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Figures in a Landscape: Dana Frankfort Interviewed by Margaux Ogden

Paintings that work with words.

Dana Frankfort and I first met at Boston University where she was teaching and I was completing my MFA in painting. Her presence was a breath of fresh air in a program then known to be quite traditional. For a young painter like myself, her shoot-from-the-hip irreverence was what I remember most from those days and what I've tried to maintain in my studio. Since Boston, we've

communicated almost daily, texting images back and forth to gauge the other's

response. And not just of our paintings, but also street signage or bits of color seen in the wild. Frankfort is a painter who distills humor, philosophy, and experience into both language and paint, and I've long felt lucky to be a part of her project—if only through an iPhone screen. The following conversation took place on the occasion of [And Jugs Paint Reuse](#) at Houston's Inman Gallery. These paintings are intelligent, generous, and somehow both dense and breezy. Your first impulse will be to read what they say. But Frankfort asks you to slow down and read between the lines.

—Margaux Ogden



Dana Frankfort, *And*, 2022, oil on canvas, 5 × 7 inches. Photo by Allyson Huntsman. Image courtesy of the artist and Inman Gallery.

Margaux Ogden: This is hard because I know you so well. Let's just start with how this new work feels different to you?

Dana Frankfort: I don't know if they look different, but they do feel different. There was a speed to the earlier work; and even though I'd work on them for a long time, it felt like they were action paintings. This new work is slower. In the older paintings I'd layer and then scrape down and layer and scrape down again. I don't scrape down as much anymore. I just layer. The new paintings build the way moss might build on a rock.

MO: I like the moss analogy. I'm thinking back to that crusty shell image you sent me as inspiration for what you were trying to achieve in your paintings.

DF: Was it the painting that I literally glued shells to?

MO: Maybe! Sometimes you have to do crazy things to work through an idea.

DF: Yes, and I did that and left the shells on the painting for seven or eight months and went in one day and pulled them off, which allowed me to finish the painting, and that painting will be in the show. If you look closely in the center of the *P*, you can see where I ripped off the layer. Another change with the new work is scale: all the paintings in the show are eighteen by twenty-four inches or smaller. I wanted to make paintings that I could easily move. Economies of scale, words, and materials are on my mind. I'm also painting primarily on burlap now. They feel rough and raw. Lastly, I started repeating a lot of the language, which feels refreshing.

MO: I'm curious about the repetition. How do you know you want to repeat a word?

DF: This isn't a new idea in painting, but by repeating a word the word loses its meaning. Initially, I'm thinking about the linguistic component of the word, but ultimately with this work I wanted to watch what happened in smaller shifts between paintings rather than the big shift of a new word. *And* is a quiet connector word, and language can't really work without it. Another word that I've made a lot of paintings of is *Paint*. It's like I'm talking to myself in the paintings. *Reuse* speaks to a studio practice. *Jugs* references the painting as a container. I'm going back through words I've painted before and finding a way to repurpose them so that they feel fresh to me again.

MO: Does it get easier when you repeat a word?

DF: Sometimes. And sometimes it gets harder, and eventually I'll stop using a word altogether. I don't think I could make a *Meatballs* painting anymore.

MO: Is that because humor was important at a certain point and no longer is?

DF: At that time that word felt complicated but also funny, and it doesn't have any of that for me anymore. Now overlooked words like *And* and *Paint* feel the most complex.



Dana Frankfort, *Paint*, 2022, oil on burlap, 16 × 20 inches. Photo by Allyson Huntsman. Image courtesy of the artist and Inman Gallery.

MO: I know when you were in graduate school you started painting words because your professor told you to paint what you know. Is it still important that the words are close to you, or do you prefer some distance?

DF: I probably need to feel a word or to have lived a word in order to paint the word. The color as well as feeling a connection to the color relationships in the painting are equally important.

MO: I'm always surprised by the expansiveness of your painterly language. The way you paint seems to change with each word. Sometimes the paintings feel gestural, wispy, or calligraphic, and other times wobbly and precarious.

