

PURPLE

Gus Van Sant: The legendary filmmaker has lived in hollywood for the past 40 years and has never stopped painting his city, revealing on canvas a more delicate, intimate side.

by Olivier Zahm
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art

GUS VAN SANT

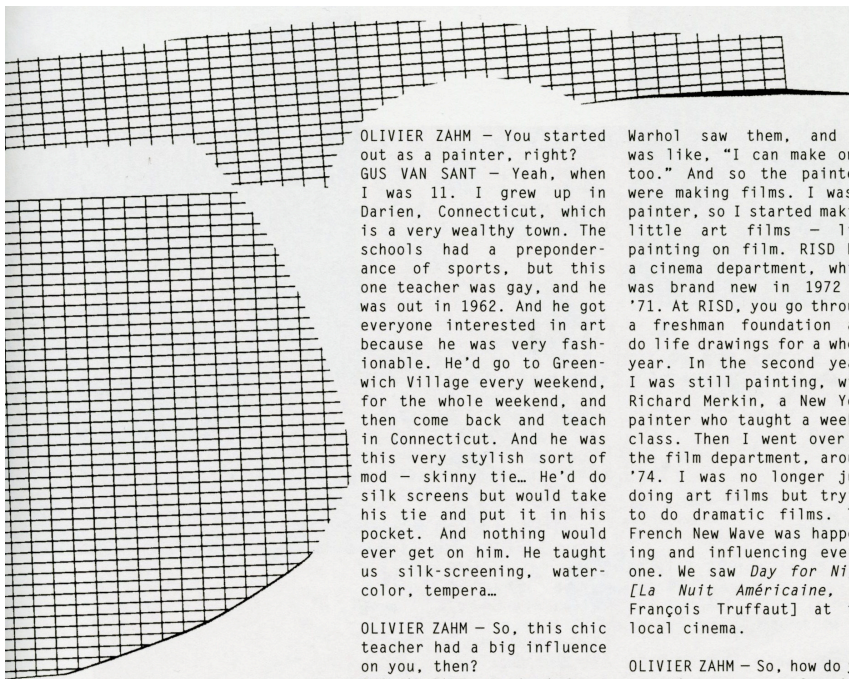
THE LEGENDARY FILMMAKER HAS LIVED IN HOLLYWOOD FOR THE PAST 40 YEARS AND HAS NEVER STOPPED PAINTING HIS CITY, REVEALING ON CANVAS A MORE DELICATE, INTIMATE SIDE

INTERVIEW AND PHOTOGRAPHY
BY OLIVIER ZAHM



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GUS VAN SANT



GUS VAN SANT, *UNTITLED*,
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GUS VAN SANT, COURTESY
OF THE ARTIST

OLIVIER ZAHM — You started out as a painter, right?

GUS VAN SANT — Yeah, when I was 11. I grew up in Darien, Connecticut, which is a very wealthy town. The schools had a preponderance of sports, but this one teacher was gay, and he was out in 1962. And he got everyone interested in art because he was very fashionable. He'd go to Greenwich Village every weekend, for the whole weekend, and then come back and teach in Connecticut. And he was this very stylish sort of mod — skinny tie... He'd do silk screens but would take his tie and put it in his pocket. And nothing would ever get on him. He taught us silk-screening, watercolor, tempera...

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, this chic teacher had a big influence on you, then?

GUS VAN SANT — Yeah. And not just me but a whole group of kids that I'm still in touch with. Chloë Sevigny knew him. His name was Mr. LaVigne — Robert LaVigne. She was quite close because her mother knew him. And she knew him socially. It was called Middlesex, a junior high school. And kids who weren't playing sports — he'd get us busy doing things. He'd paint in class, so the kids would be doing their watercolors, and he'd be doing his acrylic painting at the same time. You could go to his class and hang out while he was in session with other students. There was a group of seven or eight students who would just hang out. We had him for four years as a group. We went to high school together, and then all went to art school.

OLIVIER ZAHM — You moved to Portland later?

GUS VAN SANT — Yeah. My family moved when I was 17, and I went to school in Portland for two years. And then I went to the Rhode Island School of Design [RISD].

OLIVIER ZAHM — You started with painting and never really abandoned it...

GUS VAN SANT — Well, when I went to college, I was making little films. This was during the time of the New York underground cinema — Jonas Mekas and all the different people showing their works every week, in a sort of open-mic situation.

