FIGURE / GROUND
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CONVERSATION WITH TOMORY DODGE

by Marie Thibeault and Suzanne Unrein

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Tomory Dodge was born in Denver, Colorado in 1972. He received a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1998 and a Master of Fine Arts from the California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, CA in 2004. One-person exhibitions include the Philip Martin Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, the Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, NY, the LUX Art Institute, Encinitas, CA, ACME, Los Angeles, CA, CRG Gallery, New York, NY, Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles, CA, Alison Jacques Gallery, London, UK, Inman Gallery, Houston, TX and the Monica De Cardenas Gallery, Zuoz, Switzerland among others. His work has been included in many group exhibitions including The Spaces in Between, Ceysoon Benetiere, New York, NY, Yin/Yang, 0-0 LA, Los Angeles, CA, LA Painting, Museum of Art and History, Lancaster, CA, Grafforists, Torrance Art Museum, Torrance, CA, Mona, 68 Projects, Berlin, Germany, An Appetite for Painting, National Museum of Art, Oslo, Norway, Painters' Painters, Saatchi Gallery, London, UK and Future Tense: Reshaping the Landscape, Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase, NY. He received the Joan Mitchell Foundation MFA Grant in 2004 and is in the public collections of the Berkeley Art Museum, Berkely, CA, the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, the Knoxville Art Museum, Knoxville, TN, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA, the Smithsonian Museum of American Art, Washington DC, the USC Fisher Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA, the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY and the Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT among others. Tomory lives and works in Los Angeles.

SU: You grew up in Colorado. What made you move to California?

TD: I moved to California for graduate school and stayed. I was really interested in the environment out here and how humans interacted with it, especially when we got out into the desert. The tension between what was settled and organized and what was wild. I was interested in the starkness of the desert and the harshness but I've come to realize that what I was really interested in was the idea, the kind of problem with representation. When does it come to the point where something can be identified or recognized? I was using that setting and that work to move through that.

I was also interested in the environmental and social dynamics that those paintings brought up, but that was a side interest to the main thing that was the issue of painting and representation. I ended up becoming frustrated with those paintings because they kept running into implied narratives and I was more interested in an abstract way of working, and ended up following that path to evolve out of those paintings.

"Car", 2004, 78 x 108 inches, 198.1 x 274.32 cm, Oil on canvas

MT: When you were at Cal Arts did you experience a lot of resistance to painting?

TD: Not too much. I was there at a weird time where there was actually a lot of interest in painting on the part of the students in the grad school, which for Cal Arts means probably like 6 or 7 people in the grad department. They hired a professor, Anoka Faruqee, who is a painter. I wouldn't say there was a lot of resistance to painting there, more like a lot of skepticism.

MT: Yeah, good word. So from the landscape work and wanting to move away from narrative, did you feel you were going more towards abstraction, but also toward pure painting? How did it feel for you to leave a subject matter that could be tangible for people?

TD: I don't know if I would say pure painting as that could mean a lot of different things. I was interested in what I thought of at the time as abstraction, which of course is a really big tent. But that move always had a representational base to the later abstract work. I never went fully abstract.

SU: So in terms of subject matter, do you see that as your external world?

TD: Yeah, I think of most of them are still operating within a Renaissance kind of box. There is a representational space operating in those paintings. Some are more overt than others, but a lot of perceiving space and objects.

SU: I'm going to skip around a bit, but would love to discuss the paintings at your last exhibit at Miles McEnery. There seemed to be more layers and a larger variety of mark-making than in some of your previous work and a wonderful internal rhythm that pulls it all together when they could have gone terribly wrong. Did you work on these paintings until they had that rhythm or what I guess I'm asking is, do you ever fail? It seems there could have been a lot of failures!

TD: Yeah, I think they are all failures. In any one of those paintings there are six or seven failed paintings underneath. I'm not throwing stuff out anymore. I used to work on something and if it got to a certain point where I thought it was unsaveable, I would put it in the dumpster. At least for now I'll work on something until it turns into something I may not be overjoyed with but that I know I can leave alone and not keep messing with it.

"Capricorn", 2019, 84 x 96 inches, 213.4 x 243.84 cm, Oil on canvas

SU: Is that because you have become less critical of your work, or do you think you're able to maneuver in ways that you weren't able to do before?

