

ARTFORUM

Nadel, Dan. "Dan Nadel on the Art of Daniel Hesidence." *The Online Edition of Artforum International Magazine*, 1 Mar. 2022, <https://www.artforum.com/print/202203/dan-nadel-on-the-art-of-daniel-hesidence-87912>.

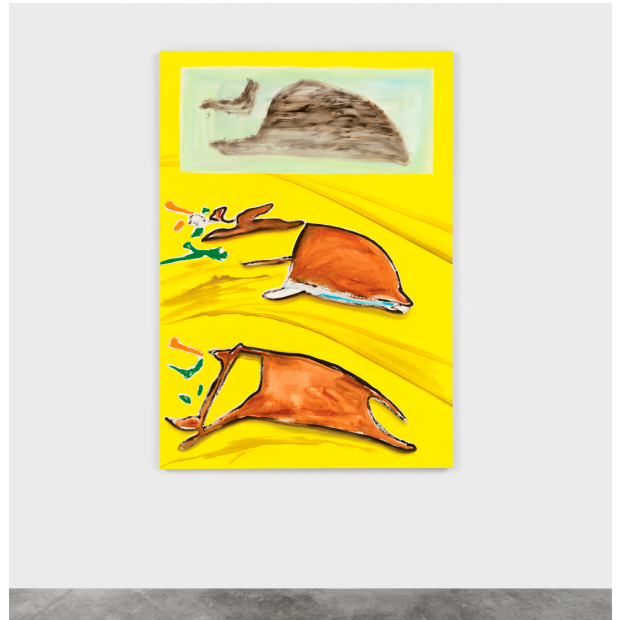
A VULNERABLE PLACE FROM WHICH TO PAINT

DANIEL HESIDENCE'S PAINTINGS insist that we become aware. How does a painting insist? By offering a hitherto unimagined shape or form—an idea, really—brushed, scraped, mashed, or detailed, and through its sheer unfamiliarity demanding a response. Just to get that response requires heeding one's own beguilement. You must pay attention. And getting an object to elicit that attentiveness is no easy feat. Hesidence has to tune in to himself, trancelike, to receive what is not immediately available to him. He says, "The more someone makes, the closer they get to an acute awareness of what's out there." In turn, the viewer needs to spend time with the paintings for them to release the information the artist has encoded. It's a bit like the story of *Horselover Fat*, protagonist of Philip K. Dick's *Valis* (1981), in which God reveals sacred knowledge to Fat in a pink beam of light. Dick writes,

Fat was spiritually haunted by that color. Sometimes it showed up on a TV screen. He lived for that light, that one particular color. However, he could never really find it again. Nothing could generate that color for light but God. In other words, normal light did not contain that color. One time Fat studied a color chart, a chart of the visible spectrum. The color was absent. He had seen a color which no one can see; it lay off the end.

When Fat sees something no one can see, he receives information about the conditions of his and our existence. This information is very difficult to discuss for both author and protagonist. Hesidence's paintings are evidence of his own attempt to delineate the unsayable, to reproduce previously unknown information by finding, he says, "a shape or form that is not this or that," something unique and indescribable.

His most recent cycle, *Carrier*, 2021, on view at New York's Salon 94 gallery through March 5, is sun-dappled, vulnerable, enamored of surface and light. The works invoke (depict is too strong a word) a camel, the pyramids of Giza, botanical shapes, and calligraphic motifs. If the paintings coalesced into nameable images, we might call them, collectively, a travelogue. Instead, they never quite settle down, thematically or physically. If a composition congeals into a legible image, Hesidence disassembles it; if a group of colors hint at, say, sky and sand,



Daniel Hesidence, *Untitled*, 2021, oil on canvas, 78 x 55". From *Carrier*, 2021.

Hesidence first gently, then savagely, mashes them to thwart recognition. The result is not an image executed in paint so much as paint that has come to resemble a series of flickering sense memories.

Many of the Carrier paintings contain a repeating three-sided form that morphs depending on its placement. In one work (Hesidence almost never titles his paintings) dominated by a mustard field, it makes multiple appearances: hazy on a pale-blue rectangle, vivid and possibly volumetric, flayed open. It trails shards of lush, unmediated green and orange. What keeps it from being identifiable is that, despite the appearance of light and shadow, there is no evidence of physics. Hesidence is not world-building, but rather way-finding. For him, "the repetition of forms is like a way of getting something into focus, mimicking physical phenomena." Hesidence's techniques arise not only from a refusal of certainty but also from careful observation of paint phenomena and a dedication to making an unimpeachable surface. "Mimicking, but not reproducing. For me, it allows the sensation of movement in time and place, like passing through a sunset in an airplane.

