

ENTERTAINMENT

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Artist Matt Woodward: How WNY Has Influenced His Work



Laura Duquette

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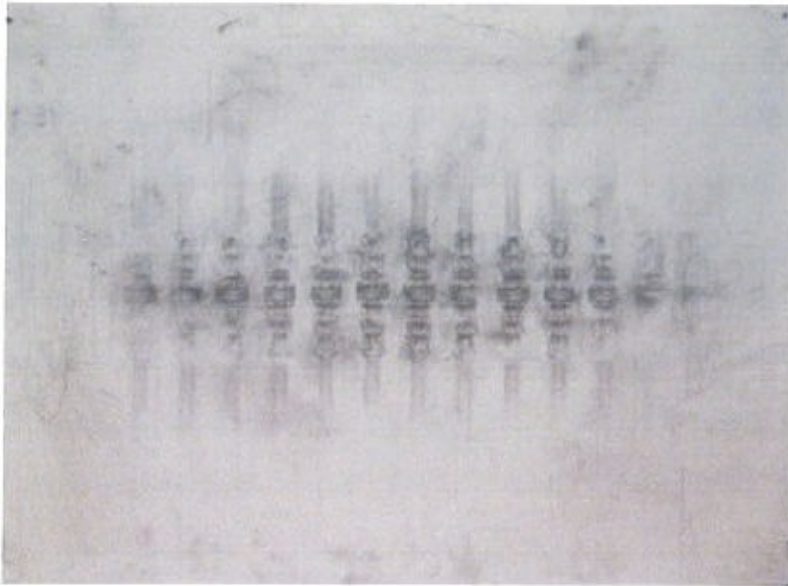
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Read this interview as you would an editorial from an impassioned and educated outsider sharing his views on Buffalo's legacy. [Matt Woodward \(http://www.mwoodward.com/\)](http://www.mwoodward.com/) is neither a local artist, or a former student at one of our institutions, nor born in the Queen City, but his connection to us is real. Matt is important in uncovering why Buffalo has become a hub for artists in the upper half of New York State and what's so inspirational about our city, and others like it.

BR: Tell me about your first encounter with the arts community and what drove you to this profession.

MW: The first time I saw a painting I was about fifteen. I didn't come from a house that was particularly interested enough about art to be active about it. My mother had all these wonderful, dark [Andrew Wyeth \(http://www.google.com/images?q=andrew+wyeth&oe=utf-8&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&client=firefox-a&um=1&ie=UTF-8&source=univ&ei=35jy54UOoL7wFA-OrTDO&sa=X&oi=image_result_group&ct=title&resnum=1&ved=0CCoOsAQwAA\)](http://www.google.com/images?q=andrew+wyeth&oe=utf-8&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&client=firefox-a&um=1&ie=UTF-8&source=univ&ei=35jy54UOoL7wFA-OrTDO&sa=X&oi=image_result_group&ct=title&resnum=1&ved=0CCoOsAQwAA) prints everywhere and I was sort of surrounded by them growing up, but they were just on the walls there. These incredibly painted, deeply storied, somehow abstract portraits of the land and the people, which also had a way of being perfect little psychological Thanksgiving decorations, at least to a kid who had no way to know what he was looking at. It wasn't until later in my life that I actually looked at them, and so, to get back to your question, I think there are two instances with art that really shook me up and got me looking. Like I was saying, when I was about fifteen I went on a school trip to the Memorial Art Gallery in Rochester and carelessly walked in front of a [Hans Hofmann \(http://www.google.com/images?um=1&hl=en&client=firefox-a&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&hs=isch%3A1&sa=3&q=artist%2C+hans+hofmann&btnG=Search+images\)](http://www.google.com/images?um=1&hl=en&client=firefox-a&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&hs=isch%3A1&sa=3&q=artist%2C+hans+hofmann&btnG=Search+images) like it was a giant, escaping, screaming horse. And I remember the tour guide stopping everyone to talk about this painting, and she tried to get us to say what we felt when we looked at the red in it, and I didn't know what I felt, I didn't know that it mattered. I was crushed. Suddenly. And I could talk your ear off about it now, but I won't. Anyway, a few years later I was in Buffalo for something and it was a time when I was trying to figure it all out and do something. And I went to the Albright-Knox and it was like wading into the ocean. I was overwhelmed. I had never been to a collection like the Albright-Knox and, furthermore, I had never seen a [de Kooning \(http://www.google.com/images?um=1&hl=en&client=firefox-a&hs=cb2&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&resnum=0&q=de+kooning&ie=UTF-8&source=univ&ei=9JXyS_7WKIKBIAepuun3DA&sa=X&oi=image_result_group&ct=title&resnum=1&ved=0CDIOsAQwAA\)](http://www.google.com/images?um=1&hl=en&client=firefox-a&hs=cb2&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&resnum=0&q=de+kooning&ie=UTF-8&source=univ&ei=9JXyS_7WKIKBIAepuun3DA&sa=X&oi=image_result_group&ct=title&resnum=1&ved=0CDIOsAQwAA). I had only read about him and looked at pictures. It was one of his woman paintings. Loudly colorful and flat in a way I had never seen the figure, and intensely built. I remember the face was like a prophetic block of varnish. But the whole museum had that effect, it had energy in it like an illumination.

