

Diana Dean

BOY GETTING OUT OF BATH

Diana Dean: *Boy Getting Out of Bath*

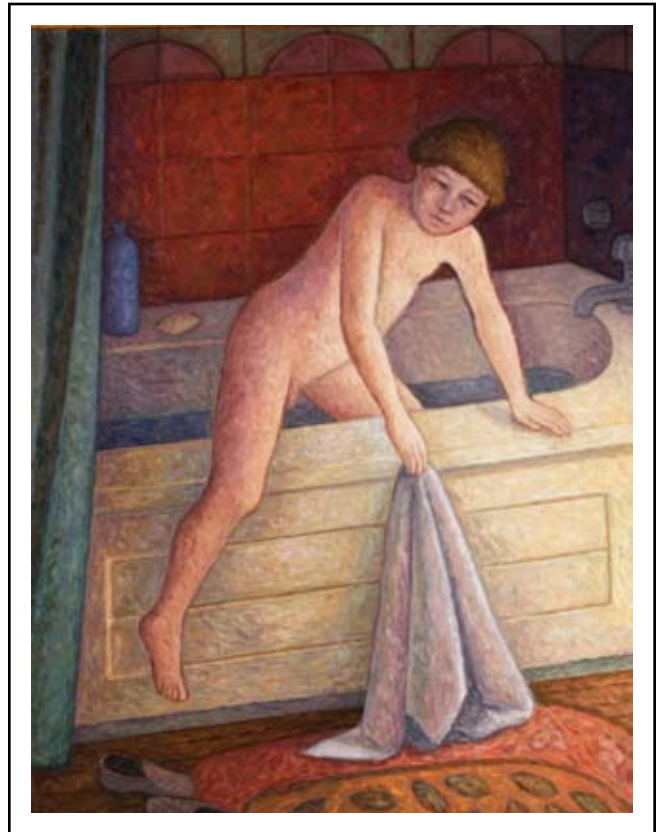
BY ELIZA LEE

Artist's Statement (2000)

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Artist's Statement (2001)

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Diana Dean: *Boy Getting Out of Bath*

By Eliza Lee, 2001

Born in Africa and raised in England, Diana Dean has spent over twenty years in Salt Spring Island, British Columbia bringing her art to new heights repeatedly. Completing her art education at Bath Academy of Art and University of Bristol with distinction in sculpture in 1964, Dean's media of choice are painting and sculpture.

Diana Dean
Boy Getting Out of Bath, 1981

oil on canvas
(121.2 x 91.2 cm)
SAG 1987.12.01
gift of the Surrey Art Gallery Association

Photograph by Cameron Heryet



Diana Dean, *Boy Getting Out of Bath*, 1981, oil on canvas (121.2x91.2 cm) SAG 1987.12.01 Gift of the Surrey Art Gallery Association. Photograph by Cameron Heryet.

Dean's work has been heavily exhibited and collected throughout the United Kingdom and Canada. Many of Dean's work sit in some of the finest collections, such as the Canada Council Art Bank, Confederation Centre Museum and Art Gallery, DuPont Canada and Royal Bank of Canada.

Her approach to her art reflects those of the Renaissance Masters. Dean sees herself as a disciplined craftsperson who must incessantly observe and absorb the splendors of light on daily life, and be in tune with her inner dialogue and emotions. As a result, when the images do come to her, she receives them and simply acts as a conduit, creating a painting that yields a unity in detail, technique and emotion. In the artist's own words, "the painting is following its own order."

The influence of the Renaissance, Rembrandt and even Van Gogh is evident in Dean's work. The beauty of the mundane and everyday life the masters depicted in their awe-inspiring trompe l'oeil, which generations have learned to love, is revived, if not further explored by Dean. Themes on Christianity, youth, motherhood and nobility also resound in her paintings: Madonna and Child, Christ offering bread and wine and the celebrations of the noble class. Upon further inspection though, one will see that Dean's works are more than mere emulations of the masters. The artist's touch, intent and style found in her paintings are all her own. Unlike the masters who were preoccupied with representing the aristocracy and religious figures in a reverent light, Dean brings majesty to her subjects - everyday people.

There is a timelessness in Dean's scenes. The fourteenth and twentieth centuries seem to mesh, and her subjects can be time travelers from the past or maybe contemporary inhabitants of Salt Spring Island.

Perhaps Dean's paintings should be seen as multi-layered allegories, and at one layer she is reassuring that modern life is not void of wonder and refined elegance. On the contrary, as Dean shows the viewer through her eyes, that beauty is intrinsic and is in everyone and not restricted to a particular class or time period. Hence, there is the Madonna in every mother, and a resemblance to Jesus in every white-robed, long-haired young man. And as Dean would have it, the Renaissance is in contemporary Salt Spring Island, and who can say that this world is not real?

