called across the street, "You're full of shit. The *real* brilliant singer is Josephine." So he comes over and says, "Why are you on my case, man?" Then he says, "Let me look at the drawings," and he goes, "I love these." And I'm thinking, He's a fucking musician. They're cheap, bullshitting motherfuckers. So he pulls out his hippie purse. I'm sure he had a big hippie purse somewhere with hundred-dollar bills, but he pulls out his tiny hippie change purse. And this lady was there with an iPhone. So there's this picture of me while I still have hair and a beard with Devendra Banhart and this doofy drawing that he bought for 50 bucks.

BB

(laughter)

DA

But then he said, "You're right. She is the best one." I told him he impressed me right then because he finally told the truth. Then Jeff Bailey, the bass player from Phosphorescent was manning the booth for a while.

BB

He sell anything?

DA

No, his fly was totally down.

BB

Maybe he was cooling off after the baths.

DA

Well, he wasn't at the baths. The point is that people came. I sold the big picture of the bird that was in the White Columns show in 2008. Not to namedrop or whatever, but I had called up Sarah Driver—Jim Jarmusch's ... not *wife*, but he's lived with her forever. She called back and goes, "How much more do you need?" I said \$460, and she says I can come tomorrow and pick it up. It was an excellent thing.

The other thing has to do with Vic Chesnutt. Jem Cohen made a film with Vic called *Empires of Tin*. Chesnutt wrote amazing songs for many years when he was alive and was a difficult, cagey guy. Now that he's dead, those songs for sure are going to be used in feature films. I wanted Jarmusch to go to the concert and meet Chesnutt, thinking he would either make a film with Chesnutt acting and use his music, or just use the music. That also was an action. His songs should be out there and they would make Jarmusch's films a lot better and it would make Chesnutt feel good. I try to incorporate that way of being.

BB

Where, into your life? Performances?

DA

My performances or my off-the-cuff jokes. Most of them, like the best humor, have a point: stirring something up or making people think about certain things. The last few months have gotten me to think less in black-and-white terms. I was reading this book, *A Brilliant Darkness*, about a theoretical physicist from Sicily. It went into what quantum physics is about.

BB

Like the Uncertainty Principle?

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And indeterminacy and all that. What they found out in the last 50 years is how the universe works. It's not necessarily logical. It's wild shit and that's why a lot of eccentric, flipped-out people get into that stuff. This book was about Ettore Majorana, who probably killed himself when he was 36. Some people reasoned that he was working on or discovered an idea that could then become something atomic, like a bomb.



Untitled, 1983, pastel on paper. 30 x 22¼ inches.

BB

Wow. When did he live?

DA

He was born about 1900. This other book about Paul Dirac, *The Strangest Man*, says that he had Asperger's. A lot of these people had a bunch of things, so that's why they sometimes didn't get along with each other, but they also would figure out equations. A lot of Dirac's findings were before other people's. Sometimes he would just jot them down on matchbook covers and go, "Well, I'm not into publishing, fuck it," and toss them. One time he figured out this equation and Fermi asked him where it was, and Dirac said, "I threw it in the fucking wastebasket because I figured it out. Let's have another!" I can relate to it because he was kind of a punk. A punk theoretical physicist. Chesnutt was a punk too. Just pushing things. But a lot of people push all sorts of shit. There's bad crazy and good crazy and boring crazy. The musicians I knew were usually fucking BORING. But not Chesnutt; he was into history, language, and philosophy. I would give him three or four books at a time on all sorts of subjects.

BB

Yeah, I remember when we saw him a few years ago and you gave him those books on the Civil War and Flannery O'Connor.

DA

One time I talked to him in front of Bowery Ballroom. Jarmusch's brother Tom was there. In 1999 Tom had noticed a thing on my neck. He said, "That's not just a thing." A week later they said I had non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. Anyhow, recently Chesnutt and I were talking about Obama. I had given him this amazing book *Angler*, a biography of Dick Cheney. Then on Chesnutt's last record is the song "Cheney." He said, "You gave me the book, I read it, and I wrote that song." I said, "That's cool, but whatever." We had some bullshit. Intense emotion influences the cancer, and that influences your immune system. Three or four years ago I had to

hassle with Stephanie Schwam, the woman making the first film about me, *Near Life Experience*, and that's when the cancer went from eight years of being okay to being a problem. Subsequently, when something heavy-duty, jarringly emotional, happened, the tumors would grow. That's a hard thing to figure out.

BB

Well, it makes sense; it's how emotional and mental energy affect the body.

