# BEYOND OBJECTHOOD

## A Conversation with Benjamin Degen

I spoke with artist Benjamin Degen about his paintings that were produced recently in a three-and-a-half-year period living simply in the wilderness of upstate New York. We discussed the socioeconomic, political and deeply personal reasons that inspired him to move away from New York City and then back again and how this played out in his work. As Degen has stated, his work hails from the "current existential situation on this planet (see for example the text *Ecology Without Nature* by Timothy Morton) and the struggle for individuals to have a clear vision of themselves and their environment in this moment."

The wilderness-engendered paintings, with quirky stringy paint application, read as fresh and unfamiliar even as the subject matter is familiar: sunshine, youthful figures lounging, reading, swimming, setting out and returning, sequestered in verdant woods and clear waters. The city-engendered paintings also have this dialectical quality. All the paintings conjure formal essences and life-affirming interests of Matisse, Bonnard, Seurat, Renoir and Gauguin, but the work is absolutely recognizable only as itself, a multitudinous color play in chords of romantic undertone and metamodern sincerity. Degen's current solo exhibition at Susan Inglett Gallery in New York runs through December 5.

**BY STEPHEN KNUDSEN**

**Benjamin Degen, *Here comes the neighborhood!* 2015,** oil stick over acrylic on paper, 26" x 40." Courtesy the artist and Susan Inglett Gallery, NY.

***Stephen Knudsen - Your exhibition "Shadow Ripple Reflection" at Susan Inglett Gallery a couple of years ago keeps returning to my memory. You've had me thinking for some time now of that tiny off- grid cabin, wild chlorophyll and nights dark enough to see the stars above the woods, and you've had me thinking of Henry David Thoreau. Have you seen the replica of Thoreau's cabin across the street from Walden Pond? There is a bronze sculpture of Thoreau emerging out of the cabin, the great resister, stripped to pencil and ax, finding something essential in and outside of himself, something transcendent. And those thoughts bring me back again to your painting. Is that something you are finding good to get back to even if it is sort of Thoreau-light, with car keys in hand?***

**Benjamin Degen** - I've never visited Thoreau's actual cabin site, but I've visited the idea of his cabin many times. When I first read Thoreau, Whitman and Muir they defined an ideal for me: the deep natural connection of Transcendentalism; the idea that the American landscape was imbued with spiritual power that is a source of strength and life. I also was attracted to the concept of the landscape as a reflection of our collective humanity and our individual selves. These ideas were definitely in my mind when I recently 'escaped' New York City to live for a few years in the mountains of upstate New York. Some aspects of these concepts of an idealized 'nature' and an idealized 'humanity' are a little old school, and I appreciate some of the more contemporary ideas about nature as expressed by writers like Timothy Morton, but as a pictorial/conceptual vantage point I do like the dialectic idealism of looking 'out of the urban window into the shadow of the forest and conversely looking 'in' to the city from up in the mountains. The titles *Kleos* and *Nostos* allude to this 'going in' and 'going out'; both paintings depict a door as a threshold that is crossed from one world to another. Kleos is a concept in ancient Greek epic poetry that alludes to going out into the world to achieve heroic acclaim. This is the theme of *The Iliad*. The term 'nostos' on the other hand refers to the journey of returning home, which is an achievement unto itself. This is the main theme of *The Odyssey*. The woman in *Nostos* is coming home from a run, kicking off her shoes and taking off her clothes as she bounds through the door. It is a heroic feeling coming home after a long run. It is an act of achieving everyday 'nostos!' The painting *Kleos* is a small moment of prosaic heroics as well: The figure is walking out the door into a new day. Both paintings are intentionally a little goofy in this self-conscious conceit, but let's face it: If you can't see the heroism—and the humor of the heroism—in each moment of existence, what's the point of living?

