

# DANIEL SENISE



## **Interview between Daniel Senise and Brett Littman, The Drawing Center New York**

Brett Littman: You're considered a painter, but your work for me has always been grounded in printmaking and collage. Can you describe your process and explain how you view it as an exploration of painting?

Daniel Senise: I feel I am exploring the idea of what it means to be a painter today. I started in art school painting but then I realized that I was not interested in the materiality of paint. I have always been more interested in image over the process of painting. But since I make my work with my hands, use material and the work is on panels, I haven't minded begin called a painter over the years. I guess it just seems this is the best description of what I do.

BL: At what point did you abandon brushes and paint and start making your constructed images?

DS: I didn't study art for a long period of time. When I started painting in my studio in the 1980s, three years later I was showing in the Biennale in São Paulo, so I was still learning how to approach my work. At that time, I was not thinking about something external from the process of representation. I was representing things, constructing

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floorboard and other studio debris. I thought that this image was just as important for me as the original image on the front of the fabric – and after that I started to work on both sides. This process went on for five years and I didn't know exactly what to do with these prints but in 1992/1993, I realized that this way of making imprints of floors and rusted nails was very profound for me personally. It allowed me to represent myself using my immediate physical surroundings. Later, I decided to start an archive of these cloth imprints of surfaces and conditions in the real world and then used them to create illusions or represent images.

BL: Did you feel this idea of the implosion of the real world into the image was in some ways like Robert Rauschenberg's Combines or Jasper John's assemblages?

DS: I have a friend, an American painter. He told me, "These fabrics with the prints are fantastic. You just have to hang them on the wall." I told him, "You are American. I'm Brazilian. I'm much more baroque." I think Robert Rauschenberg's approach to his work, in a way, is more technical, and definitely less baroque. I think I have this approach, which is different, which is much more European in a way. I think about how to do something and then I mix everything. I don't respect boundaries very well.

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floors, I was living in Brazil, but I was coming to America very often. I had more options for wooden floors in the US because the weather is dryer here. I used to go to Connecticut a lot and found big empty buildings and was able to print the floors of these abandon spaces.

BL: Do any of the floor patterns come from historical buildings or have any historical significance?

DS: In 2000, when I decided to represent spaces with the floors, the big question was for me whether or not I would represent the place from where the print came from. In the end, after a lot of deliberations, I decided not to be so specific because I don't want to put so much sociology, anthropology or history in my work. However, there have been some occasions when I do want to represent a specific place. I did that in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Niterói, Rio. I used a carpet to represent some specific birds that live in this area. At the end of the exhibition that work ended up staying at the museum – which was great – since in this piece is so specific to that environment. In 2004, when I got back to Brazil after living for four years in New York, I started using all the fabrics that I had imprinted in the US. So, for example when I represent a large parquet floor in my work each swatch of cloth had come from a different place. For me it was like a crowd of different people in the works – each cut swatch of the fabric has its own quality. This was a very freeing

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impulse ....

DS: Yes, that is true. I went to Paris in 2000 with my family and had one of those guys who sits by the Seine cut a silhouette of my daughter. I watched as he folded the paper, cut the silhouette and then he discarded the remains of the paper. I was really interested in these discarded pieces of paper so I made a deal with a group of these guys to buy 2,000 of these paper scraps – so now I have an archive of 2,000 people who went to Paris and had these silhouettes made. It's like the same as the cloth – but right now I don't know what to do so it might sit in the studio for 16 or 17 years until I figure out what I can do with them. One collection that I recently used were old art invitations and catalogs which I shredded to make paper pulp and later used to make a new installation and several wall works.

BL: I want to jump forward to a more recent body of work entitled Biógrafo (Biographers). I know you began the series after the death of your father and that you are planning to make 85 works in the series. This series seems to be quite open, and in a way, directly about life's sometime unfortunate circumstances. In the exhibition at Nara Roesler, we are going to open with the three most recent Biógrafo's that you have made. Is there something that is particularly interesting or innovative for you in these works?

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Europe – so the range of images and types of people is pretty diverse. Looking at these photos I realized that I don't know who these people are and where the photos were taken. As well, my father, who was a difficult person and never really spoke about these photos, is no longer around to answer these questions. My way of processing these images through my own work was to create the Biógrafo series. These works were composed as a rectangle in a rectangle – which for me allowed for the exploration of the idea of the original and its representation.

BL: Does the rectangle reference a printed snapshot?

DS: No because in reality his camera took square photos. Although thinking about my father's life as I was looking at these photos was genesis of the project it is not directly related to what he was doing. I think the rectangle in the rectangle is a visual form that allows me to collect and analyze information over a long period of time. For me this series is about finding sense in things I don't know yet.

BL: I want to formally describe the processes for making a Biógrafo. The inner rectangle is always the same size and the aluminum panels are also uniform. While you are working on these sometimes you turn the panel on your table so you can construct it from many different perspectives. Is that basically a correct synopsis?

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simultaneous orientations. If I am trying to make a floor and wall I just make the work from one position. I really think these works are a kind of visual problem solving for me, a kind of game, where basically at the end of it I will have found 85 solutions.

BL: A theme we are going to explore in other works in this exhibition is the tension in your most recent work between making and unmaking. I wanted to try and contextualize this by discussing two earlier works that I think illuminate the more reductive aesthetic tendencies in your output since 2011. The first work I want to talk about is the large-scale installation you made in 2011 entitled 2892. Can you tell me more about this project and elucidate a bit about what you were thinking about when you made it?

