

A detailed black and white charcoal or pencil drawing of a landscape. The scene features a winding path or road that curves through a rugged, textured terrain. In the foreground, there are dark, craggy rock formations. The middle ground shows a path leading towards a large, rounded rock formation on the right. The background consists of more textured, layered rock or earth. The overall style is expressive and textured, with heavy shading and fine lines.

Dana Saulnier
Night Tides

And there, in the dark, I find again in myself a form of praise
for all that continues to crush my certainty.

Nicole Krauss, *Great House*

Dana Saulnier
**Night Tides,
Water, Flesh, Sky**

Oct. 4-29, 2011

First Street Gallery
526 W. 26th St. #209
New York, NY 10001

www.firststreetgallery.net

www.danasaulnier.com

Notes on the wall
of the studio.

Space/Sky

Space of durations, immediacy, speed, fast, slow.

Enacting forces, nurturing, threatening.

Sky is 'open,' given ahead of events.

Space/Water

Another order.

Constant change, time, history.

Other: flooded, swamped.

Space/Night

Enclosed reflection.

Weight, density, extension, constancy.

Vocabulary of Forces

Permeating, sly, furtive, water.

Sudden, re-orienting, rhythmic

Sudden, scattered, temporary

Muscular, dominant, attentive, without center,

all over, claustrophobic

Without center, inside-out, reversing

Vociferous, desiring, blind, consuming, sweet, mobius



Still Night Falling

Statement on the Night Paintings

The night paintings began with the experience of loss when one I loved lost her memory. Our relationship collapsed into darkness. Even though my emotional orientation to these events is central to this work, this explanation is too simple. In art, explanations need not be inaccurate to be inadequate. Rationales rapidly become too small, too needful of cause and effect thinking that is inadequate to thinking about painting. Though these works structure loss they also contradict loss understood as a slow retreat of memory. Rather, the work impels presence. The paintings are insistently carnal; flesh bears weight and pressure, flesh becomes muscular, growing, falling, tipping, spilling, collapsing, and decaying. The paintings mediate a complex nullified relationship to the history of painting. The figure in landscape, with its dynamic poles of encompassing nature and now lost relationships to spiritual traditions, becomes present within the work even as the images are fragmented across multiple frames of reference. I welcome the differences; seeing painting as a site of colliding, overlapping sense.

My painting has always moved between tactile and optical modes seeking a space where sense opens thinking. Cyclical perception, limited perception, presence and absence, have been structured within my painting practice and I now think that I have been making 'night' paintings for some time without

calling them such. I think this is because of something more fundamental to the work, to its specific carnal pulse aligned with its reticence. This becomes clearer if we think 'night' as a plenum wherein we find ourselves differently. We live the night as beings permeated with its intimacy. Feeling our way through the dark, touch is the active mode of sense. Yet, we inherently understand that touch is personal and therefore profoundly limited and provisional to any understanding of what is beyond ourselves. We find the night differently; the intimacy of the night becomes as a beginning. I find myself in the night mode of painting, embedded in the insistent, dense, materiality of painting, awaiting what painting will make visible: a witness to the night.

Works Exhibited

- Night One, 2011, oil on canvas, 63 x 84" 7
- Night Two, 2011, oil on canvas, 56 x 70.25" 5
- Night Three, 2011, oil on canvas, 77 x 88" 9
- Night Tide, 2011, oil on canvas, 70 x 87.5" 16
- M. in Flight, 2011, oil on canvas, 88 x 77" 13
- Still Night Falling, 2010, oil on canvas, 77 x 88" 3
- Untitled, 2010, oil on canvas, 70 x 80" 15
- Headdress, 2009, oil on canvas, 70 x 56" 11



Night Two

Alan Pocaro interviews Dana Saulnier

Pocaro: *How do the night paintings differ from previous bodies of work?*

Saulnier: I was approaching tragedy differently, more personally. Someone I love is ill and has lost her memory. The work that is most clearly personal is “M. in Flight.”

In this work I took up the specific goal of working out the drama of this loss, but I also recognized broader potentials in the work. I was thinking of forces that cycle through the night paintings, both a generative force and a devouring force. I have been thinking about this while witnessing someone I care about being consumed.

Pocaro: *It is true that you often talk about the interaction of forces. I wonder what antecedents are in your work for the forms in the night paintings?*

Saulnier: I found that the color began to change in the painting, “Hut,” from 2008 (page 8). The color not only revealed volume and light, but started to move and transform. This happens in the night paintings when the forms are de-stabilized through color. They seem to be subject to different lighting conditions and the light is not mapped consistently throughout the space. I think this structures their decay as some other order overtakes them.