TD: Yeah, I think the latter. I would like to say I'm less critical but I don't think that's true. I think the working and scraping down and painting over stuff is a criticality. Those paintings usually start very much with an idea that I'm inspired by that I really want to work with and I'll start the painting based on that and that you know maybe lasts a couple of days before it totally falls apart. And then I'll try to figure out another brilliant idea. I often feel that when I'm scraping them off and painting over them and so on that I'm trying to see what sticks. The central question ends up becoming what is it that I'm painting. That goes back to representation again.

SU: When you start with an idea is that idea a pattern, a layer, subject matter?

TD: It can be any of those or a finished painting in my head that quickly crashes and burns to something else. I can bring it back but it always changes and evolves.

MT: I know you mentioned before, in another interview, that the central mystery of painting is the zone between material and image. That painting is magical because it has this quality of illusion. Your work is vacillating between representational and purely abstract realms. When you are working in that space, does one pull you closer to resolution? Do you have a default position between representation and abstraction? Or are those the same thing for you?

TD: Ultimately I think they are the same thing. I am always anchored to some degree to representation like I always have been and think I always will be. Ultimately the difference doesn't have much to do with the actual painting itself but what you bring to the painting as the viewer or the painter.

MT: I'm interested in the density that you physically get in your paintings, but also the activity and the pattern and repetition. It seems like you are building and elaborating and amplifying. Is this a strategy for you or a natural way of building a painting?

TD: I've never thought of it in those terms exactly, but I think that fits. So often as you're painting you keep bumping into pre-mapped stuff, your history or whatever. So yeah, it's trying to figure out a way around that application.

SU: Do you think it is similar to driving in a car on a dark road in the country where your vision is only a few feet ahead of you. Do you feel like that when you're painting or do you have more of a vision beyond the next step?

TD: I'm tempted to say both. I do have an overarching vision of what I want to do with the painting and in the end, it's always a starting point, an idea that has to be let go of at a certain point. I think once it's let go of then the analogy for headlights is more accurate.

MT: Do you choose color for energy? For light? Is it symbolic? Is it a spatial component?

TD: I can say it's not symbolic, at least not consciously. The other three, I would say probably. Color is something I've struggled with. Some people are natural born colorists and I'm not one of them. It's been something that I've worked at for years and years and years. I think I'm getting pretty good at it. At different periods, I've looked at other people for color. At one point I was looking at Bridget Riley, particularly when I was doing those striped backgrounds. I almost entirely lifted that from her work. More recently, I'm looking at a lot of late 19th and early 20th century French painters – Matisse, the Fauvists, Vuillard and Bonnard of course and Van Gogh. A lot of my color has been really informative from that space. That color is in some way abstract and is also very rooted in representation. A sense of light, atmosphere.

MT: And sensation. It becomes more touchy-feely.

SU: Your recent works with the patterning of dots seem to invoke technology and digital imagery. Having lived in LA, it also reminds me a lot of that landscape. Looking down at the city from the canyons at night, the interspersing of lights, the movement of the city. Is that an inspiration as well?

TD: Yeah, for sure. And a lot of those dots were based on a digital component that I was playing around with. Not using digital technology but a response to the omnipresence of the digital. And playing around with the RGB color palette. As far as the LA stuff, for sure, especially at night. The LA nightscape does feel digital in a way. Science fiction. A lot of times, I use those patterns as filters. In LA we are seeing through haze a lot of the time. I notice that all the time.

And a lot of the painting that comes out of LA doesn't reference that, surprisingly.

MT: You make collages and little paintings and you have a whole drawing on paper practice. Is some of your mark-making influenced by things you find in magazines – visual elements?

TD: I've always had a works on paper component to my practice. There's always been a dialogue between the paintings and the works on paper. With the earlier representational landscapes, the works on paper could be seen as studies, watercolor studies for the larger paintings. As the work changed, that process no longer made sense and I had to figure out a new way to make the works on paper. Collage became a pretty obvious answer to that.

Arc With Forms, 2019, 74 x 84 inches, 188 x 213.4 cm, Oil on canvas

MT: The drawings aren't necessarily pre-studies for the paintings in any way?

TD: No, not anymore. Not consciously. I make a drawing or collage where some elements of it will find its way into a painting at some point. But I'm never going to make a painting of that paper piece. With the magazines over the years I'm attracted to different kinds of backgrounds or edges of the images. The blurry thing on the side of whatever they're trying to sell. That's what I will use.

