

Dingilian



Jim Dingilian: Subtractive Images

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The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

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Light Nearly Lost, 2011
Courtesy of the artist and McKenzie Fine Art, New York



Our understanding and sense of the past is inexorably tied to material culture. The impulse to save and categorize artifacts is driven in part by the belief that the past can be perceived (and understood) through scrutinizing the things that we humans have made. Similarly, our individual memories are augmented by objects from our past. The child's toy that has been saved, the carefully preserved wedding dress, are both spurs to memory, transporting the viewer back in time. For the past 186 years there has been another potent window into the past: photography. For artist Jim Dingilian, these vehicles of memory are not mutually exclusive, but rather have the potential to be complementary; their combination has led to the creation of a body of work that amplifies the unique attributes of their associative mechanisms.

This exhibition brings together three singular series of sculptures that approach these ideas from different but interrelated directions. The earliest series, ongoing since 2001, is of landscape drawings made on found school desktops. These were followed in 2007 by a series, continued to the present, of landscape drawings rendered on the smoked interior surfaces of glass bottles. The newest series, begun in 2011, presents figurative "portraits" pointedly resembling daguerreotypes, made of manipulated aluminum beverage cans. What they all have in common is the painstaking removal of material—respectively graphite, soot, and metal—in the process utilized to render their imagery.



The representative elements of Dingilian's sculpture are created via drawing processes, not photographic processes, but the nature of the artist's realist impulse has been significantly informed by photography and its history. As a student in the 1990s, Dingilian started out as a photographer, focusing on the traditional medium of silver gelatin printing, spending much of his time in a darkroom environment. In a darkroom one is exposed to not only the miracle-like experience of a photographic image slowly appearing before one's eyes, but also to the mysterious nature of light and optical phenomena. Outside the darkroom, his approach with his camera was akin to classic street photography, wandering public spaces and recording what he found. During his time as a graduate student at the Rochester Institute of Technology, he made the transition from photography to a wider field of inquiry, including making three-dimensional work for the first time.

As a street photographer, Dingilian found his inspiration in the social, man-made environment, a situation that continues to inform the artist to the present day. Drawing on his memories of growing up in both Belgium (the artist moved to the US when he was seven) and suburban Delaware, Dingilian's interest in rendering landscapes on the surfaces of found objects has been partially based on childhood recollection. The transition from the cold, northern light of Belgium to the dazzling light of mid-Atlantic America left an indelible impression on the artist's sensibility, a condition that reveals itself in Dingilian's interest in the effects of both daylight and artificial illumination; but it was what he discovered as an adolescent in the marginal, man-made landscape environments at the edges of American suburbia that became his primary subject matter. What Dingilian found in these landscapes was not just the sprawl of highways, parking lots, and weedy no-man's lands, but also the debris of the surrounding civilization: beer cans, empty liquor bottles, and abandoned cars and furniture.

To most of us, the school desktop is a naturally evocative object, bringing to mind homework, long-forgotten knowledge (what exactly is the quadratic equation?) and the tedium of mornings and afternoons spent staring at dust motes floating in shafts of sunlight. The surfaces of school desks are registers of their past inhabitants: ink smudges, crudely engraved names and initials, and layers of random scratches from their years of public service. Dingilian's desktop drawings capitalize on the memories and associations that are conjured by these objects, but through the unexpected process of layering two separate systems of information: concentrated, physical nostalgia overlaid with optical versions of the lonely and marginal. The landscapes Dingilian chooses never embody classical beauty, but rather places of either numbing banality or unaccountable foreboding.

In the work *Light Nearly Lost* a car (it looks like a Chrysler from the early 1990s) is on the side of the road near a highway overpass. No passengers are visible (Dingilian's landscapes never have human figures in them) and the trunk is open. Is the car abandoned? Did the driver run out of gas and go to find a filling station? The desktop the artist chose for this work is unusual in that it is white wood-grain Formica, a surface that gives the image a brighter sensibility than most of the other desktop pieces. The image itself is not based on a photograph (it has been constructed from memory, as in Dingilian's other works²), but uses stylistic effects based on what one finds in photography, particularly depth-of-field (objects in the

foreground are in sharp focus, while those further away are not) and the kind of specular highlights that are caused by light being refracted by a lens. There seems to be some sort of implied narrative: a chipped and scratched school desk, a car, mysteriously parked in the late afternoon (the sun is visible through the trees on the right), and a hint of failure (dysfunctional car, failed car company, lonely setting). Dingilian's desktops, although sharing connections with romantic nineteenth-century landscape painting, don't exhibit spiritual exaltation, but rather a more melancholic view of human experience.

