

# ART SPIEL

Reflections on the work of contemporary artists

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## Greg Drasler: Crowded Places / Open Spaces at Betty Cuninghame Gallery

**In Dialogue with Greg Drasler**



*Crowded Places / Open Spaces installation Betty Cuninghame Gallery*

Greg Drasler came to be a metaphorical figurative painter when he lost everything he owned in a fire in 1978, except for two paintings. At that moment he decided to focus exclusively on painting — he was a painter and painting would be everything he needed. He began to rebuild his pictorial world with scenes from the self-help DIY magazines and for over 40 years has continued to explore and expand his visual vocabulary through several bodies of work. Greg Drasler says he identifies with the subjects of his paintings “as personal questions, metaphors, and allegories often responding to social and cultural topics.” His current solo exhibition at Betty Cuninghams Gallery includes both works from his lengthiest series, the Hats Paintings, and some from his most recent series, the Road House paintings. Sparked by the effects of social distancing due to the pandemic, the paintings overall assume another layer of meaning.

**Tell me about your process of painting. How do you start a painting?**

I have worked with a large image bank since the '70s. I use sources like scaffolding that is resuscitated through painting. Currently, when I begin a painting it is with a vivid color ground such as orange. This allows the progress of the painting to feel like I am putting out a fire as I build a picture. This process gives the finished painting its internal heat. I generally paint in categories such as Hats Paintings, Baggage Paintings, Cave Paintings among others, and now I'm making Road House Paintings inspired by my Road House Project of 2016 with a Guggenheim Fellowship.

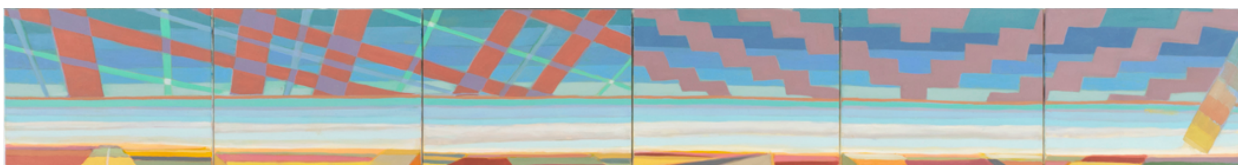
**As reflected in the title the paintings in this exhibition split into two themes: crowded and open spaces. In both visual worlds, patterns seem to play a central role — patterns of hats, sky, or cars. Can you elaborate on that?**

What engages me about the pattern is its extendable implication beyond the edges of the canvas and the grip of orientation it affects. A pattern can operate like an algorithm generating orientation and expansion. Patterns can indicate a cultural affinity such as a family plaid or a surveyor's grid. Initially, I did not relate to the compositions of the *Hats Paintings* as a pattern per se. With the distribution of hats, these paintings were first concerned with the identification of a figure distinguished within the crowd. As the work moved away from a focused stand-in, the distribution began to insinuate the pattern. I began these paintings 30 years ago, so they have become a continuum and an organic pattern through their various deliveries.

In the Road House paintings, the pattern is used in a perspectival form to tie the atmosphere back to the horizon and suggest endlessness. The picturing of cloud computing as one pattern meets another suggests a shift in time and space creating a frame-to-frame cinematic effect.



*Back Pages 2005, oil on canvas 70×60 inches*



**Can you tell me about the genesis of the crowded places series – what drew you to men’s hats, and crowds?**

I grew up when every man wore a hat in public. This association certainly informed my attention to a man’s world of conformity. During picture research at the New York Public Library Picture Collection (pre-digital 1980’s), I found a trove of images of Union rallies from the 1930s through the ’50s. The jostle, gesture, proximity, and memory continue to inform new paintings. The sensuality of the paintings enters through all of the shaped felt hat surfaces. The shuffling shouldering movement, with jostling, and manhandling gives a restless movement to the pictures, posing the question, am I in or am I out?

My association with these paintings has changed over 30 years. They begin to feel like history paintings of middle management. In the age of Covid an anxious reminder despite being drawn to a crowd it is viewed from behind and above. I don’t like being in crowds. Painting them keeps them at arm’s length. Through reading a crowd, building an audience, picturing a market, or waiting for the light to change, an interpretive pattern of gestures, signals, and movement perpetually informs the crowd.



*Late Edition 2020 oil on canvas 40×30 inches*



*Land Rush 2021 oil on canvas 60×70 inches*

**And what is your idea behind the Open Spaces series?**

The Open Spaces paintings evolved from invented landscapes in my Auto Interior paintings. The overt construction of atmospheres composed with graphic patterns and atmospheric color pulls one into the crease of the horizon. Facing the horizon presents an architecture of displacement if not quarantine. The patterned atmosphere not only pulls one into the horizon but also pictures an extensive pattern connecting one frame to another. The filmic opportunity of the car as a camera delivering timing, framing, and movement inspired me to begin sequenced bands of canvases into a sort of road building. The long format inspires looking on the move. Viewing side to side the drive of my inspiration is reenacted.

Pairing the patterning with the crazy quilts pares the happenstance with the repetitive. I understand them as cloud computing floating over property divisions. The open road is the Open Space with a painted line reaching for the horizon. A series titled *Bus Stops and Checkpoints* accompanies these works. They are another expression of my interest in roadside architecture between here and there in the middle of nowhere.

### **How do you see the relationship between these two bodies of work?**

Both bodies of work prompt losing oneself. They are going in opposite directions. The Hats paintings engage in the dense mix-up of crowd building. The space in these paintings, between shoulders in the crowd is a pickpocket's dreamscape. This is the space available for occupation. The Road House paintings present an un-occupied vista with a pull to the horizon. Imaging the horizon as an object that encircles us is the reach of the earth, a spectacle of land, atmosphere, and scene leaves an open boundary dominated by luminous constructed atmospheres.



*At the Track 2021 oil on canvas 50×70 inches*



*Rear View 2015 oil on canvas, 50×70 inches*

Etty Yaniv works on her art, art writing and curatorial projects in Brooklyn. She founded Art Spiel as a platform for highlighting the work of contemporary artists, including art reviews, studio visits, interviews with artists, curators, and gallerists. For more details contact by Email: [artspielblog@gmail.com](mailto:artspielblog@gmail.com)

**All photo courtesy of Betty Cunningham Gallery, NYC, NY**

**Greg Drasler: Crowded Places/Open Spaces at Betty Cunningham Gallery. Through March 6<sup>th</sup>, 15 Rivington street, NYC**