
A great big 'X'

Dexter Dalwood and Rosalind
Nashashibi

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Author(s)

Dexter Dalwood and Rosalind Nashashibi

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About the author(s)

is an artist based in Mexico City. In 2017 he undertook a residency in Oaxaca and made a series titled *An Inadequate Painted History of Mexico* on his return to London, which has since featured in the touring show *Esto No Me Pertenece* at Centro de las Artes San Agustín, Oaxaca, and Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City (2021–22). Dalwood's other major solo museum shows include Kunsthaus Centre PasquArt, Biel (2013), CAC Málaga (2010), FRAC Champagne-Ardenne, Reims (2010) and Tate, St Ives (2010). His work has featured in recent group exhibitions including *The Paradoxes of Internationalism. Part I* at Museo Tamayo, Mexico City (2023); *You to Me, Me to You*, A4 Arts Foundation, Cape Town (2023); and *Modern Media Networks: Painting and Mass Media*, Tate Modern, London (2020).

received her BA in Painting from Sheffield Hallam University, after which she attended the Glasgow School of Art, where she received her MFA. As part of her Master's degree, Nashashibi participated in a three-month exchange programme at CalArts, Valencia, in 2000. In 2020 Nashashibi became the first artist in residence at the National Gallery in London, after the programme was re-established. She was a Turner Prize nominee in 2017 and represented Scotland in the 52nd Venice Biennale. Her work has been included in *documenta14*, *Manifesta 7*, the Nordic Triennial and *Sharjah 10*. She was the first woman to win the Beck's Futures prize in 2003. Nashashibi was one of six artists shortlisted for the Film London Jarman Award 2024.

Cover image:

A great big 'X'

by Dexter Dalwood and Rosalind Nashashibi • 16.04.2025

The artists Dexter Dalwood (b.1960) and Rosalind Nashashibi (b.1973) first met in 2017, when they both had studios at Cubitt, London. Over the years, they have maintained an ongoing exchange – one rooted in the ambiguities and contradictions of painting. Nashashibi, whose work spans film and painting, is preoccupied with the acts of observation and recognition. Her canvases are populated with familiar, recurrent motifs: a pair of interlocking swans [FIG.1](#), dogs, clocks, brick walls, handheld fans. Her scenes are often split or framed – through open curtains [FIG.2](#), pillars or legs – suggesting several layers of perception, not simply, as the artist has stated ‘those that are obviously communicable to others’.¹ Her recent exhibitions include *TO DIE FOR*, with Elena Narbutaitė at Grimm Gallery, Amsterdam (18th October–23rd November 2024), and *O Rose*, with Marie Lund, at Den Frie Centre of Contemporary Art, Copenhagen (10th February–7th April 2024). In 2020 she was artist in residence at the National Gallery, London, which culminated in the exhibition *An Overflow of Passion and Sentiment* (3rd December 2020–27th June 2021).

Dalwood’s practice spans three decades. His imagined and composite landscapes collage together imagery from art history, personal memory and political and cultural history. In addition to his consideration of the traditions of painting, Dalwood also tackles significant historical monuments, events and dates associated with Britain and Mexico [FIG.3](#), where he now lives and works. His solo exhibition *English Painting* at Lisson Gallery, London (27th September–14th December 2024), explored his attachments to national art history and to the culture of his youth in 1970s and 1980s Britain. Most recently, he has co-curated an exhibition of works by the Mexican painter José María Velasco (1840–1912) at the National Gallery (29th March–17th August 2025), the museum’s first ever dedicated to a Latin American artist.



Fig. 1 *Unstuck*, by Rosalind Nashashibi. 2022. Oil on linen, 150 by 130 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Grimm Gallery).

This conversation emerged from the artists' own informal critique process, in which they often act as one another's 'first viewer' for new works. Here, they discuss performativity and perversity in painting; the role of memory and time in relation to the reception of works of art; the experience of placing their work in dialogue with art history; their evolving use of signs and motifs; and painting as a meta language.