The artist's bottle drawings share with the desktops many of the same landscape concerns, but the radically different medium evokes a new series of associations. As with the desktops, the imagery on the bottle works has a photographic-like character, but once again it is a product of Dingilian's imagination. That having been said, the landscapes portrayed on the desktops and the bottles are the result of direct experience: the artist makes frequent reconnaissance trips to marginal landscape areas, particularly places in northern New Jersey that are reachable (and adjacent to) train lines. But in the case of the bottle works these excursions are not only the sources of accumulated visual knowledge of the landscape, but also of the bottles themselves. One unavoidable feature of the contemporary landscape (and particularly the marginal areas that attract the artist) is trash and debris. Dingilian, instead of merely picturing trash, actually uses it as an evocative "ground" that startlingly manifests both the physicality and sociology of the places depicted. An empty liquor bottle lying in the weeds—and especially the whiskey, vodka, and other hard-liquor bottles that Dingilian utilizes—conjures human weakness, loneliness, and the need for escape. As Dingilian has written about the bottles he uses: "They are simultaneously public and private spaces full of potential and peril.... When found by the sides of the road or in the weeds near the edges of parking lots, empty liquor bottles are artifacts of consumption, delight, or dread. As art objects they become hourglasses of sorts, their drained interiors now inhabited by dim memories."³

The obvious question is how does the artist accomplish these unusual works? Dingilian first deposits soot from a candle flame inside the bottle (in and of itself a delicate task), and carefully inserts brushes and other small implements that he has affixed to the ends of dowels. The artist's hand, manipulating these tools, then selectively erases and/or scrapes the smoke from the interior surface. Dingilian began his experiments with smoke as a drawing medium in 2002, depositing soot on found, silver-plated serving trays (more about this later), but was dissatisfied with the impossibly fragile nature of the resulting drawings. The utilization of empty bottles solved this problem by serving as a protective vitrine for the drawing, with the additional benefit of inexorably connecting the drawing to the place depicted.

The characteristics of a glass bottle allow Dingilian to create some curious effects that would be impossible on a flat surface. First, due to their cylindrical and transparent nature, there is the opportunity for two separate picture planes: a "foreground" and a "background" that are separated by the bottle's diameter. This situation leads to a powerfully convincing illusion of space, made much more surprising due to the bottle's limiting and intimate interior. Usually, Dingilian makes the image shade off gradually into clear glass on its top and bottom edge, creating a vignettted

scene as ephemeral as smoke itself. The effect of the image fading, coupled with the somewhat distorting nature of the glass (mass-produced glass bottles are far from optically perfect), creates a palpable atmosphere, reminiscent of a hot and hazy summer day. Indeed, the distortion of the glass creates visual effects that resemble heat waves rising off hot pavement—a situation that reinforces the vague discontent of the subject matter.

To the careful observer there are other elements, often either mysterious or troubling, contained in many of the bottle's images. For example, the piece *Triple Hoist* depicts a clearing in the woods that is surrounded by the frameworks of house-like buildings. Are they houses under construction, or houses that are teetering on the edge of decay? More perplexing, however, is a construction made of three chairs that dangles by rope from the branches above. Dingilian recalls wandering as a child through woods near where he grew up and encountering arrangements of discarded furniture, piles of empty beer cans, and rain-soaked magazines, all haunting indicators of recent human activity. Dingilian's inclusion of these sorts of images suggests an allegorical—and even moral—narrative that has been caught in freeze-frame in the bottle's interior.

The newest work in this exhibition, *The Unexpected Signal*, is the first multi-bottle piece completed by the artist, composed of a total of eleven bottles. Although each bottle comprising the work contains an individual vignette, Dingilian merged the separate images to create an ambitious panoramic view that sweeps from a



shaded wooded area on the left to an urban streetscape on the right. The two green bottles that are at the left rear of the composition ingeniously reinforce the cool darkness of the trees, contrasting sharply with the shimmering glare of the street. Careful scrutiny reveals, however, not a still moment on a summer's afternoon, but rather the unfolding of a perplexing drama: smoke seems to be rising from a small building in the middle distance. Once again, Dingilian's imagery has an allegoristic slant that is open to broad interpretation. The artist has used smoke itself to render smoke, but more interestingly, the building on fire resembles a structure that should be familiar to anyone over the age of thirty: a Photomat booth. Back in the age of chemical photography, America's parking lots were home to small huts where one could drop off exposed film and pick up prints several days later. Can Dingilian's *The Unexpected Signal* be read as a harbinger of the end of the era of traditional photography? Perhaps, but possibly it is one person's response to a quickly receding memory from the not-too-distant past.

