



HEART
WORN
THIN
DAVID
MELLEN

FRONT COVER

SWANSONG (DETAIL)

PREVIOUS PAGE

CORRIDA (WORK IN PROGRESS PHOTOS NOVEMBER 2020, PARIS)

CATALOG DESIGN BY DAVID MELLEN DSMSTUDIO.COM

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NINA MDIVANI

DAVID MELLEN'S UNFOLDING ICONOGRAPHY

David Mellen's work on view at Ivy Brown Gallery are not easily defined, vacillating between human flesh and its metaphoric representation, they beg you to look deeper, consider their physical properties. As Duchamp, de Kooning, Bacon, Giacometti, Rothko – all direct influences for Mellen, he also could not be strictly categorized as a representational or an abstract artist. Such a definition is beside the point for us, Mellen's audience, because we are intrigued and fascinated by the loose and yet, intricately sculpted shapes on his large canvases. But ultimately, curiosity leads into cataloguing and analyzing and here we are trying to decipher, although Susan Sontag advised us against interpretation, fostering certain abandon when looking at an artwork.

This impulse to put a name on everything though characterizes us as species. Hence this essay will look into how David Mellen works, what he means and how his approach falls within the larger scheme of artistic meaning-making. In doing so, the iconological approach of Erwin Panofsky comes in very appropriately.



BREATH | DRY UP DETAIL SCULPTURE 1997



DISPLAYING SLIGHT IMPURITIES
DETAIL
SCULPTURE
1996

Accomplished German art historian who spent most of his career in the U.S., Erwin Panofsky's (1892-1968), derived three levels of iconography initially used to analyze works of Italian Renaissance and medieval art. His premise was expressed more fully in *Studies in Iconology*, published in 1939 in Oxford and to this day has an iconic status in aesthetics and art theory.



 $\mathsf{C} \ \mathsf{o} \ \mathsf{R} \ \mathsf{R} \ \mathsf{I} \ \mathsf{D} \ \mathsf{A}$

2021 OIL ON LINEN 46x32 IN 116x82 CM



MEMORIES OF CRUELTY

2014
PIGMENT AND VARNISH ON LINEN
51X81 IN
206X130 CM

The first level of Panofsky's analysis works most directly with the artist's hand, his primary or natural subject matter, his texture, color, forms. What do we see when we look at Fragment, Swansong, Corrida, Memories of Cruelty among others? Mellen paints forms reminiscent of human bodies, building them one day at a time for the duration of several months. Endless process of addition and subtraction is at work here as the artist starts with an idea and proceeds to an image that has a weight and presence. Loosely defined figures that Mellen creates work in sharp contrast with precisely executed geometric background of neutral colors. These figures might be fighting encircling fray of conventions, but also might be breaking free of the gravity. Compared to Mellen's previous exhibition at BOSI Contemporary in 2014 the paintings presented at Ivy Brown have more defined landscapes. If *Ohne*, 2014 gives viewers a significant amount of negative space punctured with objects reminiscent of skeletal structures; *Bloom*, 2018 a flashy form is pierced by geometric lines, a struggle is taking place.

This juxtaposition between exposed canvas, well-defined geometric background and a form as the subject of the painting is a motif that follows Mellen work through the years. His definition of forms has changed thoughout. If works from the last retrospective presented figures more defined as abstract, paintings created between 2017-2021 take a more representational approach. In *Descent*, 2020 thick black demarcations cannot stop a disgraced mystical figure sliding downward. In these later paintings, forms we observe stand in for figures or human-like entities with an agency and volition of their own. They became animated agents rather than remaining simple forms or objects they were before.



