

ST. IVES, UK

Dexter Dalwood

TATE ST IVES

This midcareer survey of paintings and collages by Dexter Dalwood provides a full picture of his work since 1997 and confirms his reputation as one of the most interesting and engaging painters at work today. The display was curated by Martin Clark (the director of Tate St Ives) and shows the persistence with which Dalwood has pursued the twin themes central to his work: painterly quotation and psychologically charged scenes linked to famous historical figures and events.



Dexter Dalwood,
Manderley, 2009,
oil on canvas,
78¾ x 98½".

Two small paintings near the entrance of the exhibition, both made in 1997, show the dual origins of Dalwood's work in the high and low of literature and popular culture. *Montaigne's Room* shows a bare living space, lightly painted on a white ground; *Bridge of the Enterprise* is equally minimal, a few shapes and a star-filled window evoking the famous set of *Star Trek*. The subsequent paintings are larger and more intricately composed and develop Dalwood's use of citation and pastiche. *Sharon Tate's House*,

1998, and *Neverland*, 1999, are both derived from written descriptions—in the case of the former, Vincent Bugliosi and Curt Gentry's famous account of the Manson Family murders, *Helter Skelter* (1974). For these, as with all paintings since, Dalwood first made small preparatory collages, a fine selection of which is also on display. It was in making these collages that Dalwood began to use reproductions of paintings, such as the section taken from Morris Louis in *Hendrix's Last Basement*, 2001. An unspoken relation is conjured between the historic or biographical subject matter and the pastiche of painterly styles. The effect is to render history poetic, and the poetry of artistic style historical; Dalwood's paintings happen where these two opposing vectors glance off each other. Yet despite the cunning with which Dalwood plots his work, there is no sense in which a key is required for decipherment (in contrast to R. B. Kitaj's painting). With Dalwood it is the evocative power of the image and the delight of its design that count.

In works such as *Burroughs in Tangiers*, 2005, the design strikes a delicate balance between a Matissean decorative surface construction and a Rauschenberg-like interior narrative. The same might be said of *Herman Melville*, 2005, which combines elements from Picasso's analytic Cubism and a painting by Georg Baselitz. The interlocking of art and history is more direct in paintings with a political-historical referent, such as *Yalta*, 2006, showing the Livadia Palace, where the Yalta Conference was held, overlaid with a Picasso and suggestive of the cultural cold war to come. Yet the notion that these are contemporary history paintings, as is so often claimed, is inadequate. *The Death of David Kelly*, 2008, showing a tree (derived from a painting by Lucas Cranach) against an Yves Klein-blue background, only obliquely alludes to the case of the British military expert who allegedly committed suicide after testifying before Parliament about claims that Iraq was in possession of weapons of mass destruction. This is important contemporary history (and has also been treated by Richard Hamilton in his recent "Medal of Dishonor," *The Hutton Award*, 2008), but the painting hardly functions in the public-consciousness-building manner of history painting, as it is traditionally understood, reflecting rather the opacity and complexity of contemporary historical events and the mediating power of images.

—John-Paul Stonard