Interview

DAMIAN LOEB'S UNIVERSE

By RACHEL SMALL
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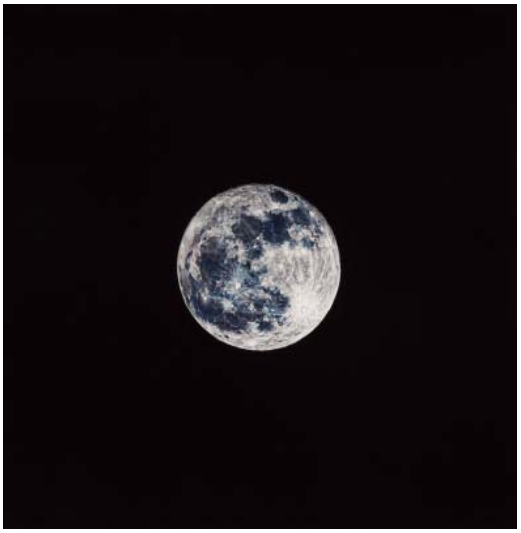


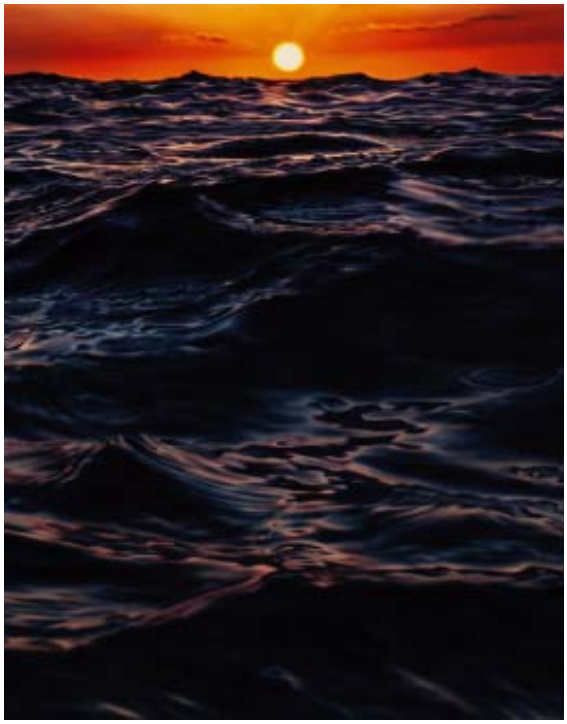
For an artist whose paintings depict a breathtakingly vivid natural reality, Damian Loeb spends a lot of time on his computer. Yet it's not so surprising, at least, when you realize two things. First: every painting twinkles with a digital glow, remnant of subtle enhancements he makes to photos from which he works. And second: Loeb seeks and needs images to keep him buzzing, images that answer and raise questions for him as he spirals into recesses of a meme-filled Internet.

He will never find the end, of course, but he can't help himself from looking. Perhaps that's related to why, for his latest show at Acquavella Galleries, his chosen subjects capture nothing less than the Earth and the universe, painstakingly rendered, from the ocean, to the moon, to every visible detail of the Milky Way. He sought to understand their existence, he will explain. So he painted it, layer by layer, sunbeam by sunbeam, particle by particle. The stars of the Milky Way alone took him 10 days. Not one is missing. Titled "Sol-d," an astronomical term for Earth, the exhibition is Loeb's first foray into landscapes.

Though it's easy to think of Damian Loeb's hyper realistic artworks as photorealism, he insists they are not. Never without a camera, he shoots all the photos he works from. He uses photo-editing software to break down the image, delicately refining lighting and tones, before rendering the modified form in oil paint. Using transparent glaze pigments, Loeb created skies that brighten or dim with outside light.

Self-taught, Loeb moved to the city from Connecticut in 1989. Now 43, this is his third show with Acquavella Galleries. The previous one, in 2011, focused on intimate depictions of his wife, Zoya Todorovic, with whom he has two children.

