

Over the Counter Prescriptions

BY BRUCE HELANDER

After investigating artists' careers for literally decades, there are certain attributes that a critic constantly finds that somehow always connect back to childhood and parental influences. Many of the relationships obviously are transparent, like the lineage of the Wyeth clan, where one famous artist followed the next one until the family tree was blooming with creative talent. In a review I once wrote on the legacy of the celebrated sculptor Tony Smith and his two artist daughters, Kiki and Seton, titled "In The Name of the Father," for their exhibition at the Palm Beach Institute of Contemporary Art, there also were comparisons to talented relatives that had a strong effect on their offspring. With few exceptions, parental authority with loving encouragement and professional enlightenment at the dinner table or otherwise seem to be the advantages that fortunate kids get for free, which give them the understanding and motivation to find their place in the sun. After all, Judy Garland conceived Liza Minnelli, who inherited her mother's same sparkling smile and distinctive voice. Henry Fonda produced talented actor siblings Jane and Peter Fonda. Dana Donaty was inspired by her aunt, a brilliant artist who lived in Colombia, South America, and she points to the deliberate, youthful sway that having a painter in the family offered her as she was growing up. However, her greatest familial impact ironically was not an artist, actor or singer, but her father the doctor, who ran a successful practice all his life. What she discovered after his death while cleaning

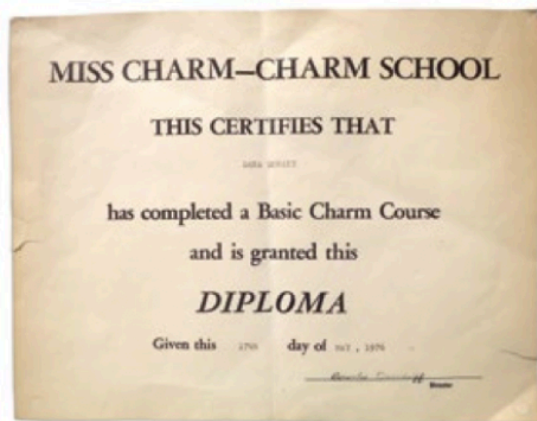
out his office was that there were distinct similarities to the essence of an art studio. Tools of the trade, both in the medical field and to a lesser degree the studio, need to be precisely organized for the health of the patient and the well-being of a developing painting.

Dana Donaty's archeological "dig" into her dad's medical office revealed what was from Dana's point of view an "obsessively meticulous, strategic, multi-tiered system," from recordkeeping to the storage of office provisions, and to the

overall professional atmosphere that trickled down to the doctor's talented daughter. The example of fastidious recordkeeping became an answer to Donaty's search for solutions to organizing her own files, supplies, ideas, and even filing the palette sheets once they are dry in exacting order with date of completion and title, ready to be pulled out and adaptively reused for a future project. What the artist also learned, long before the passing

of her father, was that "waste not, want not" was a household motto. Like shiny tools on a surgical tray that are sterilized and then used over and over again, Donaty, taking the cue from her dad, saves everything, eventually becoming one grand collection of things that are covered with her signature of drips and circular blots created in the paint blending process.

Within this parade of unusual scrapes is something the artist has labeled "The Next Generation Sheet," which becomes a fully completed painting. Realizing how beautiful and engaging her studio floors looked (and typically not wanting to waste an



Charm School Certification, 1976.



Palette Sheet, 2013,
Painting palette,
12 x 16 in.

opportunity to recover excess paint that could be used later on, she places a canvas underneath a work in progress, which eventually becomes a painting on its own and with a clear, association to an ongoing piece. Donaty always seems to be in the midst of gathering, quantifying and using the remnants of other works to create hybrids of them. While visiting her fascinating, multi-stationed studio one can immediately recognize that the artist packages her natural talents as a successful business, incorporating her natural instincts, core values of purpose, hard work and extreme passion. Her studies at Moore College of Art & Design in Philadelphia allowed Donaty to experiment with delivering paint to a surface. Virtually everything that could be mixed or pried loose was catapulted onto a canvas surface. Perhaps part of this direction came from her fascination with Francis Bacon, who also saved everything with the idea that it could someday fit a need. She also was motivated by artists like Lucian Freud, Gaudí, and Donald Judd, admiring the way they collaborated and took prompts from one another. Her large bold paintings, which incorporate portraits, have been influenced by other artists like Chuck Close, Barbara Kruger and Jenny Saville.

