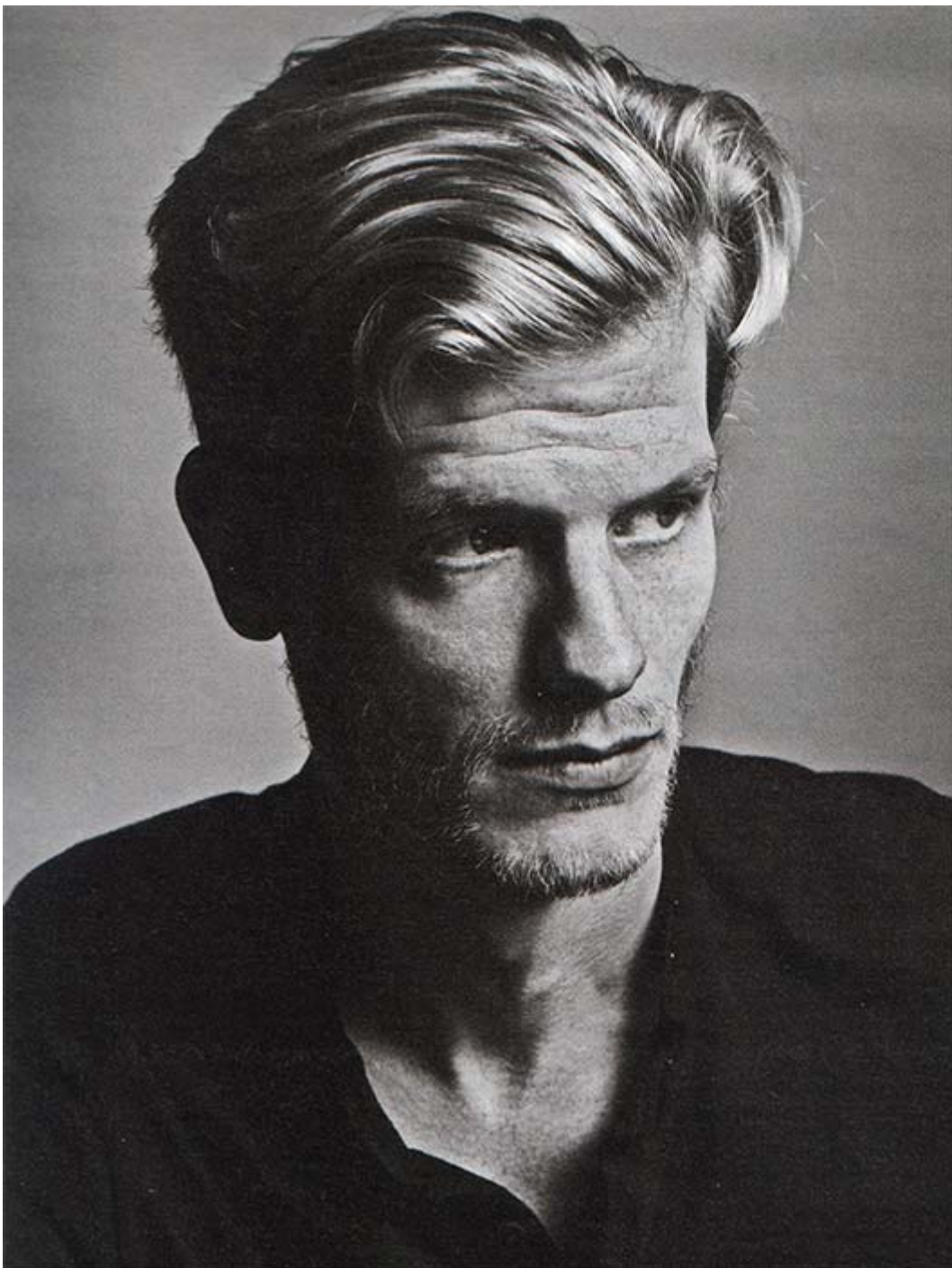


INTERVIEW MAGAZINE: SEPTEMBER 2008
PHOTOS BY SEBASTIAN KIM, INTERVIEW BY MIKE MYERS



DAMIAN LOEB *by* MIKE MYERS

Photography SEBASTIAN KIM

AN ACCOMPLISHED PAINTER WHO NEVER FOLLOWED THE CROWD AND PLAYED AGAINST HIS PERCEIVED CHIC, HE DOESN'T PAINT FROM LIFE, BUT FROM LEGO AND *STAR WARS*