INQUIET

2017 OIL ON LINEN 52X73 IN 132X185 CM





WE BELONG TO NOWHERE

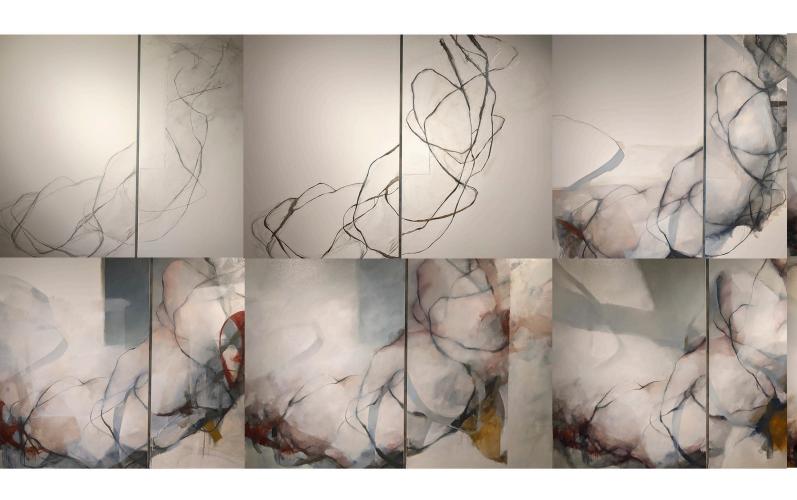
2015
OIL ON LINEN
DIPTYCH; TWO PANELS
EACH 64X42 IN
163X107 CM

Panofsky's second level of analysis looks at conventional subject matter, where the motifs observed above lead in the process of our interpretation, and the stories and allegories they invoke for us. This is where a viewer comes forth with all her distinct narrative of personal archetypes, history and subjective web of analogies. Iconographical analysis leads us to consider where Mellen goes with his figures and geometric backgrounds, what exactly are they to us, how we can relate them to from what we have seen or read. Mythical and symbolist allusions emerge from Mellen's almost abstract bodies for me personally. His entities reference actions rather than concrete characters. For example, in *Descent*, 2020 a fall from grace would be recognizable to any medieval reader of the Bible, but we could also see the figure in the act of alienation from its identity. A demonic presence inside a body is suspended between outer and inner realms in Fragment, 2021. The diptych Swansong, 2021 baffles us with our inability to make a coherent statement about anatomy based on our critical thinking, a painting unfolding beyond the frame. An aspect noticed by artist himself as he works with this intention in mind until a technical problem, he tested himself with, is finally resolved.

Distortions of Mellen's forms link him to Francis Bacon. Although the portrayed people have perceived Bacon's distorted figures as injuries, by deconstructing their bodies he simply was making *images more real to himself*, following his mind's eye. In an attempt to arrive at a deeper sense of meaning and truth, beyond menacing or screaming figures, Bacon used sense of alienation and existential despair as his vehicle. Mellen uses techniques he has mastered over time to create a body of work that explores ideas of boundary, spatial positioning, self and its limits.

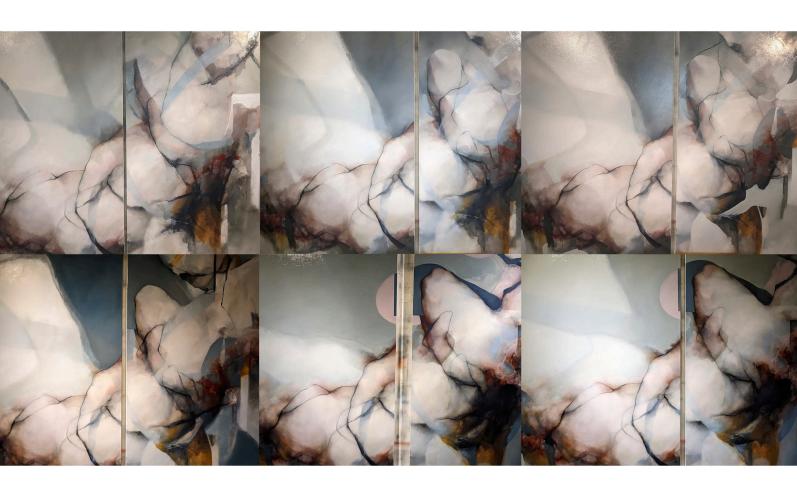
His figures are breaking through or escaping the surrounding matrix, attempting to inhabit a new sense of place. We do not have an opportunity to observe their thoughts or see their emotions, but we can see the struggle and graceful energy of it.

 $^{^{\}rm 1}$ BBC, Francis Bacon Fragments of a Portrait – Interview by David Sylvester.



