

## Cool and Curious Wind

March 12, 2019 in Kelly McCafferty, East

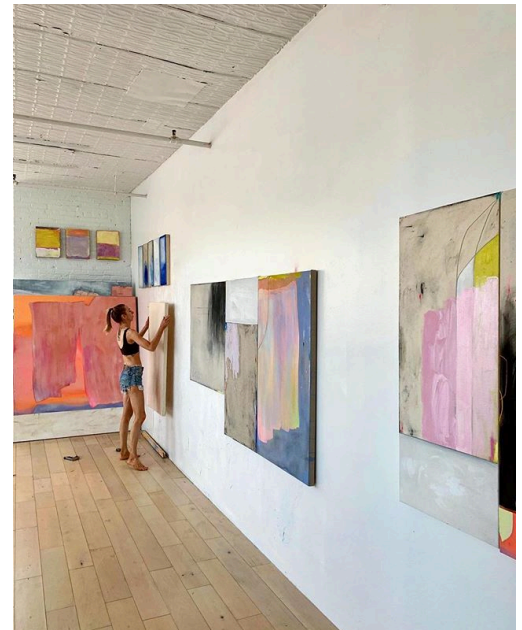
Dana James: A Profile

By Kelly McCafferty

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Dana James is the perfect person to meet at a cocktail party. And that's exactly where we crossed paths. It was the



sort of party where you are expected and encouraged to walk up to strangers and start a conversation.

Dana comes across as clear and aware—her presence is strong. She's assertive but also receptive. Dana feels like wind—cool and curious.

I'm almost positive Dana approached me first and we started a conversation where we discovered that we both had studios in Bushwick and we should probably be pals. Dana felt easy to talk to and we discussed the art world, New York with an emphasis on Brooklyn/Bushwick, mutual friends and her paintings.

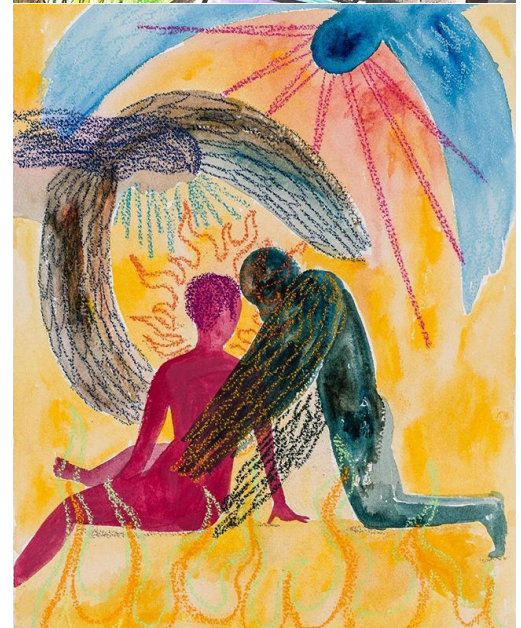
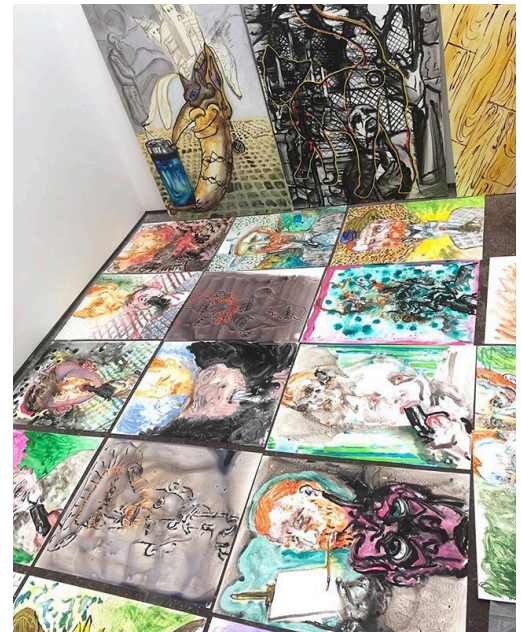
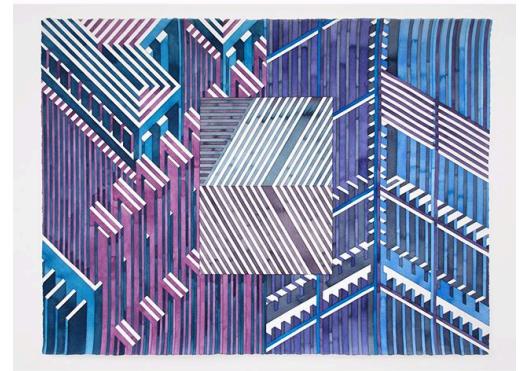
I like to play an internal guessing game when I first meet a new artist. What sign are they? And what do I think their art looks and feels like?