While living as an artist in residence in London, England, she began to expand her research into the science and mythology of binding metal fibers, oxidizing them, creating patinas, using lime plasters and paints, and exploring gilding and sculpting components. The habit of experimenting with new elements continued with her residency in Granada, and there she was motivated by the fast-moving and vividly costumed flamenco dancers, the heat of the music, and the

transformation of integrating a different cultural spirit into the soul of her pictures. In this new series of exciting works that celebrate investigation of media, applications, layers, patterns and textures, Donaty clearly has uncovered her passion for painting dynamic human expressions.

In much of her artwork, the strong bond created with her talented aunt is obvious and continues to be an ongoing inspiration in Donaty's work. An examination of Aunt Esther's notebooks of watercolor studies for larger paintings shows a thorough concern for notations of color, shadows and, like Dr. Donaty, making the organization of information an art in itself. The so-called "Brick" paintings are named in honor of Aunt Esther. Ordinary bricks were placed beneath the paintings in Esther's studio to elevate the works and protect the floor. Donaty's version of "Bricks" consists of small boards with experimental finishes. When placed below her paintings, they sprout a new life with—not surprisingly—an identifiable DNA that has passed on to or dripped from the mother painting. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree in this case, creating a remarkable common denominator of tint and texture to be exhibited with the original painting. Dana also was fortunate to be encouraged and inspired by other family members, as well. Her talented grandfather immigrated to the United States from Colombia; he was a lexicographer and his brother was an architect with two sons who are well-known artists living in Bogotá.

Donaty's custom of saving everything was particularly valuable when it led to the decision to save her paper palettes, which originally were manufactured as a convenience for

Aunt Esther's Color Study
Esther Hurtado Cardenas
Color Study, 1961
 Watercolor, 18 x 24 in.



artists as they were designed to be disposable, not renewable. After each painting session, the multi-hued paper palettes are allowed to dry and then placed into large, cataloged folders. Each sheet becomes a recognizable work of art, and after a while, knowing that each will be saved for posterity or reused, the artist pushes a bit harder to add additional aesthetic merits to these small “paintings” that were produced during the process of creating a bigger work. On a few occasions, she manipulates the paper smudges by photographing the works and then adding “eyes” that bring ambitious figures and head shapes to life. If that isn’t interesting enough, the artist has taken a giant step by reassembling the palette squares to create flat kimonos that are unmistakably unique, complete with sleeves, cuffs, and an Asian rope with tassels at the top. The comparison to a real wedding kimono next to Donaty’s brand of the same is astounding. Her habit of saving the remains of her latex paint materials that are pulled off from individual compartments used to mix the medium, and then are reconfigured often as sculptural objects. Individual scraps are multicolored, offering unlimited possibilities to incorporate this unusual item into other uses. Her pile of thin strips has been fashioned to provide a wickedly funny home for a plastic lobster, reminiscent of Salvador Dali and Jeff Koons, which rests on an operating table.

A good example of Donaty’s large-scale paintings is *Red Tulips*, which utilizes her love of portraiture, repeating design, foreground magic and a surface that is completely her own invention. In preparing a canvas, she works up a background that builds deliberate drips that fall vertically and horizontally to

form a novel, under the skin pattern. In another work, *Untitled self*, the artist builds her canvas in the same way, expanding upon the decorative patterns in the background that could be a substitute for wallpaper. Here her expertise in creating a light wash brings to the surface a mysterious glow. *Self*, two naked figures look like they have just been expelled from the Garden of Eden, is a remarkable image with a compelling setting. *Hawkfish* shows off her skills at illusion and compositional placement. *Red Dress*, a large painting measuring 72 x 72 inches, takes advantage of the dripping background to confidently place a wildly twirling, crimson-laced dancer at center stage. *Manajama Grande* also is a very convincing portrait of a woman dancing spiritedly. *Madison*, a 92 inch wide painting, presents a mirage of a dancer/swimmer combination that seems to pop out of the picture plane.

At the end of the day, Dana Donaty, armed with an honest to goodness Charm School diploma and an unquenchable thirst for invention, regardless of inside information and the curious studio environment she keeps in pristine condition, particularly the front “operating room,” the end results of her fascinating canvases are rewarding and full of artistic ingenuity, surprises and an engaging use of materials.

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