

Interview: David Ellis

by Dan Boehl



David Ellis working at the Visual Arts Center

Project commissioned by Landmarks, The Public Art Program of The University of Texas at Austin

Photo: Christina Murrey

In a joint venture between the Landmarks program and the newly opened Visual Arts Center, UT hosted the New York based artist David Ellis for a month-long residency. Ellis used his time at UT to create one of his stop-motion animated paintings in the VAC's Vaulted Gallery. He also painted a mural on the building that houses the Austin based collaborative art space, Co-Lab.

...might be good [mbg]: What has been your experience with artists and the community here?

David Ellis [DE]: Well, aside from Co-Lab I've been submerged in the project here. So I haven't had enough exchange to comment on that, other than the people I met at Co-Lab that night and Sean Gaulager, who runs that space. I really love his direction with that space and it reminds me of spaces I've worked in around the country that have a similar bent: artist run, not-for-profit spaces, often where the artist will live in the space itself. These kinds of spaces provide a home and a hub for artists to exchange ideas and meet on a regular basis. It's refreshing, that kind of small, grassroots thing, people are in it for the real soul of it.

...mbg: That's kind of what my writing explores here in Austin. We don't have a real large art-buying community, so everything is based around projects, collectives, locally owned galleries that are trying to scrape by.

DE: Okay Mountain looks like a real good one too. I know a little bit about them from when they were in Miami. They're explosive.

...mbg: What does your studio look like?

DE: My studio's in Bed-Stuy on Spencer Street between Park and Flushing right next to the Marcy Projects. It's a space that, as the direction of my work moves and changes over the months and years I've been working there, transforms to be kind of a shop with power tools and work tables. Sometimes I work on sculptural things, and then I pack that up and shift gears and go into a more painterly mode. And it's also where I record and experiment with sound and music. I wish I could say there's a clean break between projects, but a lot of times those disciplines overlap and it's a bit chaotic, a bit of a mad laboratory.

...mbg: Can you talk a little bit about how do those disciplines overlap?

DE: Physically I'll be working on two or three things at once. The sculpture came out of painting and film came out of painting. The sculptures started ten years ago when I realized that the paintings are basically drums in that they're this membrane stretched over a frame and when you tap them they resonate. So I wanted to take that further and tune them and make different volumes as resonators and put automated drum actuators on the paintings and turn them into a way to make music.

...mbg: Your bio talks about growing up and listening to music near Raleigh. Can you talk more about what the role of music has been in your work?

DE: I look at musicians and recorded history for cues and answers to some of the questions I'm trying to work out in my own work. My brother's a musician, and I have a tremendous amount of respect for what he's doing. He's more coming from a Jazz discipline, and the core of what I do comes out of Hip-Hop. But from that vantage point everything can weave through it. Lately, I've been working on these record collection pieces which has allowed me to get back to vinyl and I'm going back to record stores again after being kind of MP3-driven for a while. I'm making these pieces called "recollections" that are collections of records that I arrange based on color, more than anything. I'm going through mountains of records. I'm reading liner notes. I'm pulling these things aside and I'm filling in some gaps in that I'm not buying music primarily for the music, but then I'm going back and listening to the music after realizing that this was the perfect cover for the end piece or this is the perfect spine to bridge that gap in the middle, so I buy records visually and then listen to them and work from some of those ideas and themes that run through the music.

...mbg: If you're buying records visually, do you consider yourself painting musically?

DE: *[Laughs]* You said it. I like that idea. I don't know that I'm always that successful but I try to think of it in those terms.

...mbg: You also said that you're trying to work out some things in your work. What are those things that you're trying to work out?

DE: I guess how to translate some of the cultural sparks that got me motivated—from music to sports to other artists—and reinterpret those things, the ones that apply to the way I'm seeing the world today, fusing them and then throwing them back out. Trying to put something out in the world that will resonate within a larger world.

...mbg: There's a lot of political and cultural themes that really resonate with me. Could you talk about how they arise and how you deal with culture and politics in general?

DE: Just to be general, sometimes it feels like the world is constantly ripping itself apart and we human beings on the planet actually are contributing to that. One of the things, hopefully, you can do with music and art is point to another direction that's patching things up, fixing things, create another path rather than the one that I feel is really ripping this planet apart. I think Mother Nature's pretty angry right now. Specifically, I don't really want to get into the politics.

...mbg: Yeah, that's fair. On a spectrum of optimist to pessimist about modern culture and the world, where do you think you fall?