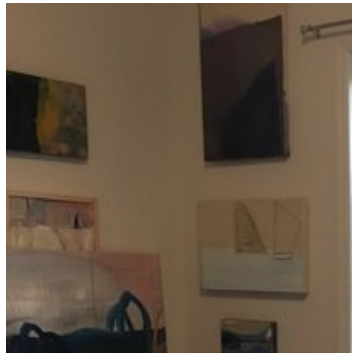
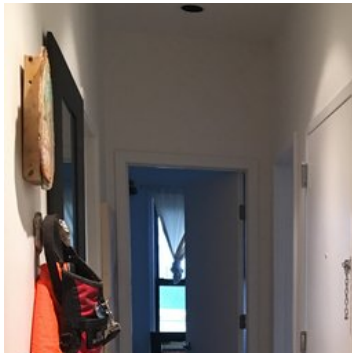
Now I know the answers to both of those questions having interviewed Dana, been in the presence of her paintings and asked her flat out about her zodiac chart.

Does Dana feel like her paintings? I would say, absolutely yes.

Dana has recently moved, but when I visited in 2018, she had a live/work space in the part of Bushwick where the train runs above the street. I love seeing studios as much as I love seeing apartments, so live/work spaces fascinate me. There is a vulnerability in a live/work studio visit, both for the artist and the visitor. An artist is opening up the fullness of their life and one can see and imagine how their days and nights fill the space. The aesthetics of their life are on display.

Dana's space is a beautiful newly renovated apartment with two front street facing rooms and a large kitchen/living space at the back. Dana has compartmentalized her art/life in the arrangement of the space. The left front room serves as painting storage and the front right room serves as active studio space. Moving towards the back of the apartment, there is a hall with closets and a bathroom and then it opens up into a sleek kitchen and combination living room/bedroom.





Dana lives there with her rescue greyhound, Veronica. I recognized Veronica from Instagram and meeting her felt like meeting a model/actress in the flesh—her beauty is otherworldly. Veronica greeted me as soon as I entered the space and stayed present in our conversation.

Is everything in Dana's world beautiful? Dana, Veronica, the apartment, the paintings—they are all stunning.

Dana's paintings are big. They are definitely bigger than Veronica. And they are as big as they could be in the space she inhabits.

We settled into the studio to begin our conversation. I noticed immediately that the train runs parallel to the studio window. There are constantly people on the train looking right in. It must be a strange experience to work and feel watched in that way and it must change the work somehow—there is a built in audience and the act of making becomes a performance.

I've never lived near the above ground trains in NYC, and staring into the train reminds me of when I lived in Chicago and how so many peoples' apartments there looked into the train. I would ride the train and daydream as I peeped into peoples' lives.

Dana is of course immune to the train, as anyone who lives their life looking onto it would be. And when we enter our conversation, I realize later that I've forgotten all about it and even stopped noticing the sound of it.

We sit with our backs at the windows. On the left side of the studio, Dana has set up three older pieces that were in



her most recent solo show. And on the right side, there is a cluster of new works of various sizes.

