



Danielle Roberts

Night Light

Interview by Kristin Farr Portrait by Bryan Derballa



How do you paint tension? Danielle Roberts demonstrates such an elusive skill by directing scenes like a filmmaker and approaching narrative like a novelist. She amalgamates observation and experience through pictures that are grippingly curious. Growing up in two opposing landscapes, suburban California and a British Columbian island, she is adept with dichotomies: dark and bright, north and south, natural and artificial, mundane and magical. Roberts volleys between forces to paint stories that teem with tension, that are rich with mystery, and she generously reveals the deep secrets of her practice.

Kristin Farr: What's the most Capricorn thing about you?

Danielle Roberts: The amount I'm working. My friends make fun of me. I'm obsessively always working. It's my friend's birthday tonight and I'm hoping I see something that will help me finish this painting. I can't count on it, but you never know!

At a bar? So you'll go to the party, but you'll be sourcing material.

Exactly. I'll feel like it's OK to go out if I'm still working.

Why do you feel so connected to the light at night?

There are a few reasons. Like the movies, light can control the mood and feeling of a space so dramatically. At night, it's really accentuated because things get washed out by natural light in the daytime, so there is something about artificial light that I'm really interested in. I'm into night because that's when you see it become more exposed.

In historical paintings, like Caravaggio, that natural light meant something to the time. It was a reflection of their values, this "holy light." With my paintings, that artificial light is speaking to a contemporary time and questioning our values. Artificial light is often based on consumption. What if the artificial light was representative of the values of the time, what would those values be?

I noticed that light from phones, streetlights, fish tanks, and candles. Light is a lead character.

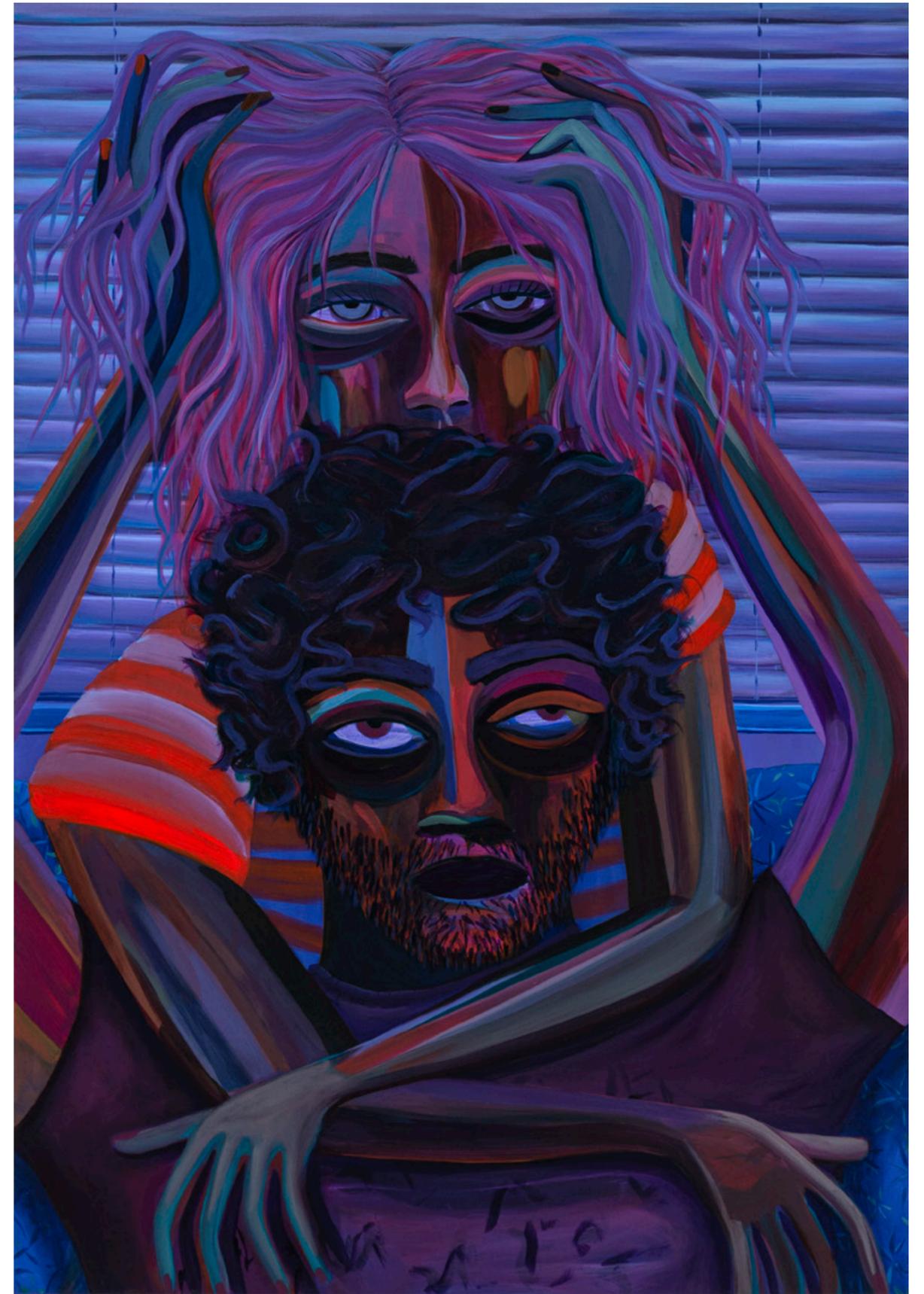
In some of my older paintings, I was into vending machines because they're funny, almost a portal, and they can more directly represent that interest in where light is coming from. Waiting rooms at night give a freaky fluorescent glow, and I like barroom light because bars have different colored lights; there's a push to control it, and it's all about setting the mood in

