



IN STUDIO - Dalton Portella

December 10, 2013

by Sandra Hale Schulman

Photographer, painter, musician, surfer: a visit to Dalton Portella's beyond ideal seaside studio in Montauk gives a picturesque view of the facets of this artist's darkly elegant art and his world.

As a full-time artist for the last decade or so, Portella often manages to do some work in all the mediums of his repertoire on a single day. He lives on a large property set back from Old Montauk Highway. There is a large yard, a one-story house and a separate cottage studio. His studio has one wall for the computer / digital work, one wall for painting, one storage unit wall and one wall for musical instruments.

A small shed behind the studio serves as the outdoor painting area.

"Well the first thing I do every morning is check the surf," he says with a grin. "I can see it from the top of my lawn. If it's good I'll do a session for a few hours. If it's great I'll surf all day and then work all night. I don't rest well if I'm not as productive as I can be all day."



Portella outside his Montauk studio. Photo by Sandra Hale Schulman.



Portella's studio in Montauk. Photo by Sandra Hale Schulman.



Portella's outdoor painting studio. Photo by Sandra Hale Schulman.

Portella was born in Florida to Brazilian parents. His mother split from his father when he was 12 and moved him and his three sisters to Rio de Janeiro for six years.

"Yeah, those were my de-formative years," he says wryly. "My dad was a violent alcoholic, I think it's where I get a lot of the darkness in my work from, but it also comes from the state of the world:

the greed, the loss of environment, the evil that man does and the darkness in humans. I feel all that and cannot be cheery about it when it comes to my art. So, besides my own turmoil dealing with the abandonment by my father and the insecurities and addiction that plagued my early years, there is that.”

He moved back to California for a few years when he turned 18, then on his way back to Brazil he made a pit stop in New York, where on a whim he showed his portfolio to a potential client and to a teacher at Parsons School of Design. Winning on both fronts, he got the job and was accepted into school on the same day. He considered this to be a definite sign, so he stayed in New York.



Early artwork from the 1980s by Dalton Portella.

“The best teacher I had was a Japanese man who was a watercolor master,” Portella says, “and he emphasized ‘the mark’ – the very first line you lay down that can make or break the whole piece. I worked on that technique and I still work on it now. I love the immediacy of watercolor and use of negative space.”

Out of school he did photo retouching and commercial design for such companies as Miramax. He mastered digital imagery, and began using photos as the basis of his art for a long time before he started making the photos into fine art.

His strawberry blond daughter Brynn figures in many of his images.

“My daughter figures prominently in a lot of my work,” Portella says. “At first we would go on walks and I would shoot her because she’s my daughter and she’s beautiful and it helped me develop my skills as a photographer. Then I started using her to create images that would inspire a story, like photo composing her with a tank on the beach, or her and her friends playing in a junkyard in Mexico.

“I also came to the realization that shooting her over the years will create a powerful series. It’s an ongoing series that will span decades, hopefully. She enjoys being a part of the artistic process and seeing what I come up with from our shoots. Our shoots are connecting moments for us, since she’s been at boarding school for high school and is now in her first year at NYU.

“When she’s home we always try and get something done. I have a library of images of her that I peruse when looking for inspiration and that keep me connected to her even when she’s not here. I’ve also been using other models to fill the void when she’s away.” (As he did in *Bride, Waiting*).



“At Play in the Fields of Men” by Dalton Portella.



“After Challenger” by Dalton Portella.

“My current series of shark artwork also shows this process,” he says. “I first went to the Riverhead Aquarium and took lots of pictures of the sharks in the tank. Then I went on a cage dive about 15 miles offshore over the summer and shot them underwater. I liked the unusual angles I was getting of them swimming away and wanted to emphasize the sleekness and mystery of them. I used the photos as the basis for some small watercolor studies, and have now graduated to painting them larger in watercolor and on canvas in oil. I’ll have a full show ready for next spring.”

He opens drawers filled with the signed and dated work, beautifully rendered with the blue sharks suspended in the whiteness of space, gliding silently with no water or other fish in the image. He is also painting them on surfboards for a commissioned work.



Drawer full of watercolors. Photo by Sandra Hale Schulman.



Shark painting in progress by Dalton Portella. Photo by Sandra Hale Schulman.



Shark watercolor by Dalton Portella in the studio. Photo by Sandra Hale Schulman.

Portella has done similar series with bird skeletons, taking pictures, making drawings, and paintings- one of which he suspended in resin and still returns to as a source.



Bird Skeleton in resin in the studio. Photo by Sandra Hale Schulman.



“Dead Owl” by Dalton Portella.

"I try and look for something every day to shoot, to capture a mood or a moment," Portella says. "Sometimes it's the sky and sea, or an animal I find on the roadside. October has had really dramatic skies so I've been shooting those a lot. Fall and winter tend to be really scenic in Montauk, seeing snow on the beach is still a novelty to me. I take them and switch them up with ocean shots.