DA

I had a hassle with the guy who owns the club Cake Shop when Liz Durrett—Vic's niece—played a gig there in October. I got into a fight with the guy; that was my lowest point. At Vic's memorial, I knew Liz didn't want to talk to me. It was just obvious. But even though that happened, she was about to make a new record. Someone had said that Mark Linkous from Sparklehorse should produce it. At Chesnutt's thing, who was sitting on the couch? Mark Linkous. Immediately we got along. I just said, "They want you to produce the record, and she needs a new record label." I felt good about doing that. Obviously when we make things, it's an extension of ourselves, but hopefully we can also go beyond ourselves. Or at least understand that we're not the only ones that things happen to. I don't believe in the word "artist" anyhow.

BB

Through history there have always been people that just *need* to make things, things that extend or transcend their personhood.

DA

I think it's important to go beyond what we know and are comfortable with or fearful of. It's also important to take a view about the world that isn't just cynical. Cynicism is easy. And it can be totally right. But do we

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want to spend so much energy *not* doing something? I think that in this country, at the present moment, it's a super important point. Some people think the government's going to *dosomething*. Some people think the government's bullshit and shouldn't be involved. Meanwhile, the *populace* is not changing shit. They're not changing buying habits. They're not changing thinking habits. There's a lot of chaos, recrimination, blaming, victimizing, being thought of as a victim or a new-age savior. But there's no direct attack of what—collectively—we're dealing with. A lot of green marketing has to do with PR and money. Our carbon footprint here, our fucking brontosaurus footprint here. Why don't we talk about something else, Ben?



Untitled, 1980, pastel on paper, 30 × 22 inches.

BB

Why don't we talk about *your* footprint, what you are putting out there and adding to the world? You said you don't get hung up on yourself, that you don't like art that is about the self. You're more looking *out* at the world.

DA

More than I used to. Let's say a person is on a higher-level plane in terms of their humility. Not just because they *think* they are, but they actually are. I don't believe in poststructuralist this and that, that it's all the same and just semantics. I do believe that there are levels, hierarchies, whatever you want to call them. Also, people have a lot more talent and ability than they give themselves credit for. That's why a lot of times in galleries it's more edifying to talk to someone who's sweeping the floor or bringing the wood in than the curator or the salesman or the artist or whatever. In any field, not just in art.

Another thing I want to get into is that one of my goals is to set up a foundation. I don't know what the reach of the foundation will be, but I think my work will, at one point, be worth quite a bit of money. So I want that to go toward assisting people. Not just artists, and not just people who have Asperger's or are bipolar. It's my hope that I will actually be healthy enough to start this and get people involved so they'll get a real idea of what I'm thinking about. Also, I don't want to spend a lot of my time with bureaucracy. Some foundation grants are like getting on welfare. A lot of the people who really need them can't deal with forms and fine print. Some of it you need to deal with—because of the IRS and whatever—but there are still different ways of running something. I would hope this could have an effect on how other foundations are run and give people an impetus to start new foundations that don't just run like all the other ones. That's one thing my work has to do with. Plenty of kids need help. And if they're *really* brilliant, they have a problem.

BB

A foundation would be great. But first you've got to help yourself. I mean, the congestion of this apartment seems to be how you need to live but it also gets in the way of your living. How many guitars do you have?

DA

I have three guitars, and I'm going to have a dulcimer very damn soon.

BB

What about all these books?

DA

Well, you can see that my TV is covered by books. If it weren't so fucking heavy, I would throw it out the window. I guess the tubes in there would explode and maybe kill something. I use a computer, but books function as my personal Internet. Some are just titles I was attracted to at the Strand. I literally stubbed my toe on the Amish book. It fell on the floor, and I hit it with my toe, and it turned out being very pertinent to what I'm going through. A lot of Asperger's is dealing with sensory overload, not being able to filter stuff out. But a bunch of Asperger's people have a telepathy that can mitigate some of the deleterious effects of the chaos. With me, it seems like the psychic phenomena happens more and more. People I'm thinking of call. When Stephanie was making *Near Life Experience* it happened a whole lot, and it initially freaked her out. This is someone who goes to yoga, goes to 43 different AA and NA and GA meetings.

BB

What's GA?

DA

God awful. I once made a joke that they should have ... what was it?

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BB

Anonymous Anonymous?

DA

Yeah, yeah. They don't like jokes like that. It's like in LA: when you make an LA joke they run you out on a rail. I don't know in New York. New York is both a joke and not a very good one.



Untitled, 1980s, tempera on paper, 10½ x 9¼ inches.

BB

Why have you stayed in New York for so long?

