

DASHIELL MANLEY: "Interview"

Interviewed by A Will Brown

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Dashiell Manley. The Great Train Robbery (scene 3 version c), 2013. Installation view, Storage, Los Angeles CA.

Los Angeles-based artist Dashiell Manley talks about *The Great Train Robbery*, explains why he sees himself mainly as a film-maker, and reveals how he forms his ideas and the processes involved in his complex, layered and thoughtful works.

Dashiell Manley is an artist living and working in Los Angeles, California. He works across a wide array of media – film, video, sculpture, photography and painting – often combining many and sometimes all of these forms to create his unique installations, videos and

paintings. His work engages both written and visual language, often through an exploration of current events and cinema.

I talked to Dashiell in 2012 during Art Basel, Miami Beach, where he had a solo exhibition with the Jessica Silverman Gallery at the New Art Dealers Alliance (NADA). Since our initial meeting, Dashiell's work has been included in numerous group and solo exhibitions and he has undergone some important changes in the studio. I caught up with him recently to talk about his successes, forthcoming exhibitions and ongoing projects, as well as to discuss how he forms his ideas and the complex processes he uses to make his work.

A Will Brown: Dashiell, the last time we saw one another, you were working on a number of projects. What are you up to now in the studio, and what new areas or forms are you working in?

Dashiell Manley: I am working on a new film based on *Rules of Civility* [a 2011 novel by Amor Towles]. The film itself picks up formally and conceptually where the third scene of another work of mine, *The Great Train Robbery* (2013) [he is referring here to his film *The Great Train Robbery* (Scene 3) and his installations *The Great Train Robbery* (Scene 3, Version A) and (Scene 3, Version C)], left off. This new work plays around with post-production and Photoshop to ponder a digital image's relationship to and with cinematic space. However, with this film, the accompanying objects will not be framed "paintings", but rather stained-glass panels. The stained-glass works will most likely be suspended from the ceiling of the gallery and will play with the architecture of the exhibition space more than past works have. While there are some formal similarities between these new stained-

glass windows and past works, I have not previously played around in post-production quite as much as I am for the Civility film. I'm spending a fair amount of time working every image (film still) in Photoshop and, as a result, I've been thinking a lot more about digital images. Specifically, I've been thinking about cutting them up, painting and collaging them in much the same way one would if dealing with printed images on a worktable. This has caused me to go back and think about ideas I was interested in early on, thinking about folders of images on a computer desktop, scrap film footage on the floor, a stack of cast-off doodles and, most importantly, the potential new works represented by these cast-off things.

AWB: What are the most compelling ideas for you today? What kind of things, places, people or ideas do you find yourself drawn to?

DM: Recently, I've been really interested in digital space and, more specifically, in how it translates into physical space, which brings me back to a particularly philosophical question: what does the backside of a digital image look like? In addition, it seems like I've been going to see every major motion picture recently, and I've been thinking a good deal about the films *Under the Skin* (2013) and *Boyhood* (2014), which are both quite experimental structurally, at least for Hollywood cinema. My interest in these two films seems to indicate that I am consistently drawn to things that just seem to happen or unfold naturally, although only after the concept, structure, and specific of composition and narrative are put into place.

AWB: Your work is incredibly thoughtful and layered. With so many rich visual and textural references, one could miss a lot, especially if not looking and thinking carefully, which is a great strength as it forces people to slow down and reconsider. Can you explain one project in particular, or break down one series of works, to highlight some of the layers and ideas that go into a piece or body of work?

DM: In my works from the series a.r.c. alphabets – which incorporate film, ink, paint, wood, glass and gesso – I wanted to look at two distinct ideas through, and in, a fundamentally sculptural way to create works that somehow bridged the two ideas. First, I wanted to look at events occurring outside the studio – events that were happening locally, nationally and internationally. I was looking at events with which I had (seemingly) little or no direct relation or connection. The second area focused on events that were happening inside the studio – for example, my experiments with mark-making, ideas and the detritus of my daily production (and while these internal studio-based events were obviously informed by the things happening outside the studio, it was rarely intentional).