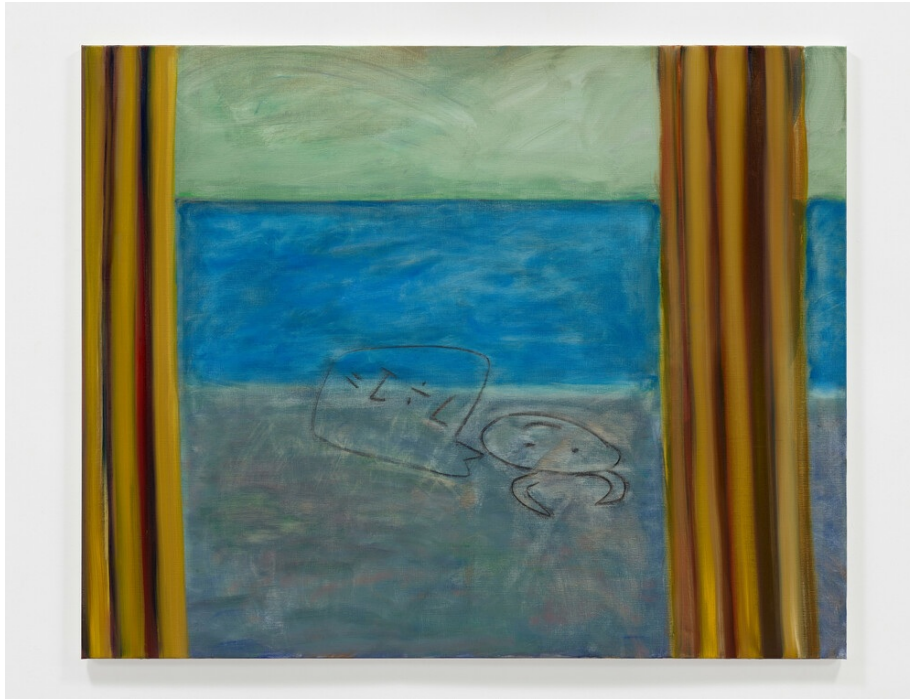


Fig. 2 *A Smile Rises Up from the Deep*, by Rosalind Nashashibi. 2023. Oil on linen, 120 by 150 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Grimm Gallery).

Dexter Dalwood: I wrote a text for your exhibition *Monogram* at Radvila Palace Art Museum in Vilnius, which is based on your film *Denim Sky* (2018–22). I wrote quite a lot about the personal, but also how, within your work, there's this self-consciousness of making something, the idea of looking and thinking, but also the idea of including one's understanding of life around you. The paintings that you included in the show are particularly perverse, in a way. In the sense that you want the viewer to both be engaged but also, you sort of push them away. There's a sense of recognition and also saying, 'this is a painting', or with certain paintings you put a great big X **FIG.4** across the whole image, saying 'but it doesn't really work'. So, there's that idea of adding things and negating things.

I'm also interested in this. I like to present something that seems to be, on the first reading, what it is. But then on the second reading, it's a little bit more complicated than that, so it takes a while to work out why the painting exists. I think that's something we've got in common in our painting practices. Not in terms of the look or anything, or even how we physically make them, but there's a similar desire of how you want to engage the viewer. Would you agree with that?

Rosalind Nashashibi: I was actually thinking about the word 'recognition' before we started speaking. It's something fundamental: it's about encountering something, not necessarily knowing where you've seen it before, but still recognising it because it fits in with what you've already seen or it fills in a gap. I'm interested in the idea of recognition where you have to

acknowledge that you've never seen it before. There's a sign, but there's nothing that it refers to, and yet you still recognise the sign. I think we share that. Maybe the perversity is to do with that: pushing something in a painting to a point where it shouldn't work or is illogical in some way, but it still works if it's recognised.

We have an ongoing conversation about painting, where each of us might be the first viewer for the other one. So, there's this other kind of recognition when we send the paintings to each other in our chats, which is about 'do you see what I'm doing here?'. I'd like to talk to you about that, because we've never really discussed it, and also how things are becoming signs in different ways in our work.



Fig. 3 1857, by Dexter Dalwood. 2020. Oil on canvas, 150 by 186 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery).

DD: I think the painting we both make is a kind of meta language. It's not based on some idea of emotional honesty, or an 'every brushstroke torn from the soul' type pain. It's more about: what are the limits of the parts that you can put down to signify the whole. I'm particularly interested in the idea that, just by having 'bits', they become like codes or metonyms. So the viewer goes 'oh, I see that, but it also makes me think of this'.