I left for Chicago shortly after.



BR: What do you think are the fallacies about Rust Belt cities?

MW: That's a very interesting question. Sometimes when I tell someone where I'm from they give me this bald look of deference that seems, also, curiously disgusted. Like I survived something, like 'good for you, you got out alive'. But I understand. I was in Detroit recently and vaguely thought I'd have to dodge shells or something, but the people there were so positive and warm and had no grief for themselves and the situation there, they didn't even seem to notice, they were just charged, with rebuilding their beautiful city, from the atoms up. But, I mean, even I was buying into those lowly expectations, the same some people may have for our side of the Rust Belt, which is that it's this impoverished wasteland, finally hollowed out, and that no one stays around because culture in New York is elsewhere. The notion that "Upstate" is a kind of *elsewhere* community I think is very strong, and they're partially right- there isn't a whole lot going on. The suburbs stretch blankly into oblivion, and the downtown areas, places that would ordinarily draw people in as cultural epicenters, seem empty and depressed and undeveloped and terribly replaced by an abundance of strip mall stucco.

But at the same time, there is a galvanizing sense of place and history there, the country's identity was forged in the Rust Belt, and when those cities backed up into a recession, there didn't seem to be any help for us from anywhere to make the transition cleanly. And while you can't groom an entire city for a sea change, that idea that WNY was suffering culturally was supported when nothing was really being done to keep the people that were capable of changing that around, like the artists, like teachers and young graduates. And I think that's something that I have encountered often from people, that government in the Rust Belt cities- whether it means to or not- is largely irresponsible when it comes to maintaining and preserving its regional accent and character.

As an aside, being from Rochester and sort of in the same crumbling boat as yourselves, we seemed to look at Buffalo like an aspiring metropolis that had it together, that cared very much for their things like their art scene. Buffalo had it, it was one of these smaller cities across the country like Columbus and Pittsburgh and Austin, even Grand Rapids, that had a very distinct and admirable and respectful presence of an artist class, but was ailing economically. Your artists were like the cities signature that embraced its region-ality, and ran with it. Things were taking place in Buffalo, it was somewhere to go, somewhere to respect and look up to while Rochester was somewhere to avoid, even though it had all the makings of a great town to work in.

BR: What makes an artist thrive?

MW: Mostly, I think, organization. There is no way you're going to get yourself up and running if you haven't organized your time, specifically into a disciplined studio practice. It shows in your work. The kind of artist that dilly dallies about and can't commit to a particular, almost regimented schedule will relay that in his work. Even if it's just thirty minutes a day, at the least. It helps an artist develop focused, resolved pieces of art that are marked with the kind of consistency that galleries look for. Also, every artist is his own agent, his own historian, his own curator, his own everything, it's unfortunate, surely, but if you wait around for someone to notice you and do all these things for you, chances are you'll probably be looked over for someone better prepared. And I think keeping track of people you've contacted, people you've met, keeping up to date on submission opportunities, events, is the other side of organized studio practice that's significant to a thriving artist.





BR: *Your work has an architectural quality to it, do you think that the architecture here inspired some of that?*

MW: It's hard to say whether or not the architecture of WNY influenced anything I do directly, I'm not actually sure there is a specific building anywhere that does. However, WNY itself has made its way into everything, I carry it around everywhere. It's not the architecture necessarily, but the crude gauzy light there, the "tired" of the region. That kind of buzzing iron of the landscape that rolls off coldly. I come from a town that sits on the Erie Canal and all through it these big boxy factory buildings would come up like great faces squatting, and this feeling of anonymity was everywhere, a longing for something that wasn't coming back and these things would sit stoically and hold on and they were mostly empty. That was the kind of architecture I grew up with.

