
DAVID WELLS ROTH: SPACE, LIGHT & SHADOW

David Wells Roth is a Boston-based artist whose work sort of reminds me of Edward Hopper. However, David has his own vibe and his work is very hip and contemporary www.davidwellsroth.com. I had a great chat with him about his life and how he really became an artist at a very young age.

MICHAEL: Hey David, Even though your work is academically influenced, it still seems breezy, casual and very painterly. I can see your pleasure in the work. Is this correct?

DAVID: Since early childhood, I've loved drawing and painting from life and observation, perhaps this is what you are identifying as "academically influenced." One thing that strikes me today about the term "academic" when applied to art, is in today's art education or academia, the norm is no longer learning to paint from life or objective reality, but its focus is on non-objective and conceptual art and has been moving in that direction for at least the past 30 years, so it seems the art world is due for a re-think on its terminology. My formal art education came during college and was based on understanding how to "see." It stressed the observation of light and form and how to interpret them through paint. Until then, throughout my childhood, I formulated my ideas and painting solutions by making countless numbers of bad paintings and drawings and discovering solutions to make them better through trial and error.

MICHAEL: Interesting. So you started very young.

DAVID: I got my start in drawing as a preschooler from my father (a Bronx native, electrical engineer) whom having seen my desire to draw, showed me the basics of perspective by using the George Washington Bridge and streets and buildings of New York City as drawing demonstrations. I was fascinated by the 3D illusion on the 2D page. My mother, also from the Bronx and a former student of Robert Motherwell while at Hunter College during the '50s, took me with her while painting landscapes when I was a child. They also exposed me to the art of Van Gogh, Rembrandt, the Impressionists and Modern art at the MOMA, Guggenheim, etc, allowing me to have a rounded exposure to art. Despite all that, I still had my interest in creating representational imagery.

MICHAEL: That's great. So you're truly educated and paint from "scratch." This definitely shows in your work.

DAVID: In painting from observation, I basically interpret what I see and try to convey my emotions from my visual experience through the use of the paint. The "rigid" basic elements such as perspective and form are now handled more or less intuitively, freeing me to allow the paint to "speak" and flow, permitting me to explore my emotional expressions from my conscious and sub-conscious feelings of the world around me. It is from this that I derive my pleasure in painting. Also, it is through the constant correction through endless errors and the act of finding solutions to better express what I feel that I most enjoy my craft.

MICHAEL: It sounds to me like you're saying that despite natural talent, proficiency in anything, let alone painting, is really the result of hard work.

DAVID: At least for me. Natural talent has very little to do with it. If I don't put in the work, then I certainly will not yield results that make me happy. A few years ago, I learned a big lesson about hard work, which made me feel more comfortable with my limitations. I watched a documentary

about Al Hirschfeld called “The Line King”. All my life I thought he simply drew those ingenious images of his characters with one steady, uninterrupted line; like a Zen master. I imagined him in a spiritual trance, simply gliding the pen over the blank page, revealing the unmistakable likeness of his subject with utmost economy of line. Wow, was I wrong. He did the unimaginable. When starting his drawing he would scribble, over and over with pencil making a gestural mess, which resembled a heap of smashed steel wool. Then, with short strokes of his pen he drew lines within the blackened chaotic mess. After this, he would erase the pencil to reveal a simple line and a beautiful likeness that expressed volumes. This made me fully understand that nothing comes easy, even for Al Hirschfeld.

MICHAEL: I hate comparing artists, but some of your work does remind me of Edward Hopper. It has sort of a space-filled, solemn, lonely quality.

DAVID: I don’t mind comparisons as we are not islands and are all part of a continuum. Just as I think that Hopper would not be offended by a comparison to Lautrec and Degas, as he seemed to be influenced by the solitude of sitters in their café scenes, I am not bothered by a comparison to Hopper. Funny you should mention “space”. In a slightly different context, as a child growing up during the dawn of NASA’s space exploration, I was deeply inspired by the beauty, solitude and vast emptiness of space, but mostly of its stark contrasts of light and shadow. I painted and drew images of astronauts floating above the earth, silhouetted against the stars or walking on the barren surface of the moon, trailing long black shadows. As a teenager, I became aware of homeless people in New York City and the rundown buildings of my parents’ old neighborhoods. I drew and painted many of these scenes, which struck a chord relating to my earlier depictions of space. I was drawn to the sense of isolation and solitude I felt from them, and the grittiness of their environment, and I tried to express those ideas in my work. It was later, in college that I discovered Edward Hopper. His paintings were sometimes cited by my professors since his approach to painting was figurative and focused on light and form, which corresponded with their teachings. I recognized in his paintings what I felt to be a similar sensibility to solitude and a sort of ‘visual introversion’. His work appealed to me because it reminded me of my earliest memories and some of my first experiences with drawing.

MICHAEL: Your work looks mainly Plein Air to me. Do you ever draw, sketch or photograph your subjects before painting?