Dana begins by telling me that she is in the middle of a transition phase. The big older works in the room with us are from her most recent solo show in October 2017. There were 4 in the show—two are in the room with us and they are all six feet tall. She calls them poured color fields. The top portion of each painting is thin and washy and the lower portions are heavy and thick with texture.



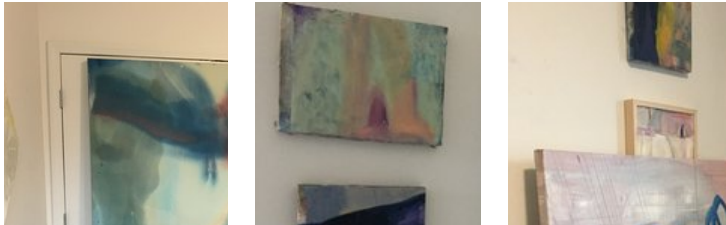
Since then she has moved over to working in the style of the paintings on the right of the studio. These she refers to as crop outs. She makes them by making big paintings and finding sections that are perfect as they are—and then “photoshoping” it in real life by combining fabric pieces. She also has some smaller pieces and collages that were the first ones she made after her show. The flow of the room progresses left to right chronologically.

Dana says that painting again after a show is always weird for her. She describes herself as a contradictory person who after going one way then must go the opposite way.

We talk about the older work first. She seems undoubtedly sure about it and it feels like the logical place to begin to understand her process and thinking. These paintings are really process minded. Dana’s palette is unusual and includes iridescence. It’s hard to see in the current grey light of the studio, but as she talks about it and I move

around the paintings, I can see it. There is an inherent shimmer to the work.

I ask about the making of them and we discuss that the studio floor is covered in taped plastic. She makes her work directly on the floor. In the case of these paintings, the top is water media (ink/dye) and the lower portions are encaustic layers with fabric and collage and paint.



She begins by pouring them on the floor and determines the orientation of the piece, then the lower section is rendered with a brush.

We begin to delve into the content of the paintings and Dana says she wanted a contrast between the top and bottom of them. They are based on memories of water and Americana. She didn't want to just pour this series—it was important to her that there was a contrast of materials and that there was a primal and child-like energy in the mark making beyond the pours.

Dana describes the paintings as mundane meets metaphysical sci-fi. They are based on swimming pools and the contrast of the air meeting man-made bodies of water. These are the vast dangerous memories of being a child and they look ocean-based and limitless but as an adult these spaces are considerably smaller.

Dana confesses to me that she is a native New Yorker from TriBeCa. These images/memories are from a childhood lost to her. They are how she imagines suburbia to be—the idea of swimming pools and backyards and isolation. She has a desire and a curiosity about these spaces/environments that were not her own. The sense of isolation and what she describes as the sci-fi twist comes from the absence of life in these imagined spaces.

I ask Dana about her astrology birth chart—I'm curious what her attraction to water is—and she tells me that she is an Aries fire sun and a Gemini air moon and a Libra air rising. She tells me that Manhattan is an island and she has always had this sense of being surrounded by water.

She thinks the pouring water element in her work comes from initiating a lack of control. She came from doing figurative work and then progressed to watercolor and then pouring. It is a trained skill, to have a controlled accident from using water media.

Dana has a strong love for materials. She speaks fondly of the poured materials sinking into the canvas. But what exactly are these materials? Is it a secret? Yes, actually. She wants the viewer to feel a sense of mystery. She is using chemistry—the essence of painting—to make surfaces that are all at once glowing, flat, waxy, thick, thin, shiny and matte. These works are about contrast. And the alchemical process that Dana concocts in her studio creates a chain reaction on the surface.

For Dana, the canvas or the paper is a light source—and once she extinguishes it, she can't get it back. She uses these mysterious materials to bring that light source through.