And when I finally got around to leaving and going to Chicago I felt sucked out, used up once I got there. What I mean by that is that there was something very different and I couldn't figure out what. Anyway, I began to notice the landscape shift like I had never seen before, and the structures that went along with them had the same kind of hard brow and brood in them that they did back home in New York. Only there was this very direct ornamentation of abundance and accumulation on everything; literally in the concrete and terra cotta there was decorative flora blooming off the faces and cornices of buildings and a curvilinear design that I had noticed was not part of the empty buildings where I had grown up. And I took that to mean that the flora was both a reference to the nature of structure, and an attempt to design and conduct and negotiate some synthesis with a nature that we either did not understand or was never there to begin with. Like this building was an acknowledgment that we put the absence in its place, like we put it there ourselves by leaving a giant empty box in the landscape. Except that in New York, where I grew up, there was no intention of decorating anything, the buildings stood as is. And the people around it proudly identified with it and what it once stood for. So, I think in that way the architecture in WNY, simply by stark contrast, has everything to do with the work I make now.

BR: *How do you work out your details on such a large scale and still get the proportions correct?*

MW: I spend a lot of time measuring and remeasuring and then measuring again to make sure

something's right. A lot of time. It can make me sick and frustrated. And if after ten hours of working out a measurement is still not right, then I'll wipe it out and start over. Nothing is precious, and furthermore, it will only help you and the work. There have been times when I have left something or ignored it thinking I could hide it later on in the process, that it was too early in the drawing to matter anyway, but if you make a mistake like a measuring mistake early on it will inevitably come through the work later. It can be glaringly obvious and distracting.



BR: *Do you miss color, or is black and white really where it's at?*

MW: I definitely do not miss color, it's just not where I am right now. I don't even really think about it that way, though when I see it I admire it, like with the de Koonings and Hofmanns. Recently I saw a few [Judy Pfaff's](http://www.google.com/images?q=Judy+Pfaff&oe=utf-8&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&client=firefox-a&um=1&ie=UTF-8&source=univ&ei=hpyS6qNfHMObIgen_Nj_DA&sa=X&oi=image_result_group&ct=title&resnum=1&ved=0CCMOsAQwAA) (http://www.google.com/images?q=Judy+Pfaff&oe=utf-8&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&client=firefox-a&um=1&ie=UTF-8&source=univ&ei=hpyS6qNfHMObIgen_Nj_DA&sa=X&oi=image_result_group&ct=title&resnum=1&ved=0CCMOsAQwAA)

at Ari Chicago and they just about killed me. If I could use color the way she does then maybe I would use color the way she does. But I don't feel any less complete without it. Also, I don't think black is any less of a vibrance, and what I lack in color I make up for—or at least try and make up for—with texture and surface. I work the hell out of the surfaces of my drawings. They're sanded and erased and punched and kicked and wrestled at over and over. And I try to use things I find around or in my apartment that I think might leave an interesting mark, a different kind of mark and I'll get in there with it and maybe erase and start over. I'm not sure I could do that with color, or with paint, in fact I know I couldn't.

BR: *Have you been accused of mimicking Jim Dine's work (http://www.google.com/images?q=jim+dine&oe=utf-8&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&client=firefox-a&um=1&ie=UTF-8&source=univ&ei=olbyS_X3CYL6lufwImiDQ&sa=X&oi=image_result_group&ct=title&resnum=1&ved=0CDAOsAQwAA)*

http://www.google.com/images?q=jim+dine&oe=utf-8&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&client=firefox-a&um=1&ie=UTF-8&source=univ&ei=olbyS_X3CYL6lufwImiDQ&sa=X&oi=image_result_group&ct=title&resnum=1&ved=0CDAOsAQwAA

http://www.google.com/images?q=Jim+Dine&oe=utf-8&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&client=firefox-a&um=1&ie=UTF-8&source=univ&ei=olbyS_X3CYL6lufwImiDQ&sa=X&oi=image_result_group&ct=title&resnum=1&ved=0CDAOsAQwAA

? Let's clear this up for folks - how do you think your style differs from his?

