

# Dale Lewis in conversation with Gemma Rolls-Bentley

## Season's Meatings, 2021

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**Gemma Rolls-Bentley: These amazing works feel like quite a departure for you and a new exploration of format and scale. I saw the work *Menu Del Dia* (2021) that's in a similar format to these in your show at Block 336 that's just closed. I'd love to hear a little bit about the relationship between that work and this new series.**

Dale Lewis: Yeah, just talking to people and showing them around the Block 336 show, a lot of people were quite attracted to that painting. And I'd overlooked it a little bit, I think not seeing it as anything too significant.

But then after having a chance to think about it after we did a talk together with the Queercir-cle group, and after my talk with Eliel Jones, I suddenly started to think and focus a lot more on that painting. I'd been wanting to develop a Four Seasons style suite of paintings on this scale since I saw the Bruegel show in Vienna with Raqib [Shaw] in 2019. I always thought it would be a nice way to create a body of work. One of the problems I've had in the past when preparing a show is that one of my works doesn't necessarily feed on the other; they're all very individual within the room together. So it was a way of consolidating something, to focus on a specific subject rather than everything being general and open as it has been previously.

**I think that's really interesting, because I remember very clearly the first time I saw your earlier works in your studio just being so blown away by the scale and the layers that were in there; in terms of all the different things that were happening, these rich, and almost chaotic narratives that you build with big groups of figures in very large scale works. I think what you're doing with this series, and with *Menu Del Dia*, takes that richness and the relationships that you see in those big works and concentrates them. It creates space for the viewer to have a more intimate relationship with the figures by honing in on one or two specific interactions, rather than pan-ning out and having many things happening. I think that technique brings a new depth and quality of connection between the figures.**

Yeah, because I think there was always this fear or panic that things needed more things around them for support or something, which needed more story. Imagine it akin to a Christmas tree that doesn't have decorations on, and you decorate the tree and you can't see the tree anymore, but the tree is the core part of what you're trying to experience. So this work, in that way, was taking all the decorations off and just appreciating them, really studying the tree, if you like those kinds of analogies for these paintings.

**I love that as an analogy for these paintings. I think that's exactly it, you're really getting to the crux of what it is that you're exploring with these works, that comes with a real intensity.**

I started by taking all the animals out of the paintings, which were previously also littered with cigarettes, wine bottles, all that kind of drama going on. But if you take all that away and just look at what's really there, I think they become stronger and more intense for having less intensity within them, more space for people to add their touch to it or to fill in the story a little bit more for themselves.

**That's one of the things that I find really interesting about your very large scale works. As a viewer, you get lost in the crowd, and that's quite deliberate. But with these works, they're quite arresting in the way that as a viewer you are really forced to think about what it is that you're looking at, what your relationship is, what your voyeuristic role is, in relation to what's actually happening in the landscape of the painting. Particularly given the themes that you're exploring with these works, that's a really powerful tool to engage the viewer. And I know when I've stood in front of these works, it's really incredible - you feel abit exposed as a viewer, actually. But then you also feel like you've got this privileged position where you're getting to be part of these very romantic exchanges that are happening within these cottaging scenes.**

I think the thing about cottaging as a theme or subject is that it's something that's very hidden away, it's very secret; it's in a deep part of the woods, where only these kinds of people would go. The fact that you're observing these people in those intimate environments adds a suspense to them, as though maybe you're seeing something you wouldn't normally come across and that you're being forced to experience, but from a distance.