SWANSONG

WORK IN PROGRESS PHOTOS SEPTEMBER 2020-JUNE 21





FRAGMENT

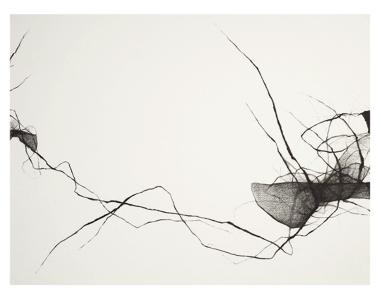
DETAIL

The third and final level of the iconological analysis by Erwin Panofsky works with what he terms as *intrinsic meaning or content*. This is where reality of today, particulars of artist's place of origin, his time, philosophical or religious standing come into play. It is only too easy to interpret eight paintings at Ivy Brown as Mellen's commentary of the stasis of the COVID-19 pandemic and our human push to escape it. Rather it seems that Panofsky's astute and comprehensive method of looking at works of art builds upon each other and show Mellen as an artist who is analyzing a space of the individual within the whole. His forms are abstract, but nonetheless they are vibrating with life and elements of flesh either falling from or going toward some new unseen center of gravity.

As a person deeply influenced by British Modernism, T.S.Eliot and James Joyce, David Mellen uses components of nonlinear narrative as his main premise. Unsurprisingly, nonlinear narrative also is the hallmark of today in 2021 as certainties of our social systems are less stable than previously imagined. As a global society we are in the state of flux and Mellen shows this to us through his works.

October 2021







VOICES I, II, III

2019 DETAIL CHARCOAL ON PAPER 24X30 IN, 61X76 CM

EXHI BITED WORKS

THE BELL

2021 OIL ON LINEN 72X48 IN 183X122 CM



Тне Вегг

DETAIL



$\mathsf{S} \ \mathsf{w} \ \mathsf{a} \ \mathsf{n} \ \mathsf{s} \ \mathsf{o} \ \mathsf{n} \ \mathsf{g}$