Warhol saw them, and he was like, "I can make one, too." And so the painters were making films. I was a painter, so I started making little art films — like painting on film. RISD had a cinema department, which was brand new in 1972 or '71. At RISD, you go through a freshman foundation and do life drawings for a whole year. In the second year, I was still painting, with Richard Merkin, a New York painter who taught a weekly class. Then I went over to the film department, around '74. I was no longer just doing art films but trying to do dramatic films. The French New Wave was happening and influencing everyone. We saw *Day for Night* [*La Nuit Américaine*, by François Truffaut] at the local cinema.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, how do you see the process of painting compared with making movies? Is it more cerebral or more of a solo activity? Visually they seem very different.

GUS VAN SANT — Yeah. I use painting sometimes in my movies. In *My Own Private Idaho* [1991], the barn crashing used to be a thing I painted a lot. And even though I'm doing that and using houses floating and things like that — in the old paintings and in the films — they're still completely separate. To me, at least. You can do storyboards, but it's just a tool. In long-form cinema, you're starting to get into story. I'm very concerned with story. Eventually, I got to that place where telling a story became an element.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, when you paint, you work in series? Your show at Vito Schnabel Gallery was a series.

GUS VAN SANT — Yeah, of watercolors. I think that's because I'm starting over again from when I left college. All of a sudden, I'm like back in my 20s.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Beautiful. [Laughs]

GUS VAN SANT — As a painter, I'm doing lots of different things to just figure out what... So, I'm doing one, and then I have an idea, and I go, "Oh, I could do this." For example, James Franco had a show at Gagosian in 2012, an installation: he recut

My Own Private Idaho. Gagosian said they wanted something for the walls. I was in the meeting because of the movie, but I said, "I can paint." So, I made some paintings just for the show. And after that, I started to work a little harder. I'd gone to Harmony Korine's place in Nashville because I was making a commercial there and had some days off, and he said, "Oh, grab a canvas and make a painting."

OLIVIER ZAHM — In the watercolors at Vito's gallery, you achieved something that's really consistent and personal.

GUS VAN SANT — Yeah. After some of the paintings, a friend of mine — a non-painter, a non-artist — said: "Why do you paint from photographs? Why don't you just make something up?"

And I thought it was a funny comment, but then I realized, "Yeah, why don't I?" And so, the watercolors are just me, no models... well, almost no models. But generally, it's just out of my head.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Are they linked to landscapes?

GUS VAN SANT — Yeah, I used to do landscapes, and I'd make them as presents for actors in the films. I'd send presents at the end of the shoot, and they'd always be landscapes with floating things or roads. So they're connected to the landscapes that I used to make, but they're buildings and cars.

OLIVIER ZAHM — The paintings are about Hollywood. Is it your vision of Hollywood?

GUS VAN SANT — I think there was something like that in my mind. I used to live near there in the mid-70s. After school, I moved to Argyle Avenue over by the freeway. It used to be a hotel, but now it's condos. Some people lived there who were well-known actors from the old days. But I lived in this neighborhood. And after that, I lived just a few blocks west, and my street was Hollywood Boulevard. There was the post office, you could get the newspaper, you could eat down there — it was sort of my neighborhood.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Was it a little bit like New York?



GUS VAN SANT, *UNTITLED (HOLLYWOOD 4)*, 2018, WATERCOLOR ON LINEN, 84 X 66 INCHES, COPYRIGHT GUS VAN SANT COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND VITO SCHNABEL PROJECTS PHOTO BY ARGENIS APOLINARIO

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GUS VAN SANT



GUS VAN SANT — It still is! It's pretty much like 42nd Street. It's still crazy, creepy, strange: t-shirt vendors, a lot of people who just got to town — just like 42nd Street.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Tourists? And prostitutes?

GUS VAN SANT — Yeah, there used to be huge prostitution. There still is, a little bit. When I was here in the old days, I saw it, but I didn't really understand. I didn't make the connection, but it was quite a hotbed of male and female prostitution.

OLIVIER ZAHM — In the building or just on the street?

GUS VAN SANT — The whole street: Hollywood Boulevard. I shot a film called *Alice in Hollywood* [1981] on Hollywood Boulevard. And in the shots, sometimes you see this John Rechy sort of man, who was perfect. He wears tiny cutoffs, black leather gloves, a cowboy hat, and shoes, and nothing else. And he's just walking down the street in one of our shots, and I was like: "He's interesting. I wonder what he does?" That kind of John Rechy situation was my Hollywood. That's where the paintings are coming from.

OLIVIER ZAHM — But they're more colorful and more paradisiacal? They're like a Garden of Eden with a dark side.

