

where the day gives way

Dany Albiach interviewed by Pauline Vermeren

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Villa Arson

Francis Bacon MB Art Foundation – Villa Arson Residency Prize

Artist Dany Albiach conceives of art as a relational and existential space, one capable of transforming his connection to others, to everyday life, and to memory. A graduate of the Villa Arson (2024), he develops a practice attentive to what often goes unnoticed, revealing the emotional and sensory depths concealed within the ordinary and the seemingly insignificant. His works appear as fragile attempts to preserve intimacy against the forces of time, erasure and disappearance. Rooted in screen printing and drawing, his practice is permeated by the experience of insomnia, which infuses his compositions that feature deep blues and nocturnal atmospheres, and which evoke silence, dreams, and the elusive traces of memory. His artistic influences intertwine with the landscapes that have accompanied and shaped his journey, from the shores and reliefs of La Réunion to the maritime horizons of Nice. Through twilight landscapes, shifting reflections and fragments of bodies or natural forms, Albiach composes suspended spaces between fiction and reminiscence. His work invites a state of contemplation and quiet introspection, while maintaining a delicate balance between personal experimentation and visual accessibility. By leaving faces indistinct, titles absent and scenes deliberately incomplete, he preserves a space of mystery in which each viewer can project their own memories and emotions. Through this gesture, Albiach transforms the intimate into a shared and universal experience.

Pauline Vermeren: Dany, you graduated from the Villa Arson in 2024, and this year you were awarded the Francis Bacon MB Art Foundation in Monaco prize. Your work was also exhibited at the 46th Gallery in Saint-Paul de Vence this spring. In terms of this idea that runs throughout your practice – the idea that you make art in a way that serves your life, and that your works are tools for shaping your relationship with others – could you tell us about the different stages in your trajectory as an artist, and your choice to work with screen printing?

Dany Albiach: This desire for my art to serve my life emerged while I was studying at the Villa Arson. I had constructed a series of projects that aimed, amongst other things, to shape my relationships to my close circle and my intimate environment. Each of these works was envisaged as a tool, as a means for reaching this end.

Marcel Duchamp's idea of the inframince was an important one for me, because it offered a way of looking differently at my surroundings. This term invites us to detect what's happening when nothing seems to be, to find an infinite richness in the apparently banal. Giacometti also helped me to think about this, as an artist who said that he would be happy to have a chair as his only subject for the rest of his life, since reality itself is so rich.

One of my earlier works was an installation that reproduced my family's living room. There was an edition entitled "0.4 ml", which is the amount of ink contained in a standard Bic ball-point pen. With the living room as my backdrop, I spent years drawing objects and members of my family. This project changed my relationship to my parents, to my brother, to my sister, to my cat and to my everyday space; it brought me closer to them. When I was on holiday, I spent hours with them, drawing them, paying close attention to them. After 1799 drawings, the ink began to run out: the last sketches feature fainter lines and gaps, and the last page stayed blank altogether. It was an attempt to record the ordinary, the familial, the intimate – a vain attempt, because the ink ultimately ran out. When you think in terms of disappearance, all those moments that you think about as banal, boring, without interest, suddenly take on a preciousness.

Other projects emerged, including one that I made using a clump of dust that I found in my family's living room. It was about producing a memory trace that wasn't dead or fixed, but rather one that registered a particular moment and that could be reactivated by the slightest gesture. The object could be activated like a snow globe: by shaking it, you could send matter that had been sealed in place for years dancing back into the air.

Later, my first attempts at screen printing went along with experiments with writing, which I pursued along phenomenological lines. Following a long period of work with protocols, I wanted to find a more spontaneous approach to materials again. But at the same time, I was beginning to worry about my future economic situation. It's rare that artists can live from their art, and it seemed obvious that I had more chance of selling a figurative painting than a glass sphere containing dust, no matter how poetic it might be. This financial motivation didn't become my guiding principle, though, as I embarked upon a long and winding trajectory of artistic research and exploration.

PV: With screen printing, there's a very particular technical process, which requires the use of an exposure unit [a machine featuring a powerful light source (often UV) which can burn a design or image onto a screen for printing]. You have often worked with photographs, drawing on the similarities between photography and screen printing. What is it that interests you specifically about screen printing? And what is your relationship to the photographic object that you use for screen printing?

DA: My first screen printing projects on wood were attempts to make scenes from family archives coexist with very old objects. For example, a photograph of the living room in which, instead of my parents, there was a Mesopotamian statue of a couple embracing. To be honest, the result was rather unfortunate, but it shows how, at the time, I was already looking to bring together different temporalities and fragment my compositions, like collages. Though I no longer use historical objects, I am still working towards a kind of archeology of the intimate.