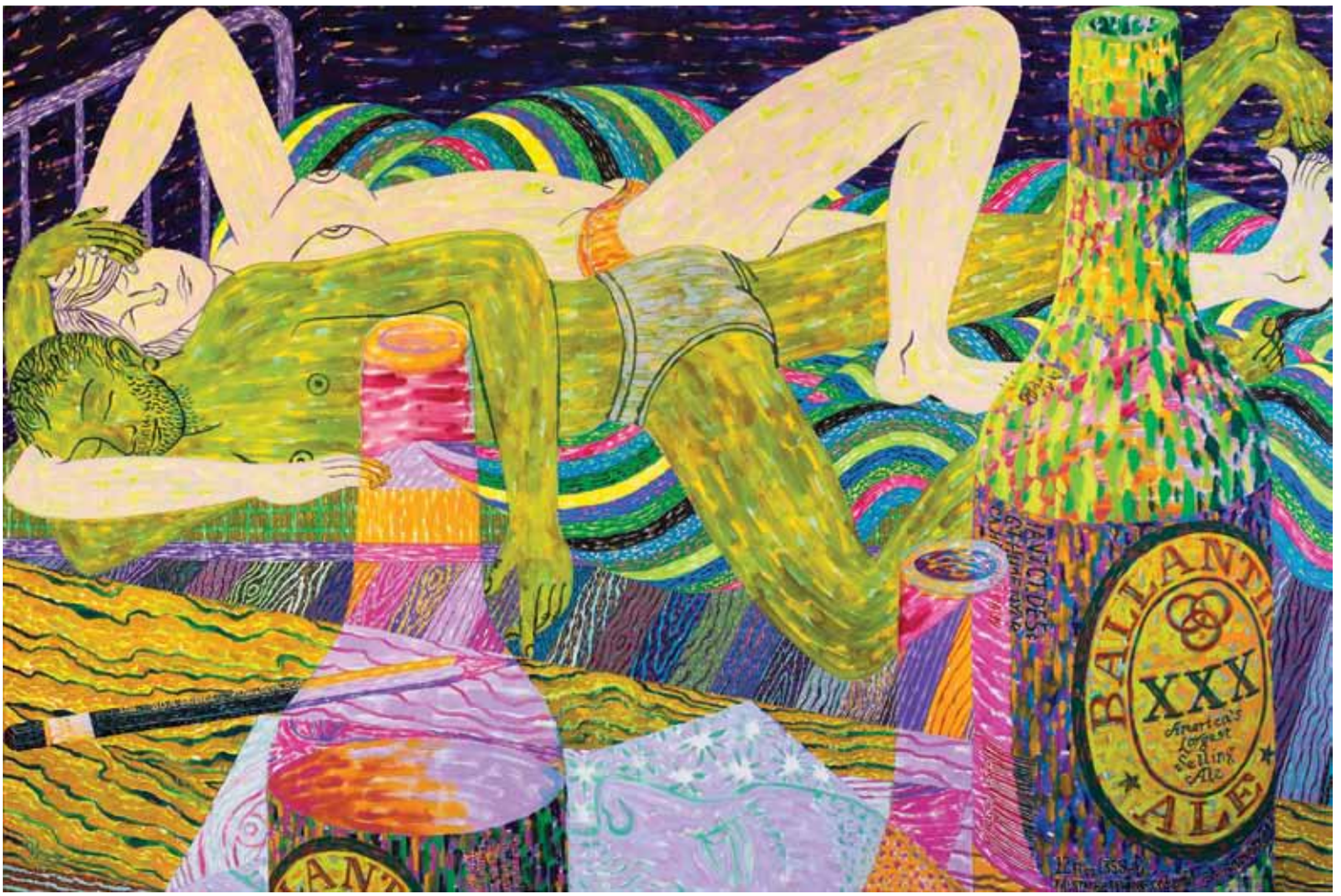
***SK - Please tell us more about your cabin/studio and surrounds.***

**B.D.** - In 2010, my wife (and fellow painter and collaborator) Hope Gangloff and I moved into a giant stone building in the woods. As city-dwellers we had a romantic concept of what this would be like. The day-to-day of actually living there was an ongoing process of reconciling our romanticism with reality: The building was unheatable; even with woodstoves blazing it was never warm or dry. Rain came through the roof, and under the doors a spring ran under the floor. We felt the elements—and we became elemental! Anything left unmoved for more than a couple of days would grow mold. Everything smelled like the woods, damp leaves, a fire. Snakes chased chipmunks through the kitchen. We raised chickens up from baby chicks, which we kept in the bathtub until they were large enough to keep them outside. We went swimming in the stream and in a big lake. At night when we left the studio we would walk around the woods with our ancient dog. In the summer there were crickets, fireflies and frogs singing everywhere in the swamp that surrounded the building. In the winter there was the sound of the dry trees clicking together and the popping of the ice in the swamp. There were a lot of owls. They would sing all night. It was beautiful. We lived like we were camping. We did what city people tend to do when they go 'country': We went all the way.

