

VOGUE

CULTURE

ART

A Studio Visit with Painter Damian Loeb

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March 4, 2014



Photo: (C) Damian Loeb 2014

The door to Damian Loeb's home-studio in Tribeca has no handle. Where one would normally be is, instead, a brushed-metal doorbell that, when pressed, triggers a camera embedded in the lock just above it. The tiny lens makes a visual record of everyone who rings—favorite friends and casual deliverymen alike—turning Loeb's front door into an undercover photo booth and resulting in countless inadvertent selfies.

Inside, the 43-year-old self-taught artist's skylight-paneled and subterranean workspace features a seven-monitor computer system that displays live feeds from at least five HD cameras constantly keeping track of the goings-on upstairs in the living quarters, on the street outside, and even on the building's roof. Numerous iPhones, Loeb's current mobile photographic device of choice, sit lined up on a coffee table across from a shelf where several SLRs and point-and-shoot cameras sit at the ready, all part of many a digital artist's arsenal.

If one didn't know his work already, it might be surprising to learn that Damian Loeb is foremost a painter. But sure enough, in the center of the studio, surrounded by ever more LCDs and iPads, is his enormous easel. Adjacent is a desk packed with dozens of tubes of pigment, diligently cleaned paintbrushes, an old-school color chart mounted on the wall, and a smudge-covered smock draped over an office chair that can be raised on hydraulics to reach an enormous canvas. On this particularly frigid late-winter afternoon, the easel is supporting a nearly finished picture belonging to Loeb's latest exhibition at Acquavella, "(Sol).d," his third with the uptown gallery that reportedly sold out before opening last weekend.



Photo: (C) Alick Crossley 2013



Photo: (C) Damian Loeb 2014

“(Sol).d” comprises both extraterrestrial landscapes and earth-bound views that are so out of context that they just look like they’re of another world. Several are depictions of the night sky meticulously composed such that every star, planet, comet, and supernova is present and accounted for. Others portray the moon in various phases that, taken together, could be mistaken for an inventory of lunar cycles. Others still are cloud formations so astounding that they recall a Caspar David Friedrich landscape, one of the most famous of which, *The Polar Sea* (1823–4), is depicted in the exhibition catalogue. “I’ve snuck one [of these kinds of pictures] into almost every show that I’ve had!” Loeb says, thrilled to have finally produced an exhibit consisting entirely of these alien vistas, a clear departure from the nude paintings of his wife, Zoya, that have recently spelled commercial success for the artist. “I really want to do another show with just these, actually.”

Seeing “(Sol).d,” it’s unsurprising to learn that Loeb’s obsession with photography and his painting process are inextricably related. “When I’m not painting, I’m Ouija-boarding with my photos. I’ll sort through my pictures, put them in different folders, and come back months later to one in particular and try to figure out why I took it,” Loeb explains of his database, which includes tens of thousands of images. (Loeb even thanks his various devices in the Acknowledgments page of the “(Sol).d” catalogue: All three iterations of the Canon 5D Mark and the Sony RX1R.) “I take a lot of pictures,” the painter says, deadpan, knowing by now that that comes as no surprise.



Photo: (C) Damian Loeb 2014

So why make these paintings at all? It's a question that has plagued Loeb throughout his two-decade career, during which the term "hyperrealism" has been applied pejoratively by critics who say that his virtuoso skills make for gimmicky art. But if there is significance to be found in Loeb's pictures, it is in the uniqueness of the individual works themselves, rather than in his technique. "I have always been interested in having people fall into the image and be aware of their reaction first, and then think about the style," Loeb explains. He says his work is only ever complete once it "takes on a life of its own," when it's no longer just a translation of the original photograph. "I have to assume that everybody interprets a piece of art they're exposed to as if it's already perfect in its wholeness, without knowing any backstory."