

A Conversation with Douglas Anderson, Nancy Sandler Bass, and Pamela Tucker

On the occasion of the Anderson's sixth solo show at
Blue Mountain Gallery
547 West 27th Street, Suite 200
New York, NY 10001

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Pamela Tucker it's so interesting how the paintings in your show connect to your childhood in Cleveland: to the heavy machinery, to the trains, the factories, the visual landscape of Ohio. Do you think this has been a consistent theme with your painting?

Douglas Anderson Yes, I think so. It's just become more conscious over the years.

When I was young, growing up outside Cleveland, I loved industrial scenes. Whenever we drove over the industrial area, The Flats, I was glued to the window, hungry for the sights of smoke and fire from the steel mills. I loved the hulking trains — the sight of their tracks got my heart beating faster, and I was euphoric if I could catch a glimpse of their lights at night.

To travel by bus or train was a rare treat. I was fascinated with the world of the commuters: the smell of diesel fuel; the rumpled newspaper left behind; the smell of cigarette smoke — they signified the *real* world, which couldn't have been more different from my placid suburban life.

So yes, the source of inspiration for my current show is definitely connected to my childhood in Ohio.

Pam And from Ohio, you came east. You have a BFA and an MFA. Do you have teachers you were especially inspired by?

Doug Gabriel Ladderman at Queen's College was a very interesting, very intelligent artist. He was definitely in the figurative camp, but he had a very open way of teaching that allowed for different forms of perspectives. He didn't take a rigid ideological stance. I found his openness inspiring.

At Pratt Institute, I liked Joe Stapleton... and once again, Joe was not ideological. He wanted you to do your own work. And that was a revelation. And at Kent State I liked Craig Lucas.

I did my BFA at Pratt and 10 years later I went to Queens College for an MFA. In those 10 intervening years I worked for Richard Haas, the muralist, who was another big influence. And from Haas it was a natural move over to theater painting, since Haas's work was pretty theatrical. I did some Broadway and mostly movies and television.

Pam Were you in a union?

Doug Yes, I had health care and pension plan and all that good stuff. It was 85% sweat and 15% fun.

Nancy Sandler Bass That's like most work!

Doug But that 15% could be really great.

Pam It must have been fun to see your work influence the appreciation of the production.

Doug Yes, that was the 15% fun part. Sometimes we'd get really good projects like a mural or a rare backdrop.

Pam Was there a lot of brushwork in those projects? Because I see a lot of brushwork in your paintings, and wonder if that was something you carried over from that experience.

Doug Yes, lots of brushwork, big brushes, little brushes. And I do think that my experience as a scenic artist influenced my work. Brushes are a very important part of that practice. I hear stories about old timers who would hide their special brush when they had found a favorite. They'd put in a secret spot in the studio so no one else would use it.

Nancy Were they really *special* brushes?

Doug They could have been brushes, that were the cheapest, most worn but they were the ones that responded best to what the artist was trying to do. Sometimes when those cheap brushes got worn, it gave an unusual character to their mark. You could do certain things with them that you couldn't do with the new ones in perfect condition.



White Bird, 19 x 24 inches, Acrylic on paper, 2024.

Pam You get so much variety yet consistency in your mark making. I can now trace it back to your years of working in large scale scenic painting.

Doug There's that opposition of control and no control. I don't want to be totally in control. One comes up against the other. I've always tried to get a sense of a form in my mark making. There's an opposition between mark making and form making. Sometimes when I'm painting I'll say to myself now make a form, now make a shape, and it'll get eaten away in a flurry of marks.

Nancy There's a groundedness in them as well as a perpetual movement. That's how I experience it. They feel profoundly alive. In your work, I can feel there's a spirit, a human experience in them.

Pam I'm thinking back about your inspirations from Ohio, there's almost a boyhood fascination with the thrill of being out of control... the thrill of the roller coaster.

Process

Pam In *White Bird*, I suspect you only saw the white bird toward the end of the painting? It's such an imaginative shape.

Doug At a certain point I become an observer of the painting just like anybody else. So what am I seeing in it? In *White Bird*, I saw a bird shape emerging. Any route you take into the painting, it's fine.

Nancy Some of the paintings are very textural and atmospheric but there are bones behind them in terms of how you build up the painting surface. There's an elusive quality that the layers create... it brings a viewer in.



Frozen City, 14 x 17 inches, Acrylic on paper, 2022.



Orchard, 17 x 14 inches, acrylic on panel, 2024.

Doug I work with acrylic and that's my paint of choice. But the material wants to go flat so I have to fight against that. I use extenders and paints to manipulate the chemistry and create texture and depth.

Nancy You definitely succeeded. Your work is very tactile. Would you talk about your palette?

Doug My previous 3 shows were almost exclusively black and white. In the work in this show, I've branched out, though the black is still clearly in the painting.

Pam From a distance ***Frozen City*** looks like an airplane. But then, it looks like traffic. And then again, it looks like a cityscape reflected in a lake.

Nancy I see a snowy winter landscape. But it's not cold! It's very rich. And your drawings have movement and excitement.

In ***Orchard***, I'm seeing all this beautiful blue. There's a landscape feeling to it. But it has a lot going on but it's so quiet. The blue shapes glow. I can see the rough industrial landscape but the white and the blue make it ethereal, peaceful.

Drawing and Intuition

Nancy Do you draw every day?

Doug The drawings keep my imagination, my intuition going so it doesn't go cold... I always have my sketchbook with me. Without my intuition it's going to be very hard to do anything.

Pam I can't think of a more durable bit of wisdom said to artists than to keep a constant sketchbook practice.

Doug I have been through periods where I just paint, but lately I've been drawing a lot. I was talking earlier to Nancy about drawing and intuition.

Nancy So let me google the definition of **Intuition**... "It's the ability to understand something immediately without conscious reasoning."

Further, "**Artistic intuition** is the practice of creating from instinct, imagination, the subconscious rather than pre planned or analytical methods." It prioritizes spontaneity and personal expression over final outcome. Keeping things open. It allows artists to bypass overthinking and to encourage mark making that the artist then responds to....process over product.... a flow state.

Multiple Painting Development

Pam Do you usually have several paintings going at once?

Doug Sometimes one, sometimes 2 or 3. And sometimes I will also go back to other paintings that I thought were done.

When I think the work is finished I'll put it in the pile. Then I'll go through the pile again and go through it again and again and again. Sometimes I'll pull out things that look promising and work on them some more.

Nancy So they're not stretched?

Doug I work mostly on paper, heavy weight Bristol, a paper that can take a beating. And then I mount them on canvas.

Corot painted on paper in oils. If you go to the corner of the Metropolitan Museum where they show Corot and friends, there are a lot of paintings on paper. Then they primed the paper with glue, shellac and other sizing. If they're properly cared for, they'll last.

And now...

Pam Are any of your paintings a direct response to a specific landscape?

Doug I come very close at times but the paintings were inspired by the massive forms I experienced from my childhood.

Nancy I would love to see this show get mounted in Cleveland, to have the work come full circle.

Doug Between the time I was there as a kid, and now, things have changed. The industrial areas are not as rough. Major industries have left, and it's much quieter now. There are still those forms though.... the bridges, highways, train tracks. The Cleveland that comes up in my mind is from my imagination that doesn't really exist anymore.

But the memories of that environment, the sense of the outside world which excited me, is still there.

My preoccupation as an artist over the years has been to capture the essence of the roiling world with freedom, spontaneity — and that continues to drive my work.