His studio is in an unassuming Tribeca building. But the uncluttered cement basement, where he works, reveals a painter of the moment. Screens showing surveillance feeds from around the apartment are hoisted to the left of his workstation. Another TV showing the feed from a camera aimed at his stoop sits above a five-screen computer. This apparently contains thousands of photographs he's taken or saved from the Internet. He divulges to us that when someone rings his doorbell (as we had), their picture is taken and stored forever. It's part of his need to document, to remember, and to record, should the urge ever strike him to paint what's been captured.



RACHEL SMALL: Your last series focused on your wife. How was painting her different from painting the celestial scenes in this series?

DAMIAN LOEB: Every single painting is different. I'm always trying to figure out what I'm interested in. Constantly. I stopped painting the paintings of Zoya when I felt like the next one I wanted to do wasn't significantly interesting enough for me. Usually when I go through and I make the collages or the images for ideas that I want to paint, it's like an Ouija board. Each painting I do is trying to understand what the hell I'm looking at, or want to look at. So, a landscape, [as a subject for a show] it's a frame of reference. I know what I was looking for but I seldom have perfect words for it. Like why this body of work came about. I have the obvious indicators that I remember from growing up and romanticizing space and science and astronomy and science fiction.

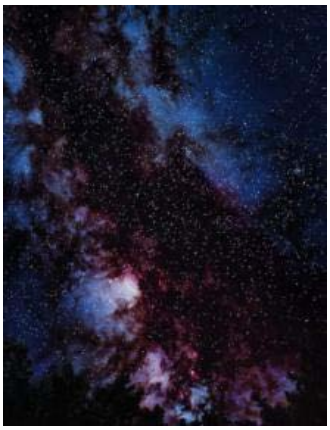
SMALL: Was that a childhood hobby?

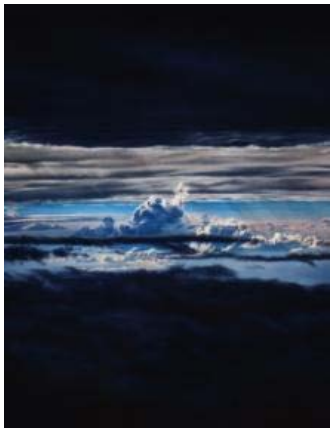
LOEB: *Star Wars* came out when I was seven. It was so different from anything else, like peeking into the land of Oz. All you wanted to do was see it again and go back and see more of it. That feeling is not easy to reproduce. Eventually, you give up and try to recreate that feeling yourself. These landscapes are all taken from images I've been shooting over the past 10 years. The process is that I shoot all the time. Any time I leave the house. So I have tons and tons of images.

I'm interested in visual vocabulary, like Warhol was interested in that vocabulary of advertisements and television and pop culture. I do a great deal of tropes. This past decade has seen a new term, "meme," which is exactly what I'm studying. In one picture or a few words, something can reference cultural stuff but at the same time exactly hit the button with a small cultural reference that is exactly what you wanted to say or understand. It's a stepping point to continue the conversation. Why are there buttons that are so easy to push?

SMALL: Have you ever had someone react in a way that's made you realize that you've pushed that button?

LOEB: Always. Every time I have people over, I watch how long they look at every part of the painting, or pictures on my computer. One of the few vetting points is that I have a few close friends and people that are constants. Whether I like their opinion or not, I've been hearing it for a long time and I can use it as this constant. I mentally pay attention to how long they look at every image, which ones they pause on and what parts of it they look at. For these paintings, I had a folder of around 300 photos. Only a few people I forced to go through that many.





SMALL: [*laughs*] Good friends.

LOEB: Very patient, good friends. I can tell exactly if they're commenting or pausing on or looking at the things that interested me or the elements that I was interested in. Then I know that there was something there. But I don't try to force-feed it or put any of those things on the images until I'm making a painting. It's not photorealism. Photorealism's goal is to reproduce a photograph. The best photorealism can't beat a printer, and I have a really nice printer. [*laughs*] I don't want to go blind doing what a printer can do.

