

ART & DESIGN

Duncan Hannah: A Painter Unmoored From Time and Trends

By BRETT SOKOL APRIL 21, 2016

This article is part of our spring gallery guide.

DUNCAN Hannah's timing has always been a little off. He graduated in 1975 from Parsons School of Design in New York, steeped in the figurative traditions of his heroes Edward Hopper and Winslow Homer and excited to follow their career footsteps. "Meanwhile, painting is dead," Mr. Hannah groaned playfully when recalling the era's reigning artistic spirit. "I thought, 'My God, I've devoted myself to an obsolete medium!'"

Photos of Mr. Hannah from the late '70s reveal a sartorial stance no less anachronistic, as he hit the punk scene at CBGB in a Bogart-style trench coat and tightly knotted tie amid a sea of torn T-shirts and safety-pinned leather jackets. Still, the vintage look helped get him noticed, turned him into an underground film star in his own right, and, most crucially, led to him being invited in 1980 to join the Times Square Show, a seminal group exhibition organized by Collaborative Projects Inc., or Colab, where his work hung alongside that of tyros like Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring. "Suddenly, being a young painter was a great thing to be," Mr. Hannah recalls thinking, especially after he was subsequently offered a solo debut at an uptown Manhattan gallery.

While painting may have returned to New York with a vengeance at the start of the new decade, Mr. Hannah's earnest enthusiasm for poignant scenes of England between the wars and portraits of old Hollywood luminaries was as

suspect as ever.

“Arto Lindsay was there at my solo show’s opening,” Mr. Hannah remembered of the no-wave guitarist and singer, famed for his bands’ room-clearing abilities. “We were old friends from years spent in the nightclubs, but he’d never really had a chance to see my work aside from an album cover illustration. Arto turned to me and said” — here Mr. Hannah mimicked Mr. Lindsay’s raised eyebrow and suspicious tone — “Is this what you do? These are like real paintings.’ His message was clear: ‘I thought you were cool!’ Well, I love painting. To me, Whistler is cool. Vuillard is really cool. I don’t think, ‘Oh that’s fusty and dead.’ When somebody’s good, nobody betters them. I’ve never seen art history as ‘this’ replacing ‘that.’”

More than three decades later, Mr. Hannah, 63, still seems like a man unmoored from time, albeit happily so. Despite enduring resistance from some critical corners, his work has sold steadily, allowing him to further indulge his period fantasies. Leading the way inside his mid-19th-century cottage in rural West Cornwall, Conn., clad in a purple suede blazer, he now appears more of a gentleman farmer than an artist with a solo show at New Release in Chinatown, a new gallery better known for showcasing hot emerging talent half Mr. Hannah’s age.

But in a larger contemporary milieu clogged with by-the-numbers abstract painters and purposely crude figurativists, Mr. Hannah’s latest erotically charged portraits of obscure film starlets and celebrities (Miss Teen Italy 1974, anyone?) come across as absolutely invigorating.

Mr. Hannah says his process has remained basically unchanged over the years. Often, while hunting down long-forgotten foreign movies, he said: “There’s a certain kind of flared nostril that always gets to me. I’ll think, ‘Who’s that?’ and then go to work.”

So, is this finally Mr. Hannah’s hip-to-be-square art world moment? “I’ve never been terribly ironic about what my passions are — I’ve never put things in quotes — but the pendulum is always swinging around,” he said with a triumphant smile.

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