Before this decade even got started, painter Damian Loeb was being heralded as the new bad-boy downtown art star of the 21st century. Painting was making a comeback on the gallery scene, and the handsome young artist fit the new face of the genre's resurgence. Loeb created searing, almost cinematic realism on his canvases, the results often looking like crime scenes about to happen. The 38-year-old Loeb has come a long way since those early celebrity days, and so has his mastery of the craft. His latest work, which will be shown this month at New York City's Acquavella Galleries, delves into the dark psychology of memory and emotion, using, among other sources, stills from his favorite films rendered in his lurid figurative strokes. Turns out, Loeb is something of a cinephile, a condition he shares with one of his good friends, actor Mike Myers. Here, the two discuss what films can do that most art cannot, why they are both so obsessed with LEGO, and how a pause button on a VCR can lead to a lot of meta moments.



Damian Loeb "M" 48" x 96" Oil on Linen

MIKE MYERS: Paintings freeze time. Do you think the static nature of your work allows you to take a moment and analyze the psychological states that are happening?

DAMIAN LOEB: Yes. But I've always been fascinated by film. I'm a first-generation Star Wars [1977] fan. That movie made a huge impression on me. I spent my early years drawing pictures from Star Wars and even drawing myself into the film. So I froze these particular moments, but I also wanted to be in on the action. I wanted to be in the Death Star, fighting. I played Star Wars with friends, and we would live in the high of pretending. But when you're done playing, it's time to go home and you don't have anything to show for it. The drawings became that other half. As I got a little more sophisticated, I realized I wanted to find a way to get a still image potent enough so that the act of experiencing it would make you recall a linear amount of time—like if you smell something, you can remember a whole moment.

DL: The series before this one was made up of long paintings. I took frames from films that I loved, cut them up, and made some as long as 14 feet. I was trying to make a still image that you could stand in front of and look at long enough so you'd have to pan from one side to the other. There was a little bit of an actual linear-time experience.

MM: You've almost made a visual pun of painting the panning that occurs in cinematography.

DL: I always noticed there was something unique about frozen frames in movies. I remember having my first VCR and being able to pause the movie whenever I wanted. Up until that point you had to show up at a movie theater, panicking about getting there on time. You sit down and you catch that train. When it's done, you walk out, and, if it's a wonderful film, you want more. But you have nothing to show for it except the memory.

MM: So you became the master of the pause button.

“ I SPENT MY EARLY YEARS DRAWING PICTURES FROM *STAR WARS* AND EVEN DRAWING MYSELF INTO THE FILM . . . I WANTED TO BE IN THE DEATH STAR, FIGHTING. ”

DL: Yeah. I managed to get a VCR from a used-electronics store. In pausing a movie, I had control. When I started looking at all still frames from movies, I realized that it was the same thing as the smell of honeysuckle. With the right frame, I could mentally rewind through the experience.

MM: You choose nondecisive moments from movies. Like if you chose *Psycho* [1960], you wouldn't show the scene where she's getting stabbed.

DL: I'd pick the room full of birds that are stuffed and all the things on the walls with nobody in the room. I don't believe any artwork should ever need a glossary to be understood. But all of my paintings are trading on what I have to assume is a known vocabulary, which is from the library of films, books, and paintings.

MM: In the '50s human beings saw something like 40 films in their lifetime. In 2008 human beings see something like 5,000 films in their lifetime. So film literacy today can't be ignored.

DL: My fantasies of Star Wars informed my way of seeing everything. You know, I saw Star Wars before I saw 2001 [A Space Odyssey, 1968]. I know you saw it the other way around.

MM: 2001 was my first [Stanley] Kubrick film. It blew my mind. I thought I was watching a painting.

DL: Our first conversation was about Kubrick.

MM: Yeah, we started out as Kubrick friends.

