

## MATTHEW BROWN

### “The Geometry of the Abyss”

*...And in these waters which are more a churning than actual waters float the images of all I've seen and heard in the world — houses, faces, books, boxes, snatches of music and syllables of voices all moving in a sinister and bottomless swirl.*

*And amid all this confusion I, what's truly I, am the centre that exists only in the geometry of the abyss: I'm the nothing around which everything spins, existing only so that it can spin, being a centre only because every circle has one. I, what's truly I, am a well without walls but with the walls' viscosity, the centre of everything with nothing around it.*

- Bernardo Soares, *The Book of Disquiet*

Dylan Vandenhoeck's paintings lead viewers down into the abyss of the artist's experience, a space that is at once celebratory and anxious, alien and deeply familiar. Inside, one finds scenes that have been rendered with an effortless winter-morning clarity: the metal lattice of a sidewalk tabletop, needle-like spines of yucca at Joshua Tree, the brushed steel sheen and dimples of an elevator door. But sharp as they are, these clear moments are partially obscured by a gummy miasma that drifts and eddies through the work. There is no fixed rule, but it often seems that this rude skrim of paint interrupting the view is Vandenhoeck's own body: the dark triangular pressure of what might be a nose, the expansive bloody murk of rolling one's eye uncomfortably far to the side. Although the details astonish and open up wonderful narratives, it's the unstable dead zones surrounding and subtly structuring the action that make the paintings feel intimate and human—one recognizes that here in these relatively graceless strokes of paint is something interior, a transubstantiation of the artist's psyche as well as of his actual body.

The paintings can sometimes feel like a riddle to crack, which is fun, if a little constricting. But usually they are simply generous, helping viewers enter a vortex of intense, structured seeing. Enticed in by Vandenhoeck's flagrant virtuosity, and buoyed along by the delight of discovery, a person can scramble back out of each piece with a zest for sensation, jolted into childlike appreciation for the strange and lovely light (and dark) that are around us all the time, the drama of physically being anywhere. *Maybe I'll go look at some shadows or stare at the sun for a bit...*

In fact, the once-you-see-it-you-can't-unsee-it quality to this work is almost invasive. It's hard for a viewer not to shake their head or blink their eyes, trying to get a doubled outline to merge back together or make a glowing afterimage of the sun go away. It turns out that there is a name for all this, the strangeness that emerges when one pays attention to how, rather than what, one

sees. The effects that come into focus are called “entoptic phenomena,”<sup>1</sup> and Vandenhoek’s work illustrates many, particularly those catalogued in Goethe’s *Theory of Colours*. Although these optical effects are time intensive to paint, the physical impression they leave on a viewer is of something fleeting and of-the-moment. They add to the sense of vital immediacy that pervades Vandenhoek’s work.

The paintings record the escalating pace of observation (the more one looks, the more one sees), recognizable to anyone who has spent time drawing from life. Here, Vandenhoek is white knuckled, trying to get it all down. The results channel old illustrated maps, with their all-over focus and engrossing open narrative. But instead of a cartographer’s mastery, they feel barely contained, spinning out of control. *The Mower / Hollywood Reservoir* is a good example. One can feel the acceleration, starting at a standstill with the minutely observed houses at the top of the hill, picking up speed down through the tumbling golden meadow, streaking across the diagonal waves of green grass by the path, before whipping back around the spiraling tracks of Vandenhoek’s orange glasses. In the crescendo of increasingly wild marks, one feels the ache of trying to pull an impossibly large experience through the too-small portal of a canvas.

The result is an open painting, full of stories. There are few resting places in the image besides the area right around the titular mower, who is also in motion, laying down the tall grass on that dizzyingly steep hill. A mark of some kind of success, this piece would be fun to look at with a child—finding little moments like the purposeful figure striding straight uphill in the lower right corner, or following the path as it accomplishes an impossible flip, giving us one perfect view all the way back to the Hollywood sign.