**If we think about queer culture and how it's been captured through art history, which it absolutely has, that has also been hidden away. In reality, so many of these experiences through history and the signs of LGBTQ+ life and experience have been closeted, ghettoised and existed on the periphery. The way these experiences are reflected through culture means that you really have to read between the lines to find them. Fiona Anderson writes a lot about cruising culture. She talks about cruising as a method; as a radical process of looking that explores pleasure and connectedness in culture, which feels really bold versus how queer life has been presented throughout culture historically. I think it's really interesting that the dominant historical practices have totally erased the existence of queer life, and you really do have to work hard to pick them out and explore the archives to find them. Whereas here, you're documenting these real lived experiences, but you're doing it in an incredibly explicit way. It's so refreshing to me as a queer person and a queer art historian to see that. But I also just can't really think of any examples where this kind of life, these aspects of life, have been documented and captured in such a raw and explicit and real way.**

Yeah, thinking about a lot of the contemporary gay painters at the moment that I look to, the work is defined by all these suggestions, subtle things that don't really reflect the way that I live and operate as a gay man. My new paintings are more engrained or attuned to the way I live and my experiences. I think it's important to address that head on as much as possible and present that to the audience.

**Absolutely. I think about this group of gay male painters coming out of New York at the moment, such as Salman Toor, Doron Langberg, Louis Fratino, who are taking a refreshing approach to capturing gay life through beautiful, exquisite painting. The work of those painters is so important because it captures a level of intimacy that we aren't necessarily used to seeing. But**

**your work goes one step further: there is nothing left out, it just feels so authentic and so, so real.**

Yeah, that's what I want to hopefully come across with the work. I've always been quite a direct person in that sense. I want that to continue in the work; I don't want to sugarcoat anything too much.

**Thinking about other artists who have tackled the theme of cottaging in their work, such as Prem Sahib, whose work often references toilet cubicles and scenes from sweaty clubs. The themes are implicit and you have to work hard to make those connections. And whilst those practices have all got their own place, I think this is a development of that kind of art practice and art history - it feels very bold and fresh, and something that I think we really need.**

I want the paintings to look as if you've accidentally come across this scene while you're walking the dog through the park. I want it to have that kind of impact. I don't want people to have to guess or read about it or think that they've seen something that they're not sure whether they saw or not.

**And they really do have that impact. Even though these works are smaller scale than what you've previously made, they're still large scale works. The figures are life size and there still is that relationship to large scale history painting, like Titian's paintings of Diana and Actaeon, where you're stumbling across Diana and her nymphs in amongst the trees, a surprise moment that you've been allowed into as a viewer.**

Well, I think art historically, when we see these three figures together it's evocative of *The Three Graces*; I'm really obsessed with the Rubens painting of *The Three Graces*.

**I can totally see *The Three Graces* in these romantic trios that you're creating.**

Yeah, in Rubens' *The Three Graces*, the central figure of the woman is incredibly muscular and she's almost pinching the bicep of the one on the left. I just think that's so remarkable. I was looking at that painting a lot before I started this series. And the first one I started with was *The Herd*. It was that image that led me into this painting.

**By applying the *Four Seasons* as a framework, do you mean that it's been used throughout art history as a way of capturing that constant change that we see through the change of the seasons? It's been used as an allegorical tool by artists right through history, from the ancient Greeks to Poussin, Bruegel and Hockney.**

It's challenging to paint the same image but do it differently each time, so this idea of the *Four Seasons* seems very logical.

**And it means that the work you do to each one of them stands alone. When you think about the paintings as a group, they pivot around the same context with the scenes changing, populated by different people continuing to return to the same spot. All through these works the clothes reflect the seasons, and the detail of the clothing is another tool to illustrate what's really happening between the figures. In *The Herd* you can clearly see the reference of *The Three Graces*, with the central figure facing away and the other two focused on him with his pants down, while the other one's got his hand down the pants.**

I think when I first made it, I thought maybe it looks like a drug deal or something similarly sinister. The figure on the right looks very menacing. He's got this Stone Island jacket on, which I associate with childhood and British youth culture. But then you see the hands are slipping down the back of the trousers and you realise it's not what you first think, it's actually an encounter which is far more revealing or surprising.

**That brings a level of sophistication to the narrative, doesn't it? But also, I think that's interesting thinking about your choice to put that figure in a Stone Island coat. Cottaging in many ways is like this. It's a great equaliser, isn't it? Thinking about class, it could be anybody coming to these spaces, whether they are a 'chav', a business person on their way home from work, or someone who isn't openly gay in their day to day life, it's a meeting ground for people to come together from every aspect of life.**

Yes. When you're there, you see men pull up in Range Rovers with pink chinos, brogues and tweed jackets. And then you get these other guys with Stone Island jackets, caps and Nike trainers, and then everybody in between. So that's what I mean - this idea of fashion allowing us to identify someone just on their appearance. And what you say about this situation being a great leveller is true, because suddenly it's not about image, it's about sex.

