

Doug Argue, Figurative Expressionist

Donald Kuspit

Expressionism throws some terrific ‘fuck yous,’
Baroque doesn’t. Baroque is well-mannered.

— Conversations on Literature and Cinema with
Alberto Arbasino, 2003

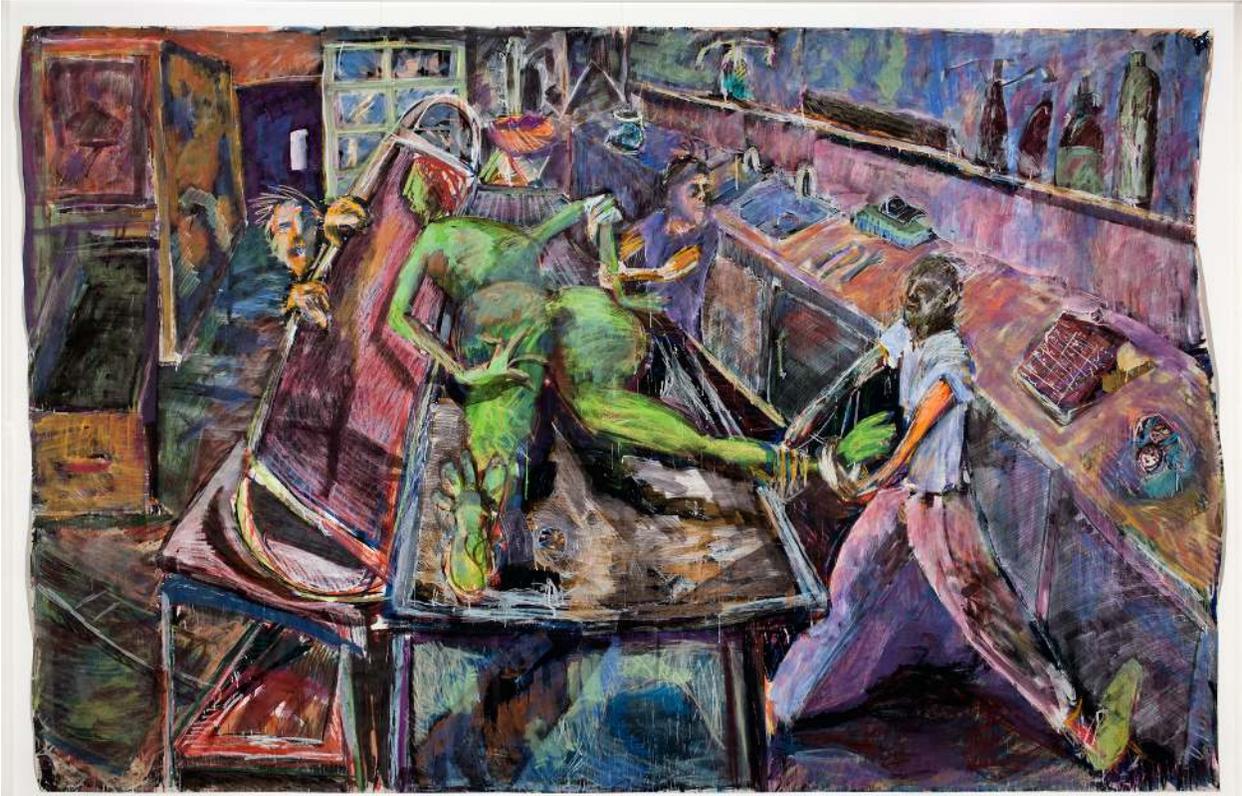
Like the cosmos, Doug Argue began his career with a Big Bang—a large exhibition of expressionist paintings, all with figures, more rather than less bizarre, not to say grotesque—at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota, his hometown. It was an extraordinary moment of recognition for a novice painter, barely out of college, where he took some studio courses, acknowledging a “liking” for the “physicality” of painting, because of his “athletic background,” and for paint as such.⁽¹⁾ Paradoxically, “getting just completely caught up and lost in its fluidity” he was able to find himself—use it to express his strong feelings, with compulsive power, if also a certain reckless spontaneity. He had come into his creative own, more pointedly he had made contact with what Baudelaire called “the furthest depths of the soul,” that is, the unconscious, where “the impossible mingles with the real” in the “intimacy” of “hallucination” and “hysteria.” Expressionistic paintings involve what Freud called “primary process thinking, a developmentally early, primitive system of thought not subject to logic and heavily affect-laden,” “an uninhibited flow of psychic energy providing hallucinatory fulfillment of wishes, as in fantasies and dreams”—anxiety-ridden nightmares, as in Argue’s Untitled figure, 1983, the “breakthrough” work that was the touchstone of the Walker exhibition two years later. He was 25, in the “heate of youth,” as Shakespeare put it—he “feverishly painted for a year and half for the show,” indicating just how hot he was. But he was not “the emotional lover” that Shakespeare said one is in one’s twenties, but “a conflict-ridden angry young man,” the title of a 1984 painting, more particularly an “angst-filled young man,” the expression of Angst being the trademark of German expressionist painting—the painting that made “the biggest impression” on him when he travelled through Europe in his twenties.