DS: The ideas that I was thinking about when I started 2892, were related to painting, representation, remains and the shroud. In 1992, I envisioned two large canvases facing each other – one side made up of bed sheets I had collected from an intensive care hospital and other side made up of bed sheets I had collected from love hotels in Rio. I called the piece 2892 because I calculated that probably close to that number of people had used these sheets. I first made a deal with the cancer hospital in Rio, close to my studio, to first collect sheets that patients has used during their stay and then to replace them with fresh ones. I then made the

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because it was so different from anything that I done before. I finally got the courage to do it after I had talked to my good friend, a writer, and critic – who convinced me that I should just go ahead and do this piece. In the end, the wait between thinking about the work and executing it gave me a long time to synthesize ideas about how I could make a statement in my work without having direct physical contact with it.

BL: It is true that this work does stand out for both the fact that it is a readymade as the marks on the sheets of blood, sweat, semen, really weren't made by you and also that work is almost imperceptible – as the stains are almost invisible – so it looks like two giant white on white paintings.

DS: Yes, this installation is a kind of readymade. But really I view it as a collaborative work between myself and many other people who were either sick or having sex. It is also a work with very little visual information except for the wooden girder structure that I had designed and built to hold the sheets up.

BL: The other works I want to ask you about are the Quase Aqui (Almost Here) series that you started in 2013. Here you took a wooden panel and used it as a table in the studio as a work surface to cut and store things on. Over time there was a build up of scrapes, incisions, marks and

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For me these pieces feel like either you removed something for them or that you didn't touch them at all.

DS: In Quase Aqui I was interested in the relationship between the marks and the white surface which is so pristine that it really did look like it was not made by hand. As well, you have this rectangle right in the center of the panel where usually there is the subject of the painting – so these works for me are very much a meditation on painting as well. In a way, 2982 and Quase Aqui anchor a sort of more loose activity in the studio for me. They are like islands – places I can go where things grow around them. I like them very much because when they were finished, they were very clear.

BL: The next serial work that you started in 2014 is what I will call the “museum interiors”. Can we talk about Hermitage, which you made this year? It started off as a much more complex image but now you've kind of stripped it down by removing pieces of cloth one by one. There is a clear kind of interplay between making and unmaking – a search for that right balance of what's the maximum and what's the minimum amount of information needed to make an image. It's interesting to see the progression of this piece, which starts off complex but ends up as an empty room devoid of paintings.



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each piece of fabric and how they should be placed on the panel. For Louvre, I used this very busy print of a cement floor that has some pieces of metal in it. This fabric was like an abstract painting from the 50s and 60s to me – so I used that as the material for the interiors of the paintings in the space. I also used for this series, fabrics of parquet with red wax, yellow or bright white paint and ended up mixing these together to have more color depth in these work. Again, these works have been a kind of game for me. I guess now that I have decided to remove the paintings from the walls of the Hermitage and have just left the hint of their presence – it seems that I am done playing this game with myself and the series is finished.

BL: I see a very strong link between 2982, Quase Aqui and Hermitage and some of the new works that you have made for this exhibition, in particular Billboard, Billboard I and Escultura which were all made in 2016. The gestalt on these images is not quite white-on-white, but nonetheless, there is a lot of empty space.

DS: In a way, a billboard is a big canvas that we see from the street or the road. I like the billboards when they are empty. We have many in Brazil that are made of metal with beautiful patterns with no images on them. Billboard started with old panels from four or five years ago that had tile-like samples of floors glued on to them. I then took

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complex. It's more like something that is kind of expanding or metamorphosing.

BL: Billboard I also has a kind of caricature of face in it, no? There are two eyes and a nose and a little bit of a crooked smile.

DS: Yes, I agree.

BL: I want to talk about the other three works in the show that represent your studio space in Rio: Skylight, Night Studio and A Floresta do Livre Arbítrio (The Forest of Free Will). You told me earlier that your studio has appeared in other older works – so this is totally new for you. But it does seem to be a kind of concentrated moment of you thinking about this interior space, which I would view as a kind of thinking about your own life and situation. Can you speak a bit about why you are representing this internal space now?

DS: I could start answering this in many different ways because there are so many different approaches. At the beginning when I started doing my work, as I told you, my subjects were the things around me. So, I represented my hammer, my nails. This was a way for me to go through all reasons why I make art in the first place. I guess I could say that I am now interested in seeing how I take where I am, the things around me, and the light in studio and turn it

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BL: I think it's an interesting time for you to come back to the studio and use that as a subject. Night Studio is very poetic with that star-like form in the window in the top right of the image.

DS: Night Studio is recycled from two Biógrafo's that I was not happy with. The title comes from the biography of Philip Guston written by his daughter. The Night Studio is about Guston's struggles in the studio. He was a very tough guy. So, he was working all night, smoking, having coffee and fighting with himself over his ideas. I can relate to this kind of neuroses.

BL: What about the other two works: Skylight and A Floresta do Livre Arbítrio (The Forest of the Free Will)?

DS: Skylight, in a way, is more about composition and different ways to represent that same thing. It is more technical about movement. In the beginning I had two skylights in the same position on both panels. I thought about separating them to have two works but in the end I replaced one skylight with a staircase. I think this created a strong diagonal vector that gives the image a powerful sense of movement. A Floresta do Livre Arbítrio (The Forest of Free Will) for me was like gambling in the casino. I made some bets, lost, ended up with a just a bit of money left and then put it all on the roulette wheel. Here the money for me was the amount of fabric that was taking

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sometimes you get lost, and to find yourself again, you  
have to bet more – take more risks.

**BACK**