

Art Pervading Life

CECILIA DANELL AND DIANA COPPERWHITE CHAT ABOUT THEIR PAINTING ROUTINES.

Cecilia Danell: How do you start a painting? Do you do any preparatory drawings? Do you have an idea beforehand or does it all happen on the canvas, as it were?

Diana Copperwhite: I do a mixture of things. I'm always looking for information and I do use things stored up in my head; I also take photos and use found photographs. Sometimes I start a drawing as kind of a map for the painting, which evolves in its own direction. I never want them to be straightforward, so it's mixture of pulling things from different places. For me, it is important that it becomes this completely separate thing that you can't locate in any one direction.

CD: I noticed your early work is more figurative.

DC: Yeah, I think it started out that way because I'm really interested in the world, and in how things relate to each other. It wasn't a deliberate decision but happened organically – sort of like translating music visually or dealing with memory and ideas of perception. It morphed from there to something more abstract.

CD: In your paintings even nowadays, I can see spaces and figures – are they deliberate or is it my mind trying to interpret shape?

DC: It is impossible to make a painting without making those relationships. If you're looking at something in low light, or in a dark laneway, you don't fully see it and your mind scrambles to try to give it meaning because we're wired like that. You can't put a mark beside another mark in a painting without it being read as deliberate.

CD: There is a sensory reality, a subjectivity, to the way we perceive things in the world. One of the things I love about your work and that I've been introducing into my own work more and more over the years, is the idea of arbitrary colour relationships – colours that aren't really there, producing a kind of sensory experience.

DC: That comes from looking at the world. I always look at light, and light sources and how that works and how white light is made from the spectrum. Under certain circumstances, like an oil slick or a rainstorm, it refracts the light, and you start to see colour. That almost seems more real than white light, in a way. There can be gaps in perception versus reality, and painting is another reality that doesn't have to correspond.

CD: I get a chance to use colours from the other end of the colour spectrum, and shapes that aren't there through drips and abstractions.

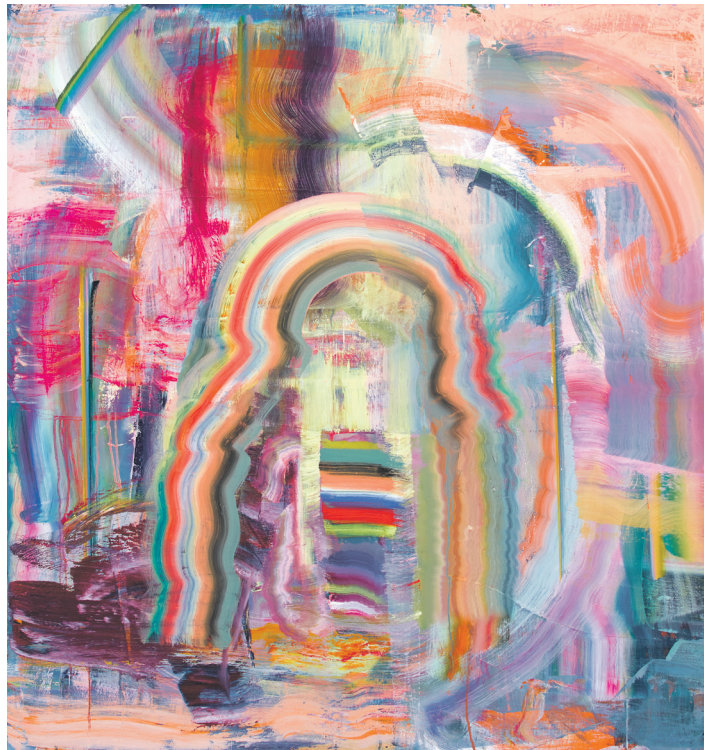
DC: You introduce those ideas in a figurative way and then you break the figure-plane relationship. You might use drips of blue and pink in this idyllic landscape and it's almost like a portal to another reality. That's kind of what I'm interested in as well – taking these ideas about how one perceives things and opening up this huge space for the imagination.