“German expressionist painting influenced the way I built up paint and the way I used the figure,” Argue stated. “I was drawn to it because I was not particularly interested in the classical notions of beauty in relation to the figure, but in expression.” He was particularly taken with the work of “Edvard Munch, my fellow Norwegian,”⁽²⁾ suggesting that he identified with Munch—and his suffering. Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*, 1910 is

the most famous painting of a man—supposedly Munch himself—driven mad by anxiety, tormented by Angst, experiencing a psychotic break with reality and with that the breakdown of his self. He is having a nightmare from which he cannot awake. A nightmare is an expression of psychotic anxiety, an emotional catastrophe, the Freudian psychoanalyst Ernst Jones writes, and, as the existential psychoanalyst Rollo May points out, anxiety or Angst—anguish—derives from the Latin “angor,” “choking, clogging,” which derives from the ancient Greek “ankho,” “strangle,” implying that experiencing nightmarish anxiety means that one feels one is being choked or strangled to death: that is, suffering from Todesangst, death anxiety. Argue’s early expressionist paintings are fraught with death anxiety—not simply fear of death but choking on death—living one’s own death, experiencing psychic death while physically alive, the experience of psychic death distorting one’s sense of one’s body. The figures in Argue’s expressionist paintings are embodiments of death, manifestations of living death, not the skeletons leading the dance of a death in medieval art but agitated figures with a certain affinity to those in the famous collection of the “Artistry of the Mentally Ill” published by the German psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn in 1922. Every one of Argue’s painterly gestures is in emotional effect a death rattle, or at least a sign of that sickness unto death that Kierkegaard called depression. His figures are more disturbed—psychotically insane—than Munch’s—they still look real rather than surreal, as Argue’s are—his gesturalism is emblematic of “pure psychic automatism,” “exempt from any control exercised by reason, and any aesthetic or moral concern,” and his images fuse “dream and reality,” which are the ways André Breton defined Surrealism. And every one of them is implicitly a self-representation, that is, a projection of his own anxiety, in an attempt to get rid of it. They are his friends, people he hung out with in the Gopher Bar, 1987, every one of them a kind of rodent, which is what gophers are. They are known for their tunneling activity and destructiveness—the bar is a kind of tunnel in hell inhabited by destructive human beings.

It seems out of place in the “heartland” of America, where Regionalism—epitomized by the realistic and nationalistic painting of Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood, and John Steuart Curry, which celebrated the homespun virtues of the down to earth citizens of the Midwest—reigned, at least until international abstraction, epitomized by the New York School of Abstract Expressionism, became de rigueur after the second world war, relegated Regionalism and nationalism to the dustbin of history. Argue’s figurative expressionism seems like another slap in the face—kick in the groin?—of Regionalist realism, for it is not stereotypically “nice” and “friendly,” as Minnesotans are said to be, but nasty and hostile. His youthful works are big, bold, brash, blasphemous, in-your-face “fuck you” paintings, suggesting how fucked up Argue himself was at the time. They’re a vicious assault on the virtues of the Midwest, suggesting it is a Big Lie, even as they show Argue struggling to be true to himself and with that authentic. They’re existentialist paintings rather than essentialist paintings, as classically beautiful painting and regionalist paintings are, the former idealizing the body, the latter idealizing a society. Argue’s existential expressionism is in effect a debunking of idealizing classicism and idealizing realism, and as such is surreal, in view of Breton’s remark that

surrealism “puts an end to idealism,” as expressionism does to classical beauty, with its idealization of the human figure.