2021
OIL ON LINEN
DIPTYCH; TWO PANELS
EACH 70X42 IN
178X107 CM





FRAGMENT

2021 OIL ON LINEN 48x76 IN 122x193 CM





S W A N S O N G



FRAGMENT

CHIMERA

2020 OIL ON LINEN 74X54 IN 189X137 CM



DESCENT

2020 OIL ON LINEN 72x48 IN 182x122 CM





C H I M E R A



D E S C E N T

As I F

2019 OIL ON LINEN 35.5x35.5 IN 90x90 CM



Вьоом

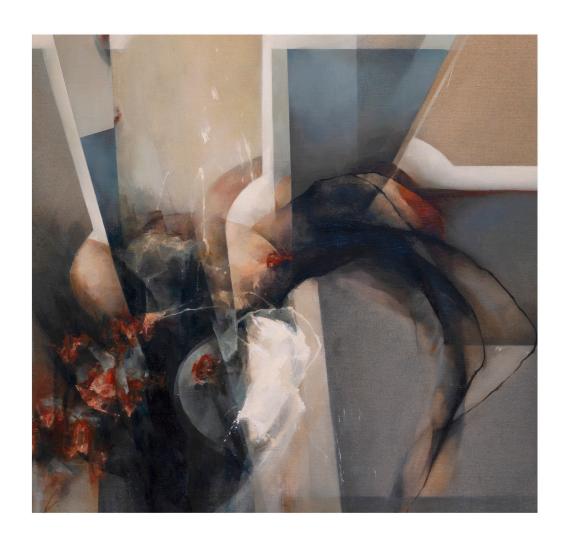
2018 OIL ON LINEN 70x47 IN 177x119 CM



THE RHYTHM, THE BLOOD

2017 OIL ON LINEN 81X51 IN 204X128 CM





B L O O M



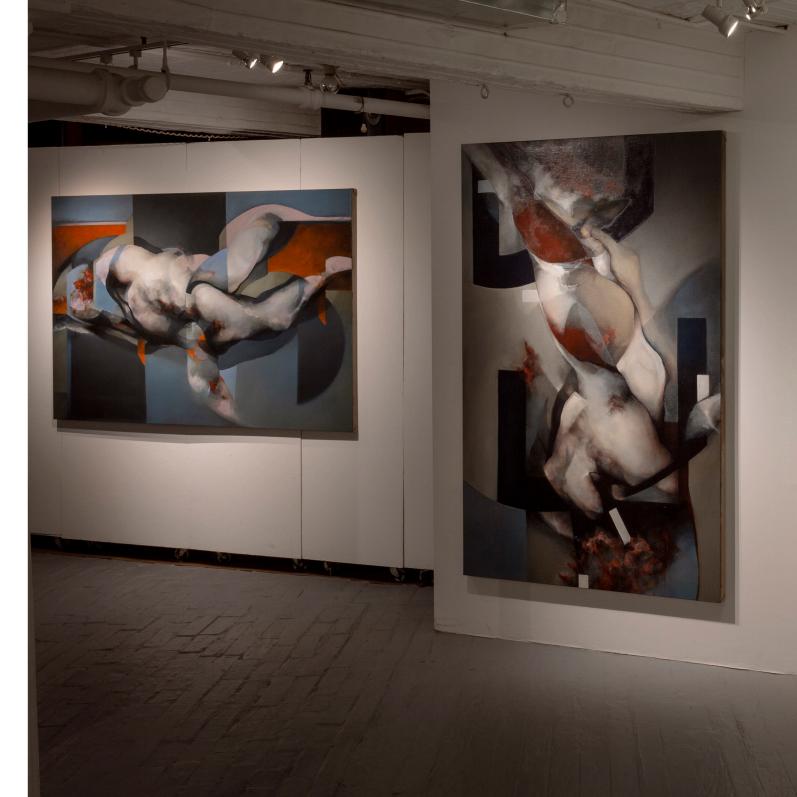
THE RHYTHM,
THE BLOOD

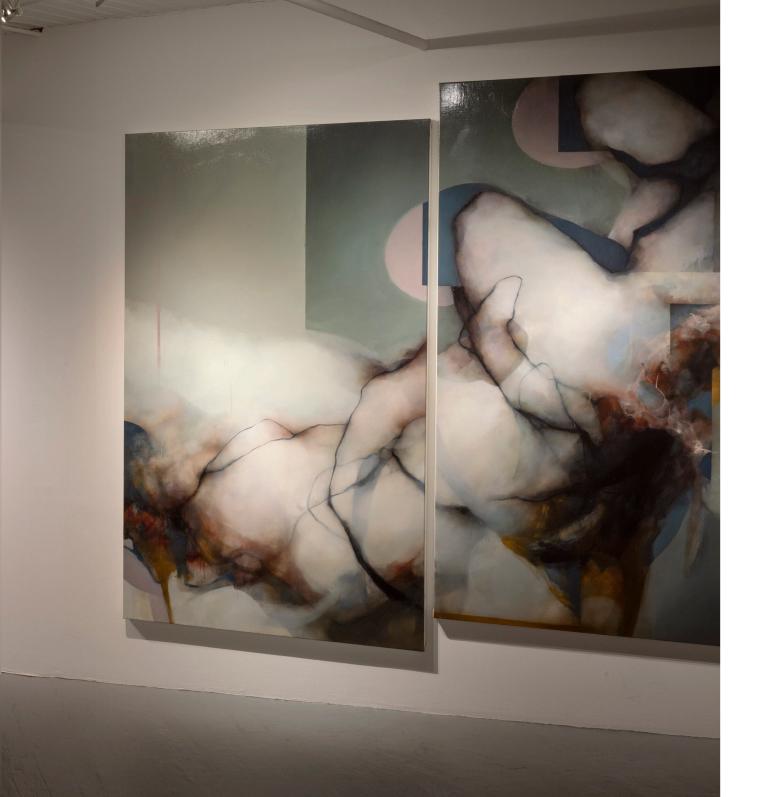
DETAIL

EXHIB ITION PHOTOS

















S E L E C T E X H I B I T I O N S

Solo Exhibitions

2021 Ivy Brown Gallery New York, NY
 Heart Worn Thin
 2014 Bosi Contemporary New York, NY
 The Loss of So Many

2021 Ivy Brown Gallery, New York, NY

Group Exhibitions

	Can you hear the silence
2020	Ivy Brown Gallery, New York, NY 10 under 10
	EndFragment Adapt
2019	Ivy Brown Gallery, New York, NY A Group of Individuals
2017	
2013	Haworth Showroom, New York, NY Abstratcted Space
2010	The Aldyn, New York, NY American Fashion: Designers at the Aldyn Kipton Art Access Soho, NY Urban Utopia
2009	,
2008	Frey Norris Gallery San Francisco, CA Summer Group

2007	Frey Norris Gallery San Francisco, CA Summer Group
2006	Frey Norris Gallery San Francisco, CA Two Paintings with Sculpture
2005	Frey Norris Gallery San Francisco, CA Five Sculptures
2000	APT Gallery London, England Terre a Terre
	Exchange exhibition sponsored by the British Council and Ministere de la
1999	Communaute française. Kursaal Exhibition Center Oostende, Belgium Easter in Oostende- Salon Actuele Kunst International art fair.
1997	Abel Joseph Gallery Brussels, Belgium Breath I Dry Up
1996	Abel Joseph Gallery Brussels, Belgium Displaying Slight Impurities
1995	Centre de Cheques Postaux XV Paris, France Cinq Artistes

1992 Ludwig Drum Factory, Around the Coyote

The Chicago Diversity Show Abel Joseph Gallery Chicago, IL

Chicago, IL

Fresh Show

A B O U T D A V I D M E L L E N

David Mellen (b. 1970, Chicago, IL, USA) attended the American Academy of Art and exhibited his work in his hometown of Chicago until 1994, when he moved to Europe. Over the next five years, he exhibited work in Paris, Brussels and London while working at studios in Germany and Brussels.

After returning to the states and living for a time in Seattle, he moved across the country and now lives with his family in Connecticut. He works in Connecticut and Paris.