real-time. It's funny against the reality of the people—at a bar, some people might be breaking up or having the worst night of their life, and some people are having a birthday party and the best time. It's this huge mess of people coming together, but under the same light that's meant to control a certain mood or tone. I'm definitely looking for it all the time, especially when it's up against the feeling of reality.

Do you have extensive backstories and dialogues in mind when you paint? I was wondering about how you paint tension.

There is often a tension, or wonder if something is about to happen that might change everything in a positive or negative way. Or it might feel like something just happened, especially in the recent show.

There's one with a Pegasus statue in a parking lot, an outdoor bar kind of place. The figures are in this played-out situation where you're with your best friend, and you have to listen to them bitch about their partner, and then their partner shows up and you all have to hang out and act like you weren't listening to your friend complain forever. There's another bar painting with two figures, and I left the center more empty so it would emphasize the tension between these people. I like that limbo





feeling, like being stuck in the waiting room. I think they all feel stuck, in a way.

Maybe the tension also comes from the color palette. The muddy colors against really vibrant colors set up this psychological discomfort because it's simultaneously bright and dark at the same time, which creates an uneasy feeling. Also the placement of the people and how they're either looking at each other or not. There's a painting of a picnic on the roof, and there's a knife in the foreground between two people. Little things sometimes refer to people or friendships that have come and gone, or had conflict, which also creates tension. It's subtle, just a knife with oranges or lemons in the foreground, but that was a painting of people that I'm no longer friends with, so it was like a joke for myself.

I figured they were just slicing lemons for drinks at the party.

It's also that. I love when there's foreshadowing

in books, where there's a little hint you might miss, or that doesn't seem important at the time, that might later point to what ends up happening. Sometimes I see the objects as having that sort of influence.

Do all the paintings reference your real-life experience?

Sometimes it's just the place, or a figure or two. They're like a collage from my experience and mind, maybe a painting of a place I used to live, combined with people I know now.

Kind of like dreams. Is it therapeutic to paint through memories?

I think so, especially when things are further in the past, like an apartment or people I don't have contact with anymore. When you put them in a painting, they live there now. They already do live there, in your mind, but I noticed I need a certain amount of time away from something before it starts to come up in paintings.