**Absolutely. And thinking about how you've captured the seasons and how you describe the palette that you've used to capture the figures and their clothes, and then how that relates to the colours that you might see in the sky or nature, or the surrounding landscape...each one is very distinctive.**

I really like the Bruegel winter painting, *The Hunters in the Snow*. When I was in Glasgow recently, I went to the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum and saw a Lowry painting called *Seascape*. It was white with a grey line through it, and I just saw it as the most extraordinary painting I've seen in years and years. I was thinking about making *The Herd* and how I was going to paint it. And then I saw that painting and I just thought, it's perfect. When you look at Lowry's paintings, you can't tell whether they're March or July or November, because they always have this white sky and white floor; there's never any identity or signifier about what time of year it is. He paints with these beautiful ochre and tones of grey, mixing into the white. I thought about when we get these very British winters - bleak January or February days where the sky becomes the colour of the frost on the ground and there's mud mixed in with the sky. It creates this heavy sense of living in a cloud. I wanted that white to have that feeling of a Lowry painting or a really cold afternoon.

**Yeah, and that very, very heavy sky. Even your choice to position the silver birch running across the foreground of the paint-**

**ing with this quite menacing voyeuristic crow, who's just on the edge of the scene; it all relates to each other.**

I wanted the birch tree to act as a barrier, almost like a red rope at a VIP event. I wanted it to give the audience space from the subject.

**It also brings in an additional element of framing the figures. It's just another way of intensifying what's happening at this moment. Looking at the other works in the series - the beautiful, fiery red sky that we see in Migration - it's a bit like the sky in Menu Del Dia. I remember you described how you wanted it to look like you couldn't tell if the sky represented heaven or hell.**

Yeah, it's like a fantasy, where the fire and the divine borrowed from Renaissance works adds this drama to the subject, intensifying this idea of passion and the heat of that moment.

**When we look at Constant Gardener, there are only two main characters. But then you actually have this third figure, which is one of the gravestones in the cemetery: an angel holding the cross and looking down on the two boys who are in this very romantic moment. And does one of them have a cigarette in his hand?**

Yeah, the one on the bench.

**I love that, because that's something that I really associate with your work - those cigarettes that are often littered throughout the composition.**

Yeah, because smoking always gives you that moment to think - that's why I love smoking. It gives me that five minutes, however many times throughout the day, just to pause and think about what I've done and what I'm going to do.

**Yes, a meditative quality.**

This painting - the blue one with the obelisks in it - depicts Mile End Cemetery. This was where that unfortunate event occurred recently, where a guy was murdered while he was cruising in East London. I wanted to make a painting about this site specifically for that reason.

**Yeah, and the painting captures how beautiful the cemetery is as well as referencing that incredibly dark moment. All of these paintings have that tension within them, capturing the dark elements of this subject, but then also the joy, the love and the romance. I think Caretakers perfectly captures that juxtaposition - it's bursting with joy, the colour in these beautiful flowers and then also reflected through the figures. We can see the outline of one of the boys' hands, holding the bum of the other boy through his shorts; the translucent pink shorts that could blend with the pink roses in the rose arch over them. It's such a beautiful, poetic image.**

Yeah, and I think it's...I almost find it a little bit silly. When I painted it, I couldn't stop thinking of Barbara Cartland.

**There's a real campness to it.**

There's a frilly romance about it. That's what Spring and Summer is to me, with all the flowers and the bees, and everyone's happy and a bit delirious. Everything's a bit beautiful for a while. So I felt like it suited being on amore chintzy side of life.

**What's amazing about these works as a series is that each one is so distinctive because of the context of the season. The interactions with each of the characters that happens in each painting creates these beautiful moments of queer intimacy.**