

Althuis Hofland Fine Arts

Duncan Hannah

Painter of pictures

11 January - 22 February 2020

“I’ve basically ignored the avant-garde”, said Duncan Hannah who is “something of an outlier in his generation” within the seventies in New York. Hannah is an American painter best known for his depictions of idyllic landscapes culled from adventure stories and classic films, and his intimate portraits of women. His painterly realist style and anachronistic subjects are reminiscent of Edward Hopper, and derive from an urge to craft a world as Hollywood once promised.

During the late 1970s, Hannah was involved in the underground No-Wave film and music scene of the time. For decades, he has also been a well-known New York figure, with a seemingly limitless supply of stories about his adventures among the famous and the infamous in the highest and lowest realms of the city. Recently Hannah published a collection of his own notebooks from the seventies, entitled ‘Twentieth-century boy: notebooks of the seventies’ published by Knopf. A book about his coming of age and wild years in New York in the seventies amongst people like Andy Warhol, David Bowie, Lou Reed, Patti Smith, Brian Eno, Keith Haring and many other phenomenons of that decade. Alongside new paintings by Hannah, the exhibition will include a wide range of paraphernalia linked to the artist’s recently published autobiography.

Born in 1952 in Minneapolis, MN, Hannah studied at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson and Parsons School of Design in New York. Until now the artist continues to live and work in New York, NY. His works are held in the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the Minneapolis Institute of Fine Art, and his work was recently added to the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, amongst many other public and private collections.

“Duncan Hannah’s Seventies New York”, M. H. Miller, *The Paris Review*, 13 March 2018

“In the last decade, a cottage industry has sprung up around wistful recollections of New York in the seventies, from memoirs authored by people who lived through it, like Richard Hell (2013’s *I Dreamed I Was a Very Clean Tramp*) and Patti Smith (*Just Kids*, which won the 2010 National Book Award for Nonfiction), to novels by people too young to have been there (Rachel Kushner’s *The Flamethrowers*, Garth Risk Hallberg’s *City on Fire*) to television series that gleefully depict the city when it was near bankruptcy and had a harder edge (*The Get Down*, about the burgeoning hip-hop scene, and *The Deuce*, about the golden age of pornographic theaters in Times Square). Some of these works are endearing pieces of art, but all of them inevitably look back with a glimmer of sentimentality—and perhaps envy—at a time when it was still possible to live comfortably as an artist in New York without a trust fund.

Twentieth-Century Boy, by the painter Duncan Hannah, a collection of the artist’s notebooks from the seventies, has none of the retroactive fondness afforded by distance. Beginning at age seventeen, Hannah meticulously documented his conservative upbringing in Minnesota (against which he rebelled with a combination of alcohol, LSD, and a part-time job as an usher at the Guthrie Theatre, where he got to live out his hero-worship of figures like Led Zeppelin and Janis Joplin) through his art education at Bard College in Upstate New York and his move, in 1973, to the city to attend Parsons and try to make it as an artist. Hannah is something of an outlier in his generation. He is a figurative painter of earnest portraits who has more in common with the realism of Fairfield Porter than he does with any of his more abstract contemporaries. In the mid seventies, critics routinely announced the death of painting in favor of the conceptual photography of Cindy Sherman and the Minimalist sculpture of Donald Judd.

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By the end of the decade, painting was once again fashionable at galleries, spurred on by the arrival of Kenny Scharf and Keith Haring—who were, for a time, roommates and got their start painting in subways—and the so-called neo-expressionist painting of Julian Schnabel and David Salle, both of whom would define contemporary art's transformation into symbols of status and wealth. Hannah, a painter concerned with craft instead of theory, didn't really fit in.

"I've basically ignored the avant-garde," Hannah told me one recent afternoon in his apartment in Brooklyn. "I was surprised by the conformity of the art world. Because I always thought from afar that it was a bunch of eccentrics who couldn't really agree on anything and were marching to their own drummers. But there was a rigidity to it that really kind of baffled me."

At age sixty-five, Hannah is still boyish and handsome, dressed on this day in a tweed jacket with a corduroy vest and shirtsleeves. A pair of campy suspenders, adorned with women in bikinis, occasionally peek out beneath the vest. His longstanding dandyish appearance was another factor that made him an outsider among the punks he was hanging out with in the seventies (he almost edited a Television fanzine, but Tom Verlaine, the band's singer, vetoed that), but it also provided him with a kind of easy entry into any room he wanted to walk into. Warhol would humor the aspiring painter by inviting him over to his studio. The New York Dolls let him stand in the wings during a performance at the Palladium. A major subplot in his notebooks is the frustrations of gay men—from Allen Ginsberg to Dotson Rader—at discovering that the cherubic young Hannah is straight.

As a diary, Hannah's book, portions of which have been excerpted in *The Paris Review*, provides an unusually levelheaded portrait of New York in the seventies, though it is still filled with charming and occasionally unbelievable anecdotes. Hannah plays pool with Richard Hell. He watches from the corner of his eye as Lou Reed—"looking like a skinny chimpanzee"—gets too drunk on a date at Max's Kansas City. Patti Smith dedicates a poem to Hannah. He serves as a chaperone for Nico, just in town from Ibiza, and takes her to a Television concert at CBGB, where Brian Eno is working the mixing board. Amanda Lear invites him to drinks at the St. Regis with Salvador Dalí, who arrives in a gold cape, announcing, "Dalí ... is here!" Nancy Spungen offers him a blowjob in the elevator at the Chelsea Hotel.

