

## mark dutcher: cycles of memory



Los Angeles painter Mark Dutcher has had a very busy year, with recent work exhibited at the Torrance Art Museum, the Santa Monica Museum of Art, and Solway Jones Gallery, all in 2006. The SMMoA show in particular is full of a certain serendipity, coinciding with the institution's ambitious exhibition illuminating the influence of Surrealist Giorgio de Chirico on 20th century visual giant Philip Guston, both of whom have had enormous influence on Dutcher's work. Rich in symbolism and steeped in melancholy, his paintings speak directly to the surreal mental and emotional gymnastics surrounding loss and memory.

Working out of a converted industrial building on the outskirts of Culver City, in an airy loft space facing a disused railway track, Dutcher seems drawn to juxtaposition and unconditional perspectives. His best known work employs elements of a visual language that includes keys, candles, jars, needles, flowers, teapots, chains and pockets of abstraction, which he then arranges according to an inscrutable but perceptible internal logic in the shelves and cubbies of vast drawn grids recalling cabinetry. Viewing his filing systems, it becomes, as in the poignant surrealism of di Chirico, impossible to ignore the significance of these objects and not attempt to decode them. But because of Dutcher's vibrant, sometimes florid palette, and the disquieting equanimity with which he leaps from representation to abstraction while mining obviously difficult psychological terrain, the visceral consternation the works engender speak to Guston's subversive influence as well.

The concurrence of the Santa Monica Museum of Art Project Room exhibition "Gone" with the Solway Jones Gallery exhibition "Come and Go" offers a perfect chance to take stock not only of what Dutcher has accomplished already, but also of where he is headed. Since graduating from Cal State Long Beach (a local through and through, he was born in Newport Beach in 1963) he has exhibited and curated extensively in the greater L.A. area. But it has really been within the last five years that his work has deepened, expanded, and to borrow a term, taken off. The paintings at the museum were completed in 2005 and early 2006, and the gallery show is entirely from 2006; taken together they crystallize the development of his oeuvre at a dynamic moment of transition in his life and work.

Formally and conceptually the two series are confluent enough to read as connected and successive. Certain key elements of his style and narrative sensibility have shifted, becoming riskier and looser, but the essential character of his vision remains strongly in evidence. The (slightly) older work as seen at SMMoA is explicitly about memorializing, inspired by heavy personal losses of friends and loved ones, in particular during the ongoing AIDS crisis. Work from that period uses those cabinets of curiosities as shrines, memento mori from a group of lives lived and ended, providing functional links to the details of individual experiences with compassionate specificity. Dutcher speaks of these works with a certain reverence and of being "surprised by the

absence of things, people and objects. I can't help but see the world through a filter of loss. People come and go, [there's] death, relationships end. Objects lose meaning, symbols change. Yet when I paint I want to live."

His activities in sculpture, painting and installation have long trafficked in the stuff of grief, loss, and abiding memory. But as of this year he is undeniably moving through those stages toward a forward-leaning period of acceptance and transcendence that, fittingly, applies to both his private and creative activities. Speaking to this dynamic most clearly is the largest of the four works at the museum, called *The Martyrdom of the Philosopher*, which forms a bridge between the previous series it accompanies and the new work it presages. Its large scale contains the vestiges of an imposed organizational structure, but only one side is sealed, creating a sliver that narrowly supports a single vertical plane. The space is almost devoid of perspective and full of floating geometrical colors, shapeless impasto, naively drawn familiar objects, and colorful, op-art inspired discs, some patterned in the textile shapes of woven rugs, which hover perpendicular to the floor, pressed flatly in the gray, airless space. In this piece, Dutcher's customized lexicon of personal images and interior spaces begins to yield to untethered ideas about perception and ambiguity. Although there's still compartmentalization, the grid structure has literally begun to dissolve; freed of their constraints, the objects float and jostle each other as if in zero gravity. This loosening of compositional control is also reflected in the more agitated passages of brushwork and the near complete abstraction of many of his constituent shapes. It is not just a powerful painting, but a benchmark.

Although Dutcher's work addresses tragedy, in person he exudes a natural, breezy optimism. That aspect of his personality finally makes itself felt in the radiant new work shown at Solway Jones in September. These works are for the most part very large, with haunting titles, such as *The Dead Speak*, *Towards an Afterlife* and *The Light Pours Out of Me*. In these paintings, the artist has dispensed entirely with the cabinet armature and spatial perspective, as well as the majority of his usual objects and symbols. Instead, vast circular patterns (pencil drawings of woven rugs) occupy most of the canvas and the smattering of abstract patterns, impastos and shapeless ideograms that still inhere are mainly relegated to the four triangular margins around them. Primary colors and raw canvas dominate, and the overall effect is refreshing, oxygenated, and a little bit giddy. The masterpiece of the show is *Above and Below*, which, like all these works, uses not only paint but also magic marker, pencil, oil stick and collage, to achieve a rich, multi-dimensional surface. The work shows a group of three spirals and a sketchy mosaic of floating objects flowing through the spaces between them. The composition is at once psychedelic, chaotic, organic, mechanistic, balanced and optimistic. One gets the feeling it could be studied daily for years with constantly new results. Informed by his own years of looking to history, Dutcher has turned his attention outward and forward, in a posture of cautious optimism.

"What am I trying to do when I paint?" he asks rhetorically, standing amid a half dozen unfinished works in his studio. "I am concerned with being authentic. My brush strokes are clumsy and awkward. Sometimes I deface what I so carefully painted the day before. I am interested in melancholy. I like that mix of sadness with beauty. Sometimes I get caught up in the idea of the heroic painter, an old-fashioned idea about painting where the artist transfers his emotions through the brush onto the canvas," he adds. "I want the painting to feel real to me."

This kind of explicit metamorphosis and careful, considered leave-taking from the past are part of the man as well as his art. Until 2004, he went by Mark Housley; he changed his name to Dutcher despite the success he had already achieved under his former name for reasons occasioned by a long-overdue reunion with his natural father, a local figure who Dutcher discovered was a painter of some renown in his own right. Dutcher chose to embrace the compelling, poetic legacy of his past at a crucial moment in his career, a symbolic personal gesture quite in keeping with his intentions in the studio.

"Lately I have been interested in pure and impure painting. Symbol versus abstraction. When I paint an object, say a pipe, I ask myself, how real do I need to make this? Can the pipe be just an

outline or a splotch of brown paint? How about when a symbol fades in importance; how do I paint that?" As Dutcher indicates, the new work is not about specific objects. Rather, it is about abstraction, pattern, repetition, obsession and meditation. What used to be rugs are now floating lozenges; the obsessive and expressive crosshatching in circular schemes resembles weaving itself; and the folksy, imperfect, obviously handmade results evoke their warmth. "My new paintings are based on images of braided rag rugs that have turned into afterlife portals. The rag rugs interested me because I liked the idea of something made with scraps of clothing from someone's life turned into a hand-woven symbol of a life lived. Wants and desire abstract themselves and become pure color. Objects melt away until you are confronted with spirit."

*Dec 2006 by shana nys dambrot*