DE: Oh, man. That's a good question. I like to think of myself as an optimist, but I think that shifts through time. Sometimes you feel kind of beaten down. But overall, I think what I try to put in the world has some light in it. I think humor is important. It's important not to take yourself too seriously.

...mbg: That leads into my next question. I recently had a chance to meet Peter Saul. Being a writer I'm really interested in texts, and text-based work. When I asked him about his texts, I asked where the text comes from. He described adding it, then erasing it, and it reminded me of the way you work. Can you say something about how text operates in your work?

DE: Currently, I'm not using text with this body of work. I've always loved words. I've come from doing graffiti and looking at a lot of graffiti and still having that mode of communication resonate. I like the poetics of words on the side of buildings and trucks. It could even be signage, especially the old hand-painted signs. If you can say it all in one or two words, or a logo, or maybe even a letter, I like those things that pull you in from that angle. I like words that have multiple meanings, and I like the way language can be bent, too. I like what happens in music and spoken word that bends the world. Using words as a place to start, I like to infuse other ideas within the word visually and let that combination of ideas be a new thing, like a new interpretation of the word. Also, taking existing

words and fusing them with different ideas, that's something I've played a bit with, too, found words. As much as I use words in my work, I try to push them into a more abstract and less overtly verbal place.

...mbg: More abstract—so where meaning falls apart?

DE: Yeah, you're hit by the structure of the word, you're hit by language and fonts and the presentation of the word before the word itself. Words on their own can be misinterpreted. I think oftentimes it's the feeling behind the word that really carries the day.

...mbg: Like the spirit of the law and the letter of the law?

DE: That's interesting, I don't know about that. I think it's the way the word—where from within the soul the word comes from is what I'm interested in.

...mbg: I'm interested in what you feel is your canvas, especially with your painting, sculpture and video works. When I was watching the videos, you were working on the truck and I wondered whether the canvas was the truck or the frame of the video?

DE: In that case, I think it would be both, definitely. The truck exists, but within that video there are many layers. That truck would go out daily, and then I would paint it, and then it would go out the next day with a different thing on the side of the truck. Depending on the route the truck would take through the city, it's a canvas on four wheels with an engine, which to me is better than any canvas made of wood and fabric that would ultimately hang on the wall or be in storage. It's a truck that's affected by an environment around it. Even if I'm painting over it for a limited period of time for a project like that, the truck itself is ultimately going to get destroyed or painted over or fade at some point in the near future. Both of those capture something that is in flux, or where what you see is just evidence of something that happened at some point, but it's in motion.

...mbg: I think you're speaking to this already, but how much planning goes into the work that you make?

DE: It depends. Sometimes it's months and months of research and sometimes it's something that's practiced, more of a freestyle thing that happens in the moment. Some of the sculptural work there's months and months of research and planning and collaboration that goes into the final result. That really spans the gamut.

...mbg: Can you describe what your work day is like?

DE: I try to wake up with the birds and the sun and do some planning in the morning, take care of some things within my personal life. Usually I walk or ride a bike to my studio, which is like an hour and a half, and that's a big part of my day, maybe stopping along the way and interacting with people within the communities where I live and work and pulling that energy into the work. Then I

work, depending on the season and the time of year and the workload, I work anywhere from eight to sixteen hour days in the studio, and then go back and check some emails—I guess I do emails in the morning too—and then sleep.

...mbg: Do you check the internet throughout the day, or is that something that stays at home?

DE: I like taking a break from it. If it's important it will be there later.

...mbg: Do you think art should serve a higher cause?

DE: I think art can serve a higher cause. I think art that thinks of itself as serving a higher cause usually falls flat. I think art that comes from a real place within a person who's responding to the world around him.

...mbg: Are you suspicious of that idea—the idea of the higher cause?

DE: Not necessarily suspicious of the idea, but it's something that I see it pretty rarely within art. I think I see it within music fairly often. For me it has a way of getting into the viewer or listener getting ideas dealing with higher causes. I think it's easier to transmit that information through rhythm and song.

...mbg: Do you think the best art is art that anyone can understand?

DE: Anyone is a big world, a big idea. I would say that art is something that anyone can feel and maybe understanding comes later.

...mbg: Do you think it's more important to feel art than to understand it?

DE: I think you should have both, but I think if the feeling comes first. The message comes from within the music. It's still the music first. You feel music first before you fully interpret all the ideas within the music.

*Dan Boehl is a workshop fellow in the Creative Capital / Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant Program. His chapbook **Les MISERES ET LES MAL-HEURS DE LA GUERRE** is now available from **Greying Ghost**.*

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