**Benjamin Degen*, Underwater,* 2015**, oil on linen over panel, 72" x 48."

***S.K. - What happened to you and your work out there in the woods?***

**B.D.** - I went to the mountains to be able to look at new things, to be able to live in a new way. I wanted to be able to see myself and the world around me through a different lens of experience. In the city there are constant intense stimuli. The urban environment is loud. My time in the woods was the first prolonged period I've spent in a quiet place. I had to recalibrate to experience more subtle stimuli. The title of the last show "Shadow, Ripple and Reflection" alluded to phenomenological effects that




**Benjamin Degen, *Drinking, Drawing, Sleeping, Dreaming*, 2015,** oil on linen over panel, 72" x 108."

can be very understated. Sometimes you need a certain amount of stillness, quiet and focus to see them. They are small events on the periphery that allow you to understand and feel large forces. For example, when you see the zig-zag ripples of a squall puff across the water before it arrives. When the squall gets to you you feel the full force of the wind. You can look up and see the clouds, the front of a huge weather system. But if you are still you can see the tiny ripples, which show the edge and the structure of this very large thing. At first these small details in the stillness could be overwhelming and even terrifying in their complexity and newness. I think the work in "Shadow, Ripple and Reflection" was about this experience: the reality of it and the semi self-conscious archetypal act of going into the woods. It is a theme of 'Gilgamesh' (Sumer, 2,700 B.C). It's the theme of Canned Heat's "Going up the Country" (Woodstock, N.Y., 1969). The call of the wild country never gets old.

***S.K. - I see that archetypal act in the imagery but also in the way that your paint builds up in signatures of webbed pigment and color, almost as if you were writing with the paint. It seems to be squeezed out of some kind of tiny tube. It makes me think of Henry David Thoreau's sister Sophie, who inscribed many of her brother's poems onto pressed leaves. Like her leaves, your leaves, your grass, your wood grain have in them other languages beyond thingness. With this kind of juicy formal language, even in the lone shoe in* Nostos*, there seems to be something Whitmanesque in the object—'I celebrate myself.' Would you tell us more about your content and the process of painting this way?***

**B.D.** - There is a Shinto shrine in the Brooklyn Botanic Gardens—I'm going to talk about another 'cabin in the woods' here—that has captivated me since I first saw it as a kid. It is a small and ancient-looking, unpainted wooden structure. It looks like a small house, but the door is tiny, maybe two feet tall, and it is always shut. There are just tiny slits where you can see the darkness inside. It was explained to me that this was not a house for people, it was built to house a kami or spirit. I love this idea that you could build a physical structure to house a metaphysical spirit or idea. I also like the idea that you can make a thing, and its very 'thingness' becomes an act of ontological self-realization: It becomes an object that then perpetually expresses its specific objecthood—the 'I celebrate myself' concept you were talking about. I wanted to make paintings that had this object presence. When I build up the paint into an impasto I think I may be trying to build a physical structure for the thought to inhabit. I'm making these physical elements to house metaphysical things within the picture plane. I like the idea of the picture working like a mechanism with discrete component objects acting upon each other physically like the gears in a watch or machine.

Usually in my process I take things in one direction and then instinctively want to try the opposite: I do a night picture, then a day picture; a male then a female; a person then an object. I took things pretty far in the built-up-structures direction. I did a bunch of still-life nocturnes that were extensively overlaid

with these dense painted structures and enclosures. The only way I could achieve areas of passage and transition within the image was to paint layer upon layer until these lattices of logic became so dense and caused such interference with each other that they would break down or obliterate and interflow. Now I'm moving in the other direction. My most recent paintings are more open. Rather than pre-planning I'm working out the paintings directly on the canvas: painting and repainting; a lot of wet into wet paint. I'm trying to use the gesture to animate the marks within the painting and to use these enlivened and direct gestures to embody the spirit/idea itself rather than using built-up structures to house or enclose or define it.

