

Richard Brettell

Ships

Stefan Dunlop arrived in Dallas Texas to paint, and he came to the right place. He had a light-filled studio in which to live and work, very few expectations placed upon him, and sufficient material for a concentrated campaign. And campaign it was. He worked almost every day and most nights for somewhat more than a month—with the odd visit to a museum or gallery or a pot-luck supper with other artists in the program called CentralTrak in which he found himself. His fellow artists were from Europe and the US, but, although he interacted pleasantly with them, he never let these encounters get in the way of his painting. He DID permit the odd “crit” with a fellow painter, an art historian, a local collector, or a grad student, but these exercises in critical discourse were so focused on his own project that they were, in effect, part of it rather than an interruption from it. He poured paint, pushed paint, scraped paint, talked about paint, painted with paint—moving his two large square canvases from the floor to the wall and back again to the floor over and over and over.

How did he get to Dallas? The story of the journey is almost as interesting as his pictorial adventure. It began with the publication of the home and studio he shares with his wife and children in an international architectural magazine called DWELL. As an architectural groupie and founder of CentralTrak AND a fan of what one might call “real painting,” I saw in DWELL a photograph of Stefan Dunlop working on a very large canvas representing several figures and was immediately interested in the combination of body-imagery and physicality in his work. Thank God for the web, because we were shortly in touch by email, and I offered him the chance to get away briefly from family responsibilities and to throw himself completely into painting in a part of the world at once unfamiliar to him and comparatively easy to access both culturally and linguistically. In other words, the huge physical distance between Australia and Texas combined with a cultural connection that made it possible for Stefan Dunlop to spring into action.

When one meets Stefan Dunlop, he is modest, attractive and very friendly. Yet, his easy-going way masks an intensity that grows with each encounter. He is, as a man and as an artist, completely focused on what he is doing, and it almost seems that his friendliness is a veneer that masks his own determined and largely solitary work ethic. If anyone thinks that painting is “easy,” all s(he) has to do is to meet Stefan Dunlop to find that the opposite is true. He pushes himself both physically and intellectually, becoming his own worst critic and forcing himself again and again to rethink his method before and after each “attack” on the canvas. Because he is so technically proficient and also has a flair for decorative colour harmonies, he feels that he has to push himself to make strong rather than “attractive” works of art—and it is the hi-wire performance of beauty with strength that defines his work.

While at CentralTrak, he decided to work on a diptych of square canvases that form, in effect, a continuous pictorial field. He knew, of course, of the late horizontal landscapes by van Gogh (one in the Dallas Museum of Art) that, like his, adopted a “double square” format. Yet, he elected both to enlarge each square and to make them physically separate so that it was impossible to create a single seamless pictorial field à la van Gogh. He also elected to paint a subject that was far from his own direct experience in an inland-studio in Texas— filling both square canvases with two archaic wooden boats crammed with sailors who have abandoned their vast sinking ships and given themselves over to the elements. Their collective struggle for survival is the “subject” of this diptych, doubling in intensity in Dunlop’s two square canvases.

The subject forces one immediately back to art history—or to the heroic theatrics of films like *Mutiny on the Bounty* or any of the pirate flicks with Johnny Depp. Indeed, the kind of Australian masculinity of Russell Crowe collides with the high-art pictorial worlds of Gericault, Turner, and numerous Dutch marine painters in Dunlop’s ambitious diptych. The imagery is, thus, at once historically imbedded and contemporary—as if to remind us that art can push us to re-encounter the elemental world of nature as it collides with our will and our sense of destiny. For Dunlop, paint is itself the medium for this primal encounter—and he pours, pushes, and physically cajoles it into pools that almost swim on the canvas, pushing up against each other, colliding, and occasionally covering each other.



A Woman Bathing in a Stream
 (Hendrickje Stoffel, Rembrandt) 1654
 61 x 47cm THE NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON



Old Master Lesson 1 & 2 2006

Diptych each 180 x 142.5cm, overall 180 x 285cm Oil on linen PRIVATE COLLECTION

The Raft of the Medusa
 (Théodore Géricault) 1818 – 1819
 MUSÉE DU LOUVRE, PARIS



Tampa 2009
 75 x 120cm Oil on linen
 PRIVATE COLLECTION



The sheer physicality of his paint is what separates his aesthetic from the equally “pooled” pictorial world of American colour-field painters like Frankenthaler and Louis, for whom paint was so thinned that it literally penetrated the canvas “ground.” By contrast, Dunlop’s paint is thick, viscous, and palpable, retaining, that is, its sense of liquidity even when dry. It is, indeed, when it is wet that Dunlop retains his power over paint. By the time it is dry, his love affair with it is over.

