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Seen From Above  
An Interview with artist Daniel Kohn  
By David McNair

As one of many visual artists who took part in World Views, a cultural program offering vacant office space in Tower One of the World Trade Center, Daniel Kohn painted several views of the New York landscape from his 91<sup>st</sup> floor studio. Of course, on September 11, 2001 the landscape paintings that Kohn produced during his residency in 1998-99, which he says "embody the physical sensations of being up there in the Towers," took on a new significance. In a matter of hours they were transformed from simple meditations on place into haunting images of an interior view that no longer existed.



In the spring of 2002, Kohn was commissioned by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority to create an installation of his paintings in Grand Central Terminal's Vanderbilt Hall. The installation called "Seen from Above" and comprised of two large-scale landscape paintings went up on July 19, 2002. The paintings presented striking views—one looking west towards New Jersey, the second facing east to Brooklyn—as seen from the upper floors of the World Trade Center, thereby inviting the viewers to contemplate these views from their own individual perspective. "We hope that Seen From Above will provide people with an opportunity to reflect and perhaps find some solace in the aftermath of September 11," said MTA Chairman Peter S. Kalikow "This installation is another reminder of how important the arts are in helping us deal with an almost incomprehensible event. By presenting this exhibition in Grand Central we hope to create a contemplative environment that will help people heal." Indeed, the reactions to Kohn's installation, as recorded in a guest book that viewers were invited to write in, reveal a desire both as individuals and as a nation to fully grieve the events of September 11, 2001. As Kohn says, "I think we all need, as individuals and as a society, time to think through what has happened to us."

*Oldspeak* recently caught up with Kohn to ask him about his studio experience in the towers, how 9/11 suddenly transformed his life and work, and to weigh in on the discussion about what to do with the WTC site.

Oldspeak: You had a studio space in the World Trade Center. How did that come about and what was it like?

Kohn: I had started two large interior/still life paintings in France before my move to the U.S. in 1996, which depicted objects on a round table. Because of the scale and choice of colors, the rear of the table looked like a horizon. When I visited the bar at the top of the WTC in 1996, I was completely taken by the view towards Brooklyn, with its layering of elements: the receding city, Far Rockaway, and the sea beyond. I got very excited when I found out there was a residency starting up which offered

studio space on the 91st floor of Tower One. I was planning to continue these large still lifes, but to do so while looking at the actual horizon. I was curious about what such a superimposition of things would do. The reality of the residency was of course quite different. The studio was a 10,000 square foot space, shared among eleven artists, with east and north views. The interior was absolutely raw—concrete floor and pulp ceiling—and reminded me of nothing so much as a parking garage in the sky. I moved in with all my work, and did work on the still lifes and some interiors I was doing for a hotel up in Lenox, Massachusetts, but spent a lot of the first three months just looking at the view and pacing my studio.

Obviously the meaning of your WTC paintings changed after 9/11, but what do you think remains from your original intentions for the paintings?

They remain beautiful images which embody the physical sensations of being up there in the towers. Looking out, seeing the days change, feeling the towers sway in strong wind, hear them creak. I did not like the towers, but they nonetheless imprinted themselves in me. The paintings which I started there were about looking out, but also the relation of looking to the movement of the person looking in the space. As you moved going about your business, the view would shift. As you got closer to the window, the East River would open up below. Then you would see the jagged roofs and forms of the other skyscrapers, vainly reaching up. They were all so small compared to us.

There was also the fear of being up so high. Feeling the fragility of the building around us, wondering how it could possibly hold up, yet somehow confident in the mass belief that they would. I often wondered how they would deconstruct them (take them down) when the time came. And there were glorious skies, clouds passing, crisp or wispy, and days where we were enshrouded in mist, or even above the clouds. Much of my work became shaped by the way Brooklyn became suspended between the East River and the sea beyond Far Rockaway, the sky above.

You live in Brooklyn and watched the towers fall from across the river. What was it like watching them fall knowing you had spent that time creating your paintings there?

It's hard to say anything other than the fact that it was devastating. I think we all (I am speaking really of those who saw it with their own eyes, since I cannot really imagine what it was like to view it through the media) underwent the typical trauma of war. We witnessed the unthinkable. Well no. What I mean is that what was thinkable but relegated to what does not happen in "real life", or at least not to us, happened... to us. This represents a fracture in one's sense of reality, since henceforth anything can happen. Your city can be bombed, you can die of anthrax; you or your family can actually come to harm. These are things we all learn in small ways throughout life. But rarely in such an overwhelming way. Rarely is it a mass experience. At least in our society.

How soon after the tragedy did you begin to realize their significance of your WTC paintings? Was it difficult to accept that significance? Did it feel imposed upon you at first?

The paintings I did during and after my residency were informed by the view and formed by the place from which they were painted, but they were rather bucolic. Painting is always transformed by history, but this usually happens over several generations, and this process typically becomes visible after the death of the artist. On that morning, in the space of two hours, these quiet images took on a whole new meaning, one which was obviously neither foreseen nor willed.

What were your expectations before your installation "Seen from Above" went up? What did you hope to accomplish?

