

New American Paintings

DAVID RATHMAN AT MARK MOORE: A Q&A

March 24, 2011



David Rathman *All my Lovelies*, 2010. Watercolor on paper, 48 x 39 in. Courtesy Mark Moore Gallery, Los Angeles.

Amidst LA's calm and casual art mecca, Culver City, Mark Moore Gallery currently features watercolors by David Rathman and photographs by David Hilliard in the two-man exhibition *Great Expectations*. Like the Dickens novel it's titled after, the show explores the aftermath of a number of great fallen expectations: dichotomous images of masculinity, the role of male heroes past and present, and the art of nostalgic remembrance. Rathman's paintings may be subdued in color, but not in content. I spoke with him about the show and his musings on capturing momentum and creating memories. —Ellen Caldwell, LA contributor

EC: *In your current show, the works **Orange Crush** and **All my Lovelies** depict two paintings mid-progress in a studio setting. Can you tell me a little bit about this subject choice and your process?*

DR: I wanted to do studio interiors for a number of reasons: It's an interesting formal exercise to try; painting pictures and paintings within a picture. Trying to convey the solitary, peaceful, turbulent, anxious, exciting atmosphere of a painter's studio, it's like an arena, a stage, in relation to the performative aspect of painting. The residue, the references, the things pinned up and put down, the placement of objects within a painter's studio seem to hold a lot of suggestion and implication.

I didn't work from photos of my own studio, I wanted to project my imagery and subjects onto somebody else's canvases. I started with source photos of other artists' studios I pulled from the internet.

As you mentioned, you certainly capture pivotal moments in this show, except they aren't mainly active moments, they are the minutes just before or right after an event, making them even heavier and more loaded moments. Besides the studio pieces we just discussed, this also pertains to your football game and concert-themed paintings. On the contrary though, your four *Untitled* pieces are triads of freeze-framed, heated, active moments in hockey.

Yes, mostly I gravitate towards the former depicting moments, possibly crucial, right before or after something pivotal happens. The hockey triptychs are another matter. I freeze-framed hockey fights off YouTube; I was struck by the beautiful, abstract quality of the images very painterly and theatrical. The fact that they captured the aggressive, violent fights in progress was something I could work away from and concentrate on the beautiful compositions and smears of color.

And they really are beautiful. What first led you to watercolors? Was it a gradual process or has this always been your chosen medium?

I've always liked working with watercolor and ink. They have been my primary mediums for the past 15 years. You can work with intention and control, but watercolor and ink have a way of surprising an image. Unintentional, spontaneous passages of water and pigment working with, and against, your control.

Going through the show, it's almost like a swinging pendulum, where these moments are painted with different points of momentum, swelling with the pre-, post-, and intra- energy...

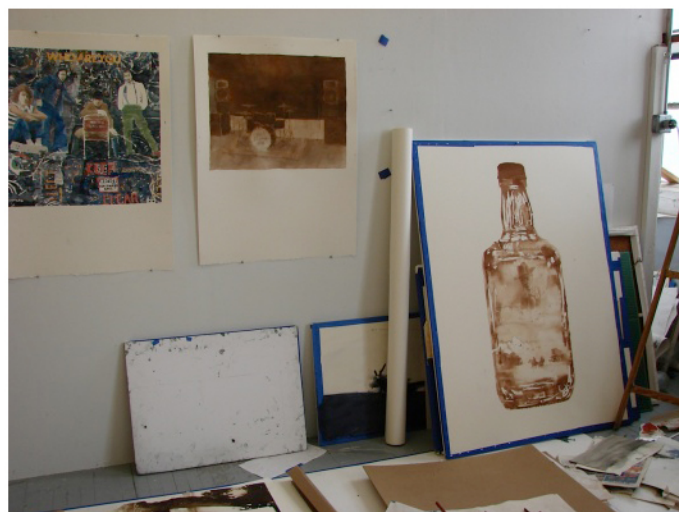
I don't really strategize how the work will look together hung as a show, but there was a nice range of energies and momentum that played out across the rooms. I start from my stockpile of source photos, mine and others, and I guess what makes me consider and keep an image for reference is that it in some way recognizes me, and I feel alert to some vague idea that, by painting this image, I will discover my intention for choosing it in the first place.

I noticed that some of your works compile many memories and themes from your show into one packed and condensed piece (paintings like *All my Lovelies* and *Where's the End of it?*). Can you discuss these a bit?

That's a very concise description you just gave of those paintings, and that was my intention: to present a central image dense with layered marks and an accumulation of thoughts and themes. Also I was working in sequence, over several days on each piece, making marks and decisions based on what has come before, as opposed to painting from a defined, static, preliminary drawing.

How we remember, what we remember, and the art of memory-making fascinates me. We've discussed the momentum you capture when you set out to depict a moment, but I am wondering more about the memories you elicit in your work. Is painting itself part of your process for collecting and making memories?

I think our memories change all the time, in ways we need them to. At least for me, I know if I can't remember all the details about a certain circumstance, I have no problem improvising and revising the story. So yes I am probably eliciting personal memories that were important to me, especially as a boy, but I'm not sure what was real and what is fiction, and I don't mind the blur. In general, my work centers on boys and men doing things to themselves and the world, testing, contesting, validating, celebrating, fighting fear and vulnerability. Those are all things that live in my mind and sleep in my memory. Fuel for the fire, so to speak.



Left: (studio shot), **David Rathman**, *Where's the End of it?*, 2010. Watercolor on paper diptych, 42.25 x 69 inches.
Right: (studio shot), **David Rathman**, *Puttin' Memories Away*, 2010. Watercolor on paper diptych, 57 x 41 inches.
Both images courtesy the artist and Mark Moore Gallery, Los Angeles.

And then Puttin' Memories Away obviously references memories, but in a darker sense since the title references the memories as being put away in the interior of a whiskey bottle...

I wrote this quote into one of my early cowboy drawings: "People talk about my drinking, never my thirst". I had that in mind again when working on Puttin' Memories Away. Ahead of the thirsts are large appetites with long memories. The drinking answers the memories that generate the thirst.

Fabulous titles too, by the way. You play with words the same way you play with the paint, leaving slight suggestions and faint innuendos – have you always loved language?

Yes, I love words, movie titles, chapter listings, appendices, song titles, names in phone books, movie dialogue; I look to these sources for poetry and suggestion. Sometimes a title or hand-written text will collaborate and confirm a certain image; other times I try and take it sideways and let the language drift in another direction. The titles and texts serve as declarations, understatements, conversation, observations, bluster and muster.

Besides this current show in LA, you have two upcoming shows – one in Minnesota and one in New York. If you know, what themes and subjects are you exploring next?

One thing that happened with the work for Mark Moore was that I didn't lock down on a subject or theme, as I've done in the past. It was the show I've been threatening to do for the past five years: no theme, just keeping the door open for anything. Of course 'anything' turned out to be everything I've pursued with paint over the past decade: cowboys, trucks, rock 'n roll, sports, interior room spaces, etc. For my next two shows, I aim to work with this open mindset that allows me to revisit my past subjects and work with them in different contexts and situations.

– Ellen C. Caldwell is an LA-based art historian, editor, and writer.