

DAN DEMPSTER

“WATERWORKS”



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1990-1997

Essay by
Peter Barton

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DAN DEMPSTER

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SENSATIONAL EVIDENCE AND SENSUAL REFLECTIONS

Dan Dempster's artwork covers a broad range of disciplines: painting, sculpture, drawing, essay writing, photography and others still untried. These many means of expression could make an artist's work seem disconnected, fragmented into distinct categories or separate aesthetics. But in the case of this artist somewhat the opposite is true because Dempster's vision rests upon a singular perspective, a unifying theme of *correspondences with nature*.

Like a botanist in the field, the artist is always about the business of gathering samples, implications of the creative process encoded within the universal landscape which will point the way to a larger comprehension. In order to do this he selects different tools for different jobs, specific mediums for specific points of view. For example, several years ago he showed me a series of photographic studies taken along the rock craggs of Ireland's southern coast. I thought at first that the images were satellite photographs - they seemed to be taken from above. But they were in fact small details, sample micro-cosmic worlds taken at various points in the rock faces.

This sense that one is glimpsing the vast and the finite at one and the same time is one of the many perceptual shifts common in Dempster's motifs. Such shifts give the viewer a new role, that of a participant in both space and time, a grainy specimen that can appear to be a surface but which is in fact a depth of understanding. Within this unit, isolated and defined in the format of a photographic image, lie the implications of everything immortal, the big issues of existence.

Still, it would be incorrect to say that all the sensations that flood the senses are aimed at the metaphysical. Synchronistically, even as the image is presenting itself for inspection, the medium is present, evidential. The quality of the photographic technique and the unique abstract compositional elements have a direct aesthetic impact on the senses. The hand and the eye of the artist are not suborned by the allure of what is pictured but share the ground of perceptual response equally.

This is the unifying character of Dempster's work: there is a common effort in each of the disciplines he uses to expand the expressive resources of the medium, not only in order to express the idea and notions, but to express with greater immediacy sensations, the irreducible elements of experience.

I first met Dan when he came to my TriBeCa studio in Manhattan four or five years ago. He had come to show work to galleries and to have a look at some of the mainstream issues operating in the contemporary art of the moment. Characteristic of his methodology, the artist inspected certain standpoints and left himself open to influences which can also be said to be *correspondences* when art itself becomes the focus of attention.

It brings up the issue of artists who choose to develop their aesthetic in neutral environments outside of the café-society regimen of urban centers. Often they are overwhelmed by the minutiae of over-scrutinized issues and salient details of philosophical speculation. But Dempster's work showed a remarkable resiliency when faced with the new stimulus and he almost immediately was taken on by the Fulcrum Gallery in SoHo. Rather than radical changes, his work underwent subtle transformations. He was aware that he had his finger on the immortal and nothing that the contained aesthetic hallways of art criticism had to offer could sway him from a central belief in the forces of creation that he had assumed as both subject matter and essential leitmotif of his process.

His vital elements are light and water and there are some specific reasons why they play out so centrally to his beliefs, not the least being that his home base is Bermuda where these ondines share domination, not only of the natural environment but of the cultural consciousness as well. This seraphic spirit juxtaposes oddly in the contemporary art scene. It has the almost geological sensibility of the scientist working in the field and bringing his observations for review by a pundit elite of critics and the public - and it works. Light and water are not just subject matter for Dan's art form, they inhabit the content and intent of the work itself. There is the living evidence in that environment of a thematic beatific presence underlying all of creation. Things wash ashore transformed by the abrasive sea and its storms. Nature there is emotionally present, erodes to spectacular forms and lyrical contour both the landscape and the psyche of its inhabitants. They are compelling muses and they have entranced Dempster beyond any lure of citified views of acceptance in the art hierarchy. He remains devoted to their beguiling ways.

In 1995 he brought evidence of his symbiotic attachment to these elements into Manhattan when he suspended *Urbanos* from the ceiling of the Fulcrum Gallery.† The work was both a commentary on Anti-form and brashly lyrical at the same time. What he had done is to take plywood and steel down to the sea where he plunged them into the briny water much like Richard Serra submits his work to the iron foundry. The result was a work of art forged by the sea, created in partnership with nature. *Urbanos* remained in the water for many months until, transformed and beatified, it was returned to civilization. But present always is that larger implication, this Emersonian idea that, "... beneath every deep another deep opens." As the mobile composition of forms floated in the gallery, there was the awareness that their new oxygenated environment, the acid rain and urban grit air, was still at work eroding to completion a work of art that was as much concept as object, as much theory as practice, as much method as medium, and as I have said, it worked. If juxtaposition may be said to be the benchmark of Post Modernist thought, this piece of sculpture underscored that benchmark with the added impetus of a naturally formed innovation.