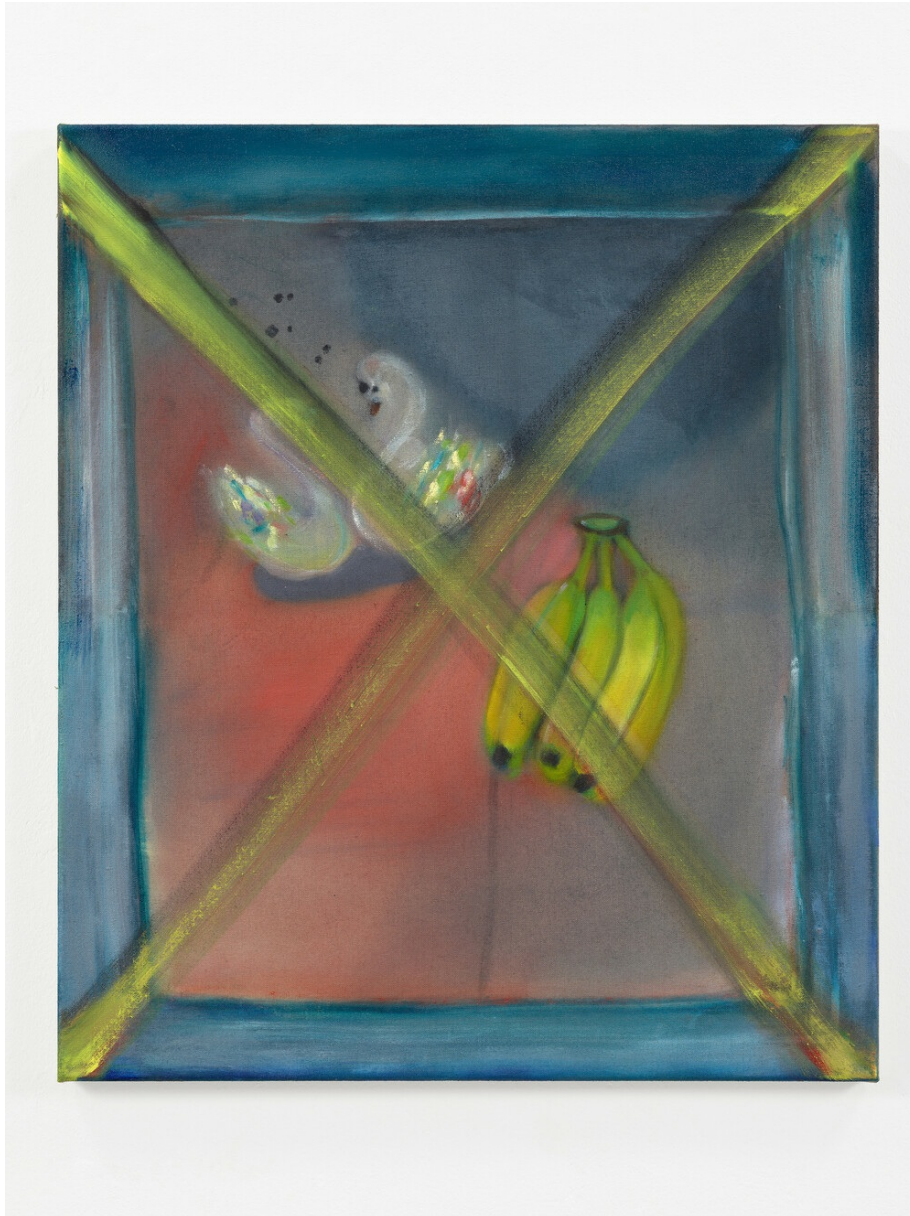


Fig. 4 *Wood, Velvet, Crystal*, by Rosalind Nashashibi. 2022. Oil on linen, 70 by 60 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Grimm Gallery).

When we send each other our paintings, often the first image is without any comment, just to see what the other one might say, rather than giving it a title, for example. Or other times it's with a direction question, like 'what do you think about the black? Is that working?', which is a very direct formal question. So, sometimes our conversation goes from what the painting is to how to resolve it.

RN: Yes, 'is it possible to do that?', that's an interesting question. Because sometimes you do something very strange or varying in some way, which breaks through some boundary – a personal transgression, let's say – in your work, but you're not sure whether it's something interesting or purely just embarrassing. For me, that's a place where I want to be. I think your work is in that place as well – that it gets close to failure in order to succeed.