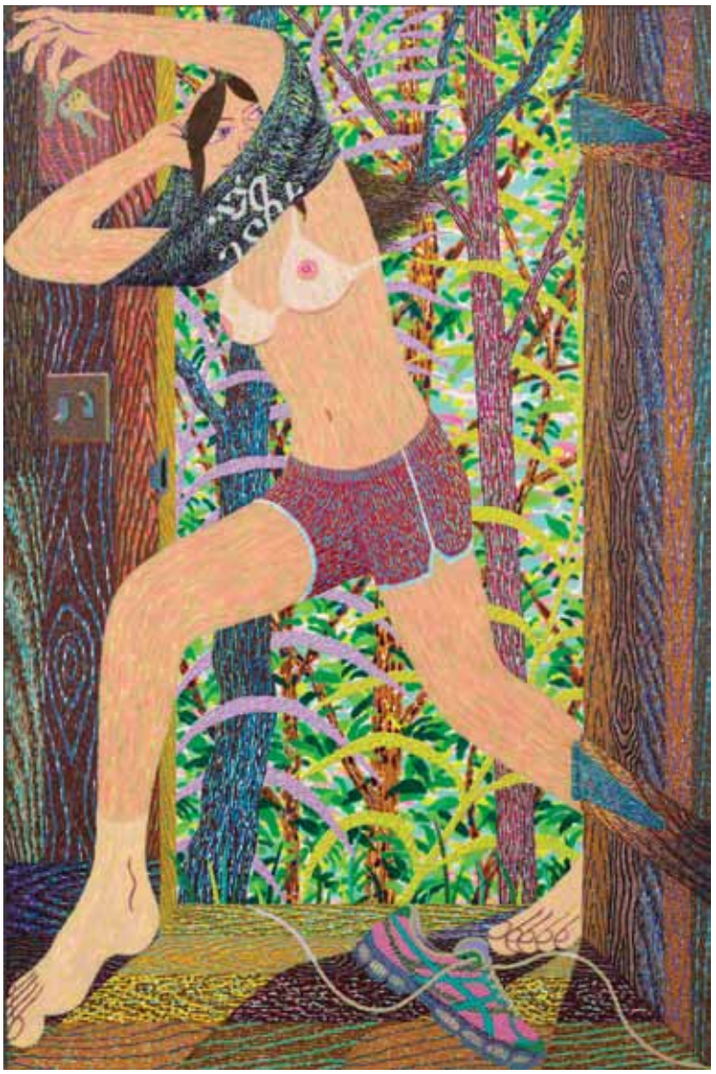
***S.K. - Where do you live now?***
**B.D.** - I am back in New York City now. My three and a half years in the mountains was a sojourn. I can only manage being a part-time hermit.

***S.K. - In the painting* Here Comes the Neighborhood *the lone figure contemplates the city almost as a figure in a Caspar David Friedrich painting contemplating the wilderness. What are you seeing now upon your return to the city?***
**B.D.** - I see millions of people living and trying to get by. I see people trying to help each other. I see people trying to get away with whatever they can get away with. I see myself. You can look at the 'wilderness' and the city in the same way. Basically, you are looking at an environment. If you see yourself within the wilderness and you can make a life there, it is no longer wilderness, it is your home. If you see yourself within the city and you can make a life there it is no longer the city, it is *your* city.

When I left New York City in 2010 it was an act of protest and rejection. I grew up in New York City. My city always felt open and exciting to me. There always seemed to be a new secret place where something was happening. There always seemed to be a funkiness and a shadow that felt electric with potential. In 2010 these funky shadows—the sacred spaces where people can do the unexpected—seemed to be exterminated everywhere by high rents and a proliferation of 'luxury' condos. My studio rent was increased to an exorbitant amount that I could not afford. Suddenly I could not make a life in the city, and this place that had always nurtured me felt like a harsh environment: a wilderness. I felt pushed out of my city. I headed for the hills.

What I realized when I was in those hills was that I missed my neighborhood—not the buildings, but the people. Going back to the transcendentalists, you can read this feeling in Whitman's writing. He had such a love, and lust, for his fellow human beings that he reveled in the energy, proximity and close contact of urban living. My new show "Where We Live" is more about that: our neighborhoods, our connection to community, and the physical and political structures of our immediate environment. Growing up in Brooklyn I was surrounded by organizers: neighborhood organizers, labor union organizers, educators and creative collaborative organizers. I need the feeling and noise of collective collaboration and neighborhood as much as I need the feeling of solitude and quiet reflection.

In the painting *Here Comes the Neighborhood*, I was thinking about this feeling of being on the outside looking in or the inside looking out—the feeling of inclusion or exclusion. Like the Caspar David Friedrich painting: that feeling of being on the edge of an uncontrollable and strong force. In this case it could be the force of exclusion in front of you or the collective force of the people behind you.



**Benjamin Degen, *Nostos*, 2013**, oil on linen over panel, 72" x 48."

***S.K. - In closing, would you tell us about one more of your city paintings? A painting like* Dancers *puts this narrative to music, yes?***
**B.D.** - There is something incredible that Bonnard does with color in his paintings: he is able to make the painting throw its color into the room with the viewer. As you look at the image you do not feel like you are looking into another space. The color comes out of the painting and surrounds and includes you. You feel like you are in the space of the painting. It makes even his large canvases seem very intimate. I'm not sure how Bonnard does this. It is such a magical effect that it doesn't seem to make chromatic or logical sense. I'm trying to do something like that with the figures through their movement and gesture. I want them to dance with a movement that is hardly contained by the image; a movement that pushes so hard on the edges that it somehow breaks the confines of the picture plane and moves into the space of the viewer. There is something that happens when you are dancing that is similar to when you look at a picture—you lose yourself. For a moment you are not you, you are just a movement or a gesture, or a color, or a sound. ■