In another painting, the form looms large in its space. Are we zooming in, or was the previous painting zooming out? Or maybe it has grown over time? Here, it enters a field of heavily built-up dusty pale greens and purples. The skin seems an accretion of layers of plaster, a shadowed quasi-alphabet, the outlines of palm fronds and a pyramid just out of reach. The shape is encased in one of Hesidence's long, luxurious strokes. He says, "When you make a paint stroke, it opens a different part of the brain, a different pathway, and then, even there, you want to subvert it." And so he does. Inside his elegant lines is a palimpsest of bulbous mud-brown marks that push in multiple directions, breaking a bit as they approach the top edge, signifying volume yet again. Within the mud and with a pinstriper's panache, Hesidence has carved out markings that go paler and flow into a profusion of aquamarines, rose, and the most limpid of greens.

The forms are not always central to the canvases. In another work, they interact with two glowing yellow rectangles, each bearing a pendant dangling from its center. This moment is occurring against the deepest aquamarine. And those bulbous marks are back, coalescing into pyramids, a sphere, and a parsnip-like form that takes the foreground in other Carrier paintings. Fluid white lines should define, but instead they confuse. The brown looks to be smeared with a smooth cloth, and everywhere it overtakes the regal yellow. With its sudden interruptions and intimations of sky, it threatens to disorient the entire group. It's of the same species but perhaps of a different type.

It is a necessary but not sufficient explanation that Hesidence is a virtuoso. He was the kid in high school who could draw with photorealistic precision the plumbing under a sink. And his impeccable physical execution is in constant conversation with a philosophy that is morally opposed to the sayable, the recognizable. This rejection is manifested through the different attitudes assumed in Hesidence's paint application: bravado, fastidiousness, grace, brutality. His techniques arise not only from a refusal of certainty but also from careful observation of paint phenomena and a dedication to making an unimpeachable surface. I look at the paintings, and I know they've been touched, even when they are as smooth and unsullied as cake frosting. Sometimes they're the opposite: scraped, scarred, wounded. Every bit of information is intentional, opening up new perceptual pathways.

So much art forecloses possibility, disallows it through strategies of containment and literal or didactic meaning. In a recent email exchange, Hesidence wrote that he prefers, as I do, the

Jasper Johns of the 1980s, free of obvious cultural referents, to the Johns of the '50s and '60s: "The complexity that evolves heading into the '80s and beyond is truly significant. In many ways the parsing of imagery, compression of space and reoccurring systems of making/application has him far ahead on all fronts." And like Johns, as well as Johns devotee and Hesidence touchstone Carroll Dunham, he has used painting and drawing to develop a unique vocabulary of marks and glyphs that can take or throw off meaning. He has reworked and refined them over the years, adding fresh ones with each new body of work. This is key for Hesidence. Like that of Dunham and Johns, his art is not about reflecting the world or creating it anew but about the process of comprehending it. It is, he has said, his way of "contributing."

HESIDENCE'S ENERGY AND ACTION began like this: He was born in Akron and raised in North Canton, Ohio, his mother a librarian and his father an alcohol salesman. "Thoughtful, tender people," he says. He attended the University of Tampa to study art because the school had the distinction of having been built on an old fairground and because when he toured the place, the head of the program told him frankly, "We really can't offer you much here." This appealed. Off the beaten path, Hesidence was free of centrist notions of art. He graduated in 1998 and then went to Hunter College for sculpture. In his second year, he must have looked a bit lost, the midwestern boy by way of Florida, so Douglas Dibble, a friend and the building facilitator and manager at Hunter, bluntly told Hesidence that "no one is going to help you drop off your slides." As if snapping out of a daze, the artist started taking his slides around to galleries. Hudson, of Feature Inc., said, "Call me in two weeks." Hesidence did, and Hudson predicted that Hunter would attempt to eject him, offered a letter of support, and gave him a show. A few days earlier, Hesidence indeed nearly hadn't passed his program review. Or as Frank Auerbach, another of the artist's inspirations, put it, "Painters if not committed to painting might spend their energy on other things. Painting is my form of action."

Nowadays, painting happens in Hesidence's studio in Newburgh, New York, with oil on cotton duck #10 or #12 canvas propped against or placed on an easel, depending on the scale. Like Carrier, all of his bodies of work maintain a limited palette. He'll keep multiple paintings going until the larger project is complete: "The entire body of work materializes at once, which allows for a competition of sorts between the works, which ultimately drives or sources content. If a single work within the grouping replicates the messaging of another, it is pushed in a different direction many times over until a logic or specificity is located."