SMALL: [*laughs*] Doesn't seem worth the sacrifice.

LOEB: Photorealism was this fantastic movement in like the late '60s and '70s, because photography finally became something that everyone could produce. I remember getting our first Polaroid camera in the '70s. My family got one and I remember just being amazed that my mom could take pictures and hand them to us and we'd watch them develop in front of us. It was amazing! Photorealism was and should've been a very short element. But the thing is, photography is so satisfying. Certainly when it's well done.

SMALL: How do you feel about [those cameras] becoming obsolete?

LOEB: Nothing. It's really not that they're obsolete, it's just that they have been incorporated into one thing. [*points to his phone*] This is a Polaroid. This is a VHS. This is the delivery system for rentals. It's absolutely everything. But it doesn't negate or change the value of painting, because the act of solidifying [something that is] artificially humanly created forces us to look at [photographs], [asking] like why did they do that? Photorealism says: to fool your eye. That isn't what I've been interested in doing.

SMALL: You're not interested in fooling people?

LOEB: No, not at all. All I want to do is realism [and follow the tradition of realism]. And [explore] what realism should be now be after the ubiquity of [smartphones]. I'm trying to answer the question. I don't think I'll ever have the words, but hopefully I'll have a few images.

SMALL: There's certainly the issue of quality of cellphone images. Do you believe in the sanctity of having something tangible? Like a tangible Polaroid as opposed to a digital Instagram photo?

LOEB: We're making so many images today and it's unbelievable. I shoot stuff all the time.

SMALL: What's your painting process?

LOEB: I try to figure a lot out before I paint. I do a tremendous amount of shooting. Then I do a ton of photo collages and work on Adobe Lightroom and Photoshop.

SMALL: How do you know when you're finished with one?

LOEB: It is an equation of the amount of effort it would take me to feel better, or I can't see anything that I can improve.

SMALL: Where does your mind go when you're just painting for days on end?

LOEB: *All* over the place. It's been so much a part of my life the thinking that I go through is crucial. I found that if I don't paint for around a week, I get practically suicidal. It took a long time to figure out why I had these mood swings, and I finally figured out it's because I haven't painted. I've always wished that I had a great ability to verbalize art theory and find a way that I fit in to the whole lineage, but I don't have a clue. I'm so grateful that I get to explore this. I try to write it down and understand it but I'm not a writer. I don't want to impress people with my writing. [*laughs*] I'd rather impress people with my ability to see and feel it and then share that.

SMALL: I think the fact that you aren't worried about contextualizing your work gives you a sort of freedom.

LOEB: It's screwed me in a lot of ways. Every art critic and every writer doesn't have a frame to start off from. If I made a statement saying, "This is Abstract Expressionism," they could go, "Well, he failed miserably," or, "Fantastic, this is a new genius!" [But] in art history, I don't see any of the artists I like spewing bullshit. I don't see anyone recording it or pronouncing what they were doing.

SMALL: That's such a modern thing, I feel, that everyone is trying to quantify painting and art. Going back to the landscapes, I know you would pick from all these photos. How true do the paintings stay to the photo?

LOEB: There's no staying true to the photo, because I shot the photo. In other words, I created it. Beauty has became a pejorative word in art. It was not something one should aspire to, because it was pedestrian. [With this series] I was trying to figure out why that was the case. Beautiful things became cheap and easy. If it's cheap and easy, then upper classes aren't going to aspire to it. So, they have to find something more esoteric. I wanted [the paintings] to be realistic enough that you would have the ability to forget that I'm showing them to you.

Now that I'm a father of three kids, suddenly the whole world seems different. I don't want to take anything for granted. If you gaze on something and you appreciate it, you become a part of that circle. That seemed to me to be the only relevance I could understand. So, the space, the time and the vastness of it all was overwhelming. [*laughs*] I needed to understand it or I just was lost.