Given Dingilian's background in photography, it should come as no surprise that he has had a long-term fascination with the daguerreotype. In 1837 Louis J. M. Daguerre,⁴ a painter and stage-set designer for the French theatre, revealed the first practical photographic process, which he had developed in collaboration with the inventor Joseph Nicéphore Niépce (Niépce died in 1833). Produced on a polished, silver-plated copper plate, a daguerreotype resembles a mirror overlaid by a phantom-like image whose viewing is dependent on the angle of the viewer's eye to the plate and a light source. Often referred to as "a mirror with a memory,"⁵ daguerreotypes are different from most subsequent photographs in that they are equally object and image, with their physicality strongly reinforced by the elaborate, protective frame-like cases that were often used for their presentation. Dingilian's earlier smoke on silver-plated serving tray works consciously referenced the daguerreotype, with the tray's raised edge pointedly framing the reflective image.



Double Portrait with Inversion, 2011
Courtesy of the artist and Mckenzie Fine Art, New York

In 2011, Dingilian began experimenting with making small sculptures out of aluminum beverage cans that didn't just reference the nature of the daguerreotype, but rather embodied it in a way that summarized many of his concerns as an artist.

Besides a particular type of nostalgia, one consistent element in Dingilian's work over the past ten years has been a keen interest in the phenomenon of light. This has been revealed in the chiaroscuro effects of his desktops, as well as the daylight he has captured in his bottles. In viewing a daguerreotype one becomes extremely conscious of the light source, adjusting one's point of view in relationship to the light until the image is visible. Similarly, the images on Dingilian's daguerreotype-inspired works only become apparent when viewed at the proper angle. Unlike the desktops and bottles, the imagery of these works is the human figure, specifically the portrait. The primary subject of historical daguerreotypes is portraiture, and Dingilian's "daguerreotypes" play off this history, but with a twist: the figures portrayed are acutely aware of light and are often reacting to it. In the work *Glare*, a figure shields his eyes from a strong light source coming from his left; in *Cell Phone Illumination*, a man's face is lit by the glowing screen of his mobile phone.

Each of the artist's beverage can "daguerreotypes" is made from a single can that has been cut, flattened, folded, punched with tools to create raised repoussé effects, and selectively sanded and polished. Dingilian creates the image by delicately scratching the highly polished surface, disrupting the reflectivity with his mark making. The printed graphics that remain after the artist's manipulation are ghosts of the can's original life: Ballantine Ale, Budweiser, Narragansett Beer, etc. Once again, Dingilian is superimposing several layers of reality: the can's product identity, the form and associations of the daguerreotype, and the elusive figurative images rendered on the aluminum surface. A cognitive dissonance has been set up: the precious, memory-laden nature of photography has collided with the temporal associations of the beer can. It is as if Dingilian is trying to rescue the present moment, not by photographing it, but rather by physically memorializing what is fleeting: the last sip of beer, the shifting light, and the memory of everything that has come before.

Richard Klein, exhibitions director

1 Both the subjects and found objects that attract Dingilian share a similar sense of melancholy.

For instance, the cars and trucks he pictures, although not specific, broadly reference American vehicles from the period spanning the 1970s and the 1990s, an era known for the economic (and stylistic) decline of the auto industry.

2 Although the artist relies primarily on memory in the rendering of the major elements in his landscape works, he often utilizes reference images to work out details, such as the shape of cars or architectural features.

3 Email from the artist, November 8, 2011.

4 Dingilian's bottle pieces share a provocative connection with Daguerre's early career. Before his invention of the daguerreotype, Daguerre initially made his name by popularizing the diorama, a forerunner of the cinema. Daguerre's dioramas, built in both Paris and London, were large-scale painted transparent screens installed in theatre-like buildings. Picturing dramatic landscapes, they were animated by various backlighting effects. Dingilian's bottles, although small in scale, share with the diorama a layered, stage-set-like appearance that causes similar astonishment in the viewer. Like many artists at the time, Daguerre utilized a camera obscura—a camera that couldn't fix images—for the preparatory sketches made for his diorama paintings.

5 "A Mirror with a Memory" is the title of the chapter on the daguerreotype in Beaumont Newhall's influential book *The History of Photography* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1949).

look. look again.

The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

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The Second Daybreak, 2011
Courtesy of the artist and McKenzie Fine Art, New York

