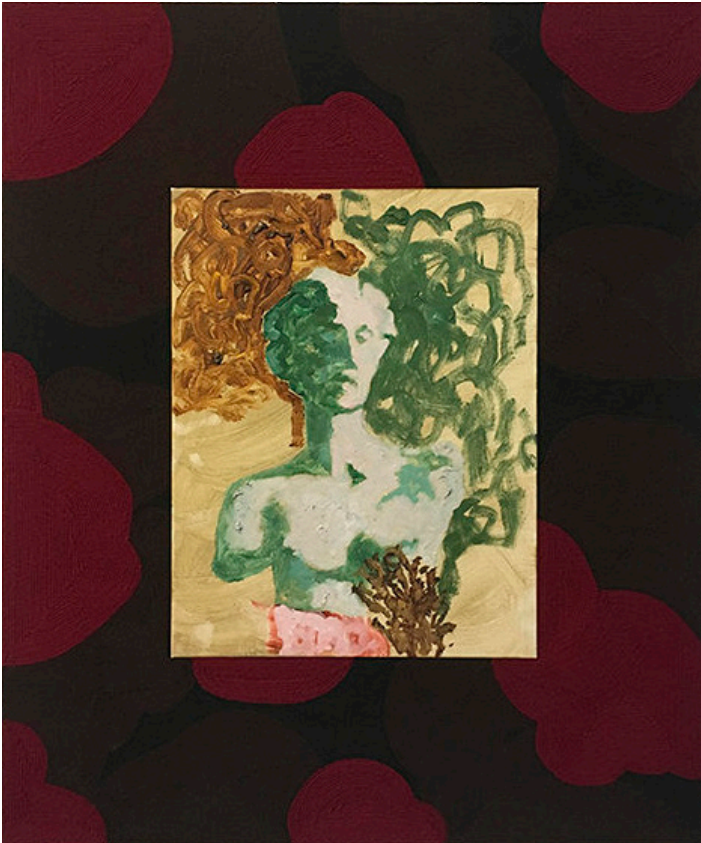




# META-ALLEGORY IN THE ART OF DAVE MCDERMOTT

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Woman with Seaweeds, 2018  
Oil, mounted canvas, yarn on panel,  
25 x 21 inches

Contemporary art loves nothing as it does a reductive statement. Whether among casual art appreciators or specialized ones, the expectation for some resolving feeling of “getting it,” some concrete something in an artwork that’s there for a viewer to get, is all but universal. And this is true despite the equally common notion that art ought to be built on a basis of irreducible individuality; so not surprisingly, a special combative vernacular has arisen to provide art and artists with a way to be “gotten” that is nevertheless difficult and uncomfortable—the “challenges to our perceptions” and “confrontations of our preconceived notions” that function as badges of seriousness in so many artist statements.

Still, however violently they propose to handle our preconceived notions and perceptions of things, most of these confrontations and challenges stop at a point well short of being too challenging or confrontational: they make sure not to challenge the straightforward language in which challenge itself is conveyed. They make sure, in other words, to clearly communicate some organizing principle, “a meaning” that, like the key to a puzzle or riddle, allows us to “get” the artwork and then, once we get it, to judge the work for ourselves, by determining our relation to whatever challenge it purports to pose. If we identify with the challenge, we like and accept the artwork’s meaning; if we don’t, we reject it. An artwork grounded in such a conception of meaning can still function as a challenge—insofar as any statement made in a language we already speak fluently can challenge us. But because such artworks still imply the same kind of resolvability, the same presence of meaning-as-a-noun that we can use to “get” them, they are a problematic: their form, the same “this means that” structure that we advert to in common discourse, always involves meaning conceived of as a thing you can point to, a discrete answer to the question, “What does this mean?”

But there are artworks that are challenging in a different sense. Problematizing the machinery of meaning itself, they make us work not only to figure out what exactly they're pointing at and how we feel about it, but whether there might not be some new way of meaning something without pointing at it in any way we already recognize. Such artworks leave us with the feeling of challenge that we are used to experiencing, not when we hear something new or unexpected in our own language, but when we struggle to learn a new language altogether. And as with a new language we're learning, the right question to ask of such works seems not so much "What does this mean?" as "How does this mean?"—an approach conceiving of meaning not as a thing that we can get and be done with, but as an action, something "going on" in the work that we must continuously participate in, in order to keep up our connection with it.

The art of Dave McDermott—some of whose drawings have appeared in *The Revenant*, and whose latest collection, *The Long Goodbye*, was just on view in New York—is art of this kind. As with other artists whose ways of making meaning are peculiar to them, McDermott's work can be difficult to describe—impossible, if you're trying to articulate some one thing he's getting at. The paintings feel by turns profoundly serious and playfully vulgar, funny and heavy; arrestingly gorgeous to look at, they're nevertheless almost awkward in their refusal to be too neatly or consistently that. You get the feeling that McDermott is definitely getting at something, but are simultaneously aware that this feeling is not caused by any one thing or quality you can point to; it seems to arise more as a residual impression, a common denominator among the different relations made between the parts of his compositions.