Another development was finding that I could

expand the tensions between the interior and exterior of the forms. In the painting “With Solitaries” (page 12), the large dark form on the right seemed to have a different set of potentials for its interior/exterior logic. It could potentially spill inside-out. In the night paintings there are forms that I describe as ‘generation channels’ or conversely as digestive tracks. They have their own logic and energy. Sometimes their exterior shells are able to contain their energy, sometimes not. This presents a fundamental vulnerability that makes sense for thinking about illness.

Pocaro: *I always think of night as being the absence of light rather than thinking of it as a force unto itself. Are you thinking of the night as a force?*

Saulnier: The philosopher Merleau-Ponty’s ideas of the night offered themselves as a confirmation of my thinking. He described the way an embodied being is present to the night as a being co-extensive with the night. Rather than be shut off by the night, we feel that we are in it. We belong to it. We sense its weight and pressure around us even as we orient to its vast extension. We sense tremendous space that is pregnant with potentials that exceed us.

Pocaro: *Instability is really built into your work. Often forces destabilize the whole composition. I recall this in “Night Tide” in particular, because the energy moving to*



Night One



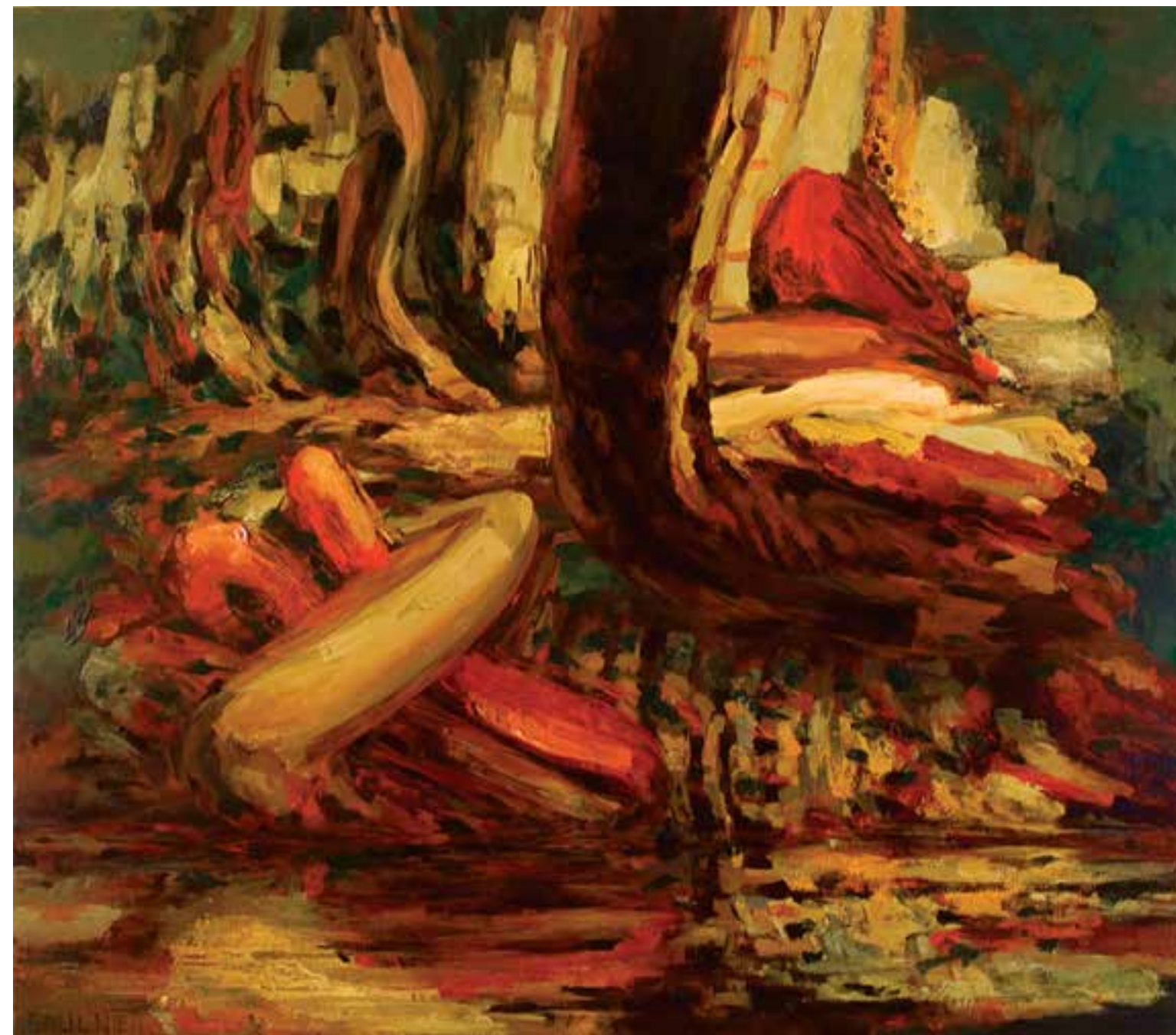
Hut 78 x 91"

the upper left opened a void in the lower left and the whole composition reacts. Can you talk more about this instability and maybe how this comes with the idea of structuring loss?