Each cycle of paintings becomes, if not an exhibition, then a complete volume, of which there are now twenty. There are the excruciating, horrific paintings of disfigured heads composing Chambers Street Paintings, 2002–2004; the elegiac Waltz Paintings, 2005, fittingly titled for their large-scale, bravura abstractions involving diamond and triangle shapes; the 1700s, 2006–2007, focused on ovoid cauldrons of palette-knife color smears and curtains of pigment. There are Farm Paintings, 2003, and Post-Farm, 2004, in which a horse appears and its viscera and biology are limned with saber-like strokes, clouds of liquid stains creating uncanny atmosphere. And then there's the quartet of groups that consumed years, each marked by a season-related color: Rose Laughter Winter Holiday, 2008; Autumn Buffalo, 2009; Maritime Spring, 2011–12; and Summers Gun, 2014–15. The Maritime Spring paintings offer the deepest turquoise traced with marks that seem to expand as you look. In 2013, this group landed in the Encyclopedic Palace at the Fifty-Fifth Venice Biennale. Those of Summers Gun are thickly impastoed, like scorched meadows, their carved lines either identifying masses or acting as crop drawings. After concluding Summers Gun, Hesidence resurfaced a kind of nameable pictorial language in Place Holders, 2017–18, and later Doppelgangers, 2019, which provided

glimpses of humanoids, goggles, vehicles, and unreadable logo forms. And now, in *Carrier*, he has found, well, a vulnerable place from which to paint.

In perhaps the most revealing painting of the group, two camel-like forms emerge, standing regally amid a profusion of greenery and cursive-letter forms in aquamarine, a blurry purple behind them. The size, place, and timing of each of these elements is purposefully unclear; the question only comes up because Hesidence places things in proximity, as though indicating a narrative, but one without a thread. The “camel” bodies are filled with a texture that has become familiar in his work—something like a scumbling done with a cloth to produce an effect of irregular colors, like paw prints made by a millipede. Elsewhere, calligraphic lines applied straightfrom the tube emanate a hint of the floral. It feels like a passel of memories emerging all at once. We always want to see land, flesh, water in abstractions. Hesidence’s *Carrier* works seem to literalize our expectations—as if to say, Yes, I am remembering to remember this body, this place, and here’s what that fleeting memory might look like at this shifting moment.

The floral returns in an emerald canvas that teems with close-up palm fronds, trunks, and a slender body mode of purple and red outlined in stark black. Other passages are highlighted in cloudy white or pushed into volumes of green. But the oddly dominant aspect is a group of floating panels of triangular glyphs reminiscent of screens floating before our eyes. It feels like an account or a collective imagining of a ramble, perhaps this time through a verdant forest. Hesidence says he admires Velázquez’s ability to render a precise object and then allow another part of the canvas to drift into something nonspecific. This happens here. Hesidence will focus on a passage by outlining it and lavishing attention on it. Others may not be entirely unattended to, but they are not specific. Their indeterminacy allows at least a moment’s rest.

Hesidence sees his closest affinities as being with a disparate list of artists with a high risk-reward ratio: not only Auerbach, Dunham, and Johns but also Francis Bacon, Huma Bhabha, Jason Fox, Maria Lassnig, Paul Thek, and Vincent van Gogh. I detect evidence of the influence of Wols, Jean Fautrier, and Roberto Matta. I won’t unpack all of these, but I think it’s worth noting that, like Thek, Hesidence is able to convey, with intent and expediency, a great deal of often gnarly humanity in an impeccable container. Thek and all the artists on this list are sensualists, locked into manifold ideas about the body from within, without, over time, and in the mind’s eye. It is Auerbach, though, who looms largest. His paintings begin, as Hesidence’s do not, with a referent, a model or a landscape. Writing of Auerbach’s landscapes, T. J. Clark hit upon something that might well be said of Hesidence:

The feeling of seeing is his subject, and of course the better knowledge that the seeing gives rise to . . . the way it can dawn on us, for example, that a “landscape” is only contingently a unity, and therefore strike us as perplexing that we normally make the array of features in front of us so confidently, unthinkingly, into a “view” or a “scene.”

Hesidence adds a prescriptive feature: “A painting downloads something into you as a human. The environment, the maker’s response to it, is all there. It’s a network of information—if we as a species tap in, there is potential for real progress. Painting can be a beacon. Though archaic, what other medium or object functions as a direct record of thought that emits a signal to future generations?” When we access that network, we’re accessing our own history, of course. It’s a feeling of recognition, one that comes without our always being able to identify just what it is we are recognizing. Hesidence never met his grandfather Arthur Hesidence, an ingenious inventor but a poor businessman known to his grandson only through the patents bearing his signature, a spiky large-scale mark of another time carrying within it historical, personal, and metaphysical information. On the back of each of Hesidence’s paintings is his

Canada

60 Lispenard Street
New York, NY
10013

P: 212 925 4631
E: gallery@canadanewyork.com
www.canadanewyork.com

own generous signature, rendered quite like one from the early twentieth century, and a lock of his hair. There is never a title, very rarely a date. No possibility is foreclosed. There is a barely legible name, a physical token of the maker, and the thing itself as an artifact of awareness, a moment of comprehension, and a gift to the future.