

AN INTERVIEW WITH
Nate Burbeck

December 1, 2013 · Interview

Minneapolis, MN
Painting
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Occasionally haunting, quietly unassuming and gorgeously eerie, Nate Burbeck's paintings present a constant conundrum of daily American life. The Minnesota native takes amber waves of grain to a whole new level. In an interview with *Dirty Laundry*, Burbeck describes the small niche in which he operates, in between rolling landscapes and dejected states of mind.



Stearns County, Minn.
Oil on Canvas
24 x 50in
2013

Nate, introduce us to your work, what's your elevator speech?

My work consists mostly of large panoramic landscape paintings, which are based off of photographs I take from my travels throughout the U.S. Within these painted landscapes I will also depict various additional figures along with some surreal or dreamlike elements to construct a visual narrative in the scene these characters inhabit. My aim with these narrative

paintings is to explore and to externalize an inner space or a psychological state that I feel permeates certain aspects of contemporary American society. Placing these fantastical elements into the setting of these canvases creates a tension between what is familiar and what is distinctively surreal. I'm interested in a sense of place and in revealing America as a social landscape, as well as reflecting an interior, psychological space.

It makes me wonder about just what goes on inside all of these seemingly pleasant neighborhoods and towns...

The ambiguity is really wonderful in your paintings. It creates a level of mystery leaving the viewers to try and figure out what's going on. Do you have a specific narrative in mind when you work? How do you come up with these situations?

There's not necessarily a central message to each painting; I'm more interested in capturing a mood or touching some nerve. Someone once described my work as "haunting" and I found myself very satisfied with that.

I'd say in general my ideas come from a variety of sources, whether it's artists I'm interested in, films I've seen, politics, or news stories I've been reading about. Recently I was thinking about a quote from a Russell Banks essay on Gregory Crewdson's photography, saying it was like "excavating the dark, moldering remnants of Ronald Reagan's sunlit morning in America." I liked the way that sounded and have wondered what that might look like. I've also been trying to watch more movies by directors like David Lynch (*Twin Peaks*, *Blue Velvet*, etc.) but I'm pretty bad at binge watching on Netflix. There have been some strange stories in the news too that I can't seem to un-remember. Like this guy in River Falls, Wisconsin, who murdered his three grade school-aged daughters during a visitation as a way to "get back" at his ex-wife. Or that high school rape case in Steubenville, Ohio, last summer. Pretty gruesome stuff. Admittedly, those are some very extreme examples, but in a way I think they sort of chip away at the collective notions we have of suburban, middle-American life. It makes me wonder about just what goes on inside all of these seemingly pleasant neighborhoods and towns I travel around.

Not that these things directly correlate to the ideas and situations I come up with but I think in some way they make themselves visible. It's partly a product of the

media I consume and things I think about. To an extent perhaps some of my ideas also come from my own experiences too or maybe people I've come across, things that have remained in my subconscious.



Sighting Near Wells, Minn., Oil on Canvas, 28 x 64in, 2012

The places I've traveled to and photograph have an influence as well and I think they affect the kinds of ideas I generate. In terms of coming up with specific ideas for each canvas it can really vary from painting to painting. There are some instances where I have a very particular idea in mind even before I set out to take reference photos of a landscape and it's just a matter of finding the right location for that idea. Then there are other instances where I've taken photos of a place that I know can work for something but I still have to come up with an idea that best fits that space. And then there are times where an idea will just come to me all of the sudden and stick.

Your paintings expose truthful little corners of America. Underneath the blue skies and the manicured lawns, there are secrets waiting to be found if you dig deep enough. In your work and even in the work of some of the artists you've mentioned, there's always that "moment" when everything seems comfortable and familiar, and then it changes, often in some minor way. This drastically alters the situation and transforms it into something dark, or "haunting" as you mentioned. The familiar turns unfamiliar. Have you ever experienced that situational shift either in art or in life?

Well yes, certainly a lot of artwork that I admire has had that affect on me, but more in a positive light. Jeff Wall's *Jell-O* comes to mind just now, or some of Judith Eislser's paintings. I guess there have been times, if I think back carefully, when I've had a situational shift of sorts in real life.

At times I've experienced a certain shift when I've been out taking photographs but I'm not sure I'd say it's that drastic shift you mentioned. It's more I think a change in focus. You sort of take in your environment with a heightened sense of things, almost like a brief touch of the sublime or something. It's also something that happens in the studio when I'm painting.



Highlands Ranch, Colo.
Oil on Canvas
20 x 42in
2012

It's interesting that some of your source material, or at least things you think about while working, are inspired by violence. It's definitely evident in the work, but it's used in varying degrees of subtlety. Do you see that as a balancing act? How do you get to that sweet spot between not enough darkness and too much?

I guess so, though honestly I don't really see my work as being too dark. Maybe I'm just used to it by now?

Gradually, I'd say the work has been starting to take on that trait more and more as I've been getting interested in using darker lighting situations. And yes, it can be a balancing act I suppose but with every work there's a long process that I go through before even starting with the first brushstrokes. All the time that goes into taking landscape photographs and developing ideas for or from those references. So because of that I tend to take my time in thinking through my ideas to make sure they aren't going to be too over the top. Although that's not to say I'm always completely satisfied with every painting. There are a lot of ideas that end up on the cutting room floor of my mind and others that I still haven't done anything with yet.



Sighting Near Scipio, Utah
Oil on Canvas
28 x 64in
2011

There are a couple of reoccurring motifs in your work. Do the birds, the silver balls, the strange lighting, and the smoke have specific meanings? Do they symbolize something?

