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Denzil Hurley Interview

The Art of Reduction: Denzil Hurley

Denzil Hurley is a Seattle-based artist who works reductively. He had his first solo museum show earlier this year at the Kemper Museum in Kansas City, Missouri. In the following interview, Denzil discusses his influences, his art and artistic advice.

You have moved around a lot in your career. Has this had any influence on your art?

Denzil Hurley: Yes, when one is exposed to different places, people and challenges, it affects your thinking. It focuses your attention on priorities concerning your work. It involves your consciousness and awareness. You develop a sense of responsibility about your work.

What is the motivation to keep working on a piece for over 10 years?

Denzil Hurley: That comes about because I have developed an open process. I watch to see how I respond and think about particular aspects of my work over time.

How do you know when one of your pieces is complete?

Denzil Hurley: When there is a certain register regarding the imagery, its structuring and my responses and curiosity about the piece.

You were born in Barbados, has this background had any impact on your art?

Denzil Hurley: Yes, very much. The island has a lively tradition of art activity. My earliest training and exposure was there. The color of the landscape and the compression of a small, densely populated place had an effect. Music and literature were important as well.

Do you consider yourself a minimalist artist?

Denzil Hurley: No, I work reductively.

How did you reach this point?

Denzil Hurley: By thinking through aspects of structuring my images and composition; by wanting the piece to be singular and not depend on a given narrative.

Do you remember creating your first piece of art?

Denzil Hurley: I was very young, maybe 8 or 9. I liked making objects. I had an early interest in sculpture. I still look at sculpture and, also, think about architecture.

What are the biggest misconceptions about minimalist art?

Denzil Hurley: That it is cold, boring, unfeeling. It is rigorous, thoughtful and exciting when an artist can make new form.

What is the hardest aspect of being an artist?

Denzil Hurley: Finding time for your work. Sometimes it is making a living, sticking to your guns when things seem to be moving in other directions.

You use "the grid" a lot in your work. When did you first begin this process?

Denzil Hurley: I had an early interest in the grid and cube about 20 years ago. They are both conscious, open, flexible and available.

For those who haven't seen your work, how would you describe it?

Denzil Hurley: I would describe it as rigorous, clearly abstract; about structuring imagery, color and surfaces. I want my work to seem available and open while maintaining its density.

Who are some of your artistic influences?

Denzil Hurley: I worked in printmaking early on. The methodology and process were important. Artistic influences: Jackson Pollock, Donald Judd, Picasso, Matisse, Malevich, DaVinci, Sonia Delaunay, Popova, Tina Modotti, Edward Weston, Carl Andre, Octavio Paz, Derek Walcott, Andrew Forge, Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, Josef Albers, Jasper Johns, Wilfredo Lam, Gene Baro, Gabor Peterdi, Robert Motherwell, Egyptian Art, African Art, European Art and Amerindian Art.

Your main medium is oil on canvas. Are you ever trying to make the media look like something else?

Denzil Hurley: No, I simply try to have it do what is necessary in a given work.

Are you most comfortable using oil and canvas?

Denzil Hurley: It is still tough and engaging. I respond to it.

Are there certain colors you prefer using when painting?

Denzil Hurley: I desire particular color through the use of many.

Do you prefer working small or large?

Denzil Hurley: Both. Some ideas need to reference scale and size in particular works.

Do you have any advice for people wanting to become artists?

Denzil Hurley: Get good training. Go to museums. Draw, draw, draw! Try new things within your work. Read. Read about artists. Read what artists write.

Your first solo show is featured at the Kemper Art Museum. How do you feel about it?

Denzil Hurley: This is my first solo museum show, but I have done several solo gallery shows. I love the Kemper show, it works!

Have you heard some people's reactions to the works?

Denzil Hurley: I read two positive reviews and I have heard supportive comments about the work.

Does every piece in the show mean something to you?

Denzil Hurley: Yes. They are particular.

Out of the pieces featured in the show, do you have a favorite?

Denzil Hurley: Tough question! The two large Scrib paintings are new and important to me. B'clus moves my thinking in a particular direction; its density is another opening.

Do you have any advice for aspiring artists?

Denzil Hurley: Talk to each other, community is important. See as much work as you can. Learn to be at one with your own work. Be curious about your own choices. Realize that it might be a big life choice, so don't hurry. Work hard and try to go to good schools where there is dialogue and excitement. Work in many mediums and be open to the demands of process. Realize that it is okay to be alone with your work and yourself. Read history. See something of the country and the world. Talk to your teachers. Have other interests as well. Be lucky!

Denzil Hurley is an artist as well as a teacher at the University of Washington.

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