The truth about light is not specific to the realm of the scientist nor is it new to the eye of the artist. That is, the truth which says that all we see and all that we are capable of seeing is the reflection of light bounced off of the world and into the cornea. This awareness provided much of the stimulus for the Impressionist artists. Painting *au plein air*, in nature, they understood that photons explode from the sun, shoot across the universe, bounce off leaf or flower or smiling lips and right into the human eyeball. Monet, in his later work, remained steadfast in his appreciation of the qualities of reflective light, especially because his corneas were fogged over with cataracts. For this reason, much of his later work was not deemed relevant by curators after his death. It remained rolled up in a corner of his studio. When the demand for Monet's canvases reached a peak, these later works were finally stretched and exhibited.

The French word for the Asian experience of spiritual enlightenment in nature (rather than in the dark chambers of a temple or monastery chapel) is *eclaircissement*, and what these later works by Monet exposed was a vision of nature which was explicit, if not directly expressive of, just such an experience. The eye of the true artist, physiologically or conceptually different from the common eye, is nonetheless capable of illuminating human consciousness. Undeniably his greatest works and the inspiration for many later Modernist art forms, we learn that the truth of light - of anything - can be perceived from different standpoints and through different modes of perception.

Recently in Bermuda Dan Dempster exhibited a series of twenty medium-sized paintings in "Ithuriel."‡ These works utilized the Minimalist icon of the equilateral square and explored a favorite theme of both Kierkegaard and the Late Modernists, the principle of variances exposed by repetition. The squares were created by utilizing industrial grades of graphite tinted - somehow and mysteriously - with ground chalk. In spite of the surface references to formalist philosophy and thinking, these works had their origins in some of Dempster's earlier forays into nature and art; earlier works which meticulously, almost photo-realistically describe the quality of light refracted through moving water. These early works have many of the qualities of the rock photographic studies described earlier in that there is a rigid if alluvial composition which translates as both graphic surface and illusionary space. That is, one is aware of the medium of drawing but also aware of the impression of a real place - a cove or rocky inlet. The stony photographs have a liquid and subtractive space, watery yet solid, while the colored drawings of light dancing through moving water have a solidity of surface which can be also diaphanous, a strict fractal pattern of ephemeral moments. To the paintings, Dempster has brought over this idea of a naturally formed medium, graphite. Graphite is a geologically created rock-like formation, and indeed we see it now translated to recapitulate the paradoxical effects of photons dancing through and bouncing off of water.

Can you see now the manner by which a common thread of *correspondences*, the consistent use of natural materials and the uncommon range of discreet methods tie this work together in an elegant web of being? Nature itself is not simply a passive structure for colour, it is a co-creator, an active contributor to the art form and part of process.

As hard and dense as it is, graphite has traditionally been used by artists to harness a feathery, transparent look as well as to exploit its natural characteristics of reflecting a silvery light. Dempster has gone to the irreducible core of these characteristics, but enhanced them out of the Minimalist non-expressive mode in order to capture a more relevant visual experience, a sensation that is from the illusion of a watery motif, yet actually created by another reflective phenomenon altogether, that of light hitting flat medium on a flat painter's canvas hung on a flat wall and acting quite flatly all in all, to reflect light.

While we cannot, certainly, grasp all the implications of this work, we know that water comes from clouds, creates ponds, oceans, rivers, lakes, which environments in turn become killing fields of predators and prey from the amoeba to the shark to the deadliest still atomic submarine; and as easily as they are formed begin to evaporate again into the clouds that move along the heavens towards other destinations, to affect other destinies.. So too, those rocky shores of Ireland are dancing atoms, spun molecules and ever-eroding toward the sea - they are alive. There they will come ashore again to reform as beach or marshland, turn into fertile soil for seagrass and the cattail mating-ground of seabirds, or maybe the grains will descend deep into the ocean floor, fall into volcanic rifts, re-melt and be spit up to create another island, a new coastline, another time-line. But as I have mentioned, these implications are not static in their purpose to intrigue us, they are also elements in the interaction of art practice and theory.

We know that everything in creation is composed of stardust; we are, the ocean is, those rocks are. We share life and are not separate from it but part of it in the most fundamental way. Across this universal landscape there can be correspondences which awaken us to these truths, startle our senses. As Thoreau tells us, "There is a subtle magnetism in Nature which, if we are sensitive to it, sets everything aright." When the work of an artist like Dan Dempster is magically

placed among us we see that this magnetism can be subtlety itself, and that, furthermore, the sensation of it is luxuriant and meaning-laden. We do not always comprehend the spiritual intent of nature's forms. We need the artist and poet to point them out from time to time in ways which satisfy and even seduce our over-worked perceptors.

Dan once recounted an experience to me that while kayaking off Bermuda's South Shore just outside the reefs he was enjoying the solitary dusk and exhilarating waves when, with a solid thump from behind, suddenly he knew he wasn't alone. The stuff of his worst nightmare, the dark silhouette of a leviathan shark followed directly on the stern of the fragile craft, continuing to speculate on the succulent qualities of his flesh. He stayed the course and after a seemingly eternal interval made it to shore safely.