These are photographs of my family and my friends; some of them are contemporary, others more than twenty years old. These paintings are made up of varied source images, and so different temporalities come together here and coexist, seeping into one another, and bringing about a spatial and temporal indeterminacy. This inconsistency extends in the interplay of reflections that shifts according to the angle of the viewer's gaze.

PV: Did screen printing become the only medium through which you looked to account for your intimate sphere, or have other mediums allowed you to pursue your artistic practice in this direction?

DA: Just before undertaking my pieces on wood, which directly preceded the ones that can be found in this exhibition, I began to make drawings on paper. This came to me following a series of long bouts of insomnia. Around that time, artists like Koo Jeong A helped me to accept pleasure as a driving force for creativity, which wasn't obvious to me, and to create a silent and meditative environment. This also gave me an opportunity to return to some of my earlier influences, such as Léon Spilliaert, Alfred Kubin or Itō Jakuchū. Alongside this, I continued to develop conceptual projects, in particular using ceramics, that aimed to create relationships with others. My current work lies at the confluence of my conceptual practice, marked by a close attention to the idea of the inframince, and of figurative drawing.

PV: How would you describe your relationship to nature, to the forms of trees, leaves, and the shores of lakes and the sea?

DA: It's a multiple one. First of all, the forest and the sea share a common trait: they are frontiers between the known and the unknown, between refuge and the ungraspable. Both of them act like receptacles for forgotten stories and submerged memories, and in this they offer a path back to the self.

The intimate dialogue that emerges between personal archives and these powerfully charged geographical spaces that are traversed by infinite strata of stories is one that opens onto a space where individual histories can encounter collective memory.

I should also mention the influence of traditional Chinese painting, which I have previously been interested in. I am still drawn to shanshui, landscapes made up of two elements, "mountains and water". These are articulated with one another like two poles of a single experience, allowing stability, flux, retreat and circulation to balance each other out in a living dynamic. The landscape here becomes a space for interior projection, a space of passage where interiority and collective heritage can unfold across different strata.

More prosaically, forests and the vast bodies of water defined all of the places I have lived. During my childhood in La Réunion, there were the hills and mountains with their rich flora and fauna, and the Indian Ocean. Later, I came to study in Nice, where again I found a dense inland landscape and a vast maritime horizon. The similarities between these landscapes made me want to bring the past and the present into dialogue with one another.

Finally, when I was drawing during my bouts of insomnia, I would depict enclosed spaces with few vanishing points that were like theatrical sketches. My last drawing, which marked the end of this intimate night, was a large, starry landscape, in which the gaze had far more space to move around and through which air or breath could flow – at least in imaginary terms. Since then, I have tended to create spaces which embody this kind of freedom.

PV: The question of insomnia is a recurrent one in your paintings, in particular by way of your use of nocturnal colours: dark blue, Klein blue, a blue so deep that it is almost black. We can observe subtle reflections within these colours, too.

DA: There is perhaps a link between these colours and insomnia, but there's also a dimension related to memory. Looking back at your own memories means plunging your gaze into a kind of darkness from which you can attempt, with difficulty, to draw out colours, forms and lines. As years go by, it becomes more and more complicated. In my recent works, I have tried to construct the image in such a way that the viewer has to make an effort, albeit a subtle one, to make it out.

In terms of the colour blue, Yves Klein is, of course, an unavoidable reference, but I am more directly influenced by artists like Edi Hila or William Degouve de Nuncques. For them, blue can evoke the idea of effacement, of a blurred memory, and induce a kind of melancholic atmosphere. For Hila, it introduces a kind of coldness – perhaps linked to the political context – whereas for de Nuncques, it is dreamlike. For both of them, the colour blue shrouds the image in a deep silence.

PV: What would you like to share with us about the works that you are exhibiting at the Villa Arson, in which you bring together screen printing and ball-point pen drawings?

DA: My aim here isn't to propose a clear, established narrative but rather to bring together a series of fragments as one might find photographs. These might be landscapes, details, fragments of interacting bodies. All this offers a wealth of possible analogies that the viewer can establish themselves, without having a pre-conceived narrative foisted upon them. This makes it possible to play with the scenography of the space: the juxtaposition of one painting with another tells one story; the addition of a third tells yet another, and so on. I try to not to foreground any elements too clearly and to avoid any overly significant anecdotes, so as to always maintain something mysterious and allow the viewer a freedom in their interpretation and their subjectivity, leaving them a space so that they can project themselves into the work.

This is why, for example, there are never any clearly defined faces or titles. I use personal photographs, but I am always careful to blur them to the point that anyone can recognise themselves in them, whether in a hand clasping another, a sunset, or an interplay of textures. I think that by speaking to the intimate, it is possible to attain something of the universal.

Traduction by James Horton.