Saulnier: In producing a 'memory image,' something known becomes obscured, covered over, or fossilized. These are all logical ways to proceed with the subject of loss. To some degree this make sense for this work, but I don't think it accounts for the violence and claustrophobia in the paintings. There is often an overwhelming quality. Forces sweep over

forms and may dissolve them aggressively. I can think of this violence in terms of weather, or personal experience, or more metaphorically, as a tragedy that knocks one over. I don't deny that the violence is there. I think the violence discloses vulnerability and our emotional reaction to that vulnerability. I let the painting facilitate these feelings and trust when I'm feeling tense about a painting.

Pocaro: *Thinking of the ambiguity in the space of your paintings in general, maybe in the night paintings*



Night Three

in particular, the viewer is not sure how deeply they can travel — is the space receding into an infinite space, or is it that if you moved past these forms, you hit up against some kind of edge — so there seems to be some sort of oscillation between deep space and shallow space.

Saulnier: There is richness to the shallow space. In the night paintings atmosphere limits vision rapidly. I think of the ‘sky’ in these works as a dramatic space where events are occurring. The sky is always already there waiting for events to occur. It is an analog of consciousness, a place where temporal and spatial events will occur.

The compressed space complicates the experience of sensing. I want the visual experience to move between modes of sensing. I think of this perceptual potency as a tension between our tactile and optical senses.

Pocaro: *Can we talk more about the experience of the viewer? Recently I read Dennis Dutton’s “The Art Instinct,” he asserts that visual art is distinctive because it is intentionally designed for the contemplation of others, and this is built into its creation. How are you understanding that this is a space that another is going to have to navigate?*

Saulnier: How do I account for my responsibility to the viewer? The simplest way is to recognize that the artist is a viewer too. We live within a shared world. We are never alone. In my work I count on the fact

that I’m engaging embodied sensations. I think of this as largely universal. I count on the fact that we all have experiences that condition our being; things like weight and orientation.

My work will make sense to a sophisticated audience as contemporary history painting. The work is historically self-conscious. I think the relation to art history positions questions about history in general. The color palette is a direct indicator of the kind of layering of history that is present. This concern is in part my response to the legacy of appropriation. I work this legacy out in my own way. If these are historically self-conscious works one can ask if they are parodies of art historical works. This both does and doesn’t make sense to me.

I recognize that the work has some alignment with the tradition of the figure in landscape. At the same time, I’m painting the impossibility of a congruent relationship with that history. I believe I’m painting our distance from it. It’s an impossible situation. So I end up walking a line between affirmation and futility. I think of this as a mode of contemporary history painting. I think it is possible that futility has a positive creative potential, even as it is also tragic. I know that this involves a collision of categories and is inherently unstable. This is tied up with an alternative way of thinking about history — that what is unsettled in history persists and lives. As a painter