Even as we pursue life in its myriad forms, death pursues us in equal and inevitable guises. It harkens back to the Asian principle that we live in a closed system; that our life force cannot leave but is recycled time and again until each of us seizes upon our own destiny and pushes beyond the limits of eternal recurrence.

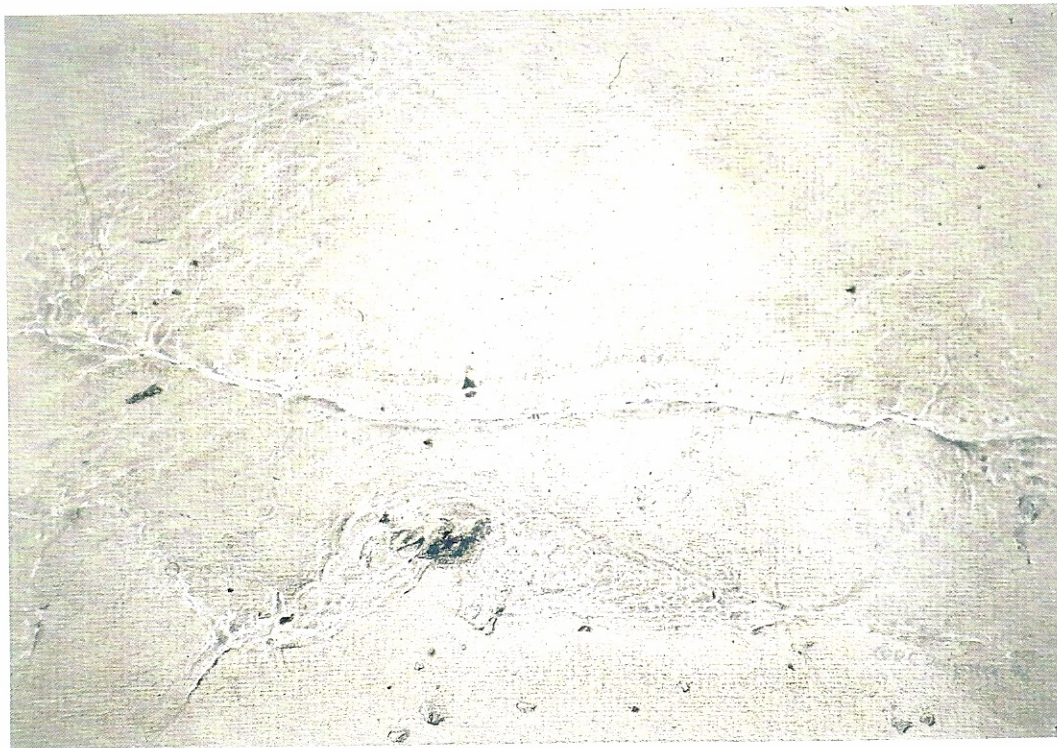
In its finest moments art, arising from this state of affairs, provides us with a similar opportunity to grab the sensations we feel and catapult ourselves beyond the normal view of things, out of simple perceptual life and into the realm of the immortal. Dan Dempster has grasped this idea by making signposts where the tendencies go in opposite directions and cross-purposes meet. They represent, and at the same time become, fulcrums between medium and illusion, tenuous standpoints in the cosmology of ineluctable absolutes. So it can be said in conclusion that as we gaze upon a work created by Dan Dempster and his ondine muses, we encounter aspects reflective of ourselves, stuff of the same atomic nature. When we break a mirror the image is not fragmented; we see ourselves whole reflected in each piece. The various aspects of Dempster's work provide us with the same possibility, each fragment a totality.

- PETER BARTON

† "*Urbanos*" mahogany/steel/aluminum/copper/concrete, dimensions variable ~ 54 x 54 x 96 inches © Daniel C. Dempster 1994. Shown at "*Perpetual Kinetics*: 1995," *Fulcrum Gallery SoHo*, then at 144 Mercer Street, now at 480 Broome Street, New York. Sister piece to "*Ethereos*" first shown at *Fulcrum* in "*Beyond Virtual: Back to Actual*: 1994."

* "*Iburiel*" the first waterworks translations: graphite on canvas. © Daniel C. Dempster 1996. Shown at the *Bermuda Society of Arts*, City Hall & Art Center, Hamilton, Bermuda, 1-21 November 1996. "*Iburiel*" is a series of 20 paintings describing the movement of water and light from textures observed in the flat rock shallows of the coastal area from Grape Bay to Ariel Sands inclusive, taking into account the hewn ledges west of Hungry Bay. These 48 x 48 inch graphite on canvas works are the first translations of those drawn studies of water and light for which the artist is well known in Bermuda. "*Iburiel*" will be shown at *Fulcrum Gallery SoHo* in November/December 1997.