It's about trying something, whether it be a gesture that doesn't really belong and seeing if it registers, or even just seeing the painting through someone else's eyes. It can be as simple as that.



Fig. 5 Installation view of *Dexter Dalwood: English Painting* at Lisson Gallery, London, 2024, showing *Track and Turf 1754*, by Dexter Dalwood. 2023. Oil on canvas, diptych, overall dimensions 90 by 176 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery).

DD: There's also a desire to communicate: you don't want to overcomplicate what you're trying to say. In making basically figurative-type images – that have got all the problems of representation – is this desire to make a language that somehow represents the ideas that you've got, but also, is not so obtuse that people can't have access to it. At the same time, you don't want to go too far the other way, so you end up making reactionary pictures of things. In the end, it's the balance that at any time, it could just collapse. Or, you do something deliberately perverse to make it collapse and actually then, that saves the painting.

For example, in the diptych *Track and Turf 1754* **FIG.5** when I painted the horse, it looked so kitschy and ridiculous. But then I soaked a piece of newspaper, stuck it on and pulled it off, and because the image had become so distressed, it came alive again. It didn't just look like an amateur's painting of a horse's head. It somehow ended up being an exciting piece of painting on a canvas, which happened to have a head in it. The other painting in the diptych repeats the date 1754, referring to when George Stubbs began painting horses in Lincolnshire. It's a sign saying 'horse' and 'date', to make the viewer think about the other thing, which is Stubbs in the eighteenth century.

I suppose that also brings us to ideas of history and time and working within collections or putting your paintings next to historical paintings. In doing that, you don't actually want your

work to be pulled back into a time period so that it feels it's got something to do with the language of painting in that period. Instead, it's this idea of, what as an artist do you think is the most important thing about the language of painting now? I think, for both of us, it's this kind of meta language that can co-exist with old work. Then the juxtaposition of the two things creates something else, rather than it being in parallel. A great example of that is, if you put Lucian Freud next to Rembrandt, there's no meta language. So the viewer might feel comfortable with thinking this is good because it looks very much like old art. I don't know what I'm saying with that, really.

RN: I want to know what you're saying. It's not reacting off, it's going alongside?

DD: Yes, it's not the similarity of how the thing is physically made in terms of painting history, it's the juxtaposition of the thinking of image-making in relationship to time. If it works, it sparks something else.

When you did your show, *An Overflow of Passion and Sentiment* **FIG.6** at the National Gallery, you put your paintings next to Diego Velázquez, and I remember saying to you, 'you realise this is the only time you're ever going to show next to Velázquez in your life?'. It was a massive challenge and also very exciting, because there were juxtapositions of things, but also there weren't. There were similarities but also there weren't. The oddness of it is what made your paintings stand out against them and then also made the Velázquez paintings work in a different, archaic way. They looked historically old in a different kind of way. You had the one with the cross-garter thing and the woman holding the fan in between his legs **FIG.7**. It just added a spark. There's a sense of humour to it as well, so the viewer has to think about that, in relationship to it, and not think about the quality of painting alone.

RN: In a way, it's saying, 'can I engage you in the way I'm looking at this painting and making this painting? I'm engaged in this way, does that engage you?'. There's a similarity with film for me. In film, you're showing real life, even personal life, and reality in some way, but it's always 'look how I'm looking at this. Do you understand what I mean? Can you help me understand it as a viewer?'. Because the moment of cognition needs to happen with the viewer – whether it's somebody coming into the National Gallery or whether it's an audience seeing the film. It has to be the moment of understanding coming back to me because it's an investigation, which is ongoing.

It was interesting with the National Gallery, because even hearing you say 'you hung your paintings next to Velázquez', I sort of cringe at the thought of it, but I really didn't doubt for a moment that it was the right thing to do. Because I tried it in advance, I brought the paintings down to the gallery and looked at them, and I could

see that there was something exciting and weird going on, and that's enough. That's a point of departure, and it could only fail if it were trying to compete on the same level or language.



Fig. 6 Installation view of *Rosalind Nashashibi: An Overflow of Passion and Sentiment* at the National Gallery, London, 2020–21. (Courtesy the artist and Grimm Gallery).