"While trying to decide what to paint, I will often just get out of the studio and shoot skies and ocean. It's kind of an active procrastination and very Zen like, and it gets me outdoors. In doing so, I've now got a huge body of work of skies and ocean that have become their own series, and inspiration for paintings. I take the pictures and push and pull detail until I've created some drama that captures the beauty and adds to it. I'm not interested in documenting as much as I am in creating, so I don't let reality limit me."

As an example, Portella noted that he had captured a glowing rainbow slicing down through the clouds in one shot, and contemplated taking it out for the finished image.

"It was too corny," he says.



"Montauk Seascape" by Dalton Portella.



"Tracks at Sunset" by Dalton Portella.

Last year, Portella shot a series of photos to capture a surreal element of sculptor Davis Murphy's life-size rhinoceros sculptures. He set them up on Ditch Plains Beach, much to the amazement of passersby. (Full disclosure: this writer is Davis Murphy's partner/studio manager.)

"The rhino series came about when I was approached by Davis Murphy to shoot his sculptures." Portella recalls. "He brought two life-size rhino sculptures to Montauk, on the back of his truck one cold January day in 2012. We did a shoot at sunset and it came out great and went viral: rhinos on the beach!

"After shooting the rhinos, I became aware of their plight through research on the internet. Since they are endangered, I decided that they would make great subject matter for a series, so I did paintings using them as reference. I also used imagery of my daughter both in photos and in painting to create works with the rhinos. In the paintings I removed the backgrounds, creating a metaphor for their loss of habitat. Putting my daughter in the painting places the hope in the hands of the next generation. *Follow Me to Safety* is about that."



"Follow Me To Safety" by Dalton Portella. Oil on panel, 72 x 48 inches.

"Removing the backgrounds from the rhino compositions was effective; I liked what it said and decided to use the same approach with sharks, another threatened species.

"One of the biggest challenges I face as an artist is choosing subject matter. If I can find a subject that will be both artistically interesting and raise awareness then I feel like I'm doing something worthwhile. There is power in a series, yet I have the attention span of a flea, so I look for subjects I can return to again and again, alternating between things to keep it interesting for me and slowly building several series that will each hold their own."

The rhino series wound up getting press in the UK, Japan, Australia and Germany. A gallery show of the sculptures and photos is being planned for a 2015 exhibit in Hollywood, FL.



"The Conversation" by Dalton Portella. Sculptures by Davis Murphy.



"Bryn's Dream" by Dalton Portella. Sculpture by Davis Murphy.



"Death of Two Worlds" by Dalton Portella. Sculptures by Davis Murphy.



Dalton and Davis on set with Rhino sculpture.

Meanwhile, six of his manipulated seascapes have been acquired by the new rooftop Sky Bar at the Viceroy Hotel on 57th Street in NYC, slated to open in December 2013.



"Godfingers" by Dalton Portella.



“Sunset Storm” by Dalton Portella.

“I spend 24 hours a day thinking about the art,” Portella says, “and about 4 to 5 hours actually making it. After years of this, some of my most successful work is done in an hour or so.

“I was living in a 3,500 square-foot loft in Williamsburg when 9/11 happened. My wife and I had a young daughter at the time and I just said that’s it, we’re not living here any longer. We bought this great place in Montauk with a house and art studio and I feel so blessed to see the ocean every day, although I’m not a ‘pretty sunset’ guy.”

“A newer big part of my day is how much time goes to disseminating the art on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Tumblr and email, etcetera. There is always a couple of hours of that before creation time. I had to accept that the marketing and publicity was a big part of the game and social media made it a lot easier.

“Now I can get a reaction to a painting or photograph within seconds of completion, it’s almost like applause after a music performance. In the past the only way to get such a quick response was to play out live. I’ve posted and sold paintings practically before they were dry.”

Music is another outlet for Portella, who can be seen at the Stephen Talkhouse or Gurneys or gallery openings playing solo guitar or percussion or as a member of Bastards of Boom, a samba band with a fluctuating number of musicians.

A guitar and drum sit right next to his computer; he grabs them frequently for mental musical breaks while the images download or the paint dries.



Portella with one hand on the drum and one on the mouse. Photo by Sandra Hale Schulman.



Portella playing guitar.



Portella heads out to surf with a shark painted board.

After our late afternoon talk, with darkness descending, Portella grabbed his camera bag and surfboard to load into his SUV.

“Off to work!” he said with a grin.

BASIC INFO: Artwork and information about Dalton Portella can be found at www.daltonportella.com. Portella is based in Montauk, NY on the easterly tip of Long Island. Montauk is either the beginning or the end of the stretch of shore side towns that make up the Hamptons—it all depends on who you ask.

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