For the events occurring in the first category (external events), depicted on one side of the work, and thinking about how they were described, I looked at the ways language can expand and contract. I was looking at the ways it can move from intellectually descriptive to primarily visually descriptive (abstract) and then back again. In these works, each linguistic step, from descriptive to visual, is articulated visually by the addition of another layer of information on to the canvas surface; I add another sequence of images superimposed on top of the latter. What ends up being a visually complicated image is reflective of a very simple process. I superimpose layers one on top of the next to correspond with the movement of written language from descriptive to visual, and I eventually arrive at something very basic, a single subtitle.

For this series, I used two different alphabets that gave a loose visual and identifiable structure to the piece. The first language was the English alphabet (the letters a to z) and the second was the Nato phonetic alphabet (alpha, bravo, charlie, and so on). The way I investigated the second areas or external events is a bit more subtle, and less concrete than the first. The compositions for the

second side, or second event, have more to do with where language and markings occur in relation to one another as I seek to map the different (sometimes intersecting) planes of the studio (tables, walls, floor). For example, the film images that depict the Nato phonetic alphabet were shot against two and sometimes three vertical planes (walls, canvases and sheets of paper). The images that accompany the text though – that seem to resemble shadow puppets – were conceived and shot on a horizontal surface usually made up of a sheet of glass laid on top of an overhead projector. These were then both photographed – the surface of the overhead projector and the surface of the wall on which they were projected.

From start to finish, the process for producing a single scene is as follows (the asterisks mark the steps that were photographed):

1. A short statement was written based on an actual event.
2. A story was written to accompany that statement.
3. The story was then translated into the Nato phonetic alphabet (a becomes alpha, t becomes tango, e becomes echo)*
4. An image was conceived to accompany the text.*
5. Using the images, the text was retranslated back into English.
6. Using a few rules, the translation was edited down into one or two sentences.
7. The remaining sentences were projected on to a surface, along with the image from step four, on top of the text from the third step, listed above.*

All these projections and overlays took place on a temporary floor that was installed to function as a stage, both in the performative sense and the preparatory sense – a performance stage and a stage of a process. When a scene was finished, wood from the floor, or stage, was used to frame the sheet of glass that was covered by the overhead projector. The first side, the canvas with writing on it, acted as the back of the object, and was mounted on to the sheet of glass. The resulting object is, on the one hand, a strange temporal and spatial document of something else (the film or the events) and, on the other hand, simply a painting. I like to think of the paintings as sentences, and the films as the footnotes.

AWB: How long have you lived in Los Angeles and where were you before? How has the Los Angeles context shaped, or influenced your ideas and your work?

DM: I've been in the Los Angeles area more or less my entire life. I was born in Fontana, California, which is about an hour east of LA. Shortly after we moved to Kobe, Japan, for a few years before my dad's work brought us back to the LA area, to Claremont. I effectively grew up in Claremont, not exactly Los Angeles, but close. I bounced around a bit after high school, but landed at CalArts [the California Institute of the Arts, where he did his BFA] when I was 21. I moved to East Hollywood when I was in my last year at CalArts and I've been in LA ever since. Being able to think about Hollywood more as a construct and institution rather than as an actual place has driven a lot of my work over the past four years.

AWB: What are the central concerns, or investigations, at the heart of your work *The Great Train Robbery* (2013), which was featured prominently in the Whitney Biennial [at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York] this year? Can you describe the work and the processes of making and conceptualising it?

DM: It is important to point out that *The Great Train Robbery* (Scene Three) is the first part of an ongoing 14-part project, and while most of the conceptual underpinnings of Scene Three act as an

umbrella for the entire project, some parts are specific only to that one scene. First, I have wanted to remake a film for some time. The main function of the Hollywood remake seems to be to showcase the new technology of today, which is a humorous proposition when we consider that technology now seems to progress faster than the time it takes to make a film. I wanted to explore this by making my version of *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) one scene at a time and to make each scene out of order. By treating each scene as an individual project, I figured I could stretch the entire project over a longer period of time, thus allowing for major technological advances to be immensely apparent. Furthermore, I decided to treat each scene differently: for example, scene nine, which I am currently working on, will look nothing like the scene shown in the Biennial. When the film is complete, the narrative of the original film will still be apparent in its essence, but, formally and stylistically, the film will be completely out of joint – like watching a 1990's effect-heavy film on a high-definition monitor; the image flattens or expands and many of the effects fall apart.