DD: Exactly. The challenge isn't to do with making a viewer think how significant the work is in relationship to how those paintings were made, it's to do with how painting works as a language. I felt that when I did the exhibition *Esto No me Pertenece (This Doesn't Belong to Me)* **FIG. 8** at the Museo Nacional de Arte in Mexico City in 2021. The possibility of failure was so great because it was all about Mexican history and included works from the museum's collection. It was completely out of my control in terms of whether it would work, but it ended up being an incredibly rewarding experience for me, because there was this great seriousness taken in what I brought to thinking about these things, and dates across time, because I was from 'outside'. The language wasn't anything to do with the language of those paintings, it was to do with the language of how do you represent history? How do you think about that? And how would you do that if you were going to make a painted surface?

With the last show I did in London, *English Painting* at Lisson Gallery, I was going to call it 'the impossibility of making anything about English painting', or something. There was the idea of writing something into it, but then I really got into just dwelling on it. I think we both like a challenge of thinking: 'perhaps I shouldn't be doing this, but I'm going to have a go and see if it works out'.



Fig. 7 Installation view of *Rosalind Nashashibi: An Overflow of Passion and Sentiment* at the National Gallery, London, 2020-21. (Courtesy the artist and Grimm Gallery).

RN: It's giving yourself permission to do something, where it might not work, but not taking precautions against it not working. I think it's important in what you just said – that you were going to call it something which would, in a way, explain it or give you some protection, and then you didn't. It's about trusting the work and the viewer at the same time.

DD: A couple of years ago you made a film called *Denim Sky* **FIG.9**, which is loosely based on a sci-fi story, but includes paintings throughout. In terms of film language, it feels a bit like a Dogma film. There's a very personal handheld approach and then also a sense of thinking, is there going to be some horrible surprise? That doesn't happen, but it uses that film recognition language to say, 'you know this *thing* where it appears as if things are just being filmed as they are', which is intercut with the paintings. The paintings are all being viewed by somebody or with a voiceover while looking. The whole thing is to do with a fantasy John Berger, when they go into the gallery. It's an extension of emotions and relationships, but also talking about the impossibility of how one uses language to talk about painting.



Fig. 8 Installation view of *Esto No Me Pertenece (This Doesn't Belong to Me)* at the Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City, 2021–22, showing *1910*, by Dexter Dalwood. 2018. Book pages, acrylic and oil on canvas, 150 by 202 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery).

RN: Somebody asked me the other day, 'why was that scene shot in the National Gallery?'. And I thought, I don't actually know, the truth is Elena was meant to have spent the night there and to wake up surrounded by all these paintings. In the scene, you see her walking through the empty galleries. She's alone in a dressing gown **FIG.10** and she's talking to me on the phone. We're talking about relationships: our own and the new person that I was seeing. We're talking about being in a relationship as opposed to being in a collective or together as an extended family. It's so important that the paintings are there, in a weird way it's about taking part in community among all these others. The paintings are people, in the film, looking back at us. So, it's about somehow being in society while being alone inside art history.



Fig. 9 Still from *Denim Sky*, by Rosalind Nashashibi. 2022. Film, duration 67 minutes 24 seconds. (Courtesy the artist and Grimm Gallery).

DD: You'd spent time with the collection as well. If you'd have shot it anywhere with paintings you didn't really know, it could've been a very different thing. There's a familiarity. And there's a whole thing with time and going back to see paintings. For example, if you suddenly have a breakup or something, certain paintings have a very powerful effect, when other times they don't. With historical collections, you go when you're fifteen, twenty-five and then when you're forty, and different things call you that you just couldn't see at other points in your life.



Fig. 10 Still from *Denim Sky*, by Rosalind Nashashibi. 2022. Film, duration 67 minutes 24 seconds. (Courtesy the artist and Grimm Gallery).

RN: There's a painting in Tate Britain, London, of a woman stood at a window and there's all these plants coming down. I think

there's a guy looking through the window who I didn't even notice was there when I was young. It's called *April Love* (1855–56), it's actually quite bad, but I loved it as a teenager. You know, this very Pre-Raphaelite kind of teenage time I was in. Every time I see it at Tate, it's almost like I'm seeing *Room with a View* (1986) again, or like I'm thirteen years old.

