



Susan Inglett Gallery is pleased to present *Where We Live* an exhibition of recent paintings and works on paper by Benjamin Degen. A reception for the artist will be held Friday evening, 23 October from 6 to 8 PM.

Dear Susan-

I apologize for being so late with this artist's statement, and I realize that it is not really a statement at all. I attempted to write something concise and coherent and after three days of multiple drafts I've scrapped the whole thing.

The thinking behind this new body of work is still new to me. I found that when I tried to put thought to paper, words escaped and the ideas only became more esoteric. The connections that seemed so clear to me in pictures became cryptic in words and I am only able to understand them through the process of painting.

I am hoping that I can share my thoughts informally rather than in essay form. The show title, *Where We Live*, alludes to how we, both individually and collectively, inhabit the space around us. Having recently moved out of the city (to the mountains and back) I've been examining these ideas from a new perspective. Formally, I used a more direct method to paint all of these pictures: less pre-planning and more action/reaction on the canvas. My hope is that this process would allow me immediate access and permission to intuit the strong emotional, psychological and political ideas that were compelling me to make these pictures.

On the most basic level I am thinking about the environment, how we organize it, how we build structures within it and how we move through it. Our immediate environment (*Where We Live*) is a psychological, existential and physical extension of ourselves. From our small, intimate personal spaces we open onto the larger public sphere. We organize as neighborhoods, simultaneous social structures and built architectural structures. The microstructure of our immediate space and neighborhood reflects historical, racial, religious, cultural and socio-economic macrostructures. We exist as individuals within this collective mental/physical/environmental self. We feel connected to our neighborhood personally: the community and its buildings become a part of our being. Returning to the city after three and a half years I realized that in this short time the city and I had changed measurably. The places that I had known all my life were different. My old neighborhoods, as familiar to me as family and friends, were gone. As I looked around at the faceless facades of a thousand new "luxury" condos I felt a wall of exclusion between myself and the "old city" that I had known. I realized that I was not mourning the loss of buildings- they are inanimate objects- but their connection with certain times and certain people that are no longer. The old city's funk and shadows where these people had lived and where they could continue to live as ghosts was whited out by new glass buildings that didn't know them or leave much physical room for their memory. The ideas of gentrification, migration, people moving-in and people moving-out seemed not only connected to the hot New York City real estate market, but also somehow metaphorically to the grand "Moving In" and "Moving Out" cycle of birth, old-age, sickness, death. Gauguin used Tahiti as the exoticized stage for the metaphorical/metaphysical "Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?" I saw it playing out before my eyes in the much more local and less exotic real estate boom. The tectonic changes in the architecture of our city seemed so sudden and immense. They started to look mythic, metaphoric, allegorical.

Every time I look out a window a new floor is built onto a new tower. And this ceaseless new construction seems to chase me, peeping in every window and blocking out the sky like a sinister lurking menace in some Hitchcockian thriller. As I write this I am looking out my window at a new megatower that is buzzing with

construction right outside my studio...

As city dwellers the skyline defines our physical horizon and reflects our collective psychological horizon. This was clear when we lost the World Trade Center, and the gap in the architecture seemed projected on to our physical bodies. Looking at pictures of the towers falling over and over again was to relive a feeling of amputation, as if we had personally lost a physical part of our collective and individual selves. The skyline is an intertidal zone. It is the built and engineered zone of human endeavor. Our constructions (Steel, Wood, Plastic, Glass) span between the "natural" realms below (Earth: Rock, Dirt Water), and the "natural" realms above (Sky: Air, Weather, Celestial Bodies). The intertidal zone is an area where powerful bodies meet. At that meeting there is potential for a great transfer of energy and material. It is a potential that we can feel; the potential to "go in" or "go out" (again physically, psychologically, metaphysically). I was thinking about those people who lived near the water and were filled with the almost mythological potential energy of its edge when I made these paintings. I thought of how you can not only "go in" or "go out," but you can "look through." This idea of portal to another space or the mental projection into a "sublime realm."

I've been listening to "El Nazareno" by Ismael Rivera, which was also inspired by an interstitial place. The song tells the story of Rivera's pilgrimage to Portobelo, Panama for the procession honoring the Cristo Negro. Rivera had a vision where he heard the voice of Cristo Negro. I should pause here to describe that Cristo Negro is a statue - a life sized black Jesus - that mysteriously/miraculously washed up from the ocean in the 17th century and was installed in the Iglesia de San Felipe where it has been venerated ever since. Cristo Negro de Portobello is worshipped by not only the local population, but also by pilgrims who come for the Festival of the Black Christ (which happens to be on October 21). Cristo Negro is thought to protect the forgotten- people who traditionally would not have been respected by the Catholic Church in the New World, including the descendants of slaves and even "criminals".