Doug Argue, *Morgue*, 1985, 72 x 96 in. Pastel on paper. Collection of Weisman Art Museum.

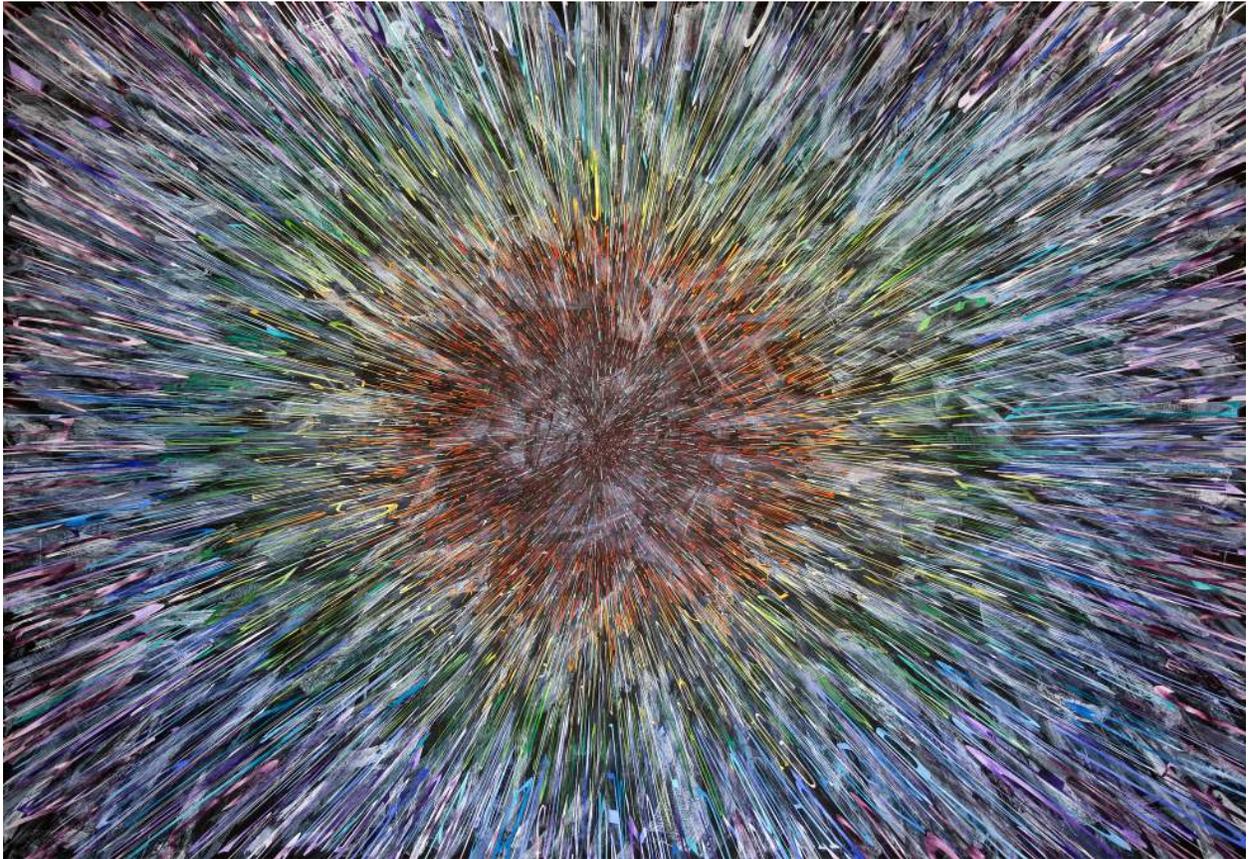
Why would Argue, a physically healthy, robust young man in his early twenties, make so many morbid, “sick,” ugly paintings, full of aggression, rage, and what Freud called “strangled affect,” which seem to inform his gestures? In an *Untitled* self-portrait he shows himself as a homeless person in hell, as the demonic creatures in the swamp in which he stands suggests. In *Bob*, 1984 he shows a man with a pistol blowing his brains out, and in *Angry Young Man*, also 1984, a pistol takes aim at a figure, implicitly himself, holding a knife as though ready to do battle. Or kill himself? These works, and many more from this period in his life, suggests he was experiencing an identity crisis. “Identity crises are frequent in adolescence, when they appear to be triggered by the combination of sudden increase in the strength of the drives”—symbolized by the bold, brash gestures and flashy, flagrantly in your face colors in Argue’s expressionistic paintings—‘with sudden changes in the role the adolescent is expected to adopt socially, educationally, or vocationally.’ Vocationally, Argue knew he wanted to be an artist, but he knew he didn’t want to teach art, his university education in it being problematic, to say the least. And he was a social misfit, as he suggests, that is, he felt he did not fit in the society in which he grew up. The psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, who developed the concept of identity crisis, argued that it was usually resolved in early adolescence, but contemporary psychoanalysts point out that the question “who am I?” remains a

