

Tim Vermeulen: Speaking to Shared Experience

Posted: 02/22/2014 Huffington Post

Tim Vermeulen's recent paintings -- on view at the George Billis Gallery, New York through March 15th -- are awkwardly confessional: just as the artist intends. Strong autobiographical, psychological and spiritual elements charge his seemingly modest paintings with considerable narrative power.

I recently interviewed Tim Vermeulen and learned more about his background, his imagery and his need to share his most personal experiences and impulses.

John Seed Interviews Tim Vermeulen



Tim Vermeulen

Can you tell me a little bit about your early background? I understand that your father was a funeral director who kept a morgue in the basement of your home.

I was born the son of a mortician in Paterson, NJ. The behind-the-scenes aspects of the business were never hidden in any way from the children in the family, so I regularly watched people being embalmed and prepped for services. I have never figured out exactly what effect this daily experience of death has had on my psyche, but I imagine this was a great motivating force in my decision to become an artist.

I also come from a strict, Dutch Calvinist background with a theology that emphasized our "total depravity" (e.g., from Calvin's Institutes: "I am compelled here to repeat once more: that whoever is utterly cast down and overwhelmed by the awareness of his calamity, poverty, nakedness, and disgrace has thus advanced farthest in knowledge of himself."). Once, in a graduate school critique, I said that my work was about dealing with issues of life and death; one of my professors disagreed and said she thought it was more about redemption and damnation. I now see that my funeral home experience, while strange and sometimes frightening, has had nowhere near the powerful, daily, often deleterious effect that religious indoctrination has had on my essential nature.



Tim Vermeulen, *The Animal Realm*, 2014, oil on panel, 18.5 x 16"

When did you first become interested in art and where did you study?

I was always very interested in art as a child, but in my junior and senior year of high school I had an art teacher who introduced me to art as a very serious pursuit, as far more than a mere cultural frill, and as a way to work through what he called "the basic plights of man." I went on to receive a B.A. from Calvin College and an M.F.A. in Painting and Drawing from The University of Illinois Champaign/Urbana.



Tim Vermeulen, *December*, Oil on Panel, 13x10"

What have your artistic influences been?

The primary influence has been 15th and 16th century Dutch painting (e.g., Jan VanEyck, Dirk Bouts, Pieter Bruegel). I especially like in early Dutch narrative painting what I have heard referred to as the "realism of particulars," where certain objects, often of great symbolic weight, are rendered with incredible devotion while the painting as a whole lacks the rigorous underlying structure that was so essential to the Italians. So, the paintings often draw you in to a somewhat believable stage space but something is always askew and awkward.



Tim Vermeulen, *The Hell Realm*, 2014, oil on panel, 18.5 x 16"

How does the theme of the true self versus the false self appear in your work? Can you tell me about a specific painting?

During a period where I underwent Jungian analysis I was introduced to this notion and the theme is most directly addressed in any of the many of my pieces that incorporate masks. For example, my most recent series of paintings is based on the six Buddhist Realms of Existence. In *The Hell Realm* I stand before a bathroom mirror with the mask of a demon obscuring most of my face. The mask represents this false self. In

my understanding the true self creates this mask to protect itself from the vagaries of a cruel and uncaring world.



Tim Vermeulen, *Displaced*, oil on panel, 14.5 x 12.5"

Is that you holding the two suitcases in the painting *Displaced*? Tell me about the image...

Yes, that is me in the piece. All of my work is autobiographical and most incorporates direct self-portraiture. In the past 12 years I have moved 7 times and I have almost never felt truly rooted anywhere. I have come to recognize that the feeling of uprootedness is about far more than just the physical house. In

the painting I gaze at a damaged home. For Jung the house is often a representation of the ego, so the feeling of being uprooted can be anchored deep within a self that for me has dimensions that are psychological, physical (about coming to terms with the changing body), spiritual, and intellectual.

Can you briefly tell me the stories behind a few of the other paintings in your show?



Tim Vermeulen, *Vision Test*, 10 X 12.5", Oil on Panel, 2013

Vision Test: For most of my life my eyesight has been above average and I have never required any aides. In recent years I have succumbed to the inevitable weakening of my vision and I now require regular visits to the eye doctor. This painting incorporates the eye test but for me it becomes a piece about

being an artist and the artists' constant questioning of the meaningfulness, authenticity, and insightfulness of his/her "vision." There can be an almost crushing subjectivity and freedom in art-making that probably plagues artists with more self-doubt than any other profession.



Tim Vermeulen, *Restoring*, oil on panel, 8 x 11"

Restoring: Many of my paintings employ excruciating detail and very complex arrangements. In this piece I wanted to try

something very pared down with a void-like background like one sees in many Baroque portraits. For me repairing the vase represents the process of trying to reintegrate a fractured and fragile personality.



Tim Vermeulen, *Stray*, 19.5 X 15.5", Oil on Panel, 2013

What are your interests outside of painting? I understand you are active in a dog rescue organization.

I have been very active with English bulldog rescue and bull terrier rescue in the last 7 years. We have had over 20 foster dogs and have adopted 3 ourselves. Dogs play a very prominent role in many of my paintings. They can be the classic symbol of fidelity or in some pieces they symbolize the aggressive nature that I

both fear and jealously desire. I have also done a number of portraits of rescues and foster dogs to raise money for our organization.



Tim Vermeulen, *Marked*, 7.5 X 9.5", Oil on Panel, 2013

How do you hope people will respond to your current show at the Billis Gallery?

I hope that my paintings work on a couple different levels. There is a surface story that is easily read and accessible. Beneath the surface story is an autobiographical and psychological impulse. This can relate to childhood traumas, to dreams I have had, to my current life concerns, and to my experiences of and in the

world. Though based in autobiography, I seek something that is universal, and I think of my own place in the work as a kind of everyman figure. The work is very personal but I want to make pieces that are more than just a visual diary. I hope they speak to a shared experience.

Tim Vermeulen February 18th - March 15th Gallery hours:
10am-6pm, Tuesday - Saturday George Billis Gallery 521 W. 26th
St New York, NY 10001

John Seed