Like many artists of the modern era, Dunlop is fascinated by the various “art histories” accessible to the global artist. Not only has he encountered major works of Western easel painting on his numerous travels to museums in London, Paris and New York, but, like all great artists in the Western museum tradition, he also loves reproductive images of many sorts, and his studios are filled with prints, photographs, and drawings of absent works of art.

Goya, Daumier, Tiepolo, Gericault, Muybridge, Rubens, and others fight for recognition in pictorial collages on his studio walls and tables with newsreel photographs of old and contemporary digital media. Each retains its integrity in these temporary collages, but each is put into the gristmill of Dunlop's imagination for different—and highly specific—reasons. Compositional energy comes from Gericault and Rubens, particular figures from Daumier and Goya, and a sense of informality and immediacy from the photographic sources. The “meanings” of these sources in the art historical sense is of minimal importance to Dunlop, who carouses through the centuries with little regard for accuracy and consistency—an almost Australian swagger of a visual sort.

What is, for me, most interesting and compelling about Dunlop's recent art is the sheer beauty of its chromatic and compositional harmonies in contrast with its highly theatrical subject matter. His scruffy sailors clamoring for life in the midst of the vast, energetic emptiness of the sea are represented in gorgeous oranges, terracottas, and sienas, while the atmosphere that battles them is granny-apple green, mint green, pretty pale blue, and gorgeous warm grey. Dunlop the voluptuary is in open warfare with Dunlop the tragic story teller.

When Stefan Dunlop left Dallas, his diptych was almost, but not quite, finished. He had struggled with and against it daily for weeks, but he calmly rolled it up and took it back to Australia to be re-stretched, re-encountered, and rethought. He flew across that same great Pacific Ocean that he had evoked in paint and drove along almost rural roads to a modern house overlooking the sea. His journey was a post-modern one, the chief unpleasantnesses of which were pat-downs in security, bad food, and long hours of sitting in an airplane. But the pictorial journey he had taken was both longer and more demanding, one taken by so many Australians for several centuries. His paintings of men adrift in vast pictorial oceans might seem oddly out-of-date given our global world, but they take us back to our ancestors for whom the world was an angrier and much larger place.



Study After 12 figures (Yellow) 2010
40 x 40cm Oil on linen

Richard Robson Brettell, Ph.D.

Richard R. Brettell is professor of Aesthetic Studies in the School of Arts and Humanities at the University of Texas at Dallas.

With three degrees from Yale University, he has taught at the University of Texas, Northwestern University, The University of Chicago, Yale University, and Harvard University and is currently Margaret McDermott Distinguished Professor of Aesthetic Studies in the Interdisciplinary Program in Arts and Humanities at the University of Texas at Dallas.

He is also an international museum consultant with projects in Europe, Asia, and the United States. He has recently been appointed the Director of the Paul Gauguin Catalogue Raisonné for the Wildenstein Institute in Paris and was the guest curator for *Impression: Painting Quickly in France, 1860-1900* for the National Gallery, London, the van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, and the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts (2000-2001).

His many books include *From the Private Collections of Texas: European Art, Ancient to Modern* (2009, Yale University Press), *The Robert Lehman Collection: 19th and 20th Century Painting*, (Princeton University Press, 2009), *Gauguin and Impressionism* (2005, Yale University Press), *Impression: Painting Quickly in France, 1860-1900* (2001, Yale University Press), *Modern Art, 1851-1929: Capitalism and Representation* (2000, The Oxford History of Art) and *Monet to Moore: The Millennium Gift of Sara Lee Corporation* (2000, Yale University Press). In 2003, *19th and 20th Century European Drawings in the Lehman Collection* for the Metropolitan Museum was published by Princeton University Press, and his scholarly catalogue of *19th Century European Painting in the Norton Simon Museum*, co-authored with Stephen Eisenman of Northwestern University, (2006 Yale University Press).

He has also published books on the work of Camille Pissarro, Edgar Degas, and Paul Gauguin as well as a major study of Impressionist landscape painting.



An Actor

Honoré Daumier n.d.

25 x 17cm Pen, ink, wash, paper, laid