The name "*Iburiel*" is a reference to *Iburiel's spear*, reputed to be an infallible test of genuinness, from *Paradise Lost*, *iv*. 810 [O.E.D.]. The name was chosen "as part pun on 'cthereal' but also because the paintings do not pretend to be 'of' or 'representing' something else. Their manner of creation results in the same chaotic patterns to be seen in the refraction lightlines of moving water in the shallows, the pattern of ice on a window-pane, satellite photographs of snowy mountains. The process results in itself, rather than describing something else. The relative densities of the graphite in suspension settle into the light and dark shapes in the canvas, just as the shape of the water refracts the light into light and dark patterns on the submerged rocks." D.C. Dempster, portfolio introduction 27 February 1997. p4.



Waterline, 1996
Colored pencil on paper
5 x 7 inches
12.5 x 17.5 centimeters



Barleycove, 1994
Colored pencil on paper
7.75 x 11 inches
20 x 27.5 centimeters

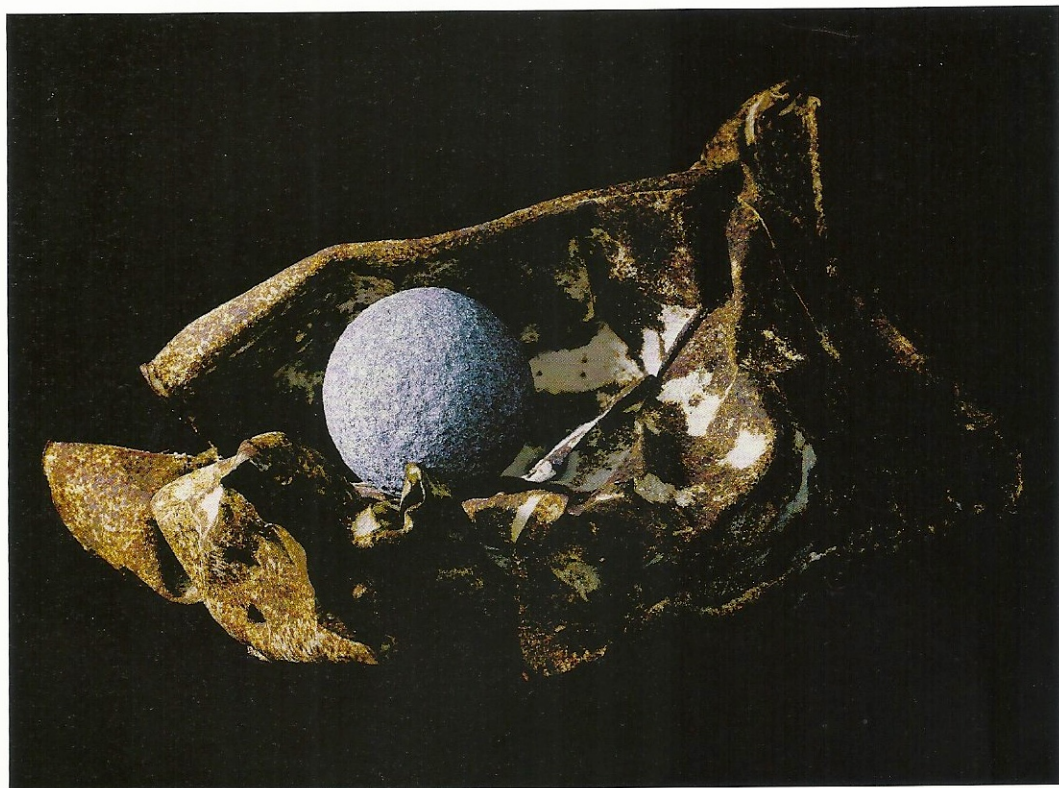


Marlbouand, 1995
Steel
13 x 12.4 inches
31.3 x 33 centimeters

Vorteil, 1995
Steel
12.8 x 11.9 inches
32.7 x 30.3 centimeters



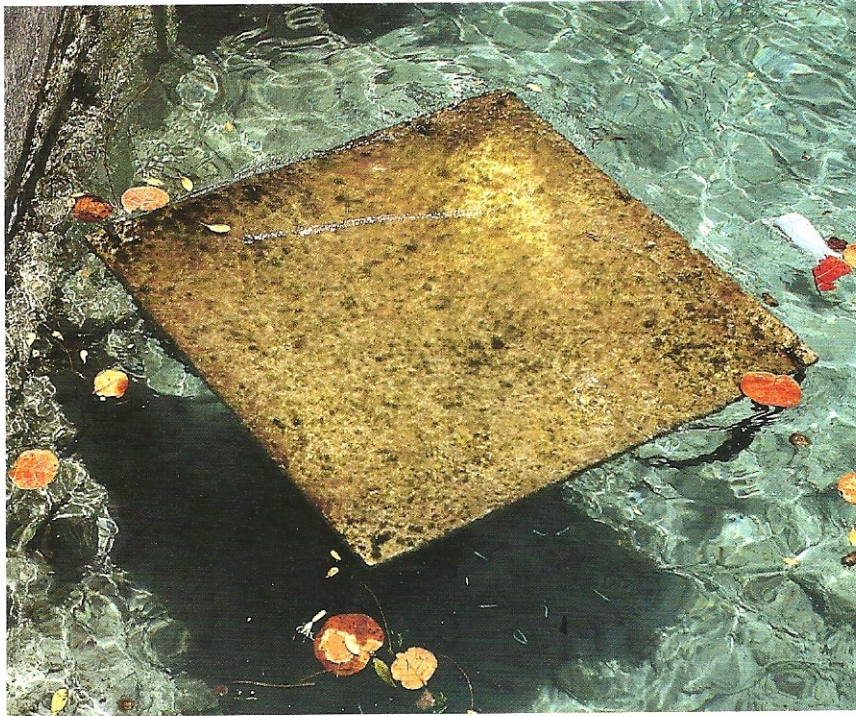
Palindrome, 1996
Steel
40.8 x 21.8 inches
103.6 x 55.4 centimeters



Peloton, 1993
Steel, stone
7 x 15 x 14 inches
17.8 x 38 x 35.6 centimeters



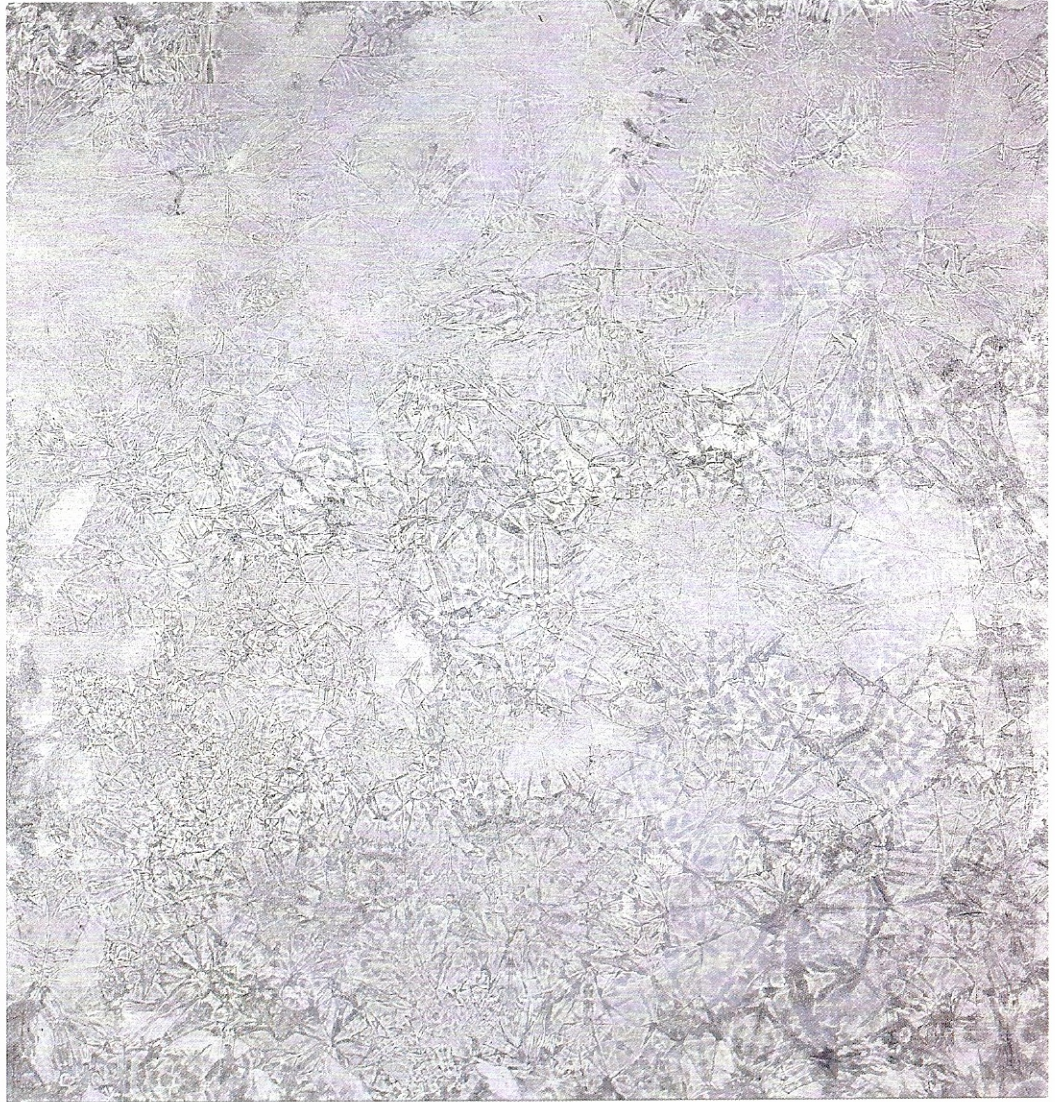
Pilarus, 1994
Aluminum, steel
72 x 21 x 8 inches
182.9 x 53.3 x 20.3 centimeters