In the refrain of "El Nazareno" Ismael Rivera relates the words that El Cristo Negro spoke:

(El Nazareno me dijo):

Be good to your friends

And offer them your friendship

And you will see that bad things

Will never come close to you

And instead everything good will always be with you Listen to this!

The Nazarene told me

That I should look after my friends

He told me... there will be much good for me

And much bad as well...

The Nazarene told me

That I should look after my friends

And keep on singing beautiful and pretty songs for

You who are my dear friends

The Nazarene told me

That I should look after my friends

By pushing forward, pushing forward, pushing forward, pushing forward like an elephant [...] do not let them knock you down, they will raise you up.

These lyrics serve as a rallying cry for all humanity. They speak of the individual's duty to use the tools at hand- in this case music- to help friends and community. They speak of a duty to support each other and to push forward together and protect each other.

I was thinking about this in terms of community involvement- being part of a human collective: A neighborhood in its physical sense as a collection of buildings, but also as a group of people. The idea of structures, physical and political, that we use to house and protect ourselves. I was thinking about this specifically in relation to our political fight for Free Cooper Union: which boils down to the institution's Real Estate versus the institution's Community and Mission.

This has been a very political couple of years for me personally, not only in my immediate community but more generally as we all confront the ongoing struggle for universal civil rights.

Going back to Cristo Negro for one more moment- I have to mention here that I am an atheist, but one who lives in America and has sung in a church choir and read the Bible... I thought of the idea of the Cristo Negro often over the past two years as we saw this series of very public executions of young black men. I was thinking of the Christ story: the idea that Jesus was sent to earth as a reflection of God's perfection and by extension an illustration of humankind's perfection. One aspect of the "sin" of Jesus' death is that we could not

perceive this perfection and thus felt compelled to destroy it. I think the main message here is clear: each human is a sacred embodiment of the Divine. I could not help but see the constant procession of young men being killed by police as some kind of American passion play- some insane crucifixion repeated over and over- the original sin of slavery echoing and echoing without end. I was thinking about the repetition. The terrorism.

I thought about our feeling of safety in our community. I thought about why we build communities to protect and help each other, the idea in Rousseau's Social Contract of the individual entering into a community for mutual benefit and common good.

I feel strongly Ismael Rivera's humanist call to: "Look after my friends by pushing forward, pushing forward, pushing forward, pushing forward like an elephant"

This is the long and convoluted constellation of ideas behind all of this new work:

This understanding that "All politics is local"

This focus on Where we Live:

How we define ourselves by how we live (individually and collectively)

How we define ourselves by where we live (our environment and the physical, metaphysical and political structures that we build)

Where is the space where we do the private small things that make us individuals? Where is the space where we do the large things that make us a community? Can we live where we live?

In New York City 2015 there is a thin line between Real Estate and Real Life, but the basic idea hasn't changed much since Bob Dylan sang it in 1968:

Dear landlord

Please don't put a price on my soul My burden is heavy

My dreams are beyond control.

I actually prefer the Janis Joplin version, which more closely reflects my attitude on the subject... *And honey I tell ya, I'm not gonna move to no other place, 'cause I just ain't gonna do it, no no no!*

Let me know if this is useful. Some of it is a little too personal for a press release, but more just for you to have a clear idea of where I'm coming from. I mean, don't write: "Ben's dog died and he misses the old New York of his youth." Or if you do please follow it with the crying emoji. Thanks.

Allright. Let me know if there are any questions etc. Back to painting!

-Ben

BENJAMIN DEGEN was born in 1976 in Brooklyn, New York. He received a Bachelor of Fine Arts from The Cooper Union in 1998. Degen has appeared in museum and gallery exhibitions in Belgium, Italy, Malaysia and Switzerland. Select exhibitions include Painting as a Radical Form, Collezione Maramotti, Reggio Emilia, Italy and Greater New York, PS1 MOMA, Long Island City.

The exhibition will be on view at the gallery located at 522 West 24 Street Tuesday to Saturday 10 AM to 6 PM. For additional information please contact Susan Inglett Gallery at 212/647 9111, fax 212/647 9333 or info@inglettgallery.com