

# Desperado Philosophy

rocks, buoys and riptides

## Carved and Painted

June 24, 2022

By DP

Now comes a brief dialogue with distinguished artist and DP friend [Morgan Bulkeley](#), regarding [an extraordinary series of carved and painted reliefs](#) completed during the Covidzeit, with an Autumn 2021 show at the [Yezerki Gallery](#) in Boston.

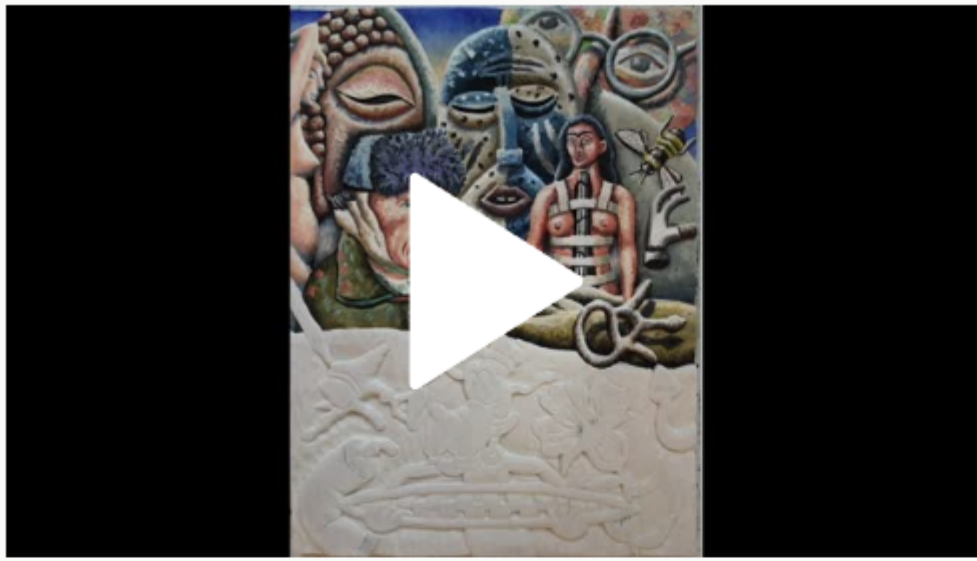
**DP** In your Artist Statement for last year's [Carved and Painted](#) show at the [Yezerki Gallery](#) in Boston, you wrote that you try "to make paintings that are beautiful, frightening and funny all at once, similar to the Theatre of the Absurd." When you first started to work on the most recent series of carved relief paintings, I sensed a strong sense of theatricality emerging, with your process of carving very much like playwrighting; working the confined space of a wood block until the images came vividly into life.

**Morgan Bulkeley** Yes, the process is much different than painting. Carving is quite physical, developing a shallow, kind of shadow image of the later piece. Making a spatial wood, essentially colorless, volume forces me to attend to the arrangement, composition, motion of the parts, or objects, to the whole, almost like the spatial thinking in cubism. Later, the painting becomes a matter of light and color, shadows and highlights, stressing and augmenting the illusions of dimension; two very different ways of growing one piece.




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Images by Morgan Bulkeley; video by Hans Teensma.

**DP** Each piece projects that strong sense of kinetic engagement. How would you describe your relationship to the wood while you are carving; dialogue, dance, wrestling? And does the wood sometimes say “no way!” to your original compositional vision and steer you towards some unexpected idea?

**MB** Definitely true. A blank piece of Arches doesn't say much, except perhaps an accusation that I have a dead brain. But the grain in the wood and the act of cutting feels like a real conversation. The mallet and chisel, versus a paintbrush, are demanding tools, and always the possibility of a slip and slash; in the past, several times when I was exerting great pressure, I have hit a turn in the grain sending the X-Acto knife into my leg, sending me to Fairview Hospital for a few stitches. Now and then, some unwanted flaw in the wood says “That's not happening” when I try to carve a too small detail, forcing me to re-consider my organization. The wood does have a voice.

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## Chart Box

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LUCY

**DP** I'm intrigued by the abundance of wooden pencils within the reliefs, often entangled with branches or poles that trap or encumber birds, in one piece appearing almost to impale a peregrine. There's a tension between pencils as part of the landscape of what you call "the refuse of consumerism", while also being indispensable creative tools, sketching the outline of what will eventually be carved.

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**MB** Pencils are almost like birds in the spaces, with a faster speed than the wriggling dollops of paint I use to writhe across the reliefs. Recently, I've also been using pieces of puzzles as actors across the surface. All these devices indicate a change, or potential for transforming the image completely, creating a new story. The friction between nature/cultural detritus is always in tension, subject to change written by pencils or sometimes by tornadoes, or sometimes by mushroom clouds.

**DP** Yes, as a lover of jigsaw puzzles, particularly those made from wood, I took note of the puzzle pieces that seem to hover rather than fall within the relief, reminding the viewer that all of these carved reliefs are dynamic fields of potential interpretations, open to countless readings.

Most of the carvings also include at least one head, sometimes with alternative brains or masks nearby, almost as accessories or alternative identities. A few times, the heads encapsulate the images, the artistic imagination apparently in control, though in most pieces the heads appear under stress or even attack. We prefer to think of the imagination as a space of creative joy and pleasure, yet it is also a space of risk and danger.

**MB** The first pieces in this series of roughly sixty reliefs were selfies, often under assault by bees, or fragmenting, as in a later piece that scared me. It was a face being assembled, (or perhaps disassembled) by various hands, a lobster claw, a palette knife, a flicker grabbing the nose. It suddenly became a feeling of therapy, being re-arranged, caught in the midst of having shibboleths shattered, of "seeing" that understood image I've watched in the mirror as far back as I remember. Eventually other stories began to interweave in the "face", stories becoming more important to the character than features such as eyes, nose, mouth.



FRITTERING WITH MY FACE

**DP** Returning to your Artist Statement for the Yezerksi show, you write about the damage that humans inflict upon nature through technology and aggression. Yet we are part of that nature; as we shatter the world, we cannot help but to shatter ourselves. During a time of converging emergencies, with the climate crisis front and center, philosopher Santiago Zabala advocates for an emergency aesthetics: art that is brave enough to face the reality of our predicament while at the same time embodying aesthetic and poetic values that anticipate a more viable future. While I find the images in

the same time embodying aesthetic and poetic values that anticipate a more viable future. While I find the images in this extraordinarily powerful body of work distressing and destabilizing in how they confront us with the truth of where we are, and who we are, in the midst of the unfolding emergency, they also move me to keep focussing on the countless creative possibilities latent within the apparent chaos of the jigsaw box. Since completing the Carved and Painted series, what have you been working on more recently?

**MB** Since the reliefs, I have been doing some very tiny carved sculptures, mainly featuring an Ivorybill Woodpecker. To me they are a symbol of hopeless hope; extinct since 1944, stories keep cropping up from expert ornithologists who insist they have seen a pair, deep in the swamps of Arkansas or Louisiana. If there's hope for them, then maybe for us?





UNTITLED IVORYBILL SCULPTURE

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