DD: I think that's why the Pre-Raphaelites are so popular in a way, because it's like a post-adolescent moment. It's also why I think Egon Schiele is so popular with fifteen-year-olds. It's all angst, it's extreme frustration. Then later on, you see it differently. I can appreciate Schiele, but I do also see him as this very upset, depressed twenty-five-year-old. Whereas, when I look at someone like Titian, and *Noli me Tangere* (c.1514), which he made when he was about twenty-six, it's the calmest, gentlest painting in the National Gallery collection. That really is something.



Fig. 11 Still from *Denim Sky*, by Rosalind Nashashibi. 2022. Film, duration 67 minutes 24 seconds. (Courtesy the artist and Grimm Gallery).

RN: I suppose he was working within a completely different context, in a workshop, and having a task to complete rather than sort of dealing with something?



Fig. 12 *The Third of May (reverse view)*, by Dexter Dalwood. 2003. Oil on canvas, 173 by 205 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery).

DD: Yes, although it seems to deal with a lot. There's a lot of emotion in it.



Fig. 13 *Isle of the Dead I*, by Dexter Dalwood. 2016. Oil on canvas, 92 by 100 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Lisson Gallery).

I've always had a thing of wanting to know: what do I think about this now compared to what I thought before? You see a show of an artist at a certain period, then you see a show of their work twenty-five years later and it's interesting how things settle in a different way. Also, because you've made so many other images yourself, and you see things differently, so your relationship to the work just changes over time. It makes you realise that's what everyone else's relationship with your work is like too. They saw it at a certain point, and now they're seeing it again years later. You can see how art history forms: there are whole periods of time when some artists' work is just completely overlooked because there's no connection with it, and then in another period it becomes relevant for some reason. People catch up with the language in a way that they couldn't before.



Fig. 14 Installation view of *José María Velasco: A View of Mexico* at the National Gallery, London, 2025. (© National Gallery, London).

RN: Like for our own work – in the way that you can make something and distrust whether it's doing anything at all, whether it's interesting or even whether you despise it. I made a painting that I wasn't happy with. And then I ended up putting it in *Denim Sky* FIG.11. I couldn't bear to look at it, and then Elena asked 'why don't we film it' and it completely changed. After I saw it in the film, I appreciated it, and I still do.



Fig. 15 Installation view of *José María Velasco: A View of Mexico* at the National Gallery, London, 2025. (© National Gallery, London).

I find that moment where you realise that you're not happy with something so gratifying, if you can do something about it. You can start working on top of it, and then you've got this history that you

can come back to in your own painting and respond again.

DD: You regain time in that way as well. When I cleared my studio out at Cubitt in December 2023, there was one painting in a rack, which was made in 2003 [FIG.12](#). It'd been sitting there for twenty years and I uncovered it. And I remember making it, I was so depressed when I made it. I had the idea of showing Goya's *The Third of May 1808* (1814; Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid) from the other side of the hill, the reverse view. The hill is made in this incredibly brown, thick 'hate-yourself' type paint. And then when I dragged it out, I thought 'wow it's really got something'. At the time, I was just really miserable, and I thought it was the ugliest thing I'd ever made. And now I think actually, it's quite powerful because it has a 'thing' in it and so many don't.

I remember talking to the writer Deborah Levy about the fact that my brother had died and I couldn't work for a while. I found it impossible. But then I had this odd dream where I woke up shouting 'black, silver, yellow' and I thought it was a message that I should make paintings using yellow, black and silver [FIG.13](#). So, I did for a while, and I made these really miserable paintings. She said to me, 'you should just stay with it because it will pass. And once it passes, you won't have access to it in the way you have now, because you're in this space'. She was right, because I look back on those paintings and I hardly recognise myself in them, but I feel something that I wouldn't be able to do now. I suppose you can't separate the life from the work, but it's not hagiography. It's about the things that motivate and propel you to carry on making, which allow you to realise you're in a completely different time and experience in your life as well.

RN: That's so interesting. It relates to that sort of adolescent art that we're talking about earlier. When you're making something under some sort of condition – whether you feel depressed or whatever – the amazing thing about painting is that it's just a channel for those things, especially if you work on something very specific. You think 'I'm going to paint that from another view' or 'I'm going to paint a portrait' or a vase of flowers, and it channels your feelings through this other thing, which you can hate in the moment because you're going through it. Do you ever paint over paintings?