CD: I sometimes work in a backwards way, where I retain the shapes rather than cover them up. The longer you work, you realise you can't keep the background as it is, as it would look unfinished, and you have to work over it.

DC: Then you see it's not nature anymore, it's a painting. That's the fun part of painting – it's of itself; it's a painting.

CD: John Berger said that a painting, unlike a photo, doesn't capture a moment but contains all the time it took to paint it and all the future moments when it will be looked at – so it's timeless, in that sense. In your work, we can definitely see that process; we can trace the edges of the painting and see the layers.

DC: I think when I'm painting, I'm looking for something,



Diana Copperwhite, *Confluence of thinking*, 2021, oil on canvas, 120 x 120 cm; image courtesy of the artist.

but I don't know what that is. I keep going and that's why there are so many chops and changes, layers, starts and stops; I want it to be gravity-free, like another reality.

CD: I used to get asked "when do you know a painting is finished?" I would say that it's when nothing takes focus unduly; when the eye travels and doesn't get stuck. Sometimes one colour can be just a fraction too intense and that takes the focus.

DC: Exactly, because the overall painting has to work! I find when I'm painting – and you probably get this as well – early on if it works really well, that's not a good thing because you get kind of attached to something and you have to learn to let it go.

CD: It can be really daunting to take that step, because you can mess it up entirely. You know that if you don't, it will be an okay painting but if you manage to do it and it works, you bring it to the next level.

DC: Usually when it's not a good painting at the beginning, you have to work really hard to make it better. You don't go in for your dinner and think "that's great, that's working". No – it's a mess.

CD: In terms of scale, when you make smaller works, you call them 'anti-portraits' and they're very close up and abstract at the same time. When I'm making small works, I do kind of close-ups of nature. This is a different way of approaching it and I would never personally make a landscape in small scale.

DC: Well, it's a different thing, small paintings... It is kind of like a release from the large paintings because there's so much going on in them – it's such a balancing act. Smaller paintings are nice and succinct; it's like making a sentence that keeps going, like punctuation with commas and full stops and adjectives.

CD: You can manoeuvre things within large paintings. When I work wet-on-wet, I can focus on a certain area and keep going without needing to let things dry, because I can move onto something else. I hate when you're in the studio and you've got something you're doing later that day, and you



Cecilia Danell, *The Old Radar*, 2021, oil and acrylics on canvas, 125 x 125 cm; image courtesy of the artist.

get really into it, and you've mixed all the paints up...

DC: That is very frustrating, because you need to stop... I time myself. I have to really go at it, and I don't know what's going to happen. I have to be very alert, but you can't sustain that level of alertness and focus for that long. I set my alarm for half-hour intervals, so I'm completely without distraction. Then I leave for ten minutes and come back and do the same thing.

CD: I find it really hard to work in the morning; I really only get going around 2pm. Sometimes you feel like it's a hard slog but then when you're about to finish up, you just want to fix one little thing and the time flies. I photograph my work as I go along. However, I often look at my work in bed and then if something doesn't work, I can barely sleep! It's on your mind constantly.

DC: I do the same! If you look at images on phones or devices you can work out what's wrong with them. You can see an overview, as if you were in a gallery standing back, instead of being obsessed with one area. The paintings are like people, following us around! That's because they kind of just pervade life.

Cecilia Danell is a Swedish visual artist based in Galway. Her current solo exhibition, 'Tactile Terrain', continues at the Luan Gallery until 3 April. She is also showing in the Hennessy Craig Award Exhibition at the RHA until 21 March.

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Diana Copperwhite is a visual artist based in Dublin. She is a member of Aosdána and is currently showing at Snite Museum, USA, as part of 'Who Do We Say We Are', an exhibition of Irish art, with an upcoming solo show at 532 Gallery Thomas Jaeckel, New York, in September.

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Both artists are represented by Kevin Kavanagh, Dublin.

kevinkavanagh.ie