Her newer work is born of the process of saving the best bits from paintings—these orphans—and sewing them together. As a process oriented artist, she has a lot of remnants and pieces left floating around and this new body of work embodies recycling. These are paintings she could never deliberately make, and that is what she likes about them. She confesses that she is the worst sewer ever and that she hates the actual process of sewing, but it gives her paintings that could never happen without the actual quilting of pieces together. The editing and arranging is what makes them beautiful. The new works are so different. Not only are they much more abstract, but they are an entirely different way of working and thinking than her previous works.

I ask Dana about her awareness of the sexuality and seduction in all of her paintings. And she says that she sees her work as both feminine and dark and dangerous. It is

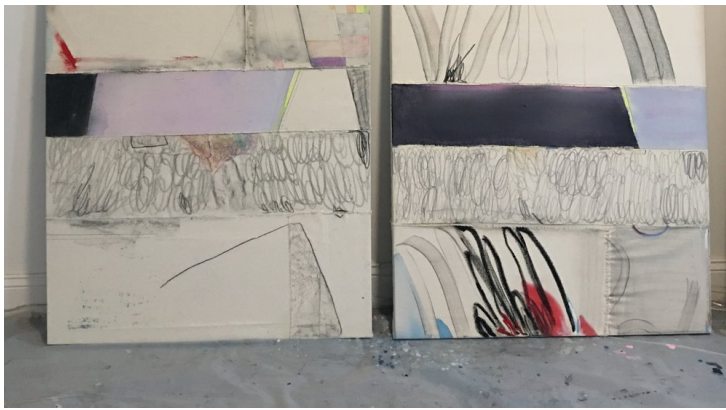
beauty with an edge. She likes things that are obviously beautiful. She is drawn to beauty. And she lets herself be. She describes an attraction to the feminine kind of glow of Mother Nature and her pursuit of replicating it.

I ask Dana about her style of working. She tells me that she works on one piece at a time. She is obsessive and she can't separate herself from her work while she is in it. There are times when she has to be patient—because there is drying time before the next moves can be made. That is extremely hard for her. I can picture her, moving around the piece, circling as her mind calculates the next move.

I feel like Dana addresses landscape in a way that is inherently from the perspective of a New Yorker. Landscape for her is either man-made or not man-made. And her fascination with landscape comes in part, from growing up in a place that is completely man-made. She has a nostalgic memory of a place—a country house outside the city—that her dad built when she was a kid. On summer and some weekends, it was an otherworldly escape from her childhood. And after her father passed, the space felt heavy with family and objects. That nostalgic feeling of sad/strange/beautiful darkness is heavy in Dana's work.

Dana has chosen to address absence in her work. There is mood and a sense of place or energy, but there is an omission of the human form. She describes it as Malibu, but weird and dark—this feeling that she is conjuring. Hearing Dana describe her work makes me instantly think of Lana del Rey and the Black Dahlia.





The absence of the human form is notable because she began as an artist focused on figuration. She abandoned the figure when she was 25. She described her early work to me as deathly dark portraits of women rendered in pencil. She says she was always such a New York girl—into fashion, make-up and body painting in her teens and early twenties. That all changed when her father got sick. She remembers seeing the loose sheets of x-rays and making abstract poured drawings based on brain forms in response. That was her first foray into abstraction and she received a lot of encouragement in response. The bleeding of the ink allowed her to be loose and open up in a way that she couldn't find when working with the figure. I ask her if she misses the human form and she says she still makes smaller representational works and pulls out a portfolio of drawings to show me. She tells me one day she could see herself returning to the figure.

Dana tells me she was born drawing. She and her sister grew up in a loft in TriBeCa, children of two artists. Her mom is a painter and Dana grew up in her mom's art studio. Art was "super normal" to her and she thought everyone knew how the art world worked. She was fortunate to grow up understanding the complexities of the gallery world and how it affects one's personal life. In fact, her mom didn't want her to become an artist. She knew it was a difficult path and she wanted something more stable for Dana. But Dana was organized, disciplined and hardworking and she chose the life of an artist. Art has been what she has always done.

**For more information about Dana, please visit her website.**



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