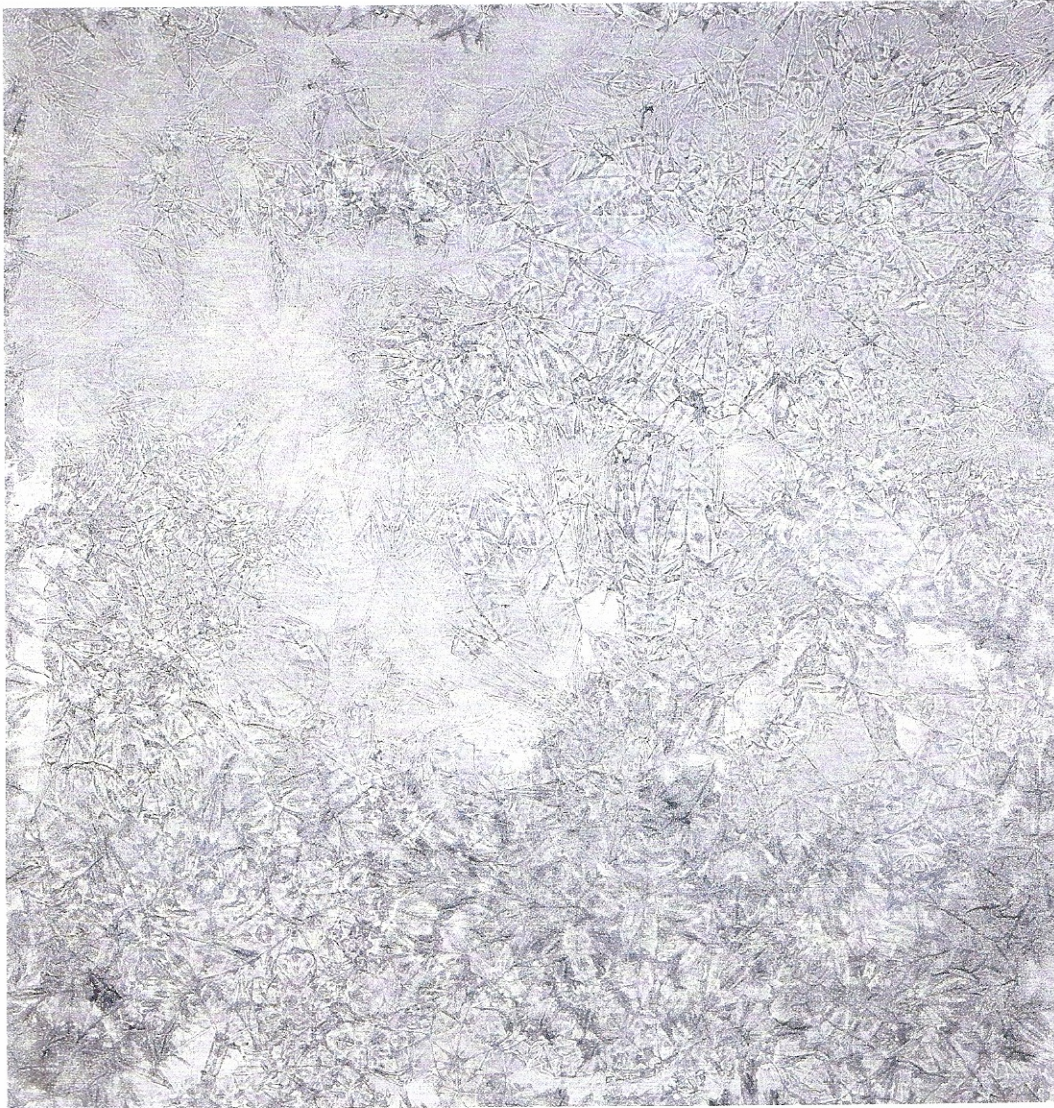
Urbanos, 1993 waterworks
Urbanos, 1995 underside



Urbanos, 1995 dried, at Fulcrum
Mahogany, steel, copper, concrete, aluminum
dimensions variable, ~96 x 54 x 54 inches
243.8 x 137.2 x 137.2 centimeters



No. 2 from "Ithviel", 1996
graphite on canvas
48 x 46 inches
122 x 117 centimeters