Sometimes, the artist’s frustration at slow paint’s inability to match the speed of sensation becomes so great that it spills out past representation into language: vulnerable commentary like “damn I suck at drawing” burning in red down the electric blue arm of the figure in *Landscape Starbucks*, or a transcript of a too-fast interaction, like “do you have permission from the manager?” standing as the legs of a skeptical guard in *Private Public*. Rather than reading as a messy affectation, these fleeting moments feel matter-of-fact and earnest, standing on top of and in contrast to the obsessive draftsman’s precision that structures many of the paintings. Their impact is earned, and as they are discovered, these little moments of language unlock new registers of experience and emotion from the scene.

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<sup>1</sup> Entoptic phenomena are visual effects whose source is within the eye itself. They include, for example, things like floaters (which are actually objects, such as proteins or chains of blood cells, floating in the fluid of the eye. Look at the sky just above and to the right of the skyscrapers in *View from Ernest Debbs* for an example), pressure phosphenes (where, by pressing on the eyelid, one can produce the appearance of light, even if none is actually entering the eye), or afterimages (all over the show, but most prominently in *Heater Afterimage*). There are also many color phenomena, such as shadows that appear as complementary colors to the light being cast on the object, or a glow that seems to surround a dark object when placed in front of a light background. Elsewhere, Vandenhoek records the subjective experience of being a body in space in a way that feels more like a diary entry than a science experiment: sunlight glinting through eyelashes, the embrace of one’s own shoulders, or the bending of space that occurs in our incredibly sensitive peripheral vision. These phenomena rarely make it into our conscious awareness, so they seem mysterious and illogical when seen head on. But it’s these oddities that give the physical experience of visual perception its unique and familiar texture.

However, these paintings are not simply a showcase for virtuoso rendering. The perfect skin of the image is full of holes and incongruities. For someone obsessed with observation, Vandenhoek seems curiously reticent, even afraid, about looking directly at anything. Much of the action happens way to the edge of the image, or gets compressed into little sparkling droplets of detail. In many paintings, the center of the canvas is a kind of no-man's land, receiving either disinterested, begrudging attention (like in *Home Studio*, where one's eye slips off the central tree towards the glow at the sides again and again), or becoming one of the vaguely threatening, even repulsive null zones that appear in many places throughout the show (such as at the center of *Heater Afterimage*). These voids both invite and defy attention, an unsettling experience.

*Miracle Mile* rotates around a large dead zone. At the center of the painting is an expanse of carefully modeled night pavement, complete with a vanishing shadow of the artist. Although this area is empty in some sense, it is still carefully observed, a sort of still life of the texture of the road. This gives way to a very different blankness: a triangular smudge of muddy purple that cordons off the cast plaque at the foot of the painting and then spills down into the corners. Next to the pebbly shine of the street, this dusty band seems unfinished and jarring. Something doesn't add up. It is almost unbelievable that the same hand that articulated the gorgeous flow of light on the sidewalk underneath the FOR LEASE sign could also leave that vaguely repellant smear.

But as unsatisfying as this blank spot is, it's key to the image. What would the painting be without it? The dead zone in *Miracle Mile* evokes the aching near nausea of looking at one's own nose. It has something of the anxious ambition pervading this show: the desire to be more than a "good painter," the uncertainty about what that means, and the vulnerability of working this out in public. Although a little sickened, one is grateful for these cracks in the illusion. Without it, the image would be hermetic, no way in.

Because of the places where things break down (in the context of so much holding-together), the paintings have a poetic depth—they are about more than just the mechanics of seeing. Even in the most resolved moments (such as in the astonishing *View from Ernest Debbs*), the paintings slowly unfurl and unravel, pulling viewers in. The theories of perception that Vandenhoek has metabolized re-emerge in the work as simply another layer of experience, alongside thought, emotion, physical sensation, space etc. Throughout, Vandenhoek's careful attention and sense of wonder are infectious: the paintings have the feeling of the dream where one discovers a hidden, magical room in a familiar house. Viewers are left with something they can keep, the unlooked-for gift of "it was there the whole time."

Text by Harper Keehn