constant in life, and becomes a particular concern when life becomes difficult, and when one experiences a trauma, a “break in the continuity of life,” as the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott calls it.

I suggest that Argue had two serious traumas in his life, both of which inform his expressionist painting: the violence of his gestures and scariness of his paintings is emblematic of the violence and scariness of his alcoholic father—“my dad was pretty scary...He was violent. He hit me. By the time he got to my (five) younger siblings, he was worn out of hitting.” Later, when he was no longer a child but an adolescent, and a student at Bemidji State University in Minnesota, he received a phone call notifying him that his “older brother died in a car accident.” He made an *Untitled* painting in 1983 “about that phone call, that memory.” A touchstone for all his expressionist figures, the self-portrait shows him in agony, his body twisted in tormenting pain, his mouth wide open in a scream, his sharp teeth ready to tear to pieces the driver who killed his brother, his aggressive rage a response to the narcissistic injury caused by the loss of his brother (he was looking for brothers when he went to the Gopher Bar). The death of his older brother, no doubt someone he looked up to, led him to leave Bemidji State University, the scene where he received news of the crime, and transfer to the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis for his last two years of academic study. He “just somehow didn’t want to go back to that scene” of the crime, which had in effect de-humanized him, that is, turned him into the despairing, raging, vicious beast in his self-portraits. Like Narcissus, he looked into the mirror of art, but in self-hatred rather than self-love. Death continued to haunt him, as *Morgue*, 1985 indicates. It is an expressionistic memento mori of the time he worked in a “hospital morgue,” “pulling the bodies out and putting them on the table” for an autopsy, which he sometimes had to help with. “For a kid with a wild imagination its was almost too much, but it was good.”

The first German expressionist were called “Die Wilden,” the Wild Ones, and the second wave of German expressionists who took the art world by storm early in the 1980s were called “Die Neue Wilden,” the New Wild Ones, and Argue was one of them. His figures are as full of pandemonium as the expressionist figures in Georg Baselitz’s pandemonium paintings, and as full of storm and stress—*Sturm und Drang*—as the expressionist paintings exhibited in Berlin’s The Storm Gallery—Galerie Der Sturm—when it existed, from 1910 to 1932, when the Nazis closed it. Argue’s expressionist paintings are even more wild, for his figures seem to fall apart, often being a patchwork—a sort of crazy quilt—of colors, often gratingly at odds. The renaissance, not to say resurrection of expressionist art in the 1980s, confirms that they were degenerate times, to allude to the fact that the Nazis thought it was a degenerate art. And it was, as scholars have ironically pointed out, for the degeneracy of expressionist figures—modernist figures in general, be they cubist, futurist, abstract, Dadaist et al bespeak what the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut famously called the Tragic Man of modern society, with its rampant alienation and anomie leading to “disintegration anxiety,” the suffering of “a self struggling to maintain its cohesion.”(3) In Argue’s self-portraits he shows his body—the first (primary) self, as Freud said—disintegrating or degenerating, a sum of incommensurate parts unable to cohere into a seamless whole—body parts at odds with

each other rather than harmoniously integrated, and thus forming a beautiful body, as in classical art. As though in despair, Argue emphasizes the discrepancy, at oddness, of the body's parts, implying the body can never be repaired, that the polite uniform surface it has in socially proper portraits was a lie. There is an incurable despair in Argue's portraits, be they of himself or others, confirming his insight into the depths of suffering.