MW: First of all, I'm not a Pop Artist. My work isn't defined by a specific era of cultural upheaval. Granted, my work is about upheaval, or displacement, but that upheaval is not a vacuum stylistically imposed within my work. And I think that's very important, context really is everything. When I looked at Dine the first thing I remember noticing was an almost playful, and wild ability to make art with urgency, regardless. He's managed somehow to absorb the Utopian condition that Pop Art foresight imagined coming and worked towards it. That *Brave New World*. The same way Beckett, when he traps his characters into anxiously doing only what they must do and that's that, employed a kind of coldly underwhelming use of dialogue in a way that confronts the limits of language and saw into a future of option-less, automated digital-speak. I certainly admired that tenacity and I would like to think that I have that in common with him, but then again, we both have that in common with a lot of artists. And certainly we have a lot in common. I don't doubt that, he was like an old father figure to me, but Giacometti was like a father to me and [Sophie Jodoin](http://www.google.com/images?q=Sophie+Jodoin&oe=utf-8&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&client=firefox-a&um=1&ie=UTF-8&source=univ&ei=D56vS_qJIsL_lgIQ7uHrDA&sa=X&oi=image_result_group&ct=title&resnum=4&ved=0CDUOsAQwAA) (http://www.google.com/images?q=Sophie+Jodoin&oe=utf-8&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&client=firefox-a&um=1&ie=UTF-8&source=univ&ei=D56vS_qJIsL_lgIQ7uHrDA&sa=X&oi=image_result_group&ct=title&resnum=4&ved=0CDUOsAQwAA) and [Lopez Garcia](http://www.google.com/images?q=Lopez+Garcia&oe=utf-8&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&client=firefox-a&um=1&ie=UTF-8&source=univ&ei=HpfyS6eeB8GclG3wvyADQ&sa=X&oi=image_result_group&ct=title&resnum=4&ved=0CDIOsAQwAA) (http://www.google.com/images?q=Lopez+Garcia&oe=utf-8&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&client=firefox-a&um=1&ie=UTF-8&source=univ&ei=HpfyS6eeB8GclG3wvyADQ&sa=X&oi=image_result_group&ct=title&resnum=4&ved=0CDIOsAQwAA), and I would like to think that simply through my serious admiration of them we all have a lot in common, only they don't paint tools. And Dine and I did.

But the thing is, it's my hope, and I'm sure it's his, too, that the role of content in our work far exceeds subject matter. I don't think he would ever accuse me of mimicking his work, or even borrowing from it directly, if even in a referential way. I don't know, though. It's pretty clear that we

are trying to accomplish different things. Dine was engaged with art in a time when the monolithic, "arbiting" modes of art making were radically challenged by pop culture's efforts to incorporate the banal, the everyday, with traditional notions upheld through centuries. Notions which ultimately said what fine art was and what it was not. My work is directly about the figurative tradition; it attempts to use anatomy as a stepping off point, a reference to call into question, and support, the contemporary state of figurative art; both its narrow, nostalgic habits and, essentially, its ability to function and blend in ubiquitously amongst schools of theory. Either like a hyena or a chameleon would. It attempts to show the way the body operates as a visual metaphor when it is reduced of any specific context, how as it adjusts to pressures and accepts the principles of an overwhelmingly conceptual environment, it manages still to carry with it its technical leanings. I tried to exaggerate that idea to a point of mechanized idiom with my work.

BR: *You work has a eerie quality to it - do you believe in ghosts? Or does that come with living in an older city with such a long history?*

MW: That's true, it does have a kind of eerie, ghostly quality to it, but no, it really has nothing to do with a belief in the paranormal. Something about architecture that's interesting, though, is that it's everywhere people are, and while it tends to reflect the tastes and fashions of the people who are putting it up, once those tastes change, which they inevitably do, the building does not. What changes about it is the way we understand it's importance, and how we understand the people who put it there. And so, these tremendous structures are constantly reinterpreted, constantly understood in a separate context, and then the next building that goes up will, of course, reference it in some way and then so on and so forth. And over time there develops this lingering, heavy sense of memory that's connected with the buildings of a particular time and place.

And, to get back to what you were saying about ghosts, I think this can have a rather ethereal, bodily effect. In that as we move around in the world and become surrounded by these structures there is this sense of having become both deeply enfranchised by them, and yet, at the same time, confronted with a past, with a screen of unreality- a very human unreality loaded with the same associations that once signaled those old tastes and fashions and convictions that would put the building there to begin with, and which were eventually abandoned. There's a sense of loss. And there I think is the ghost you're looking at; it's in the architecture's seemingly inaccessible displacement, in its recontextualization. The ghost being that imperceptible content a thing shares with the space it's in, which is time, and the impossibility of being able to inspect it, and the huge importance of a persons actually doing so.

BR: *Can we plan to see your work in Buffalo soon?*

MW: I would love to show in Buffalo, it would be a point of pride for me. But as of yet, no, unfortunately, I have nothing going on there anytime soon.

<http://www.mdwoodward.com> (<http://www.mdwoodward.com/>)

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*Laura Duquette is a former ballerina who now dances with words and punctuation. She has a knack for asking questions faster than the speed of sound, and her interviews are often off the cuff and personal. She is Co-Owner of **12 Grain Studio** (<http://www.12grainstudio.com/>), a Buffalo based creative firm that gives typical web design a kick in the ass.*

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