Describe the most common mood you're painting.

It's like what you said about tension, but maybe it's more like apprehension. They're all foreboding, they all seem like there is about to be a transition or something.

Tell me about the bus stop painting, *Waiting*, at the Armory show last year.

It's another combination of ideas. I saw a bus stop in the snow when I was visiting home and I wanted to paint it, and the idea of waiting conceptually relates to how my friends and I, in this generation, seem to feel right now. There's not much security and we're awkwardly placed in a time where we're told to go to school in order to get something at the end, and that's not always possible. Most people I know are never going to have these old values, houses, or the kind of stability that generations had before. It puts everybody in this weird limbo where you're waiting for something to happen but you don't

really know what that would be or if it's ever coming. So the waiting is also about the idea of suspended time. Maybe that's the mood.

That reminds me of your Santa Cruz beach boardwalk paintings.

Whoa! How did you find those? I haven't thought about them in a while, but I'm still interested in the same ideas about leisure as an answer to curing feelings of discontent. I loved the boardwalk. My Dad and a lot of my family live in Stockton, so we'd go there a lot. The painting of a shooting gallery was also from the boardwalk. It's the same kind of liminal thing as the bar; the artificial light, it's like a distraction with the bright lights, sounds, and excitement, but it's also really gritty, dirty, sticky, and rough.

The color palette I work with is often a grimy, dirty thing with bright lights over the top to hide the grit underneath. I like places that have the dynamic of being two things at once.

Tell me about growing up on Gabriola Island and how it appears in the work.

It shows up with the waiting rooms and the ferry. I was always on the ferry. And the way that the paintings are so dark—it's really dark in the Northern West and it's always wet and rainy. That's how the surfaces are in the paintings. Sometimes I imagine they're worlds inside of puddles because of the colors.

On the island, the trees are super dark green and the water is super dark blue, and all the colors are so deep and rich because everything's wet. It's also so dark at night; there are no streetlights or sidewalks. It was a magical place to grow up because we had free reign. We'd walk all over the place, and trails connect different parts of the island. I have memories of walking through the forest with no light, super late at night with friends, and not being afraid because we were together, but it's kind of crazy.

No artificial light.

None at all. That's why, when I visited my family in Stockton, it was such a dramatic shift. It made that artificial stuff stand out and made me question it because I had these two completely opposite worlds. One was totally flat and concrete, and I felt zero freedom to wander around because it was a bit dangerous. If anything, my influence comes from the difference between the island and everywhere else. It made everything else seem so fake and strange.

I loved being in California as a kid, visiting the boardwalk or Great America. I'd visit in the summers and I was so hyped on fast food because they didn't have it where I grew up - I'd get off the plane yelling about Taco Bell! On the island, everything closes at eight o'clock and there's no junk food. Summers in California were chaos—going to the arcade, eating tons of fast food. My uncle worked at the Kraft factory so we ate Easy Mac, whereas, on the island, everything had to be made at home from scratch. There wasn't really any packaged food. I like both



places, but maybe I liked the fake stuff a little more when I was younger. As I got older, of course, I became more critical, seeing the greater meaning of those things.

Do you approach the paintings like a filmmaker?

When I'm constructing the image, I do think of how a camera would operate, like what are the focal points, and what if the story was about the people in the background and not the foreground? I like to mess with where the narrative would be, versus the things that are disrupting your view. I read that Alfred Hitchcock used to do something like that, with background characters and secondary plots.

I wanted to ask if the background figures are extras or supporting roles.

They are their own main characters in my head, and as I'm painting them, they all have specific things going on.

I also wonder about who's looking at them.

There's a painting of a scene with cars and a glowing garage light.

On Gabriola, no one has garages, but in Stockton, everyone's leaving through the garage at night, and my relatives would have so many cars parked around. There's a specific feeling that a garage light puts off at nighttime. You can hear crickets, and garages smell a certain way. I hope the colors and the light can express the way places smell, the same way I think about the boardwalk and amusement parks being sticky.

