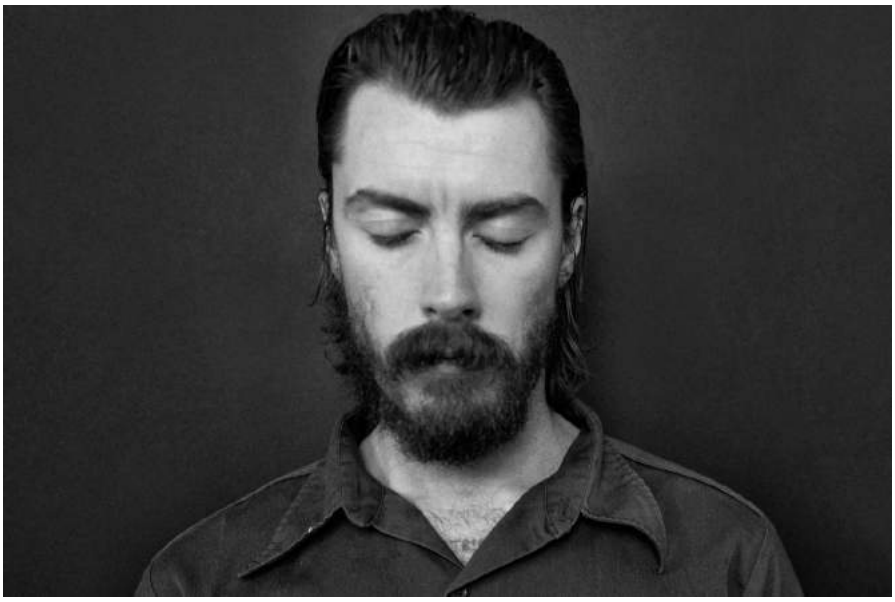
Art

# Danny Fox: "The fancy galleries don't really know what to do with me."

After a formative career spent fighting the London art establishment and his own demons, Cornwall's Danny Fox has found the perfect space to pursue his themes of identity, class and decay - among the bohemian exiles of LA



Danny Fox got married recently, to long-term girlfriend Tatiana Kartomten (better known as the tattooist Tati Compton), and when one of his friends asked if he was going to have a stag party, his response was immediate and emphatic. "I said to him, 'Seriously? I've been on a stag do for the last 15 years!'"

He meant it. Before he moved to LA last year, Fox had previously developed something of a reputation for hell-raising, or at least for living a fairly dissolute existence, and for having a somewhat combative relationship with the art world. Born in St Ives, Cornwall, self-taught (teaching himself to draw after his grandmother gave him a pencil when he complained of being bored), too wild for art school, and with no formal art education, he moved to London in 2004, squatting in Brixton, and washing dishes to buy brushes. "There was stuff going on, personal stuff that I don't want to keep going on about," he says, talking about those early days in London. "I keep mentioning it in interviews and it really pisses me off when I do. Just family stuff, so I just had to get away. Basically I just wanted to paint as I thought I could do it." Inspired by the likes of military artist Richard Simkin, as well as many of the classic St Ives painters such as Ben Nicholson and Alfred Wallis, Fox figured that his own unique brand of "naive" painting could hit a nerve in the modern, egalitarian landscape of the London art world.

Fox looks like a young JP Donleavy, and has the same dissolute, haughty face, and a similar beard. He is 30, but apparently still angry. His work is abrasive, confrontational and, as has been said before, both childlike and profound. His pictures are peppered with characters both real and imagined, expressing the vulgarity and regimentation of modern life. The horses he paints so often relate in part to the absent father he discovered in his teens, the father who lives on a ranch in Zimbabwe, where Fox has never been. When he was 15, Fox found out that the man who he thought was his father was actually his stepfather, and it had a predictably seismic effect. "I had an identity crisis; I turned into a man overnight. I'm sure Freud would have had something to say about my horse paintings." This would be enough to make anyone angry, and Fox carries his grievance like a shroud. A shroud he is attempting to lose in LA.

Looking at Fox's work is like looking at art with a hangover, as everything looks both heightened and slightly tarnished. He seems keen on ritual, and whether that manifests itself in pub culture, a boxing match or any other form of urban *nostalgie de la boue*, his pictures are alive. Mark Hix gave him his first break, giving him a show at his Cock 'n' Bull gallery in Shoreditch, and while Fox followed this with various pop-ups, and a high-profile show at the venerable Redfern Gallery in Mayfair, so far his biggest show has been at Sotheby's in New York earlier this year.

Yet he still hasn't got a full-time agent or a gallery. "That's the thing, I don't really consider myself art-world material," he says. "I still don't really like it, you know what I mean? The fancy galleries don't really know what to do with me, and both Sotheby's and the Redfern Gallery came out of the blue." When he was asked to show at Sotheby's they requested that he produce some of his horse paintings for the show, something Fox was reluctant to do - "I don't really like making things to order" - until he fell in love with the idea of painting such regal creatures down in his studio on Skid Row.