Dean's evident love and appreciation for Salt Spring Island, and her tendency to profess these feelings in her art continues an early Canadian art tradition. She is not the first Canadian artist to religiously paint, study and be inspired by the British Columbian coastline. Following in the footsteps of the Group of Seven, but more specifically Emily Carr, Dean's commitment to the depiction of the West Coast landscape and skyline in her paintings have become a recurring sight in the past ten years.¹ Here, in this practice, she shares more in common with the Group of Seven than the Old Masters.

Dean makes no effort in hiding her process, her techniques, and essentially, her artistic touch. Unlike some masters' trompe l'oeil, her paintings proudly display her passionate brush strokes, mixing and layering of paint on the canvas. Like the Group of Seven, she does not render realistic landscapes or skylines; her interpretations relating to the composition, structure and colour of the painting are purely from emotions and the sensations of the subject matter rather than a realistic approach. The shape, colour and size she employs to depict the trees, water or sky in her paintings are governed by what Dean calls her "gut feeling."

However, to say that Dean shares a greater kinship with one group of predecessors than another is irrelevant. Dean is her own artist. She does not emulate the Old Masters, nor does she the Group of Seven. The legendary Canadian masters placed nature in the foreground, while Dean reveres its beauty from afar. Often, in her more recent works, nature is just over the subject's shoulder, whether seen through a window or a painting on the wall of the subject's home. For Dean the domestic scene and the human subject take precedence; and hence, dominate the foreground. *Boy Getting Out of Bath* (1981), is such a painting.

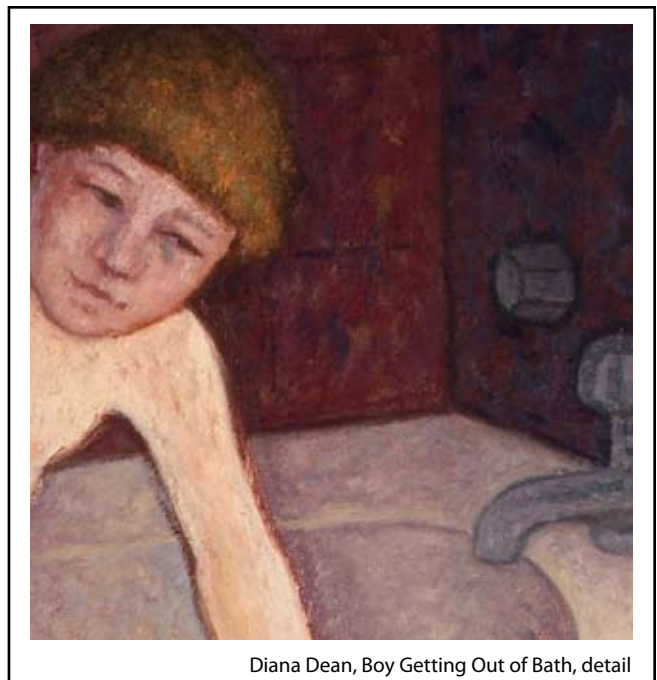
Boy Getting Out of Bath carries an air of melancholy. The boy in the painting is most likely one of Dean's sons, and in this work her subjectivity, or the artist's emotion, is clearly felt. Every mother mourns the passing of the time when her child no longer depends on her. The mother is at once sad and proud that her child is becoming his own person. This prepubescent boy is now bathing without assistance, and has even placed a towel by the tub, and carefully laid out is a pair of slippers; this display of independence and pride is expressed on his serious face, while he clumsily climbs out of the enormous tub.

This painting thoroughly demonstrates Dean's interest in the Renaissance. Like the child subjects from the Old Master paintings, this boy too possesses a wisdom on his face far beyond his years. In addition, Dean has successfully rendered a depiction of a domestic scene in a reverent light. However, like her other works, the signs of modernity are boldly in view: the tub's faucet, a bar of soap, a bottle of shampoo, etc. Once again, she is finding the beauty in the everyday, in everyday people.

I feel there is a gathering together at this time in my career as an artist. A gathering of all avenues that I have followed in painting and sculpture that is leading to a new stage in my work.²

This painting was completed during the beginning of a period of artistic growth and curiosity for Dean. She was beginning to consider the making of deeper space in her paintings and how compositionally her work can change. One of Dean's key interests is creating a deeper psychological space in her work as well. *Boy Getting Out of Bath* carries more of her earlier traits, in that the perception of depth is not as strong as her current work; therefore, the subject and his/her surroundings appear physically closer to the surface. Dean uses colour not only to create light in this work, but to create a sense of shallow space too.

