



Mark Dutcher

Solway Jones, Los Angeles, USA

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On the first Saturday of September, Los Angeles, like many cities that weekend, was overwhelmed with gallery openings. Typical of LA, a preponderance of the exhibitions promoted the young and the restless – those who've graduated from area MFA programmes over the past few years. Yet on the outskirts, removed from what felt like a homogeneous vortex of the next new things becoming the next old things, other aesthetic prognosticators lurked. Mark Dutcher, a native of Orange County (now residing in Los Angeles), was among the latter.

Dutcher's exhibition 'Come and Go' was his third solo show of the year and ran simultaneously with his 'Gone' at the Santa Monica Museum of Art. On the surface Dutcher's paintings are simple, alive with radiant colours actively and specifically placed over a canvas in a commingling of expressive gesture and geometric form. On further consideration Dutcher's canvases offer more, furnishing these surface qualities as a medium between the here and now and the hereafter. Take *The Light Pours Out of Me* (2006): slightly larger than six feet square, the work was dominated by its yellow ground and the pencil-drawn circular form skirting within its boundaries. Surrounding and hovering over this mandala were various abstract blotches, spheres, hourglass shapes, scrawls approaching recognizable forms, and the plainly imagistic (such as a pipe borrowed from René Magritte). Bold in its rough-hewn presence, Dutcher's imagery is a veil for his true subject, death, and its relationship to representation and commemoration.

In earlier work Dutcher often employed *trompe l'œil* window sills and cupboards. Vessels such as urns or vases could be found on or in these cabinets, along with the artist's signature circular hourglass, and various floating formed and deformed symbols. Represented in crude but true perspective, Dutcher's shelving spaces appeared to reference the moment when painting discovered perspectival space, and thus when the real and the represented merged (think of Roman frescoes in family tombs). Concurrently they drew on Jasper Johns, who likewise sought to address the painted canvas as a partition between actual and depicted spaces. (Dutcher's work remains indebted to Johns' *Target with Four Faces* of 1955, its four visages poking out from individual compartments above a circular target.) Dutcher, however, addresses the question of painting as a transitional limit between two spaces with a more paranormal outlook; his canvases negotiate a liminal state between the depicted and the recollected, emphasizing a congruity of death and representation.

The Dead Speak (2006) was particularly reticent. As in all of Dutcher's recent mandala paintings, the round form that dominated the field alternated between various possible presences. Was it a whirlpool of effects and affects of the once living? Was it a record spinning, the record as the afterlife of past history? Or was it a halo of bright light, like one that may wash over us near death? *The Dead Speak* was apparently all of these. With various forms floating outside its central orbit, only scant moments were pulled into the vortex of the ring's energy – most notably, a face represented in black paint applied directly from the tube. The face was crudely presented, as if not a face at all; it seemed to be both becoming recognizable and simultaneously slipping into the annals of abstract memory as grey matter. In similar scrawled application a corresponding form remained grey and amorphous, lying beneath the face near the circle's edge, perhaps further from the slippage between states.

A perceptible benefit of Dutcher's age (in contrast to those aforementioned MFAs) is his organically evolving aesthetic and maturity in balancing the personal with the common. Dutcher acknowledges the effect of the AIDS epidemic on his work, engaging the inevitable sense of loss and memory attending death without weighting his work in sentimentality. Central to his recent work, the pencil-drawn, spherical mandala recalls ash and dust in its hazy presence. Each line lies on the surface of the canvas like cremated remains (a recognizable form here or there, but mostly lacking assimilation and left to the imagination). In approaching such grave concerns Dutcher confronts the problem of commemoration; how the dead are to be remembered in represented form. Although his paintings commemorate no one in particular, Dutcher's work provides a vessel for grief (not unlike the two empty pillows in Felix Gonzalez-Torres' untitled billboard from 1991). They stand resolute as the medium between here and the hereafter, implying that a memorial should be a metaphysical experience, near death itself, rather than a vain attempt at a constructed commemoration lacking such universal ideals.

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