

Damian Stamer's Role Models: The Artist Paints Himself Into the Conversation at Freight + Volume

BY MICHAEL DAMIANO | APRIL 11, 2012



Damian Stamer in front of "Trespass," 2012, at his Chapel Hill, North Carolina, studio.

(Photo © Michael Damiano)

"If you were sending a letter to Matthias Weischer, and this letter was a painting, what would you want to say?" Damian Stamer, a 29-year-old painter from North Carolina, mused. We'd been standing in front of a completely blank canvas in his studio at the University of North Carolina, where he's pursuing an MFA. It was January. Within three short months, he had to turn the canvas into one of the centerpieces of his first solo show in New York, opening at Freight + Volume on April 12. The exhibition marks his highest-profile outing yet, following several group shows, booths at Pulse Miami and New York, and a solo show at Mill Fine Art, in Santa Fe.

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Weischer and other contemporary European figurative painters, such as Michaël Borremans and Neo Rauch, are never far from Stamer's mind. He regards them as "painters' painters" who are "interested in the overall tradition of painting, along with the current conversation." Stamer's greatest aspiration is to enter this conversation and, during the past several years, he has created a body of work with which he hopes to achieve that goal.

In 2005, while studying at the Staatliche Akademie der Bildenden Künste (State Academy of Art and Design) in Stuttgart, Germany, Stamer became fixated on the influential European painters who have come to play an important role in his work's development. Since then, he's been engaged in a one-way dialogue with them—responding to their work through his own, without the ability to address them directly. The process forms part of his daily practice. On a table in the corner of his studio, he keeps a dozen or so art books opened to pictures of paintings by Rauch, Borremans, Anselm Kiefer, and others. As he works, he sometimes moves between a wet canvas and the books, consulting them. Recently, before he painted some wood planks, he stood over the table and asked himself: How would Weischer have done this?

Since beginning to focus on these artists, Stamer has developed a robust painterly language of his own. The first step came in 2006 when he painted *Heal*, an energetic composite of disparate figurative elements—from a snow-covered landscape to a tightly rendered urn—stitched together by broad gestural brushstrokes in pinks and purples. *Heal's* combination of figuration and abstraction laid the groundwork for his more recent efforts, and Stamer now regards the painting as an important "breakthrough" piece.

Two years later, he built on *Heal's* foundation by adding a spatial component. In *Szolnok*, 2008, he placed a house and a hyper-realistic apple amid a field of abstraction. The abstract sections include geometric forms such as boxes and planes.

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The contours of these objects, as well as the lines describing the house, recede to a single vanishing point, drawing the viewer's eye to a horizon that is lost behind drips and slathers of paint. Despite the fact that abstract brushwork covers most of the painting, a sense of space prevails.



Stamer has brought together the concerns he explored in these two "stepping-stone" paintings, as the artist himself characterizes them, in a group of works that has occupied him since 2009. In his "South Lowell" series, Stamer interprets scenes from the North Carolina countryside where he grew up, testing the limits of how he can represent space.

He begins some of these paintings, such as *Haymaker*, 2010, by freely applying thick brushstrokes without a view to a final composition. He builds up the abstraction until a sense of space suggests itself to him and then he "carves out" a landscape, as in

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Haymaker's expansive field bisected by a row of hay bales. Although the borders of the figurative scene melt seamlessly into the surrounding abstraction, the center is naturalistic and carefully executed.

In other "South Lowell" paintings, he works directly from photographs, creating a realistic landscape and then adding an abstract intervention, such as the red swath of thick brushstrokes that looms over a shed in *Toler's Fence*, 2010.

Stamer feels that it's natural to integrate these kinds of abstract and figurative elements. In fact, he sees them as indistinguishable in some ways. He argues that the red swath occupies physical space just as the shed does: If you could enter the painting, you could walk around it. The two elements are also painted using the same technique. "Look," he says, pulling up a digital photo of the painting on his computer and zooming in on the shed. "These are just two strokes," he explains, gesturing to demonstrate how he painted the roof and a wall with one quick brushstroke each.

In some of Stamer's most recent works, the dichotomy between abstraction and figuration has broken down even further: Forms emerge from gestural brushstrokes that, isolated, could be transplanted to an Abstract Expressionist canvas.

In a work tentatively titled *Trespass*, 2012, he allowed the edge of a tightly painted stove to drip toward the bottom of the canvas; he rendered some barely identifiable paint cans with a few quick strokes; and when he needed to balance out the blue contour of an object in the center of the painting, he simply dripped some powder-blue paint into a corner of the canvas. Standing back from the finished work in his studio, he told me, "It might be one of the best paintings I've done."

Stamer feels that with the "South Lowell" series, he has found his voice. Now, after years of listening intently to those of other painters, he wants his own to be heard.

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"I saw the Borremans show," Stamer says, referring to the artist's recent exhibition at David Zwirner gallery, in New York. "It would be interesting if he knew who I was. I know how much energy and pleasure it gives me to look at and admire someone's paintings, and it would be nice to be in the conversation with these people."

He's "not expecting that to happen overnight," he's careful to point out, but he feels that his upcoming solo exhibition might be a first step toward that goal. "It's a way to talk to a lot of artists," he explains, before adding, "Hopefully that blank canvas I've got turns into a good conversation starter."