Here, we also see Dean begin to represent her human figures in a more life-like and naturally curvaceous way, instead of the geometrically bold figures in her earlier works.



Diana Dean, *Boy Getting Out of Bath*, detail

Dean has been painting for over 40 years, but her passion, curiosity and willingness to explore to bring her art to new heights does not wane. We can only expect Dean and her work to evolve to greater possibilities.

Notes

1. The Group of Seven were a group of Canadian male landscape painters who were heavily influenced by Post-Impressionism and the works of the Canadian painter, Tom Thomson. The Group was formed in 1920 shortly after Thomson's death, and disbanded by the mid-1960s. The Group of Seven were interested in depicting the Canadian northern wilderness. Their art movement was a nationalistic gesture, as they believed that by practicing their landscape art they gave credit to their beautiful country. They were responsible in placing Canadian art on the international map. Emily Carr is perhaps Canada's most celebrated female artist. A contemporary of the Group of Seven, Carr resided in British Columbia and explored its remotest parts in search of her ongoing inspiration: native culture, the B.C. coastline and its thick forests.
2. Diana Dean, Artist Statement, 2000

Artist's Statement (2000)

My work as a painter has been slowly evolving over the last 40 years from a rather primitive construction of space to a greater appreciation of depth and composition.

Apart from the ten years in my early work where I was using flat geometrical forms with colour being used to depict space, the main body of work is figurative.

My main interest has been in developing a deeper space, psychologically as well as in the structure of the painting, whether it is within rooms, through windows looking out onto a landscape or in the landscape itself. The figures involved have also developed from simple, heavily sculpted forms into the more life-like figures that I am painting today.

At this time I am beginning to see the geometric universal connection between forms, whether it is in the mountains, the rocks or in the arm of a figure on the beach. This understanding of the universality of form plus my own developing theory of colour, used to represent light, is gradually taking a path of its own. So that now, whether it is a complex interior or a simple still life, the painting is following its own order.

I feel that the artist's work is to be there in the studio every day, to study constantly the effects of light on everyday life and to be present to the intuitive current that flows from our subconscious. To be open and structured at the same time. To receive images that relate metaphorically or, in fact, to the conditions, emotions, and spirit of the day and to produce a painting by artistic means that is a form complete within itself. A painting whose subject and construction are at one with the emotion and being of the work.

I have also wished to honour the great painters of my past tradition, to learn from them and to continue on their path as a craftswoman/artist.

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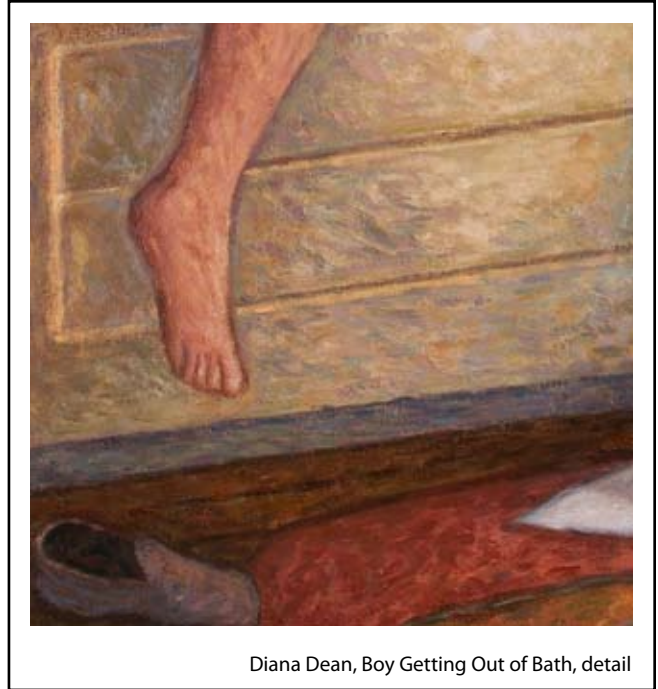
Artist's Statement (2001)

This painting represents a stage in my early work, where the space is quite close to the surface of the canvas.

The figure of the boy crosses diagonally over the not quite horizontal lines of the bath creating a simple array of shapes between the boy and the surrounding space.

The colour is used to give a sense of the boy coming out of the darkness into the light as he steps out of the bath. This use of colour to represent light is one of my main interests in painting and has been influenced by such painters as Giotto and Balthus.

In painting I wish to create a sense of the extraordinary when everything is there, recognized into one whole. Painting then becomes an act of reverence as I struggle to represent the space, figure and light. I use nature with its spirals, lines and curves to understand the interconnectedness of structure and form.



Diana Dean, Boy Getting Out of Bath, detail

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