SMALL: And you got every star.

LOEB: I made this whole landscape show of these images because I was tired of not understanding them. When most of the universe is [consists of] those things, not us. Not our world. Not my little life in the city. Not my family. Not anything. These are the big things. [*laughs*] And I wanted to do a show where I dealt with that.

SMALL: And when did you realize this?

LOEB: I started getting afraid of dying. I don't have any religion and I wanted to understand something about these greater powers without anthropomorphizing it. That's the best I can come up with for why did these landscape shows. I kept collecting these pictures. I wanted to finally feel better about understanding. I painted my wife because I wanted to understand her. I can talk to her, but I didn't understand why I was so compelled. Every show I've done, I've just wanted to understand something of this weird life that I woke up in. I've never woken up in anyone else's life, so I've got to understand this one. The only skill I was given is this [painting]. [*laughs*]

SMALL: Do you feel like you've reached a catharsis once a show is up and done?

LOEB: Each painting, I feel like I kind of might have gotten something. If I feel like I totally got it, there's probably something wrong and it's not finished. [*laughs*] And if I really feel like I understand it then I'm done with these paintings and I'll have to do something else. I'm nowhere near that with this series.

SMALL: You are literally taking on the universe.

LOEB: There's the people who can't stop looking and figuring it out. Then there's the people who have one of these [cell phones] in their pockets and don't have a clue how it's made. I really want to understand.

SMALL: I feel like with something like this, even sort of the length of time, even on a very superficial level, the fact that it took you 10 days to paint stars forces some sort of understanding of the universe, at least a little pocket of it.

LOEB: And the landscape is one of the kinds that I think, at least this body of work is the least selfish of the stuff that I've done. It's all selfish. It is making images of things that I want to see, that turn me on, that make me happy, that satisfy me.

There was footage from the International Space Station this year, [that helped explain something] that no scientist had ever figured out, which was gravity on a small scale. They understood how gravity can make planets and stars, because every object has gravity. But they never understood how it started—like how do you get dust to pull together, and start a thing? One of the astronauts—he just did this on his own—filled up a Ziploc bag with sugar. He shook it up, and held it up, and particles started clumping by themselves. The little grains just started forming objects. No one had ever thought of that. He put it in a bag so it couldn't go anywhere else, and blew in air so it's swollen. Every time he shakes it, they just start going back.

SMALL: That's so eerie, because that means we're all in a huge plastic bag, essentially.

LOEB: I love seeing things that work in the micro and work in the macro.

SMALL: Everything works similarly, but on a different scale. It's comforting. It's a universality you can wrap your head around.

LOEB: That's a comfort. I'm a painter, I'm an artist. I take things too far sometimes. I really need some comfort. [*laughs*] Really that's what this show is about. Each of these things comfort me in a way that none other of the things that I've worked on did. The Zoya show certainly comforted me because I am extremely fond of her—I don't know if you have someone who's significant to you—I'm sure you have. Fondness for people can be terrifying, because it's intangible and it can disappear, or it can be taken away, or you can say the wrong thing. A million things, so it's so uncomfortable. So when you suddenly become aware of it because they don't call you or something for half an hour or whatever, you lose it. I made paintings of her so I could ease that a bit, and not feel so uncomfortable and anxious. These are about death. That's the most artsy of a statement I can get for you. [*laughs*] I wanted to get enough of these paintings done so I felt a part of the Earth, instead of a joke that's going to turn into dust.

SMALL: It's going from something so intimate, like the paintings of your wife, to something that's equally important.

LOEB: Again, the micro and the macro. I have a whole other series of my wife that I want to do next! But I really

needed to do this, so I can do another series, and it will be different, hopefully. But I could get distracted. Who knows.

“SOL-D” IS ON VIEW AT ACQUAVELLA GALLERIES THROUGH APRIL 11.