DD: Yeah. When I was first at Saint Martin's, I used to paint about twelve paintings on each stretcher. I'm glad that there wasn't Instagram then because, you'd send it out and get thirteen likes, and think 'oh yeah, perhaps I should keep it'. Back then, there was no way of recording it. The thing is, you don't know when something's finished. That's a skill that takes quite a long time. It's like making a desperate soup, just continually adding things in when the base of it isn't working. You're never going to reclaim it, you've lost the surface and everything else.

RN: I think, for me, if it does come back to life, it's somehow better than when something goes well from the start.

DD: Occasionally a painting comes out like a golden egg, and then you think, this is the start of something, and then the next one is absolutely abysmal.

RN: Do you think you acknowledge your own life or biography in your painting?

DD: I did in a way in *English Painting*, in the sense of reclaiming bits of history and time from my lifespan. There's the whole thing of 'punk is dead' and having experienced that at the young age of seventeen. It was kind of cathartic, but also a very difficult period in my life. I haven't really revealed things about that before. I think it's also connected with age and trusting yourself a bit more.

I'm curating this exhibition *José María Velasco: A View of Mexico* at the National Gallery **FIG.14 FIG.15**, but I'd never had an intention of curating a show for them, that wasn't in my remit. I got so excited about Velasco, who was a nineteenth-century Mexican painter, but I couldn't find anyone in Mexico who was excited as I was, in terms of my take on his work and why I think he's interesting. And the more I spoke to people, they said, 'well why don't you curate it because you seem to have a completely different angle on it'. So, that's how it came about. But, really, it's all about following the enthusiasm. I don't think you can set yourself up to think, 'oh I want to curate', but then not know what to curate.

RN: Our personal biography is so much the choices we make rather than where we come from or where our parents come from. That's obviously who we are as well. But, if one of us is responding to a painting or an image we've seen, we've selected that thing. And that's the very personal part of it. What we do is so rooted in where we stand, who we are and what we see. Then, we want to put it against something else and ask, 'do you see it?', or 'what do you see?'. It's this constant refining of signs and putting signs next to each other.

I don't think there's any difference when working in different media on that level. You constantly find yourself referring to other things all the time, whether it's in film or painting. But sometimes in painting, it's weirder because the craft is so visible on the surface. I'd like my films to be like that as well, actually. I always want them to have that sort of slightly handmade quality, so that the actual making is visible on the film. It's to do with pushing a comparison or a juxtaposition that makes it handmade.

DD: I don't think I'm interested in the idea of specifically bringing in biography to my work. But the idea of 'Englishness' in the Lisson show came about because it struck me that, when you live outside of the United Kingdom, it suddenly comes into high relief that

you're this thing that everyone's telling you are, which is English. Now that I've lived in Mexico for nearly three years, I see myself in a different way. I'm learning Spanish and I'm surrounded by a different culture, which reminds me of just how odd that small island I grew up on is and that I grew up with everything taken as a given.

RN: Yeah, I was thinking earlier when you were talking about being English and how you've started working with that while living in Mexico, I've never felt fully British or English or Northern Irish or Palestinian, which are the backgrounds of my parents. In a way, I've always avoided any sort of sense of identity that's grounded in a place. I was talking to a young artist when I was in Amsterdam who's from Lebanon and she was saying, 'it's great how you can make work about Palestine, but you can also make work about other things'. There's this sense, and it's a very strong pressure for Palestinian artists, that they have to make work about the genocide or the Nakba, and we do want to do that but not only that and not always.

In 2003, when I was twenty-nine, I won the Beck's Futures Prize with four films shot in Glasgow, Omaha and the West Bank. I hadn't really had any exposure before as an artist, and the show was at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London. There was a lot of press around it and there was an attempt by the press to portray me as a Palestinian artist for their own agenda. My reaction to that back then was, well, I was brought up in the UK, I don't speak Arabic, it's disingenuous to say, 'here's this Palestinian artist and it's the first time she's showing in the UK'. I felt like an imposter. In recent years, things have changed. It's understood that you can be more than one thing and none of them has a full stop at the end.

Footnotes

- 1** Rosalind Nashashibi, quoted from R. Mitchell: 'Rosalind Nashashibi goes through the legs and between the shutters at Nottingham Contemporary', *Ocula* (28th April 2023), available at ocula.com/advisory/perspectives/rosalind-nashashibi-at-nottingham-contemporary accessed 11th April 2024.

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