I'm not sure how clear I was before the installation about what it was meant to accomplish. I felt that there was a need for everyone, not just the heroes and the martyrs, to come to terms with what had happened in their city. To do this we wanted to offer a place of peace, of meaningful silence at the center of the city, a place where they could remember, and perhaps take stock of feelings and thoughts which had not been allowed to

surface.

After the paintings came down in August 2002, I felt I knew better what they were about or for and that they had accomplished what they were painted for. They were to a great degree pieces meant to aid in healing, to open up a space of reflection in a city with little room for restful thought. It is rare for the artist nowadays to be positioned on the terrain of the healer. But in this case that is exactly where these paintings were meant to stand.

There was music accompanying the installation. How important was that to the overall experience of viewing the installation?

Quite significant really. Grand Central Station is a busy place. Vanderbilt Hall, where the paintings were hung, is bisected by the passageway connecting 42<sup>nd</sup> Street to the Grand Concourse, through which everyone using Grand Central goes to reach the track. So the music served as a sort of acoustic cocoon. It buffered the space from the rest of the station. In addition it created a rhythmic and melodic bed for the gaze to wander upon. I can't really imagine these images without the music.



There was a comment book available for people to write in. Can you share some of the things that people wrote?

Yeah. I'll leaf through it and read you a few...

*"Thank you for providing a place where I can sort out all my feelings about that tragic day which I will certainly never forget. It's a good thing somebody was on my side after I delivered a package to the 89<sup>th</sup> floor at 1 World Trade Center at 8:30 a.m. on that horrible day. God Bless You and God Bless America."*

Here's another one. This was the one that sort of made me emotional... anyway...

*"I lost a son and a daughter in the World Trade Center. Though the pain is still with me, seeing your work helped me emotionally a great deal."*

*"Dear Daniel, brings tears to my eyes. Thank you for your thoughtfulness."*

These are very personal.

Yes, many of these were addressed directly to me, which is unusual in a guest book at a show.

Why do you think that was?

I don't know. (pause) *"Thank you Daniel for love and inspiration. I thought there were no more tears left until I entered upon this magnificent space."*

*"I was touched by the sight. I was so touched by the sight. I lost a family member in Building 1. I am grateful for a peaceful reflection. Thank you."*

Here's an unusual one, just someone who felt inspired to write down their own story...

*"I'd like to take this opportunity to thank the crew of the southbound Number 4 train I was on that day America was attacked. We were stuck*

*between two stations for about 40 minutes that morning. The tunnel had a lot of smoke in it and people were scared. The crew kept us informed as best they could, but I could tell they were not getting any information but they did their best to keep the situation calm. The train was moving to Fulton Street and we were told to evacuate by moving to the first car to exit. Once on the platform, we discovered the station was locked up and we could not get out. I looked at my watch at about 10:28 a.m. when the people started to scream at the large billowing clouds of smoke that were pumping into the station. We retreated back into the train. The operator was the last back on. He made sure everyone got back on. The view of the station was gone because of the thick smoke. The train was eventually backed up to the City Hall station where we were evacuated. The crew kept their cool. No one was hurt. Thank you, MTA, for this exhibit. New Yorkers are the best."*

It's hard to read these without having a knot in my throat.

Yeah. I bet. What's the feeling of reading these?

I haven't finished processing all that stuff, all the emotions tied to the event.

In a way, it is sort of unprocessable.

I think it is, though..I mean, processing might be the wrong word, but I think there is letting emotions out but there are not many places to do that or times or whatever. One of the things that felt like the show was a success was that it allowed people to have a place to let things out, to cry or to not. Because so many people are just moving ahead without taking the time for quiet reflection. Here's another....

*"Thank you Daniel Kohn and the MTA for sharing beauty with all of us passersbys. It makes me think that although there have been acts of evil, thank goodness we can balance that with beauty, kindness and heart."*

Oh, here's another one I wanted to read...

*"At first I was weary of any attempt to make art relating to the loss of life at the World Trade Center. The paintings seem too benign, the environment too easy. But something in me clicked and I realized my own delight at the views of the city from the tops of these Towers—a delight in this landscape still beautiful even if in its celebration of man's intended impact on the landscape. These paintings put me back into that stance of one small observer suspended in air inside the eyes of so many of New York fellow residents and visitors to this city of mankind and I realized the vision in life we hold in common and hold sometimes only for an instant."*

One last one...

*"Thank you for this very powerful experience. I just sat for an hour, tears streaming down, feeling more connected with everyone around me than I had in a while. This beautiful contemplated haven in the middle of the busy city is a perfect resting spot to sit and slow down and admire the amazing beauty of our world and our fellow human beings. Thank you for that power of peace (and what I will take with me forever because of it)."*

What was it like getting such raw, personal reactions to your work? Did you feel you were providing a public service in a way? Obviously people seemed to use the installation to reflect and grieve. Do think reflection and honest grief has been absent in our national response to 9/11?