And yet as a catalogue of the city, recounted as the history itself unfolds, *Twentieth-Century Boy* often has the feel of reportage, even if Hannah occasionally interjects with an awestruck "Wow!" or "This is our music." The mythological status of various seventies landmarks is summarily debunked. CBGB is a "biker bar at Bleecker and Bowery" where the "decor is neon beer signs and giant blowups from bygone theatricals. Smells like dog poo." Hannah laments his cheap apartment with its "twenty-five thousand cockroaches" and the toilet that never stops running. Most telling is Hannah's brief recollection of the legendary Times Square Show. An art exhibition held in the summer of 1980 and organized by a loosely affiliated collective known as Colab inside an abandoned massage parlor on Forty-First Street, this show is now widely credited as introducing the mainstream art world to a generation of scrappy artists, such as John Ahearn, Haring, and Jenny Holzer, who mostly worked on the street or in bars and subway stations. In Hannah's description, the exhibition is, quite simply, "a chance for all of us to see what everyone else is doing ... We only see each other at scuzzy nightclubs." These are reality checks on a decade for which there is seemingly no limit for nostalgia, and they are refreshing. Hannah's documentation further muddies history: throughout all of these events, the author is often inebriated to the point of debilitation, guzzling Pernod and Jack Daniel's and white wine and anything else a friend or acquaintance places in front of him with disturbing urgency.

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“A lot of it was kind of painful,” Hannah told me. “It was cliquy. It’s not as though everybody liked each other. There were a lot of bad vibes. A night at CBGB’s—not all the bands were good, and not all the people were nice, and you wake up with a terrible hangover and couldn’t really remember what happened. It was just kind of chaos in a way.”

As Hannah’s book progresses in real time, there is a kind of foreboding awareness that the kind of life New York represented in the seventies—a dirty Eden of three-hundred-dollar-a-month lofts—was fleeting. New York has a tendency to endlessly devour its history and replace it with something shinier and more expensive, and Hannah seemed to have an awareness from a young age that just as the past decades were long gone, the one he was living in would soon be too. In April 1974, at another Television concert, Hannah spots a pale, weary figure who “looked like he hadn’t eaten in months,” sitting at a cordoned-off table with a “slightly chubby black-haired guy with a Long Island look about him.” This turns out to be David Bowie and Marc Bolan (“Already past his prime!”), “two mods come to check out the New York underground,” as Hannah describes them—in other words, two geezers checking in on what the kids are up to. Later, in 1976, while reading John O’Hara, Hannah eats lunch at Artists & Writers on West Fortieth Street, one of O’Hara’s old standbys, which by the seventies had become, as Hannah writes, “a faded restaurant off Times Square. There’s a dusty suit of armor in the corner. Try to imagine it in its heyday. It’s hard to do.”

Hannah knew that his New York could never last, and the changing city would take Hannah’s reckless lifestyle with it. There is no shortage of sex and rock and roll in this book, though most of it is viewed through the bleary eyes of a brutal hangover. (“I thought it was kind of thrilling to treat myself as if I had no worth,” Hannah told me. “I could so easily not be here now.”) In the book, detached realizations about his lifestyle—“Reading about alcoholism in Time magazine. I fit the profile”—give way to more intense reflection—“If I admit I’m an alkie, then I gotta quit.” Eventually, Hannah winds up, after the collapse of a relationship, “in a semi-comatose state,” subsisting on vodka alone and declaring that “if anyone was going to hurt me, it would be me doing the hurting.”

In 1980, he quits drugs and alcohol. On December 8 that year, John Lennon is murdered, and a final spiritual blow is dealt to the decade of Hannah’s youth. In May 1981, a sober Hannah has his first solo show at a gallery, and with the onset of adulthood, the book ends.

“When I was seventeen, I didn’t know I was an alcoholic, and by twenty-eight, I did,” Hannah said. “I kept thinking in my twenties, Well, maybe it’s something else. Maybe I’m crazy. Which was kind of appealing. I was drawn to a lot of self-destructive people, so in that regard I thought, You’re probably doing the right thing. By the end, I thought, You’re just not going to live that much longer. And I looked at the corner of my studio, and there was a stack of paintings. Not that many paintings. Fifteen maybe. And I was thinking, You know, if you die, that’s it. No one’s ever seen them, and it’s not going to be like James Dean or something, where the whole country is in mourning. It’s going to be the few people you know and your family. And they’re going to go, ‘Oh, what a waste.’”

But *Twentieth-Century Boy* is not really a book about addiction or recovery, though the presence of both provides Hannah with a narrative arc. It’s more of a farewell to an entire era of decadence. Hannah sets out to become a serious artist, and despite his efforts at self-destruction, and much to his surprise, by the end of the book, he succeeds. “Sometimes I was surprised at how little I’ve changed,” Hannah said, on the subject of rereading his diaries. “Other times, I would shake my head and think, God, what an asshole. But I was surprised how well it all worked out, in a kind of shambling way. You can have a plan, but then your plan doesn’t work, and then something else happens. But just kind of inadvertently, the plan worked.”

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As we were finishing our conversation, I asked Hannah if he still kept a diary, and he said he did, motioning to a bookshelf full of thick binders labeled on the spines with spans of years leading up to the present. The original diaries, the ones covered in the book, were sitting inconspicuously in a stack by Hannah's couch, beaten and tattered but still here, extraordinary remnants of a different city."

M. H. Miller is a writer and the arts editor at T: The New York Times Style Magazine.