DA

At most I have only *spent* six or seven years straight in New York. But I've *been here* 35 years. Part of it is having a good setup now with the bookstore and doctors and the health-food store as I deal with this stem-cell thing. It's weird; now I have more desire *not* to be here. When I went to Jemez—the Zen place I've been to a bunch of times—they were very welcoming. But it's always the same in that environment. These people ... some of them meditated too much. A lot of strays were attracted there. I also didn't feel well physically during the trip.

BB

Where is it?

DA

In the Jemez Mountains between Albuquerque and Santa Fe. There are things that are good about it, certain other people. One of my problems about New York is that I want to hear *other people's* stories too! I love to be entertained! The weirder the fucking better. I would hang out at Burroughs's with Patti Smith in the '70s, before he hung out with James Grauerholz. We'd all tell stories and have a wonderful time. That's what I enjoy.

I enjoy music a lot, but I have to say I'm not thrilled by *musicians*. I was thinking the other day how artists are ridiculous in terms of their egos and personalities, and a lot of artwork is super ridiculous. But if artists are goddamn ridiculous, musicians are *beyond* fucking ridiculous. What about the ones who are both? What the hell am I? I learned singing from a crazy Mormon woman, I play some half-assed guitar, I can't write a fucking song to save my life, and I make art. I'm unbelievably fucked up and absurd. That's megalomaniacal, self-deprecating humor or some kind of

BB

I get it.

DA

I do hope there's some humor in this interview because *Near Life Experience* was 75 minutes of almost no humor. That was one of my main gripes.

BB

Could you talk about *your* videos? Can you try and put what was behind that video you showed at White Columns into words? I don't even know how to pose the question. You had the video of the moon, then you found the music, and that was the extent of your action in making it, but the result was something way beyond the combination of the two.

DA

That footage was shot on Tom Jarmusch's funky camera when we were on the Jersey Shore. But it wasn't until a year later that I got the footage. He had the raw footage and I had no idea it was any good. I got an idea to put it with one of Liz's songs. I was looking on MySpace in the middle of the night, and she had put up a demo version of this lullaby, "The Sea a Dream." It was perfect. It virtually didn't have to be edited.

I did another music video using footage that I shot of the hot-dog eating contest on Coney Island with the Josephine Foster song "The Garden of Earthly Delights." Then there's another beautiful video using another version of the same song. I shot the footage live when she was playing at Monkey Town and they had these projections of Busby Berkeley going. There was synchronized swimming in it and a silent movie of someone doing this dance with silk. I'm pretty used to making music videos by getting the music, finding old footage, and putting it together. Now it's probably good for me to make more videos by a different process. The problem with a lot of artists, musicians, filmmakers, or writers is that they

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do things that are easy or natural or successful for them, then stop.

BB

They just figure something out and stick with it.



Untitled, 2009, tempera on paper, 18¼ x 12 inches.

DA

The *real* visionaries—which is a word that’s used way too often—aren’t celebrities or CEOs, they’re the ones below. Either they don’t want to be visible or they’re too crazy or nasty. Nonetheless, they exist. That’s one thing I think about history: how it becomes about who is the villain and who is the hero. That’s why I liked photographing wrestling. The wrestlers *loved* what they did. There was a lot of joy and camaraderie there. I don’t see that much at concerts. I definitely don’t see it in the art world much. I see it more in communities that are smaller and closely knit. They have a party and actually *talk*. They don’t tell each other about their novel or their sandals or eyeglasses or the instrument they’re inventing. They’re serious and they’re living in the moment and that’s attractive to someone who might not be around much longer. This kind of thinking has made for a huge shift in my consciousness. I’m calmer; I’m becoming more self-aware, I’m more aware of other people. Do we have a few more minutes?

BB

Yeah. I want to talk more about your work.

DA

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Let me just mention one other thing: if I’m more known and respected I’ll get more of an opportunity to meet people who have influence, who run companies that collect art or whatever. I’d love to have a frank discussion with some of these people about the importance of how they spend their money. I think a lot of people with money are afraid of doing things differently and so they repress certain intrinsic parts of themselves. Some people who obviously have Asperger’s keep it secret or kind of know but don’t really *want* to know. Colin de Land didn’t say, “Hey, I’m Asperger’s,” but he said it without saying it. We also exchanged articles about alternative cancer treatments and I talked about him going to Brazil to see John of God, the healer. He almost went. When he died, his

memorial was at Cooper Union. When Pat Hearn died before he did, I asked Colin if I could speak and I said a couple things that just weren't what other people said. When Basquiat died, Glen O'Brien and John Lurie programmed the memorial service. O'Brien was really worried about what I was going to say, but Lurie said, "Dan's crazy and funny; put him up there!" He didn't prevail. My point is that around here, the only time people get together and talk is a marriage, funeral, or wake. Otherwise it's a networking party. I just think that's madness—that rote type of behavior and being.