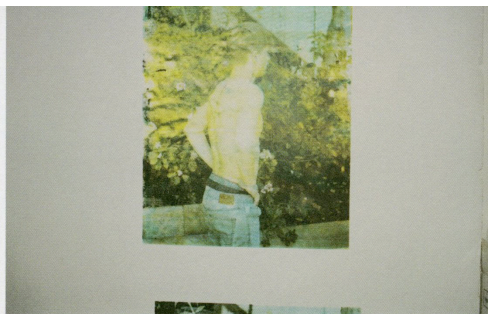
GUS VAN SANT — Yeah, there's a dark side, but you see the bright colors because of the bright lights in LA, and on Hollywood Boulevard. I think there's some weirdness that you feel when you're here — like you've done coke or something. Even though you haven't. You feel antsy, though there's nothing to do. It's almost like you're on vacation; you feel kind of strange...

OLIVIER ZAHM — On the edge of something?

GUS VAN SANT — Yeah. Which I used to experience when I came from Portland. All of a sudden, I'd have that feeling.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Are you always a bit on your guard.

GUS VAN SANT — Yeah, and I personally feel it's something geological, or it could be from a cactus, like something in the air, or the dust...



GUS VAN SANT, *UNTITLED*, SILK SCREEN ON PAPER
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OLIVIER ZAHM — Is it also seismic fear?

GUS VAN SANT — Yeah, it could be geological magnetism.

OLIVIER ZAHM — There's also something very sensual in your paintings, as if painting gives you the possibility to express your feminine side — something very erotic that maybe you don't have in your movies? What do you think?

GUS VAN SANT — [Pauses] Sometimes in the movies, too. It depends.

OLIVIER ZAHM — These are young men, but they're a bit feminine. There's an ambivalence, like in the collages you used to do with boys and girls.

GUS VAN SANT — Using models, yeah.

OLIVIER ZAHM — In a way, you're part of this gender revolution today.

GUS VAN SANT — I don't know. I mean, it's new to me. I just met a model, Hunter Schafer, who was in *Euphoria*, the TV show. So, I'm just learning that the fluid generation, you could call them, is a new thing.

OLIVIER ZAHM — What's the difference, from your point of view, with the Warhol era — with Candy Darling...

GUS VAN SANT — Yeah! It's interesting that Warhol was in the middle of it in the '60s.

OLIVIER ZAHM — He created it, in a way, because he made these people superstars.

GUS VAN SANT — Right.

OLIVIER ZAHM — And they were actually outcasts or

in their little world of fantasy or selling their bodies.

GUS VAN SANT — Yeah, it's amazing. I'm working on a story that doesn't really examine that particular period, but it's about the art world in the early '60s. You come across that whenever Andy's in the story.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Did you meet Andy at the time?

GUS VAN SANT — No. He walked by me on Madison Avenue, and I was working on 59th and Madison, and he was with somebody who looked like a businessman. I think it was probably his friend, the diamond collector John Reinhold. And Andy was in a ski parka and had a backpack. He was just talking to John. We didn't lock eyes or anything. I thought, "Wow, there goes Andy Warhol." That's about as close as I ever got. But around '87, I started adapting a book for Universal, with Paul Bartel, who was the director, and we got assigned this book that was about Andy — it wasn't Bob Colacello's book. Later, we went to the Factory and met Vincent Fremont.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Andy wasn't there?

GUS VAN SANT — He was dead. It was 1989. But the Factory was still there. And Fred Hughes was there. They showed us around. *Drugstore Cowboy* [1989] had come out, and I was working on this script — and I met Lance Loud in LA. I interviewed people who were part of Andy's world. I met Paige Powell. It was 1990 — I was still working on this story,



GUS VAN SANT, *UNTITLED (HOLLYWOOD 7)*, 2019, WATERCOLOR
ON LINEN, 84 X 66 INCHES, COPYRIGHT GUS VAN SANT
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND VITO SCHNABEL PROJECTS
PHOTO ARGENIS APOLINARIO



GUS VAN SANT, *UNTITLED*, 2019, WATERCOLOR AND GOLD LEAF
ON PAPER, 84 X 66 INCHES, COPYRIGHT GUS VAN SANT
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

and Paige had just moved to Portland, and she'd been part of the *Interview* magazine scene, so we became friends. At first, it was just to find out information about Andy, and then we hung out longer. Through Paige, I met tons of different people in New York who were connected to Andy. So, I was studying him, and yet I'd never met him.

OLIVIER ZAHM — But he was close to William Burroughs, and you were influenced by Burroughs?

GUS VAN SANT — Yeah, William Burroughs was more of an influence. In the early '70s.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Why him?