SU: Do you ever get stuck on a painting and go to the works on paper to try and sort it out or do you always try to figure it out on the canvas?

TD: I approach each one as its own thing, a finished piece in its own right. I'll make drawings inspired by paintings, but I won't try and work things out. If I get stuck I will try to work it out on the painting. It may take months and months and months.

SU: When was the last time you threw away a painting?

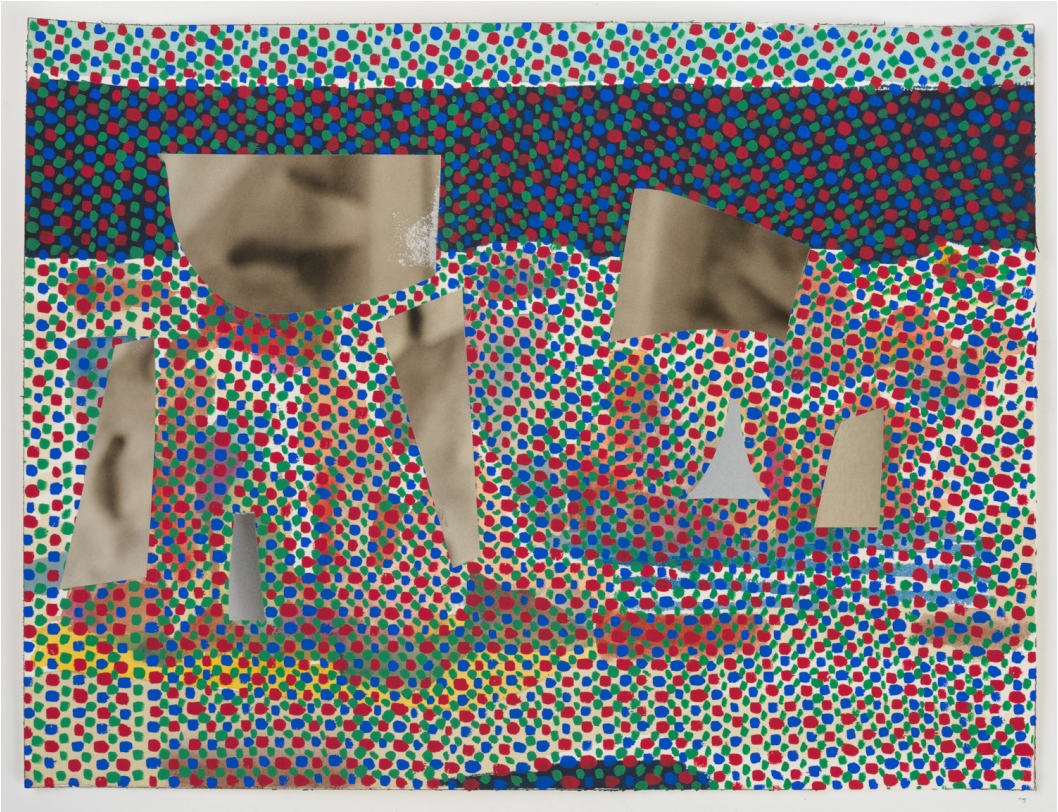
TD: Truly, I think it was four years ago.

SU: Wow, that's great. Are there canvases sitting around from say four years ago that are still unfinished or do you work on a painting until it's finished?

TD: If it gets to a certain point where I don't know where to go with it, I'll put it away. Not usually for years, but maybe a month or two and then bring it back out.

MT: I've seen on social media recently these beautiful little still lifes you've been creating during this period.

TD: Yeah, I've been doing tons of those lately. I'm really into them. It's something that has been in the back of my mind for a long time and I never got around to doing them. And then being locked down, it was like, now's the time. But you know, in a way, it goes back to that representation problem and the larger paintings and the work in the studio and trying to answer the question of what I'm painting. These take the opposite approach and either simplify or complicate it depending on your view. The subject is there from the beginning, and I keep it simple and I'm painting a lot of flowers and it's liberating in a way. They are plein-air paintings. They are probably the least cool thing you could do.



Beach Day, 2016, 12 x 16 inches, 30.5 x 40.6 cm, Watercolor, acrylic, gouache, collage on paper

MT: Are you doing them at home or at the studio?