Second, I am interested in the idea that film locations, or sets, are a kind of fly-by-night operation – they are businesses that operate in one location one day, then in another place the next week. Movies seem to have so little to do with where they are made or the people who live there.

Third, I was interested in multiple takes on a single scene, and this is particular to Scene Three. I am less interested in the moment when the director makes the subjective choice as to which take is *the* take, and more interested in the (as I mention above) potential represented by the takes that are not used. I wanted to play with this by making multiple versions (takes) of the same scene, essentially repeating myself three times. In addition to creating takes or scenes, I also thought that this action could play with ideas concerning sculpture and sculptural multiples.

I broke Scene Three of *The Great Train Robbery* down into five essential actions that all take place in the mail car of the locomotive. The mail car worker enters the frame and works, the robbers enter and startle the worker, the worker is shot and falls, the robbers blow up the safe, and finally the robbers make off with the loot. I broke these down even further into five distinct actions that could be repeated by a performer – me, in this case – in the studio repeatedly. A painting (though at the time of production I considered them as backdrops) was made to reflect each one of these actions. I enter (blue 12 x 12 inch squares), I'm startled and throw my hands up in the air (red rectangles), I'm shot and fall (blue and grey quarter circle), there is an explosion (black abstraction), the loot is removed, which is articulated by an abstract object free-floating in space (red abstraction). The viewer sees these five actions performed three times in the top channel of the work. After the production of the actions, the notes, instructions and detritus from filming are used to write out a series of instructions on the paintings/backdrops. This process is visible in the lower channel of the final two-channel work. Additionally, the instructions were coded in an early-20th century shorthand alphabet chosen not only for what shorthand represents (the attempted mechanisation of the human hand and its possible parallel to cinema's mechanisation of the human eye), but how the marks appeared to resemble glyphs.

When production was complete, I had three sets or scenes of work, each consisting of five object/painting/backdrops, and I also had around 40 running feet of metal scaffolding walls. When the work was first exhibited in the spring of 2013, it was shown in its entirety. Each version, or take, was shown at a different space across the city of Los Angeles. The first version was shown at LAXART, the second version at Redling Fine Art and the third version was shown in a storage facility in Hollywood. This version, Scene Three, was then re-exhibited at the Whitney in the spring of this year.

AWB: Can you explain some of the overlaps you encounter working in film, video, painting and photography, and some of the divergences that make certain subjects covered in your work only navigable through one particular medium?

DM: Obvious reasons aside, I have always found working in one particular medium constraining because it often requires the work to answer to one particular history, and as a result it can feel rather stiff. That being said, I do consider myself a film-maker first and foremost, and approach most projects as if I were making a film. Probably as a result of my undergraduate education at CalArts, where I was taught that the idea comes first, and while I certainly don't think this is always true, I think the multidisciplinary essence of the statement is right on. Right out of graduate school I had been rather enamored with the idea of making films that functioned like paintings and paintings that functioned like films, and this still intrigues me – particularly the idea of things that pretend to be something that they're not until eventually they are.

AWB: Do you have any forthcoming projects or exhibitions that are particularly exciting or dramatically different for you? What's coming up on the exhibiting end?

DM: I'm really excited about the work I mentioned above based on Rules of Civility. The exhibition opens on 6 September at Redling Fine Art in Los Angeles [and runs until 11 October 2014]. This will be a bit of a shift away from how my objects function in relation to the moving image works. The glass panels are, in a way, partial deconstructions of the double-sided objects I've been making for the past four years. The glass that makes up a completed panel was used in the making of the film, though instead of servicing a tactile function such as covering an overhead projector, the sheets of glass become the objects of study in the work about Rules of Civility. While I've been playing around for the past year with fixed objects that the viewer can see through, or that light can pass through, those objects have always resembled paintings. An early example of one of these works is being included in Variations: Conversations in and around Abstract Painting, an exhibition that opens early next month at LACMA [the LA County Museum of Art]. The glass panels in the Rules of Civility work, on the other hand, do not resemble paintings but rather seem to insert themselves into the architecture of the exhibition space a bit more fluidly. I'm excited to see them outside the studio for the first time. I will be having my second show, which I'm still developing, with Jessica Silverman in January next year.