

IRON MEN: *A VIEWER'S GUIDE*

[*Iron Men* is Gary Michael Dault, John Scott and Matthew Varey, painting collaboratively]

The Iron Men Trajectory:

I met John Scott decades ago when he wandered into my lecture room at OCA (as it was then) from Detroit. He was so brilliant a student that his transformation into an equally brilliant artist was inevitable and rapid. I met Matthew Varey only a couple of years ago. Greatly gifted as a painter and designer, Matthew also possessed a rare quality foreign to John and to me: organizational lucidity and a flare for *praxis*. It was the catalytic Matthew who emailed me one day last Spring wondering if I'd like to join him in some collaborative painting, and wondering, furthermore, if John Scott, whose work he admired but whom he didn't know as yet, would be interested in joining us? I asked John about it and he was.

We began working together in John's studio on Sunday afternoons. I suppose each of us assumed it was going to be an uphill struggle, with three wildly different sensibilities and three well-nourished egos in contention. Nothing could have been further from the truth. Several people whose opinions we respected told us collaboration wouldn't work, and we were half inclined to believe them. In fact, we worked together from the beginning as if we had always been doing so.

A number of people have asked us how we actually work. Do we work alone on a picture and then pass it on? Does each of us paint a section by himself? No. We paint together, in the sense that we work simultaneously on each canvas, drawing (with the brush and with anything else that falls to hand) and painting according to the dictates of what each of us thinks the painting requires. What is so satisfying to us all—and essential, of course, for the well-being of every painting or drawing we make—is the degree to which all three of us enjoy the continual critique this process engenders: one of us makes a mark or a drawing or paints in a section or glues something onto the canvas; the other two look at what's happened and agree to leave it alone, modify it, embellish it, or simply paint over it.

All of this happens very quickly, but always by mutual agreement. None of us gets ignored, coerced, curtailed or diminished. On the contrary, when things are going well—and they almost always seem to be—every expressive, accumulating act ignites half a dozen more. We work the way a think tank works: each suggestion is taken seriously by all of us, since there's no way of knowing, no matter how initially unpromising any isolated painting moment may appear, where the new suggestion will ultimately lead us.

We began small (but not, I think, tentatively). We started with works on paper, progressed rapidly to painting on small canvases (three feet square, then four and five feet square), and finally to six by eight foot canvases—which quickly began to feel like the right scale for our purposes. Now, as we continue to work, even that size, however, is beginning to seem like constriction. It's a question more of ideas than of raw energy. Working together, like batteries wired in series, we generate ideas by the acre. Sometimes they pull together in the same direction. Sometimes they fly apart, centrifugally, and cannot be contained within the field of one picture—an initially distressing situation which is often resolved by the decision to progress to the making of a companion painting—or a entirely new valence for the work.

What do we paint? We think of ourselves as painting abstractly, but we do so only in the sense that we surround and connect our images and ideas with passages of picture-making which, we admit, clearly stem from an unapologetic, hedonistically engendered love of painterliness. But we have never painted non-representational paintings per se, and we have never submerged our chosen images—which are often reinforced, underscored and amplified by applications of text—in paroxysms of painterliness for their own sake. Images in the paintings run from the archaic and archetypal to those incarnating the mythopoeics of our post-industrial culture, weaving them together into threnodies of celebration, warning, desire and despair.

Many of the images recur to the point where we now stand at the beginning of assembling a sort of image-bank or image-frequency-list for the works: there are, in the paintings, vestiges of the epic journey (*Odyssey/Iliad*-derived ships, seas, distant horizons), isolated and displaced faces and figures, and a preoccupation with boundary, invasion, transgression, exploration and haven. There are emblematic animals—both victims and familiars. There is a certain preoccupation in the paintings with the act of listening, both in the intimate personal sense and in the invasive technological sense. There are modes of travel, both intimate (airplanes, tanks) and stellar (space vehicles). There is a lot of journeying. And a certain amount of tentative arrival.

Where are we going? As far as we can. We are journeymen, in all the senses of the word.

Gary Michael Dault
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