The experience is characteristic of McDermott's works, on which consistent judgments of even the simplest kind are surprisingly hard to make. The pictures seem to shift and reorder as you look at them: distinctions of figure and ground, medium and support, symbol and referent, are problematized, made shaky by contradictory relations found elsewhere. What counts as support in one view takes on the significance of a medium in another; what looks from one distance or angle to be an unbroken field of color dissolves on another look into complex groups of forms, which themselves shift and re-group when seen from other angles and distances. The size of his larger paintings also contributes to this: many of the elements in them are too small or too far away from one another to be seen at the same time, leading to a mental dissonance between one view and another. It's an effect even more destabilized than optical illusion, because optical illusions have "right" ways of seeing them, views or understandings that resolve their trickery into fact. What we experience with McDermott's paintings is more like mental illusion: a peculiar sort of whole-in-parts that refuses to leave the mind with any predominating way of putting those parts together.

All this may sound chaotic, and at first glance it may also look it. But the definitive thing about McDermott's work is that its denial of uniform resolution doesn't result in meaningless indeterminacy; all the different interpretations are so evenly balanced, what results instead is dynamic tension. The best description I can give of this effect is psychological: having moved many times from one view of a painting to another without being able to hit on a single interpretation that successfully resolves the whole, the viewer's mind settles into the rhythm of that motion, and begins instead to locate order in the consistency with which its own efforts at finding the "key" start up, and are baffled, and start up again. The mind begins, in other words, to find order in its own ongoing search for order, made possible by the complex counterbalance of parts that McDermott has created. And as the mind does this, the parts it perceives stop looking like incomplete interpretations of a whole, and begin to look instead like hints at something too vast and multifaceted to perceive but in glimpses.

The result is that what we might expect to feel chaotic, because it lacks a single resolving key, instead feels not only orderly, but more orderly than things feel that do possess such a key. In place of the satisfaction of a uniform resolution, we are given—for as long as we can hold onto it—the idea of an always-just-around-the-corner order, an order that's always bigger and more perfect than what we can grasp at any moment. It is an order that, precisely because it is impossible to perceive once and for all, is capable of striking the imagination as all-encompassing in a way that simple resolutions aren't; and the satisfaction we get in apperceiving it, though it requires an almost meditative lability of mind to apperceive, is as powerful as it is fleeting. If allegory consists in the one-to-one relation of symbol and thing symbolized, McDermott's art is meta-allegory: the suspension between many such relations, such that the resulting feeling of ideal resolution transcends in resolving power the kind of resolution that might have arisen from any one of them taking charge of the rest. A resolution, we might say, is once and for all; the activity of resolution that McDermott's work makes possible is endless.



Twilight at Crab Key, 2018  
Oil, oil stick, 23k gold, plaster, wood on panel, 25 x 21 inches



The Talker, 2017  
Oil, 23k gold, wax, yarn on panel, 75 x 63 inches

Going through the many ways McDermott achieves this meta-allegorical suspension would take me beyond the scope of this essay; it would also mean missing the point more than a little. Much of the art we're used to is about setting rules and following them, but not McDermott's; his emphasis is rather on his ability to incorporate anything and everything into his particular balancing-act. Accordingly, his success lies not in the invention of a fixed grammar of suspended meaning that we might summarize, but in his ongoing invention of new ways of achieving that suspension among whatever media, thematic bearings, and compositional structures he happens to work with.

But the importance of parts and part-interpretations to McDermott's work does naturally point to one good technique to talk about, a technique present in McDermott's paintings and drawings in various evolutions since the beginning. This is his use of what we might call particulation—the breaking-up of a figure into a multitude of discrete parts. The particulation in Dave McDermott's work is crucially different than most, because it is used not to break apart images that are themselves unitary and whole, but to create further complicating subdivisions among elements that are themselves already partial. The "pieces" of McDermott's paintings can be put together in many different ways, but putting them together only leads to other pieces; as wholes, the paintings are resolutely nothing but collections of parts that, lacking a unifying key, continually problematize each other. The resulting experience of looking at them is singularly open-ended, and the artistic procedure we infer from that experience is, too: the paintings often seem as though they could have been started, and finished, anywhere.

