

Dexter's Conservatory

Anyone seeking the expertise of an interior design historian could do a lot worse than to shoot the breeze with painter and Turner Prize-nominee, DEXTER DALWOOD.

ART DEXTER DALWOOD
TEXT HARALD SMART

All paintings courtesy of the artist and Simon Lee Gallery
© Dexter Dalwood. Right: Too many flowers, 2015.
Following spread: Half Moon Street, 2014.

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Pine Bar, 2015

WE'VE SPENT DECADES trawling obsessively through magazines like *World of Interiors*," he tells me via Skype from his London studio, as we discuss his early work, "and I would look for things — lamps, ceilings, different bits — that I could maybe include [in the paintings], and then go back and forth to the photocopy shop and resize them." At one point, the artist had a whole archive of periodicals, and a vast collection of cut-outs of architectural elements divided into their individual categories. In trays, they would await the call of duty in a preparatory collage, and a shot at a second life in the bedroom of Jimi Hendrix or the bathroom of Truman Capote. In re-imagining and splicing together these (infamous) spaces, along with countless others, Dalwood also gained a deep understanding of frequently fickle design trends. "If you look back at old interior magazines," he explains, "you just see the trend for what it was; one minute it's all exposed brick, or suddenly it's something else — it just becomes a look."

Dalwood is still interrogating how we imagine and construct interior space today, even if his perspective has shifted. Recent works have moved into partial abstraction, attempting to "break down" environments, whilst still piecing them together from disparate sources. He also aims to induce a sense of slowness to the resulting images, in both their creation and their reception. Acknowledging the pervasiveness of the back-lit, screen-based image, Dalwood aims to spark a dialogue about the relevance and impact of painting as an artform today. "What is it about standing in front of a painting in 2017 that is interesting?" he asks me, semi-rhetorically, before continuing: "For me it's about looking at how and why these paintings are made; how the surface looks, and how the image can be a slow burn release."

The "slow burn" of his more recent work is frequently characterised by a sudden flash of recognition. The cultural hegemony of the West still appears as a recurring subtext within many of Dalwood's paintings, and epoch-shaping moments from recent history are often subtly concealed within the multidimensional spaces. *Pine Bar*, completed in 2015, and 2017's *Tehran 1979* both present re-imaginings of well-known political events via the spaces they occupied. The former is named after the Mayfair drinking den in which the Russian ex-spy Alexander Litvinenko was fatally poisoned by a radiation-tainted teacup, and the latter presents the artist's impression of a room in Tehran's once-luxurious Hilton hotel, where dozens of Western expats and diplomats waited to flee the country during the 1979 revolution.

Dalwood was compelled to paint Tehran after visiting the city, finding that his preconceived idea was far less detailed than those of the American cities he learned to navigate before ever visiting. At the same time, Dalwood's work is still informed heavily by this mediated way of seeing. "I'm not so interested in representing reality," he clarifies towards the end of our discussion, "but more of a mental image. And in paint, it's also about challenging the ways in which things are meeting each other." Perhaps this explains the lamps seen either side of the hotel sofa suite in *Tehran 1979*; pinched from a set in Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*, indicating that Dalwood's rebellious taste for cross-pollination is still alive and well. Using these, and other such suggestive techniques, he allows the walls to impart their own myths.



Tehran 1979, 2017