Birds?! Ha! That's reaching way back (relatively speaking)! Well, in my "older" paintings - 2010 and before - I was much more concerned with symbolism and the history of certain icons, those birds for example, but now I've become less interested in specific meaning. Things have taken on a more generic physiological malaise. I think that lack of specific meaning now in my paintings is partly due to the fact that these ideas just sort of come to me and make more intuitive than actual sense. So I usually can't really answer definitively when people ask me, "What does it mean?" I can only really comment on the things I was

inspired by while making a given artwork and maybe how I feel about it now after gaining some hindsight.

As an example, the Clear Lake, Iowa painting comes to mind. I got the spark for this idea when I was driving through Nebraska on the way back to the Twin Cities and I noticed all these typical highway rest-stops from a distance, how all of the fast food chain and gas logos could be spotted peaking over the trees and off-ramps. For some reason that kind of space interested me so I started researching nearby locations to potentially photograph when I got home. In the actual painting (as I look back on it now) I like how there's a pull between this rest-stop area in the background, with all its lights and neon signs, and the added strange light source that's hidden behind an area of overgrowth further in the foreground. The location itself is interesting; it makes me think of road trips and how maybe we tend to think of these trips as we're leaving the city or metro area and into the "countryside." But we haven't really left anything, we can access all the comforts of home with these various chains that are everywhere, even out on the interstate.

I don't think art has to necessarily "make sense" or answer all of our questions. Most of my favorite artworks are the ones that don't answer any questions but propose new ones.



Clear Lake, Iowa, Oil on Canvas, 28 x 60in, 2012

I also like how the rest area is seen in the distance behind an overgrowth area of trees that I can see as more natural in contrast with the parking lots and gas stations in the distance, even though that too is fenced off and "manufactured" in a sense. There are other details that stick out to me, the flag at half-staff for instance, how the curve of the hill leads my eye back out to the highway in the distance. When I look at the strange light source that's been added in the middle of

the canvas I notice how the figure is approaching it and I wonder to myself if this is some sort of otherworldly portal, or even if the figure is the only one who can see this strange phenomenon?

So if someone were to ask me what the Clear Lake, Iowa painting means, I couldn't really tell them definitively. But that's the sort of stuff that comes to my mind when I look at that painting.

Plus I'm more interested in what the viewer puts into it and how they react. I know that will sound like a cop-out response to some but honestly I don't think art has to necessarily "make sense" or answer all of our questions. Most of my favorite artworks are the ones that don't answer any questions but propose new ones. It's up to us, the viewers of art, to find meaning or not, and hopefully that's something that pushes us forward to ask more questions and maybe think about things we wouldn't have otherwise. If it's just laid out there then there's no magic left and nothing to grasp for.



Near Worthington, Minn., Oil on Canvas, 20 x 42in, 2013

Have many people given you responses and feedback on what they interpret in your work? If so, has it changed the way you see the work looking back on it?

There have been some people who've given me responses to the paintings and how they've felt, apart from critiques I've sought. It's always interesting to hear the viewer's perspective; they usually will point things out that I hadn't thought of. I recently had a show at the University of Nebraska at Omaha and it was interesting

to hear some of the students' feedback. A lot of people said they were drawn to the relatability of the landscapes, that these could be places they'd grown up in or seen before. But then they were taken by some of the stranger set ups and happenings. Someone said they were gorgeous and eerie, which is an odd pairing, maybe not something you'd normally expect from otherwise quiet and uneventful scenery.

So are you attracted to these somewhat vacant American landscapes on their own? Or are they more of a good backdrop to put yourself and your imagery into? What's more important, the setting or the figures?

I'd say it's a mix of both but I probably lean more toward the setting. When I first sort of started on this style or mode of making I mostly treated my landscapes as backdrops to the narrative I was trying to create. Now as it's developed I've tried to integrate the narrative more into the scenery.

And yes, I find these vacant landscapes to be interesting, usually they help to springboard my ideas. I can go through phases too in terms of the type of place I'm interested in using for a painting. There have been a number of suburban landscapes I've used, also rural, small town and highway landscapes too, places like rest-stops or interchanges. Sort of "non-places." It's hard to say what exactly draws me to these settings. Sometimes it's a more general feeling I get from certain types of places. For example all those newly built, larger suburban housing tracts where everything feels too perfect and manicured. And sometimes it comes down to a very specific place, the way it's composed, say, or its unique character. Lighting and weather play a big role too. I've found that pretty much everywhere doesn't look as interesting in the middle of the day as opposed to during those later evening hours heading to dusk or twilight. There's a certain magic in that timeframe. So yeah, even though there are some reoccurring themes when it comes to setting, I'd still say there's no particular process in terms of finding places that speak to me. It's more intuitive.

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Where do you see your work going or progressing?

I'm not really sure. I feel like my work tends to progress or change at a very slow pace, which is partially due to the fact that I only work on one painting at a time. So in

that sense it's hard for me to project what I'll be working on in the next year or two, or how things might diverge. I guess if I looked back at the work I was making a few years ago and then through on to the present I'd say things seem to be getting a little darker and subtler in tone. But who knows? Maybe I'll start working with interior spaces?

I think I'll definitely stick with painting though, I enjoy it too much.

Regardless, I think it's important to keep pushing forward and to try and not get too satisfied with what I've done thus far. It's important to stay motivated and keep those creative juices flowing.



Cottage Grove, Minnesota, Oil on Canvas, 24 x 72in, 2012



Marshalltown, Iowa, Oil on Canvas, 24 x 50in, 2013