For an original and characteristic example, take the yarn-application technique McDermott has developed over the years with black yarn (and recently used with different colors of yarn for the first time). At a distance, the yarn's matte finish causes the areas covered in it to read as uniform blocks of color—as overlapping or spatially disposed shapes, usually appearing as the ground for figures that seem to float over top of them. From closer up, the yarn's thickness causes these same areas to reappear as superficial layers—often the thickest, topmost layer on the painting's surface—and single colored fields that subdivide into smaller shapes according to how the material is laid on. Nor are these shapes themselves stable: the concentric patterns in which McDermott adheres the yarn provide for various two-dimensional and three-dimensional shape-interpretations—many of which cross over color boundaries—as well as for maze-like linear spirals and blocks of parallel lines. It is a division of the painting's surface that makes, not only for many different ways of seeing it, but for many contradictory ways of seeing it, not one of which ever assumes the primary organizing role. The yarn-configurations are not "actually" receding background colors, or superficial layers, or overlapping fields, or facets or spirals or lines.

They're equally all of these organizations, and more; and the more of these part-groupings our minds are able to hold onto in moving among them, the more enticingly complex and comprehensive becomes the order we imagine them all fitting into.

This same meta-allegorical pattern is elicited in McDermott's work by other particulated media: squares of gold leaf, blotches and strokes of paint, two- and three-dimensional collage. It is elicited by the changing relationships we perceive between these various media, and between the shapes and figures they provisionally represent. It is elicited by changing assignments within each composition of figure and ground, medium and support, representation and abstraction, reference and thing-referred-to. It is even elicited, in shows of McDermott's work, by the relation of different works to each other—works that, taken together, are similar enough to justify being thought of as continuous, and yet remain too different to allow for a definitive statement of that continuity.

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Perhaps in this last respect most of all, McDermott's art, novel and challenging as it (truly) is, evokes a strong historical precedent: Cubism, which similarly sought to engender a multifaceted, changing conception of visual experience. As with the Cubists, the meaning of McDermott's work lies in a mental activity, an order that accrues among operations the "real" hierarchy of which is not discoverable in the painted object; accordingly, it seems fitting to draw an analogy between McDermott's constantly changing body of work and the perpetual creative motion of many of the Cubists, particularly Picasso. Granted, the mental activity with which McDermott is concerned is different: whereas Cubism strove to depict the different states of physical objects, McDermott's work takes this approach to depiction itself, complicating and refracting the experience of visual interpretation by situating itself at the balancing-point between the many different ways a visual object can mean something. (In this sense, McDermott's meta-allegorical approach is meta-Cubist, too.) Yet the central conception of the painterly project is the same: in both cases, because the object to be painted is infinitely more complex than anything that can be depicted once and for all, the painter's goal is to evoke the feeling of putting things together, rather than any particular put-together thing. In both, objects and themes are starting-points, and concrete meanings and resolutions are seen as obstacles to the synthetic movement of mind whose whole truth lies in its continuity. Artistic meaning is not conceived of as completion, but rather (to use a much-abused term in its real Cubist significance) as process.

Both of these forms of painting-as-process also bear different implications for judgment than do artworks in which meaning is conceived as an answer. Without a resolving statement, there is nothing for us to agree or disagree with in these paintings; there is not even something to "get," in the way we usually mean it. If anything they offer us, not a particular order to align with or reject from ourselves, but the chance to lose ourselves in the pursuit of order altogether; and because the feeling the paintings are designed to evoke is precisely the sense that there is always a bigger whole to make of them than we are ever quite able to make, they even account for our failure to feel that. Indeed, given that the closest thing we ever get to resolution in McDermott's works is the ever-changing, ideal glimpses of order that we enjoy while striving after it, we might say that in these works, the feeling of failure is intrinsically bound up with all experience, even—especially—the feeling of success. Even the figures McDermott depicts are isolated from one another, as they are from us, by the mode of their depiction: like everything else in his paintings, they only appear to us in moments of successful apprehension. Everything else that surrounds those moments, so to speak, is failure—and even in them, what counts as success in one sense is failure in another: we are always aware that our glimpses of the bigger order, in which everything is connected and made clear, are not the bigger order itself.

But as with all great art, the expression of that emotion more than takes the sting out of it. There are many definitions of beauty, and one of them is a transcendent quality made perceptible. Just such a quality is the ever-elusive, yet all-encompassing idea of order that Dave McDermott's paintings express. It may be, as thematically the paintings of *The Long Goodbye* explicitly suggest, that the primary emotional quality of that idea, for McDermott, is failure: the equally tragic and comically absurd feeling of futility that underlies all human effort. But in so thoroughly realizing the conditions of that feeling—in painting, a medium predisposed to completion in a visual sense—McDermott's meta-allegory is an artistic triumph. It does represent an abandonment of the ideal of final artistic resolution, an abandonment to which few art viewers, and perhaps even fewer artists, can fully commit. But it is a peculiar kind of abandonment, aptly named in *The Long Goodbye*: a process of letting go that lasts forever, is never the same twice, and means as much, in the final analysis, as any resolving grasp could.