"When I start a new painting, it's as if I've forgotten how to paint. I mean, once a painting is finished, that final image is so separate from the painting's beginning, which is buried in this history of false starts and mistakes, that I've forgotten how I went about it. For me, a finished painting is an accumulation of many small decisions which eventually add up to form a final image, but when starting something new, there is no history...there is nothing but a feeling and an idea.

There's a line in Becket's Endgame 'There's something dripping in my head... A heart, a heart in my head.' That's how painting feels to me, slowly accumulating drop by drop."

A B O U T N I N A M D I V A N I

Nina Mdivani is Georgian-born and New York-based independent curator, writer and researcher. Her academic background includes International Relations and Gender Studies from Tbilisi State University, Mount Holyoke College and, most recently, Museum Studies from City University of New York. Nina's book, King is Female, published in October 2018 in Berlin by Wienand Verlag explores the lives of three Georgian women artists and is the first publication to investigate questions of the feminine identity in the context of the Eastern European historical, social, and cultural transformation of the last twenty years.

Nina regularly writes for outlets such as Arte Fuse, White Hot Magazine, Arte & Lusso, Indigo Magazine, Art Spiel. As curator and writer Nina is interested in discovering hidden narratives within dominant cultures with focus on minorities and migrations. Her recent exhibitions among others include This is Not My Tree at NARS Foundation, Brooklyn, Rooms & Beings at 68 Projects, Berlin and New York Meets Tbilisi: Defining Otherness at Kunstraum and Assembly Room, New York City.

Public Digital Art Platform is another new global initiative that is curated by Nina.

ABOUT IVY BROWN GALLERY

Ivy Brown Gallery was founded in 2001 as a result of 9/11 and her commitment to opening doors in her community. The Gallery represents and exhibits contemporary art of all mediums. Dedicated to supporting emerging and established artists, Ivy Brown takes her experience from the commercial arts world and brings it to the fine arts arena. The gallery also curates exhibitions throughout New York City.

Ivy's dedication and belief in art and the critical part it plays in our humanity is the grounding force behind the gallery.



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F O R SUSIE