Doug Argue, *Genesis*, 2007-2009, 160 x 230 in. Oil on linen. Private Collection. Courtesy of the artist.

Argue's figurative expressionism is a degenerate art in more ways than one, for it is a celebration of degenerates, "people peeing on my door at night" when he lived in "a seedy part of Minneapolis that had seen better days but was pulsing with rowdy activity." "There were people evangelizing on soap boxes, and some stabbings, and prostitutes, and pool sharks." He identifies with these social outsiders by painting them, confirming that he was one of them, as he was at the time—the outsider who suddenly not to say unexpectedly became a successful insider with his exhibition of expressionist paintings at the Walker Art Center, a major museum. There is a sense of loneliness that haunts Argue's figures. They seem isolated and alienated however much they may socialize with each other in some bar—compensated by Argue's manic gestures, distorting their appearance so that they seem alive rather than the living dead, as the bizarre figures in the underground—hadean—bar seem to be. Argue's figurative

expressionist paintings show his season in hell, to allude to Rimbaud's poem. They also suggest that his senses are disordered, making him a seer, as Rimbaud said, that is, a visionary—an artist able to make unconscious feeling conscious and with that come into his creative own. However social their scenes, Argue's expressionistic paintings are profoundly personal: for him self-expression is self-analysis.

The radical change of style evident in *Untitled*, 1994, with its orderly row of chickens—animals caged rather than running wild like the human animals in Argue's expressionist works—and steep one point perspective confirms that Argue has at last integrated and centered himself, and with that matured. The even more extraordinary *Genesis*, 2007-2009 shows that the Big Bang with which Argue began his career continues to reverberate, now with a new force, integrity, and authenticity: Argue's art, and with that Argue, for his art is the instrument of his self-expression, not to say self-creation, is no longer disintegrated and rancid, but whole and oddly wholesome. **WM**

Notes

1. All quotations from Argue are from "Ideas in Paint," Claude Peck's interview with him, "Doug Argue talks about his sometimes frightening childhood, trouble at art school and inspiration," *Doug Argue, Letters to the Future* (Milan: Skira, 2020), 35-43

2. Between 1851-1920 hundreds of thousands of Norwegians came to Minnesota. The Twin Cities, Minneapolis and St. Paul, are the unofficial capital of Norwegian Americans. Their Protestant work ethic is alive and well in Argue, who can paint all day every day of the week, as he has told me.

3. Heinz Kohut, *The Restoration of the Self* (New York: International Universities Press, 1977), 222

By DONALD KUSPIT, April 2022

DONALD KUSPIT

Donald Kuspit is one of America's most distinguished art critics. In 1983 he received the prestigious Frank Jewett Mather Award for Distinction in Art Criticism, given by the College Art Association. In 1993 he received an honorary doctorate in fine arts from Davidson College, in 1996 from the San Francisco Art Institute, and in 2007 from the New York Academy of Art. In 1997 the National Association of the Schools of Art and Design presented him with a Citation for Distinguished Service to the Visual Arts. In 1998 he received an honorary doctorate of humane letters from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. In 2000 he delivered the Getty Lectures at the University of Southern California. In 2005 he was the Robertson Fellow at the University of Glasgow. In 2008 he received the Tenth Annual Award for Excellence in the Arts from the Newington-Cropsey Foundation. In 2013 he received the First Annual Award for Excellence in Art Criticism from the Gabarron Foundation. He has received fellowships from the Ford Foundation, Fulbright Commission, National Endowment for the Arts, National Endowment for the Humanities, Guggenheim Foundation, and Asian Cultural Council, among other organizations.