

DAVID MCDERMOTT AND THE HIDDEN HISTORY OF PAINTING AS PERFORMANCE

At the Vito Schnabel Gallery in St. Moritz, something incredible is about to unfold: painter David McDermott, possibly the greatest colorist working today, will be exhibiting his new series of Mountain Paintings from July 27 to September 15, 2024.

Due to McDermott's painstaking technique deeply rooted in historical practices, the arrival of any new work by McDermott is an event in itself. But, as if that weren't enough to draw crowds, in a high wire act only a true master would dare to undertake, McDermott will actually be completing some of the paintings during the exhibition for onlookers (and wise students) to observe. It's painting as performance.

While seeming startlingly original in our contemporary context, McDermott's daring ploy is ripped from the pages of obscure history going all the way back to at least the 15th century when Albrecht Dürer gave public demonstrations of his masterful techniques to astonished audiences. Leonardo would follow somewhat later in collecting crowds during his painting of the mural of *The Last Supper*.

Giorgio Vasari, in his essential oral history *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (1550) describes innumerable examples of painting as performance in the studios of Botticelli, Raphael and Leonardo da Vinci, among others. Similarly, the unsurpassable Renaissance pornographer Pietro Aretino (himself no stranger to crowds), described in countless letters the joy Titian took in opening his studio while at work to patrons and students alike.

The Romantic trope of a long suffering artist working in a garret's lonesome solitude of public neglect is not only inaccurate, but perhaps more importantly, misses the largest purpose of any artist's primal impulse: the defining nature of talent is to give.

Perhaps the most celebrated (or certainly well documented) examples of painting as performance comes from the historical record of English master JMW Turner's annual exhibitions at The Royal Academy of London, which Turner morphed the normally static status of the gallery into a kind of théâtre personnel, demonstrating his astonishing bravura technique to capacity filling crowds.

Just as audiences need art, artists sometimes need audiences. Too much solitude can be crushing to certain fragile temperaments, no matter their talent or skill.

Michelangelo, too, received too few visitors and was haunted by the loneliness of his work, particularly when scrunched high in the air on makeshift scaffolding painting the frescoed ceiling of The Sistine Chapel.

The solitude nearly broke his spirit and made him question his talent when in ending a 1509 poem to his friend Giovanni da Pistoia, Michelangelo wrote:

*My painting's dead. I'm done.
Giovanni, friend, remove my honor's taint,
I'm not in a good place, and I cannot paint.*

For the daring exploit now unfolding at the Vito Schnabel Gallery, neither the fortunate visitors to this exhibition nor artist par excellence David McDermott will be subjected to the pangs of Michelangelo's loneliness and isolation.

As showman and master raconteur, those lucky enough to catch even a few moments with David McDermott and his extraordinary talents will be richly rewarded.

They say everything in life comes down to timing: don't miss this.

- Scott Griffin