TD: At home and taking the easel to the park by my house in Pasadena. It's really funny because I haven't worked that way since undergrad and even then I didn't want to do it. When you are young you are trying to put your own spin on everything. Now it's just trying to make paintings and they feel really honest. They're definitely not edgy. I can tell you that. There's something about them that I really like.

MT: I was just talking to Suzanne about this. I think it's interesting when all the pressure is off and the world is at a standstill, that you just want to do something honest and let the rest of it fall away. Maybe that's the silver lining in all this.

SU: Have you worried at all about how these little paintings might affect the larger works in your studio?

TD: I worried about it a lot when I first started making them and then I decided to not worry about it anymore. I'm sure a lot of people think it's a dumb thing to do, but a lot of people responded really well to them and I really love doing them.

MT: I was listening to a couple of your interviews yesterday and somebody asked you what advice would you give young artists and you said, "Give yourself permission to do whatever you want." I really love that. And I have a very hard time telling myself that and I think a lot of painters go through periods of doubt. How did you learn to trust that instinct to go forward to do new things and to trust what you're doing? Or do you still have doubts?

TD: Oh yeah, well I do. I still work at that all the time but I think it's a really important thing to keep in mind. It's definitely not easy. The first time I saw that I was visiting my friend who was going to grad school at Columbia at the time and Dana Schutz was there. He said you have to see this woman's paintings. She gives herself permission to do anything. We went to her studio and it was true. I've always remembered that feeling of being in her studio and thinking this is how you do it.

Flowers, 2020, 8 x 10 inches, 20.3 x 25.4 cm inches, Oil on panel

SU: That reminds me of another thing I read that you said which was to paint yourself out of a problem instead of think yourself out of problem. I really love that. Have you always been able to do that?

TD: I've definitely had blocks. Periods where I didn't know how to get through something. I spent a lot of time trying to think through a painting and it got me nowhere. I don't think it ever really gets anybody anywhere. I guess you have to be ready to ruin anything because there's always that part of the painting that you don't want to mess up. And you have to in order to get the rest of the painting to work.

SU: Have you become more optimistic over the years that you'll be able to make a painting work?

TD: That's hard to answer because there's this idea that an artist has a grand vision. And a good artist executes that grand vision. I think there's a lot of people that do work that way. It's become a popular notion that they come up

with an idea and then you know all the machinery goes into the operation. So in that sense I'm not a very good artist because I can't get any of my ideas to come off at all. So in that way I've become more pessimistic as I've gotten older. In terms of getting a painting to turn into something that interests me, where I can find some degree of truth, then I think I have become more optimistic or more confident is a better word.

MT: It's like a painting is not very good at being specific. Like Oliver Jackson said, "A painting is ambiguous, but it is purposefully ambiguous." What do you think painting is capable of doing? It's different than other mediums and not the best vehicle to get ideas across. It's one of the questions I'm sure we all ask ourselves. What do you tell yourself painting is capable of?

TD: In a way, I don't. I try not to give it a job to do. I think once you do, it's not going to do that. I think that's an important thing to keep in mind. In the end, I think there's few kinds of media where you can almost get into someone's skin in a lens experience like you know their experience. In painting, you're experiencing another person's experience.

MT: You mentioned before that you like the large scale and the very small scale and that the in- between has been difficult. I find that to be a problem also. Like your imagination can go crazy with the small ones and the big ones affect the body, but somewhere in between is the midsize that is more difficult.

TD: Yeah, I've come to see that size as picture size, the size of something you put over a couch or you know, posters. I actually finally started to make some headway working on that scale. It has not been easy, but I'm happy with what I've been able to do so far. It seems to be derived from the idea of portraiture.

SU: I think painters have specific sizes that suit them for some reason. As if there is an innate size that fits them.

MT: Yeah, and format brings up a certain time of history. Like a surreal size or an early abstraction.

TD: A lot of my friends and I would make a list of favorite paintings and a lot of them are pretty small.

SU: Would you name some of your favorites?

TD: Yeah, there's this little Rembrandt study of his mistress, bathing in a stream.

SU: Yeah that's a great painting. One thing I've noticed about some of your newer work is that it seems more whimsical, lighter. Do you think that has to do to some degree with having had a child in the last few years?

TD: Yeah, I think it does. The paintings are definitely more playful. Also, I don't know if it has anything to do with getting older, but I'm learning to take myself less seriously. I think that's an important thing.

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