GUS VAN SANT — Well, I'd read *Naked Lunch*. I only knew about Andy through the later films because I was young. When I went to college, one of my good friends was going to Drew University, in New Jersey, and he said *Naked Lunch* was the book that they were all reading — but just in pieces; they'd open it up and read it out loud. I didn't know what it was, so I bought it. I'd read some of the Kerouac books, so I knew of Burroughs as a character. *Naked Lunch* became a very big influence because of the cataclysmic, dreamlike writing, the violence, but also the science fiction, all put together in a strange mix. It was also funny. Warhol was funny, too, almost like stand-up-comedy kind of funny. Burroughs was writing letters to somebody to make them laugh — like to make Jack Kerouac laugh. Yeah. After I graduated, I went to Oregon to work on a film. I was a soundman on a great film by Penny Allen called *Property* [1979]. She paid us through a CETA [Comprehensive Employment and Training Act] grant — which was pretty good money. With that money, I went and asked William Burroughs if I could make *The Discipline of DE* [1982]. I found him by looking him up in the New York City phone book when the phone book was like Face-book. [Laughs] He was listed as "William S. Burroughs," and I thought, "Well, that must be the guy!" It took me a week to get enough courage to just call. It was around Christmastime, and I went over there — ostensibly to

ask permission. I thought, "If I go in person, it's better to ask permission." Kerouac and Ginsberg were always visiting him, so I thought, "I'll meet him." He was very gracious. I was moving to LA, and he gave me people to look up. He'd only been there one time, but he gave me numbers of people — one of them being Fred Halsted, who was this porno filmmaker and actor who never answered the door. And if he had answered the door, I probably wouldn't be alive because I would've gotten involved in that whole world. [Laughs] Fortune had it that I lived... So, then I made the film, and then later, when *Drugstore Cowboy* was being made, I offered Burroughs the role — I didn't know him well, but we got to know each other later, after *Drugstore Cowboy*, which he was in. Back then, I'd drive across the country because it was cheaper to drive than to fly all the way from LA to New York. So, I'd stop in Lawrence, Kansas, where Burroughs lived. I'd spend the night, just say hi, and then move on. And so we kept up.

OLIVIER ZAHM — And he never came to LA?

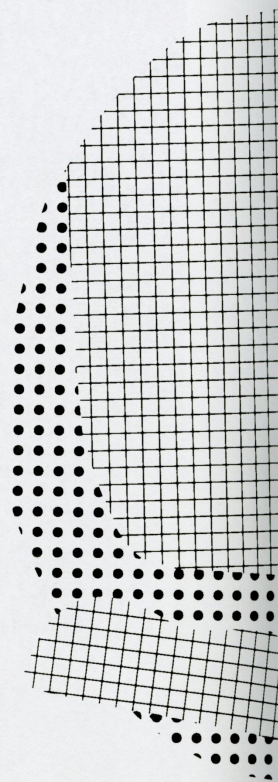
GUS VAN SANT — Well, he did. When I met him that first time, he said, in that kind of drawl that he had, "I only went one time, with Terry Southern." And they stayed at the Hollywood Roosevelt hotel, and he said something incomprehensible: "Our Daimler" — which was a luxury car — "as we were driving down Hollywood Boulevard shrunk down into a two-seater, and we were out of that town." And I was like, "Okay." [Laughs] He just went into his book voice. So I didn't ask him what he meant, but later I realized the story was much longer and involved two trips in two different cars. He'd been staying at the Hollywood Roosevelt hotel and had been flown there with Terry Southern by Chuck Barris, who made *The Gong Show*. Barris had auctioned the rights to *Naked Lunch*. Burroughs and Terry Southern were picked up from the Hollywood Roosevelt by a Daimler, driven to Malibu, which is an hour's drive down Sunset, and they got to Chuck Barris's house,

but he didn't have time to see them. So they went back to the hotel and invited all their Beat friends over — running up room service, partying. The next day, an MGB came to pick them up — an MGB is like...

OLIVIER ZAHM — Two seats. [Laughs]

GUS VAN SANT — Exactly. And he had to sit on Terry Southern's lap. So, Burroughs is sitting in the MGB all the way to Malibu, which is like an hour away, and Chuck Barris again didn't have time to see them. They drove back, and when they got to the hotel, they were like, "We better get out of here!" [Laughs] "We have to get plane tickets, they're gonna make us pay for all this stuff." And they just left.

END





GUS VAN SANT WITH TWO UNTITLED WORKS
SILK SCREEN ON PAPER (TOP), OIL ON CANVAS (BOTTOM)
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