No. 17 from "Itburriel", 1996
graphite on canvas
48 x 46 inches
122 x 117 centimeters

STATEMENT OF INTENT

Peace of mind is fast disappearing amidst the world's insatiable addiction to information and irrel- evance. Information, thought and identity are still dangerously linked as reality. Our identity and charac- ter are vulnerable to challenge of a radical and fundamental nature, to a degree never before possible. The sheer volume and rate of change of the information environment are compounding stress on an already thought-laden existence, to the point that truth and identity are shorting out in a haze of trivializing media impression-bite. The proliferation and democratization of information alone is not necessarily a boon to humanity. To make wise use of it, concomitant education on the nature and limitations of infor- mation is imperative. Information is only a tool, and cannot ever adequately explain or substitute for real- ity, despite shallowly disguised claims otherwise. Until then, information remains the ideal product, offer- ing perfectly legal asymptotic hope: we need more and more to understand less and less. Further, infor- mation daringly offers itself as the solution to the contradictions it spawns. However, thought-based so- lutions fail because they are ultimately self-referential, and are therefore part of the pandemic.

The search for relief from thought demands that the artist serve as an opening into the relief of things as they are, past the distorting screen of thought and word. It demands work that draws us toward centre rather than distracting us further from it. It demands of art purity of experience with least asso- ciation; truth beyond technique. The immediacy of such work is achieved as far as possible by removing ego from the process. Technique is learned, then mastered, then ultimately forgotten in the fluidity of action. The artist is not so much creating the work as being created by it. In listening to the piece rather than forcing his interpretation upon it, the artist allows the work to speak with purity and clarity. The boundaries between observer and the observed dissolve. With the dissolution of self embodied in creat- ing the work, the work does not arouse the defensive ego of the observer that would block his experience. The observer is thus ushered through the window of the work to the magic of experience itself. The per- ceptual boundaries between artist, subject, object and viewer dissolve.

Agnes Martin in "Beauty is the Mystery of Life" wrote, "When your eyes are open, you see beau- ty in everything... Blake's right about there's no difference between the whole thing and the one thing." But where Martin sought the expression of perfection in an ideal, I seek the expression of perfection in the incredible beauty of things as they are. Where she wrote that art work is enjoyed or not depending on the condition of the observer, I believe it is possible, and indeed the artist's responsibility, to induce the observer out of his or her condition. Yes, the observer brings his condition as ego and all its attachments to viewing the works, but as outlined above, if the viewer is confronted with as little conscious ego in technique on the part of the artist, the work's truth may be electrically experienced by the observer.

Rodin turned a very elegant phrase when he, regarding his partial figures as finished works, retort- ed to intolerant criticism, "Beauty is like God; a fragment of beauty is complete!" This cogent expression is a fitting introduction to my work which "re-presents" the innate aesthetic of our surroundings. Rath- er than lecture the observer, the work explores those boundaries through indirection and subtlety. Its concision is in the paradox of thought. The obvious is not obvious at all, and the very complex is actual- ly very simple.

In creating this work I am learning to articulate something that I have always intuitively under- stood - that definition by its nature automatically reduces experience rather than opening it up. Conversely, dissolving definition into experience restores our connection to experience. By "re-present- ing" the obvious through the artist's aesthetic without ego the observer is able to "re-cognize" the spec- tacular in the mundane, the order in chaos in order that one had forgotten or simply become habituated to. My work uses the movement of water and light, and the change inherent in materials as vehicles for exploring and exposing the fundamental essence of the moment as it is.

The information environment although ubiquitous, remains artificial. To survive and prosper, we must relearn innocence and trust in our intuition. Intuition is nothing more than the natural result of allowing oneself to become open and receptive to one's true environment. We need to learn to see again, as children do, the magic contained in the tiniest events that every moment surround us. This is what my work provokes the observer to do. Gradually, after time spent searching for associations or relations in the work, the observer is drawn to contemplate the fantastic beauty of things as they are, and gains under- standing through peace of mind.