Headress



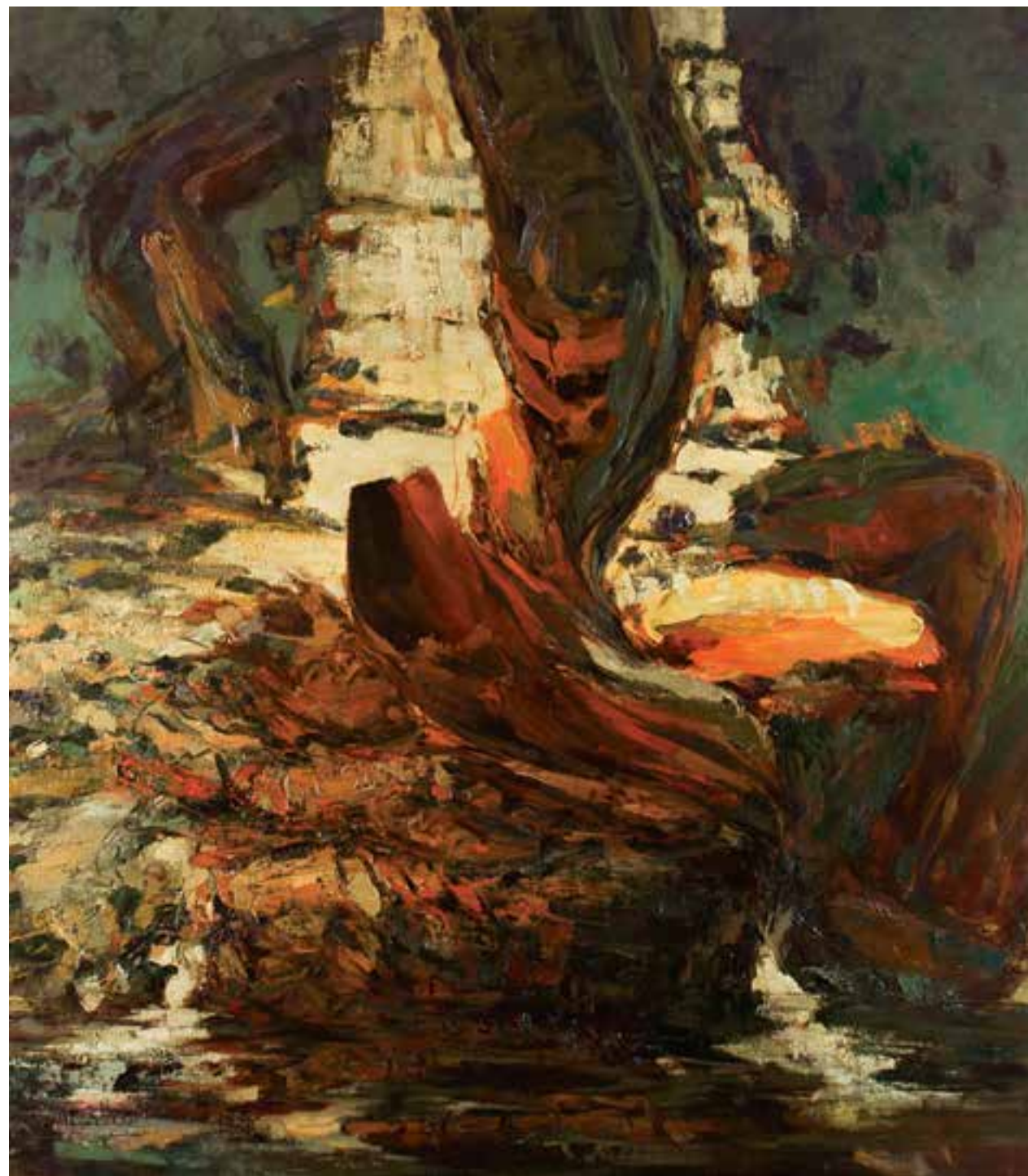
With-Solitarities 78 x 98"

who is making visceral and participatory paintings I am insisting on presence. I am insisting on a present need to realize living sense, rather than an inert past or a deferred future. This is my job, and what I have to do even if I'm only able to do so in a compromised and limited manner.

Pocaro: *Well one of the things that excites me about your work is that though it is clear that there is an acknowledgement of the tensions we have discussed, your painting is not directed by this. Perhaps another way to speak to a*

tension between parody and good faith painting involves your frequent use of concepts of 'difference'. This comes up again and again, including in your statements on the night paintings.

Saulnier: Our discussions about whether the works are parodies leads me to think that it would be more accurate to say the work is structuring difference. Presenting difference is not as restrictive a meaning as saying they are parodies. An alternative way to describe many images would involve recognizing them



as events born of processes. This makes me wonder if we would do better to think of creativity as differencing more than as representation. Thinking difference emphasizes process and the priority of our immersion in sensual experience rather than a conscious controlling agent or a language system that utilizes representation. To make an image is to witness sensual experience as it is differentiated when moved across the distance inherent in consciousness and a medium. Making an image requires structuring a differential that marks an opening or a 'gap,' a parallel without identity that provokes new ways of thinking and sensing. To represent is to control while to difference is to enlarge.

Pocaro: *Then how do you reconcile both your recognition of moving significations, or constant differentiation with your practical concerns in making art, that is, with your concerns for clarifying the specifics of visual experience in your art? I mean, understanding that a movement between generality and specificity must be at the core of the work, how is this so? What specificity are you referring to? Are you saying that the illness of 'M', in the work "M in Flight" was the specific content, or are you saying that the specific formal relations, the shapes and colors comprise what you mean by specificity?*

Saulnier: You and I know it has to be both, of course. I have a general vocabulary of forms, though to call them this is misleading. It may be better to think of them as configurations that live for me. Configurations that provoke thinking through sensing. This must be worked out in each specific painting. This mark, this color, etc. My work is atmospheric, there is almost always water, there are body-like forms, the color range in the night paintings present darkness... all these things point to limitations in perception, and build the space I have forged for thinking in painting.

If I say that the forms live for me I indicate that I'm intensely involved. My ongoing perception of this illness was taken up consciously as an issue in my practice. The time we spent together entered my artistic practice and changed it. She put pressure on my painting and I responded. She entered into my process and I sought her out within it. I'm not trying to produce an objective account of her illness, but we are living with it and this now includes our living with it within my painting practice.

Alan Pocaro is an artist who writes about art.



Untitled



Night Tide

Front cover: detail of drawing for Night Two / Back cover: drawing for Night Four

This project was made possible in part through the support of the School of Fine Arts, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio

Full text of the interview is at danasaulnier.com