DAVID: Some of my work is painted Plein Air and some is not, depending on circumstances and the results I am looking for. I enjoy painting outdoors or from life whenever possible. Many of my street scenes, for example, are not painted on site due mainly to logistics; in these cases, I use photos and sketches. Sometimes I use photos as aids for accuracy when painting portraits. Early in my career, I found that it was more important for me to *learn* directly from nature by observing the essence of what the visual field is composed of including light, depth of field, atmosphere, etc, and I found that when painting from photos the results were often stale, flat and lifeless. Now, having had many years of experience painting from life, I feel I can now better “interpret” the information in a photograph and predict the reality of natural light and translate the emotions I associate with it into paint. This brings to mind a recent encounter at one of my exhibitions. A plein air painter asked me if I painted from photos. I told him I did at times, depending on certain variables. He said he *never* paints from photos, implying that it is somehow taboo or inferior to do so. I asked him if he liked the paintings of Monet. He said he loved them; and he feels that Monet is one of the great plein air masters. I told him that while in Paris, I visited the Musée Marmottan, a small museum dedicated to Monet and learned there that he projected photos of the Rouen Cathedral directly onto canvases that were covered with a photo emulsion, producing a full-blown faded photograph of the cathedral on the canvas onto which he painted. It was with these painted-over canvassed photos that he created his famous series. I feel that, like a paintbrush, pallet knife or camera obscura, a photograph is simply another tool, leaving the importance of the art in the results rather than the process, though, the process itself can also be quite interesting.

MICHAEL: You've just made a tremendous point about results. Why is it that people (human nature?) feel that there has to be just ONE way to achieve a goal or result? Can't there be many approaches? This really seems to be a cancer that's eating away at society ... whether it's in art or politics.

DAVID: I think people can become complacent in doing things only one way and in thus doing so, inadvertently avoid innovation. This can result in stagnation of creativity. I believe it is human nature to both stagnate and overcome stagnation, as were the Dark Ages to the Renaissance. As far as today's society is concerned, it is hard to say if we are in a dark ages or a renaissance. Personally, I think it is a bit of both. If there is a cancer, I think there is also a cure. So, absolutely there can be many approaches to achieving a result and even setting new goals, but people must need to do so.

MICHAEL: I'm getting a sense of lonely, wistful longing in your work. Is it me?

DAVID: Growing up during the birth of the space industry, I was fascinated by space. I found the stark contrast of light and shadow inspiring. I tried to capture the phenomenon of the emptiness of space; the concept of solitude of the people suspended against a black, starry sky. It gave me not a feeling of loneliness or longing, but instead a feeling of limitless vastness with infinite possibilities. I can't say what psychological mechanism allowed me to be attracted to particularly these themes, but I believe they continue to influence many aspects of my work. Some might find these images inspiring and touch something within themselves from their own experiences and others may not. I guess one of the properties of art is its interpretation is subjected to the uniqueness of the viewer's personal feelings and experiences.

MICHAEL: You're a good diplomat I see. Where do you see contemporary art headed and how does your work fit within that scheme of things?

DAVID: First I have to find my "core" and identify what exactly that is. That's the hard part - trying to focus in on what makes me (my art) tick and how to clearly express it in words, which requires a vast distillation process- kind of how I paint. I am not accustomed to "saying" things that represent me and my ideas to a greater public than my circle of collectors, and even they, for the most part, have absolutely no idea what goes on behind my brushes. My cats just stare at me with glazed expressions just hoping they hear the word "food" thrown in somewhere in the explanations I give them about my viewpoint of art - they don't know that I know that.

MICHAEL: And what about contemporary art? Where is it headed?

DAVID: If I were to assume that the term "contemporary" art means just that, "contemporary," then by default my painting fits in that realm - as I am a contemporary living artist. But I think that term replaced the more out-dated term "modern art" which defined art that was modern or outside of what was the traditional art in the early 20th century, the figurative artists, the Impressionists, etc, therefore, my work might not fit with that realm. What bothers me about that term is that it excludes some artists who paint figuratively and live and paint contemporarily. It also marginalizes them to something that is outside the contemporary world of art.

MICHAEL: Yes, I totally understand what you mean.

DAVID: What is funny about this term is that the idea of what I think "contemporary art" represents – conceptual, non-figurative, is now over 100 years old, so when does it become traditional? I think these terms are all inventions created by critics, galleries and museums as a fabrication to always make new what is now becoming old or passé, to be able to sell more magazines and get subscribers to contemporary art museums.

MICHAEL: Totally.

DAVID: An artist friend of mine who creates art that is more “contemporary” recently asked why don’t I paint a cat into the sky of one of my paintings to make it unique, new and different. Why should I? Aren’t my expressions of the notes of color and use of light and form composition enough? I guess not for him.

MICHAEL: Well David, if you don't create for yourself first, then what's the point? Thanks. This has been fun.

Visit David’s website at www.davidwellsroth.com. Also see [David Wells Roth: Judicial Portraits](#)