I find it hard to think outside of the experience of a New Yorker. I realize that I don't know the rest of the country very well. In New York there is a clear need to let this event resonate. To come to terms with it on a deep level, as Frank Herbert says in *Dune*, to let the fear go through us, to feel it, and to come out on the other side. The energy in New York is to move on and forget. To erase. I was shocked at how quickly the site was cleared up. I think what started as a rescue effort and continued as a search for remains was actually quickly overshadowed by the will to erase. This was compounded by the fact that the site was made off limits (off sight) by its determination as a crime scene. We all needed to see in order to

acknowledge the truth of what we had lived. I think there is actually very little voyeurism in this. Perhaps a society calls voyeuristic our need to see the violence it is capable of giving or taking.

So I think there is a clear need in New York to have places where one can stop, reflect, think over, or let our emotions wash over us. Not to dwell on them perversely, but to feel them, and come out on the other side. It is not just the paintings, but really the whole installation, the music, and the intimacy of the arrangement of benches which brought you close to the monumentality as well as the peacefulness of the view which the paintings represented, which gave people such a place.

How was this experience gratifying or rewarding to you as an artist?

I know it sounds corny, but after the paintings came down, I felt really honored to have been able to make such a gift, to be able to give back to strangers and friends alike.

There are many ideas floating around about what should be done with Ground Zero. Do you have any ideas about what should be done with the space?

A consensus amongst the people I know is that we should not hurry, that time is necessary to digest what happened and to begin to formulate a long-term symbolic response. In the U.S. the economic has so much weight that it is hard for people to express their dismay at the predominance of economic rationales. But in this case there is a clear outcry, in my eyes, against the immediate stated intention of the Port Authority and Silverstein, the leaseholder, to rebuild the exact same amount of office space. I subscribe to the idea that a mass burial site should be acknowledged as such before it is built over. It is not a question of making downtown Manhattan into a cemetery, but there are many possible uses which can accommodate recognition of what happened.

My work is concerned with place in a very broad sense. But I want to express something here which is prompted by your question.... From the time the towers came down, I have been disturbed, annoyed, by the names which have been used to refer to the events which brought down the towers and the location of the disaster. 9/11, Ground Zero...I keep trying to use other terms in my speech, which always seem on some level like avoidances. This may be a form of denial on my part, but it is also a need to avoid the stereotypical. My primary analysis of those events was that they were planned to use our own stereotypes and thus to strike at the core of our own myths. The response by the American administration was a similarly stereotypical recourse to war. I even feel that our response as individuals followed very specific scripts of grief, anger and impotence, which in many people leads to a desire for revenge.

A friend who is both a therapist and a secretary at a Wall Street law firm told me of a woman at her firm who had expressed that we should kill the people who had done this. Susan then asked the woman if this was her conscious thought-out response or a purely emotional wish. The woman had to acknowledge that it was rather emotional and that it might not be the same had she time to think it through. I think we all need, as individuals and as a society, time to think through what has happened to us.

You find yourself in a place where your private work as an artist has intersected and met with a significant moment in history. How do you respond to that? Do you think the private and public essence of art must come together before art can be significant? That is, does history intervene to preserve and save artists and art movements from oblivion, or does art intervene to preserve and save history?

I wish I knew which came first...I think



art becomes significant for many different reasons.

I have always been aware that societies simplify the past, that a confused mass of painters was resumed into two or three figurehead movements which hid as much as they revealed. I felt a good deal of skepticism when people complained that the present art world was more confused and less meaningful than the past had been. I simply felt that history and culture would make its choice, simplify everything, neither for the better nor for the worst, and that most of us would disappear into oblivion.

I know my work is significant to this place now, but I have no idea whether it will remain so, or if what is significant to the now will appear the most dated and therefore trivial later on. I think what makes it significant is this preoccupation with place and how place resonates through form. And I am good at that. For my own reasons I wanted to paint in those buildings. Because of my own susceptibility to place, I was still painting from that information two and a half years later when that place was destroyed.

What made it relevant, to some at least, was that it was a view from inside. It did not represent the towers as these monsters or icons from below or afar. It was not concerned with their stereotypical existence as landmarks or icons of world capital. Instead, it was concerned with the physical sensation with what it felt like to be in those towers and look out.

Looking is not some neutral mechanical act. You look with you eyes, your mind, your body, with the soles of your feet. You look with you culture and your past. So I painted these views with my own complexity. They contain some of the towers, some of New York, some of France and India where I was born. They are French and American. And they echo what it felt like, to stand at a window or walk before them as a human standing on two legs, subject to vertigo but also able to master it, capable of acts of kindness or petty revenge, etc.

I think artists, by offering a representation of the world as they see it, from where they stand, with all of their complexity and humanity allow others to see better their own position, to better understand their own gift of sight.

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The Rutherford Institute P.O. Box 7482 Charlottesville, VA 22906-7482  
 Phone :: 434.978.3888 (8:30 AM - 5:00 PM Eastern) | Fax :: 434.978.1789  
 E-mail :: [staff@rutherford.org](mailto:staff@rutherford.org) | Technical comments :: [webdesign@rutherford.org](mailto:webdesign@rutherford.org)  
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