DL: But Star Wars is the first film I remember seeing, and that was my frame of reference for everything after. I remember going into the movie theater as a little kid. It was clearly just a movie our parents were taking us to see to shut us up for an hour and a half. But I came out knowing—after not seeing the same enthusiasm on my parents' faces—that there was now a difference, that I had something they didn't have.

MM: Isn't that amazing—that somebody can make art and that becomes the day the world changed?

DL: Yes. It's the wonderment I've probably been trying to repeat all my life. Then there was the fantastic element of the action figures and the trading cards, and all this stuff offering ownership of an experience. The reason my friends and I wanted the figures and the cards was to own that feeling we all had when we came out of the theater. I'm still collecting Star Wars LEGO today.

MM: Would you say that seeing Star Wars was a spiritual experience?

DL: I had a friend who was very religious. I would always be the skeptic and say, "I'm not really religious," and in the end my friend said, "You're the most spiritual person I know. You can say you're not really religious, but your beliefs are thick." I always shy away from talking about it because it makes

me feel a little uncomfortable. I suppose you could say some of the moments were like epiphanies. As I got older I realized that the search for them was spiritual—I am looking to own things through the act of re-creating them, which is greedy at its core, but in essence it is the act of creation.

MM: Why would you say "greedy"?

DL: Making art has always felt a little self-indulgent to me. Actually, it's complete self-indulgence, since I make it mostly for myself. I always feel guilty.

MM: There is an erotic undercurrent to your work. Can you talk to me about why that is so?

DL: One of the things I'd always been interested in was finding the most highly distilled form of an emotion: How much can you eliminate of something until it's almost impossible to detect but still definitively affects you? You have a naked body in an image, it's most likely sexual, but how much can you eliminate and still have a sense of eroticism? If you have a mound of earth that is reminiscent of a naked body, how far can you remodel it and still get the tension? That's what I want to be able to do. I don't want to have to do it with a woman sitting on the edge of a bed naked with rumpled sheets and a cigarette. Would it work with everything but the girl? John Currin had an erotic show a year or two ago. It addressed this question from the other angle; just how much is one step before it's too much? I actually felt a little wind had been taken out of my sails because he hit on something that I was hoping to be able to communicate.

MM: But it's already in your work, sir. Now I'm going to ask you short, snappy

questions. When did you first know you wanted to

be an artist?

DL: Always. The only toys I played with were LEGO, and I always wanted to create and draw. My mom was an arts-and-crafts teacher at our local nursery school, so we were always encouraged.

MM: If you weren't an artist, what would you have wanted to be?

DL: First I wanted to be a fireman. After that it was Batman.

MM: You get one more.

DL: Policeman.

MM: Who is your favorite artist?

DL: Vermeer.

MM: Do you paint every day?

DL: I do not. I shoot on the days when I'm not painting, and sometimes I spend entire days procrastinating and thinking about how to make a painting work or just why I'm not painting.

MM: When do you know a painting is finished?

DL: I guess a painting is finished when I'm no longer totally embarrassed by it.

MM: What do you think is the role of the artist in society?

DL: Unfortunately, more and more it seems like that of court jester, which is disappointing.

MM: We both share a fascination with LEGO. What is it about LEGO that inspires you?

DL: My parents gave me LEGO early because they were good educational toys. I wasn't allowed any guns, so I made guns out of LEGO. The problem when I was growing up was that LEGO mostly only came in primary colors, and it's very hard to make an X-wing out of red, blue, and yellow bricks. Right after I thought I had grown out of it, they finally came out with the gray LEGO and a yearly limited edition model of the Star Wars ships. That and eBay is why I have a big LEGO collection again.

MM: I have one last question. You're married to a very, very beautiful, wonderful person named Zoya. What in your married life now is your greatest blessing?

DL: Well, my greatest blessing of the past year is my new baby girl, Vivian. Of all the gifts my wife has given me, one that stands out is that before I met Zoya, I thought it was my job to be unhappy that somehow this was going to help me be more sensitive and understanding and be able to express myself as an artist. Zoya showed me that you can actually go through life without being a fool and still be a happy person.