If I recover from this thing I'm looking forward to traveling, showing my work in a place like St. Louis or a smaller out-of-the-way place. I'm quite certain people would be more serious about looking. They have more time. Maybe they won't be as informed, but they'll ask sincere questions. I think in general a lot of the best work isn't done in LA, Chicago, New York, or any "art place." When Joseph Beuys was in Documenta, he drove a Bentley at the time. But a few miles before he got there, he parked, got on his funky bicycle and pedaled into Documenta. That was the Joseph Beuys they wanted and that was the Joseph Beuys he *wanted* to present to them. If I behaved that way, I hope some people would call me out and tell me what a motherfucking hypocrite I am.

BB

Do you ever find yourself being a hypocrite?

DA

Sure. Everybody is. Dealing with the stem-cell stuff, I've become friendlier with myself but also friendlier with my faults. That makes life so much easier to confront. I read about this fundamentalist Jamaican cleric Abdullah Al-Faisal who lived in England for a long time before he was deported, and somehow he got to Africa. Gambia was the only country in Africa that would accept him; none of the Arab nations would permit him

on their planes. So at some point he was in a Kenyan jail, and his followers started having demonstrations, and all these people were getting killed. There's a macro-surrealism to this story. I like the word "irreal." It's not the same as surreal. It kind of means unreal, but the sound of it is just so much cooler. The actual *sound* of it.

BB

I want to return to the wrestlers you photographed and what led you to them. Being among them and photographing them seems to be distinct from the way you're drawn to aurora borealis and glaciers because we're talking about the difference between human subjects and nature. You can look at a glacier, but a human looks back at you.

DA

The backyard wrestling shows are modern-day morality plays. There's the bad person—the heel—and there's the good person. A wrestler might be a heel but a year or two later become a good person. History can be reductive, but it's also about foresight and hindsight and who should be the villain and who should be the hero. There was a lot of joy in those matches. How did I approach photographing them as opposed to the northern lights? The wrestlers, even if they were big and looked bulky, were super-energetic, and they could move fast. I liked that. The other thing that I liked about the wrestling was the more extreme stuff with the light bulbs, the weed wackers, and ...

BB

Necro Butcher?

DA

Necro Butcher, yeah. Visually more interesting. People would ask me, "Is the blood real? Is the violence real? Are they hitting each other? Is it theater?" Well, is Obama or Anderson Cooper real? How real is reality TV? How irreal is nonreality TV? Or how real or irreal is everyday frickin' life?

Generally I'm much more interested in things that happen in life to me or to other people. On TV the very best stuff doesn't have humans in it; it's animated or claymation. *The Marvelous Misadventures of Flapjack* is one of my favorite things to watch.

BB

Yeah, you turned me on to *Flapjack*. It's the best cartoon since *Ren and Stimpy*. So when did you return to drawing faces? Some of my favorite works by you are the gestural faces from the '80s, and you seem to have returned to making similar works more recently.

DA

Well, I went back to the faces and made them look like a kind of underwater foliage. Those more abstract ones were an outgrowth or a revisiting of the earlier oil-stick pieces.

BB

They're like a confluence of lines coming together, treelike or wavelike. Are these faces mirrors? What do you see in the face and why do you make the faces?

DA

I don't know. One of the things that's said about autistics is that they have fewer facial expressions. One night I was in such a horrible mood with that shit at Beth Israel, and I came home and made drawings of faces. When I saw them later, I didn't like to look at them, and I didn't want anyone else to. They were too much for me. Sometimes the faces could be cathartic, or things I don't express in my own face, or a release of emotions I didn't want to release in another way. I'm also just really into color and want to use color more diversely.

In terms of photography, I can't use chemicals because of the cancer. It's interesting that in works on paper, I'm going into color after all those

years, and my photography is becoming more traditional in terms of using film and *not* using color.

BB

You seem less comfortable talking about the particulars of your work.

DA

No, I don't mind. I guess I just enjoy talking about other things so much more.

BB

Well you've made a lot of things. I mean, I know you'll never lead the straight life and have kids or anything. But in the end, it's everything that you're doing and everything you're making which is more important than those things, and I think it's pretty amazing. That's what people will see down the line.

Ben Berlow lives in New York. He is a registrar at David Zwirner and an artist. He has had exhibitions at Studio Miko, Jack Hanley Gallery, Martos Gallery, and Callicoon Fine Arts, all in New York, and at Parade in London.