"I never thought that I would be able to be part of the art world, and actually I didn't even know much about it. I always identified with the underbelly, I listened to a lot of Tammy Van Zant and I aligned myself with that kind of artist, like a travelling country singer. Before I left for LA I read George Orwell's *Down And Out In Paris And London* and listened to a lot of Pavement, as I wanted to remind myself of where I'd been. I aligned myself to that sort of thing, like listening to Bob Dylan. I wasn't ever anything to do with the art world in London, not really, and especially not the Britart scene."

An early patron was the artist Sue Webster, who met him in a London pub and found herself confronted by "greasy biker-length hair, a mouthful of metal" and "handmade prison tattoos". His Kentish Town studio was even more of a sight, a claustrophobic den full of unfinished canvases and no air. Unsurprisingly, his work and his lifestyle were symbiotic, each feeding off the other in a way that exemplified his temperament and amplified his locale. His work feels British through and through - ribald, sleazy, full of symbolism and the minutiae of class: boxers, strippers, the gentry... and the smell of sex. Stylistically his paintings are punchy, naive, full of vivid colours and literally full of life. You can see Basquiat, Gauguin, Picasso and a desire to shock. You also sense that the claustrophobia of city life and the nature of his previously marginal existence has informed a lot of his work, which makes you wonder how the space, climate and general liberation of Californian sunshine will affect his work. It certainly did wonders for David Hockney.

Back in London, "Me and Tatiana, we were in a studio not much bigger than a prison cell, it was really, really small. I was making small work and I just realised if I could make bigger work it would be a strong thing, I just knew it. We got rid of our fold-up bed and went to Ikea and bought bunk beds. Tatiana started crying because she thought we weren't going to have sex any more. I then bought some 5 x 6 canvases and just went for it. And it just worked. Something about getting a canvas that size, it just gave me this format and style. I could breathe. I don't know what it was, but I felt like I could live, like I had something to say."

It was this realisation of scale which played an important role in his genre-art gymnastics, and coupled with a desire to get away from the temptations of London it led to the decision to move to the US. Heat. Big skies. Freedom. Having already made a name for himself in London, Fox moved to Los Angeles last year. He currently lives at the seedier, cooler end of Wilshire Boulevard, in downtown LA, and, unsurprisingly, is experiencing something of a new lease of life. He walks around his studio in the nude, listening to music at a punishing volume, he scouts around the neighbourhood, absent-mindedly shopping, and he lies on his back, soaking up the southern Californian sun.

"I was on holiday in New Orleans, and found out from my friend Henry Taylor that he had some space here, as he was going away, so I came out and worked in his studio," he says. "Getting away from London in the winter, walking around with blue skies, it just gave me an energy. I felt as if I was cheating, getting an extra bit of life, an extra dose of summer. So I was just making some work that I liked, I thought I could make more. Then I did a residency in a tattoo studio, letting me paint as my girlfriend Tatiana was tattooing. Then Wes Lang bought all the pieces I made, and then other people started buying too. I was in London for ten years, feeling like I'd been thrown out of every pub, and then I come here and start selling my work. It feels like a new chapter.

"There is a little art scene here in LA, and I'm more of a part of it than I was in London. In London I had more 'tattooer' friends and stuff like that. I suppose it's easier when you come somewhere and you're already established a little, and people know how you work. Wes Lang is here, Henry Taylor's work I love, he works downstairs. I'm now surrounded by artists who I connect with... but people are moving here and they're all from London and New York. It feels more like I'm moving in instead of being pushed out. So you end up being part of the problem of gentrification, I suppose. Not that I mind. Having come here and working in a big studio, within two years I'll be able to see a big change. At the moment it's crazy out there, Skid Row. It's like some parts of east London ten to 15 years ago. It's wild. But, unlike London, I can escape it if I want to."

He still doesn't drive - "here you can walk to cool stuff" - but if he stays, and he thinks he will, all that exploration is before him. "It feels like a big adventure," he says, before breaking into an uncharacteristic smile. "LA is not the type of place where your mates just pop round and go out with you, and the community vibe is lost because the place is so vast, but it has its benefits. The most fun thing is being able to make work, it's such a privilege. Being able to afford materials and have the space, have freedom to do what I want. It's f***ing great."

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Now that recognition has arrived, Fox is wary of it, distrusting a system he is so ambivalent about. He subscribes to the Charles Bukowski theory that recognition is death, and that as soon as someone says you're good, you're dead. "Of course in a way that's bulls*** because I do shows, so it's double-edged. Why do we do it? I don't know. Why do we seek recognition and approval? I don't know. I wouldn't like the idea of being recognised in America but not in my home country, but I did some damage there before I left, so perhaps I am tainted."

And where does Danny Fox's self-belief come from, which dark hole or high spirit? Unsurprisingly, he doesn't properly know. "I always think back to Bukowski," he says. "Bukowski said that he never felt bad about his own work, he would always just rip someone else. I always compare myself to the greats to try and push the bar as high as possible. I mean it takes a delusional amount of self-belief to attempt to have faith in your talent, because you have to go through that whole stage of being rubbish for years before you make anything that's worthwhile, thinking something is good that's so obviously not. You have to have ambition, and if I'm honest the most important piece of belief was moving out here. Delusion is important, but you have to use it."

So far, so good, then. Maybe the stag really is over.

BY **DYLAN JONES**

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