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Dashiell Manley. Portrait by David Benhaim.

ELEGY FOR A YOUNG AMERICAN ARTIST

By: Michael Slenske
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Two years ago, as a direct response to his acclaimed New York Times and Various Sources paintings, L.A.-based artist Dashiell Manley made the first foray into oil on canvas with a body of work simply titled *Elegy*.

"I was dealing with the content of the world, all this information and news as it was reported on the front page of The New York Times and that process was very overwhelming because it was this slowed down consumption of repetitive, redundant information," says Manley of the works which depicted every story (with amplifications of words like ISIS, Ebola and the highlights from the 2016 election) from selected front pages of the *Gray Lady* written out in pastel watercolor pencil and gouache in every direction on eight-foot canvases finished with a silver wash to blur the news of the day. In the fall of 2014 he began the *Various Sources* works, painted in a similar manner, which were abstracted from political cartoons found in *The New Yorker* and *Charlie Hebdo*. "When I did the first show of Times paintings the attacks on Charlie Hebdo happened so all of a sudden these works that were kind of funny became pretty dark. It felt like the cartoons removed from context furthered their ability to be misunderstood, the caricatures blatantly tried to instigate."

To combat the frustrations of working with real time news and satire that literally cost people their lives, Manley began a “DIY Buddhist meditation” and started making his elegiac paintings as an artistic reprieve in the studio. By establishing a set of problems on the canvas—“I’m going to try to make something ugly, then make it pleasing”—he would attempt to solve them with a series of meditative marks in oil impasto on linen that resemble zen gardens, impressions of foliage, seashells, dirty rutted roads or slashing cuts depending on perspective and palette.



“I was thinking about the three series as dealing with the same content just in three different ways; textually, pictorially and emotionally,” says Manley, who considers the Elegy paintings the last part in a trilogy, which were all shown together in his recent solo museum debut at Stanford’s Cantor Arts Center. While he agrees that they mourn the deaths of the first two series and represent a Rorschach of all his previous work, the act of making them is not completely psychological. “I want to figure out the simplest mark I can possibly make that when repeated over the entire surface, the picture plane still holds up,” he says. “How can I strip this down to the simplest gesture possible?”

Stacks of oil-coated palette knives—his preferred tool for the works—are scattered about the studio floor and the low register vibrato of cars passing on the 101 Freeway hums in the background. Walking around his 1,700-square-foot Echo Park studio dressed in black New Balance tennis shoes and a black t-shirt tucked into oversized jeans, while his bushy mustache and ponytailed hair bloom from beneath a weathered 2016 US Open cap, he points to two 85×110-inch canvases that will be exhibited at the Los Angeles Nomadic Division

this month. They mark a shift from his earlier pastels and his more recent black elegies with bright underpaintings that reveal frenetic scrawls in pencil and the phrase, 'THE DISSSSSSPOSAABLEE.'



"I had no intention of these ever being seen," he says of the series walking into a storage room with his private collection of early elegies. "It was this thing I was doing in this back room." Since he graduated from UCLA in 2011, Manley's history-mining work (featuring stop-animation, video and two-sided film still style paintings made from sets and floorboards from his studio referencing everything from texts he'd written to Edwin S. Porter's 1903 film *The Great Train Robbery*) has been a lightning rod for collectors and curators. His early work was included in the Hammer's 2012 *Made in LA Biennial* and the 2014 *Whitney Biennial*, so it was only a matter of time before his recent studio secret got out.

"If there can be an artist high like there is a runner's high he's probably in that moment right now because he's worked really hard to get here and what you see in those paintings are all the work he's done up to this point rendered through his humanistic hand," says John Rubeli, a longtime collector of Manley's who first met the artist when he was working in a Chinatown strip mall studio next to Night Gallery's original space. Rubeli bought one of the first *Elegy* paintings, a 40th birthday present for his wife Stacy, after catching a surprise

glimpse of them during a visit to see the New York Times and Various Sources work. “Stacy and I got back home and we couldn’t stop thinking about them for three days. But you can’t just look at them as pretty pictures, those pictures come with a lot, there’s a lot in those gestures and paintings and it’s impossible to understand them without understanding his own historical context.”



At the moment, Manley is looking to shift the context forward yet again with a collaborative show, scheduled for the fall, with fellow L.A. painter Andy Woll. The two artists plan to rent out a 5,000-square-foot warehouse inside of which they are looking to install a 20×30-foot room. On the interior, they will hang their respective high chroma paintings—Manley’s elegies and Woll’s latest paintings of Mt. Wilson depicting abstractions of the peak’s crevasses and couloirs embedded with imagery from 6th century Grecian vessels—lit by high wattage overhead lights and seen through portal windows. The exterior of the structure will be adorned with greyscale works.



“We started at very different points but we’re coming together,” says Woll, who has been talking to Manley about the similarities in the work for a year and the pair recently staged a revelatory test hang. “The representational imagery in my paintings would pull an image out of his works.”

Those images are partly a result of the “notations” (little editing marks that originally indicated problems that needed resolving) that became their own aesthetic function of the works, which now represent Manley’s longest running series to date. Toward the end of our visit, Manley pulls a 2×10-foot horizontal panel from a corner and mounts it on a wall in a small viewing room/office in the front of the studio to show his latest evolution. From left to right the painting moves from bright fans of colors that devolve into a series of sharp black slashes, and then concludes in a choppy sea of grey swirls that resolve in a cleansing expanse of blank white. He isn’t certain it’s finished, and not really sure he even likes it, but there’s some ineffable quality about the hypnotically chaotic work that just won’t let him go.

“There’s something about my makeup or my intuition that is fundamentally flawed in that when I think I’m going to like something forever, in a year I’m like, ‘God, what a piece of shit.’ In other words, my judgment is just fucked,” he says with a grin. “This will become my favorite painting.”