Why do I see so many plastic bags in your work?

I started doing them recently. I thought it was a funny motif to have the smiley face bag because the people look so sad in the paintings. It's like a joke, they're so miserable, but be happy because you got tacos or something. Like whatever's in the bag will fix the sadness on your face.

Tell me about your sketches and underpaintings.

They're really messy. Growing up, I was into artists like Raymond Pettibon, and messy ink drawing is how I became comfortable. I took a lot of drawing classes in undergrad and I worked in acrylic ink on paper with chalk on top, so I became familiar with that drippy process, and that's how I usually start a painting. Even though the paintings look kind of tight in the end, the underpaintings are loose and messy.

With the way I paint light, the underpainting is super important. I'll start by imagining how I want the painting to feel, and whatever that feeling is in color. I'll do a really expressive wash with that color, and try to have it radiate through the painting, all the way to the end. Sometimes it gets out of control, but I feel like the light turns out best when the underpainting radiates through.

The way you capture light is almost abstract.

I like painting abstractly and figuratively, and I never wanted to lose either of them. Painting light that way gives me room to do different things in the studio, depending on what I'm enjoying in the moment.

Let's talk about titles, like your recent solo show, *Evening All Day*, and your thesis, *Always Wednesday*.

Both of those are about the suspended time idea. In the same way the objects in the paintings kind of appear like intuitive collaging, *Always Wednesday* is from a story at the end of my thesis about people at a bar. I was referencing real life when I was out with a friend, bitching, even though everything was fine and good, and he turned to me and said, "It's always Wednesday for you, Danielle." It's funny because that's kind of what the characters in my paintings look like.

Always Wednesday is more of a limbo place than always Monday.

Right, because it's the middle of the week and

you can't really complain like, oh fuck, it's Monday, how terrible. It's not like oh yay, it's Friday. Wednesday just sucks even more because there's nothing.

Do the titles come up while you're working?

I stress over the titles so much. I never want them to fully direct how things are perceived, but I see the titles as adjacent to the paintings. I usually spend a day rolling around different titles, writing, and trying to figure out what to call each painting. It takes forever. It's not very natural for me.

Do you also always write about the narratives in the paintings?

When I finished at Hunter College, we had to write the thesis and I was dreading it, so I thought of a way to make myself not hate it. I wrote narrative stories for each painting, so it was actually fun and reminded me of stuff I did when I was younger and kept sketchbooks, but I'd write in them, I would never draw in them. I lost that along the way, but I picked it up again with the thesis paper. That's when these stories started to take more shape, and



Above: Picnic on the Roof (Moon Bath), Acrylic on canvas, 67" x 71", 2022



Above: Across the Sea, Acrylic on canvas, 32" x 28", 2022

it shifted how I worked on my new paintings, and how I think about the characters. I've been writing more because it's fun to have the paintings as a jumping-off point, and then write about them—how does it smell and sound, where did the people come from, and why are they there?

They can be totally fictional and that's what opened things up, and it became like how a writer makes up stories. When I started, it was limited to my experience, but after writing about the paintings, there may be certain elements I experienced, but they could also be different people.

You almost named a painting "Custom Concern," after the Modest Mouse song. We love alliteration.

I love alliteration too. I listen to that album so much. Music like *Siamese Dream* helps if I'm stuck. I listen to that one a lot. I should fess up that I thought the title of my last show, *Evening All Day*, was from all these ideas I'd written down, but then the show went up, and my partner's friend mentioned a Silver Jews song. He wrote the full lyrics in the guest book at the show, this song called "Trains Across the Sea," which says, "It's been evening all day long," over and over! And I'd been listening to that in the studio months before. It gets in your head!

Art and music are best friends. Any new experiments in the studio lately?

Some of my paintings before the recent show had a lot of spaces within spaces, and I'm getting back into that. ■

Danielle Roberts is currently based in Brooklyn. She has upcoming solo shows with Micki Meng Gallery in San Francisco and Fredericks and Freiser in NYC in 2024.

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