

# maake

Issue 13 | March 2022

## Spotlight Artist: Danny Ferrell



The artist in his studio, 2022.

**Hi Danny. You've described the Pittsburgh art community as "both urban and rural at the same time." How has living and working there supported your practice?**

Pittsburgh has a small, but vibrant art scene. We have museums, galleries and studio buildings that foster a sense of community for the artists and enthusiasts that live and work here. All of this is buttressed by the city itself, which tries to support the arts through grants and initiatives. Pittsburgh is also a rather inexpensive city, allowing me to "live to work" not "work to live."

**You've cited the Hudson River School and Cadmus Circle as influences. What aspects of these traditions have particularly resonated with you or continued to appear in your work?**

The Cadmus Circle is rich in formal and thematic content. The artist I particularly resonate with is George Tooker, who continues to be a guiding force in the studio: notions of the "closet" are apparent in his work, the sense of cultural alienation and atomization, the rich colors and beautiful lighting conditions. It could be argued that light is the most important feature of the Hudson River School, how it bathes the landscapes with a sublime quality, and the doubleness it creates - is this scene beautiful and tranquil, or is it quietly sinister?

The construction of painting supports for you is a labor intensive process of preparing them “until their polished, high-gloss surfaces resemble plastic or skin.” They’re beautifully made. Can you talk about how the reflective surface of your paintings functions, as well as your devotion to craft more broadly?

The first time I realized how important surface is in painting was when I saw my first Julie Mehretu painting in a show called “The Painting Factory: Abstraction After Andy Warhol” at MoCA in Los Angeles. I was transfixed by the beauty of the surface, and marveled at the precision and technique required to create such a work. From that moment on, I really committed to the quality of my surfaces. The reflective quality in the work allows viewers to see themselves mirrored back, giving them a brief moment to be immortalized within the contours of the painting.

I know you work from a combination of observation, images, digital collage, and imagination. How important is research or planning in the preliminary stages of your work? Can you walk us through your process?

I plan for a painting very thoroughly. In art school, I’d often get push-back on how rigid these plans actually were, but I need everything to be fleshed out beforehand so I can relax and just enjoy the process of painting. Typically, I’ll reach out to one of my friends, and we’ll schedule an afternoon for a little photoshoot. Together, we’ll go through their closet and play dress up until my model finds something they are comfortable in. Once I am satisfied with a photograph, I drop into my Procreate app on my iPad, sketching and collaging until I am happy with the result. From there, I translate that image to canvas.

Can you tell us about your current studio? What is a typical day like for you?

Interestingly, my studio is in an old, renovated church. I went to Catholic school for 10 years, so it feels like a full circle moment painting in a church basement. Typically, my dogs wake me up around 8:00 or 8:30 for breakfast, so I feed them and nurse a coffee while I catch up on some of my favorite YouTube videos. I typically make it to the studio by 11, stare at my work for a good half an hour, and then begin to start mixing colors for the day. I’ll order a little lunch, and then paint until about 6 or 7. Pretty standard day!

How do you usually approach editing, whether it happens during the process of painting or later, across your entire body of work? How do you determine a painting is successful?

This was lightly touched above, but the editing process happens entirely before the painting process. Occasionally, I’ll make some editorial decisions when I am in the middle of making something, but most of the heavy lifting comes beforehand. For me, a painting is successful when I get that thrilling feeling in my stomach, it’s always very physical. That’s how I know.



*The Divide*, 2021, Oil on canvas, 50 x 42 inches, 127 x 106.7 cm

**Narratives of love, optimism, and vulnerability are prevalent in your work. What does male vulnerability mean to you?**

Emotional content is the cornerstone of my work and I hope it conveys notions of love, optimism and vulnerability. Male vulnerability expands the cultural definition of what it means to be “masculine” as it runs counter to the accepted narrative of what masculinity means. I have always been a very sensitive man, and I hope the work gives others the permission to feel whatever they want to feel and be whoever they want to be.

**Throughout your paintings flowers, textile patterns, and men with dogs are recurring motifs. Can you talk about your interest in European royalty portraiture and how this canon relates to your desire to elevate everyday queer bodies?**

The Rococo continues to be one of (if not) my favorite artistic movement. I love the pageantry and excess, the billowing garments and cheeky irreverence. Royalty painting is also incredibly precise and masterfully rendered, things that really matter to me as an artist. Of course, these paintings are occupied by the white, bourgeois class, so I hope by inserting queer bodies and bodies of color into these recognizable, historical spaces, I elevate them from second-class to royal-class.



*Thirty in Palm Springs, 2020, Oil on canvas, 84 x 72 inches, 213.4 x 182.9 cm*

**What significance does drawing have in your practice? I’m especially interested in your recent colored pencil drawings.**

During quarantine, I was determined to not feel like I lost something, but come out of it with something new. I was locked out of my studio for awhile, so I ordered some colored pencils and paper, thinking that the medium would translate my paintings nicely, and began to start drawing. They have been incredibly challenging, but rewarding to make. I plan on making this a permanent part of my practice.

**This summer marked your second solo show with Galerie Pact. While the works included in Storms and Saints are still affectionate tributes to close friends and loved ones, they represent a departure from the luminous gradients and radiant glow of golden hour landscapes prominent in previous works. Can you share some insight into the thematic and formal shifts in this recent series?**

I always had a fantasy of making a show of darker paintings, both formally and thematically. I conceived of the show during quarantine, so in many ways it makes sense that there was a notable shift in the work. I also spent a great deal of time thinking of different lighting conditions that make logical sense within the painting: flashlights, lightning, fire embers. This ended up being more challenging than I anticipated, but it was a great learning experience as well. I wasn’t feeling great mentally during quarantine, and I think that is apparent when I look back at that show.



Detail of *I Kiss Boys*, 2021, Oil on canvas, 84 x 60 inches, 213.4 x 152.4 cm

**It feels like there's a definite element of escapism. I know you were listening to disco in isolation while working on this exhibition - orbs of light dispersed across one canvas even suggest reflections of a disco ball. How connected are these works to the historical significance of disco in the 70s and nightclubs as collective queer spaces?**

I really want to plug the essay that accompanied my show 'Storms and Saints' written by friend and writer Emily Colucci. It can be found on Galerie Pact's website, but she articulates much clearer than I ever could the ways in which disco impact the work. For me, it was almost subliminal and unconscious, the music snaking its way through my ears and into my hands. I wanted the work to have this sense of celebration and rule-breaking, which is embodied in the sonic quality of disco. I wanted the paintings to also have a sinister quality, so perhaps they are partying under the kaleidoscopic web of disco light, but maybe it's actually flashlights from the authorities or embers from a burning building.

**What are you listening to in the studio these days?**

What I listen to in the studio is usually what comforts me through the process - sometimes that is an audiobook, a k-pop playlist, or one of my favorite podcasts.

**What are the best exhibitions you've seen in recent memory?**

Unfortunately, I haven't been seeing as much art as I would like to, given the nature of the world at the moment. The first thing that came to mind was how incredible my graduate school cohort's work has been looking - Shona McAndrew at Chart, Paul Roupail at Stems Gallery, Tristram Lansdowne at Galerie Nicolas Robert, and Ziyang Wu at Art Xiamen Museum, China.

**What are you working on or thinking about right now? What's coming up next for you?**

I am currently in the throes of painting my first show at Miles McEnery gallery, which will open in March! The show is called 'Castle in the Sky,' which is about my unrequited teenage dreams and fantasies. I'm really excited to show this work!