DANIEL C. DEMPSTER

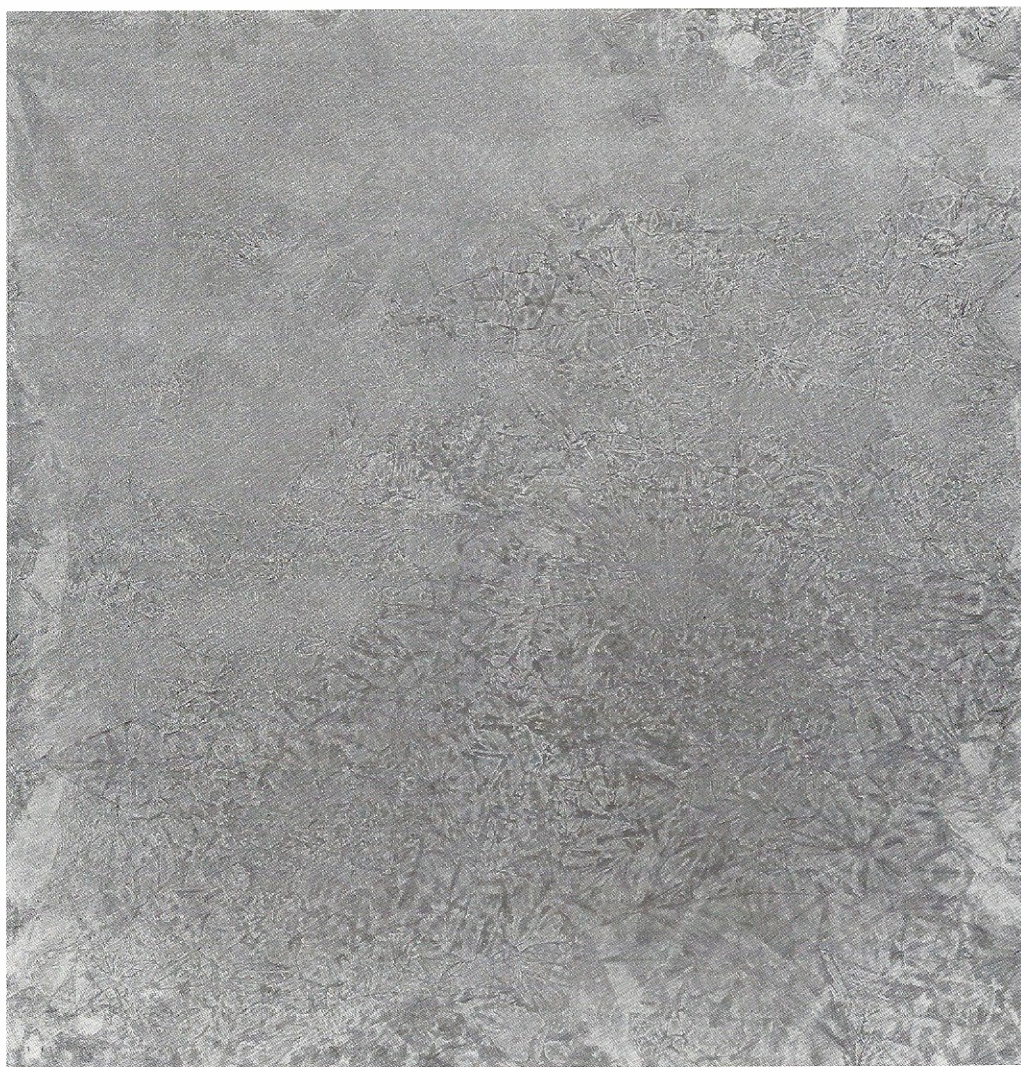
Born Montreal, 1963 of Irish parents from Belfast, N. Ireland.
Lives in Bermuda and Virginia.

Solo & Museum Exhibitions

- 1998 District of Columbia Arts Center, 2438 18th Street, NW, Washington, DC. March/April.
- 1997 Fulcrum Gallery Soho, "*Ithuriel*," 480 Broome & Wooster, New York. November/December.
- Peninsula Fine Arts Center, "*Waterworks*," Affil. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Newport News, VA..
- 1996 Museo de Arte Moderno, Santo Domingo. *3rd Biennale of Painting of the Carribean and Central America*.
- Bermuda Society of Arts Gallery, "*Ithuriel*," City Hall & Arts Centre, Hamilton, Bermuda.
- The Bermuda National Gallery, "*Biennial 96*," Hamilton, Bermuda
- Masterworks Foundation, "*Iron Moss*," Hamilton, Bermuda.
- Fulcrum Gallery Soho, "*The Water Planet*," 144 Mercer Street, New York.
- 1994 The Bermuda National Gallery, "*Biennial 94. A Celebration of Excellence: The Best of Bermuda*"
- The Clocktower Building, "*Out of Context*," Royal Naval Dockyard, Ireland Island, Bermuda.
- 1991 Bacardi International, "*Waterworks*," Bacardi Building, Hamilton, Bermuda.
- 1989 Café Bon Choix, "*Insulated Soles*," University Avenue, Waterloo, Ontario.
- 1988 Café Bon Choix, "*Tactical Thinking*," University Avenue, Waterloo, Ontario.

Joint Exhibitions

- 1997 Fulcrum Gallery SoHo "*Daniel C. Dempster, Yutaka Kobayashi & Tery Fugate-Wilcox*" New York.
- 1993 Bermuda Society of Arts Gallery, "*Context: Daniel C. Dempster & Jodie Tucker-Webster*" Hamilton.



No. 4 from "Tiburiel", 1996
graphite on canvas
46 x 48 inches
117 x 122 centimeters