DF: Ideally I'd like to make something that is a material exploration up against a linguistic and structural scaffold that can hold content but can also hold color and brushwork. It can hold a light, transparent mark but also a heavy, palette knife mark. Thinking about how I can load all of that up interests me. Verbal language against painting language. All the while I'm pointing to the fact that the painting is made out of paint. You're reading and looking at something that says *Paint* and is paint. It is directing me and revealing to you, and that triangulation interests me.

MO: If you start with one word, does that word remain until the painting is finished or can you change it?

DF: It's almost like I juggle five different words in my studio, and I'm not quite sure where they're going to land until they do. Right now I want to make these pink and purple *Paint* paintings. I know they are going to say *Paint*, but the color keeps changing and how they're going to say it keeps changing, but I've stuck with that word so far. Other times you can read vestiges of past words in the layers. I think one of the paintings in the show has the word *Cornflakes* legible in the deep layers. I think of myself as an abstract landscape painter, and the lines and the letters are like figures in the landscape. I hope one gets a color field experience from the paintings as much as a linguistic one.

MO: Are you ever embarrassed about words you've painted?

DF: I'm a very self-conscious person who is embarrassed by things that most people wouldn't think twice about, but with the paintings I just don't feel that way.

MO: So the redacting, crossing out, or layering are about creating atmosphere and not about deletion?

DF: I love this question. I think both things are true. It isn't just about atmosphere. I think it could be a kind of internal dialogue or correction. A self-corrective tick.



Installation view of *Dana Frankfort: And Jugs Paint Reuse*. Inman Gallery, 2022.
Photo by Allyson Huntsman. Image courtesy of the artist and Inman Gallery.

MO: Is legibility important to you?

DF: Legibility of the painting is important to me, but not of the word. As long as the painting is legible, I don't spend a lot of time worrying about whether or not you can read the word. I do want the work to be accessible, and I'll title the painting whatever the word was before it got covered up.

MO: I know you've talked about growing up in the '80s in Houston and the palette of those decades influencing your paintings, but these new paintings feel muddier.



Dana Frankfort, *Refuse*, 2022, oil on canvas, 5 × 7 inches. Photo by Allyson Huntsman. Image courtesy of the artist and Inman Gallery.

DF: Yes! I used to be really influenced and inspired by plastic, Lucite, nail polish, and those synthetic saturated colors, but now I'm thinking about those colors washed up on the shore. Like a turquoise beach house where the paint has been chipped away and weathered by the salty air, but it's still turquoise. That's the kind of color that interests me now. I feel like my interest in color has aged along with me. We've talked a lot about seashells, which I grew up collecting and still have a massive collection of from my childhood, and I've been very interested in the heavy weathering of surface that's rough but still beautiful.

MO: I feel like you have a very natural and masterful touch. Was the burlap a way to disrupt that or a way to help you achieve that rougher surface you were after?

DF: I think the burlap was about slowing down the brushmarks and paint. In the past, I've mostly painted on panel or canvas, but there was always a shine or slickness to the paintings that I was trying to get away from. Around 2017–2018, I started mixing wax into the paint to change the surface, but the pendulum swung too much the other way. Recently, someone gave me stretched burlap surfaces, which I gave to my daughter to paint on because I never thought I would use them. I was painting beside her and realized when you paint on burlap with a palette knife the wash sinks down and the heavier paint stays on top

and creates a viewing experience that feels slower and richer. That is how I ended up trying out burlap, and when I started painting on canvas again it just felt flat.

MO: When a painting feels finished, but you have ideas you still want to work out, do you keep working on that painting, or do you finish it and use the ideas generated by it to dictate the next painting?

DF: Both. I think one painting leads into the next. I've lost so many paintings from overworking. When I see that I can stop working on a painting but still have some ideas about it, I try to start a new one. In the past, everything was moving very quickly. You could stand in front of my paintings and get it and walk on. The whole experience was quick. You know when you go into a dark room and your eye has to adjust to the lack of light before you can see? I'm interested in slowing down the experience of looking and letting the painting reveal itself more slowly over time like that. That seashell painting sat in an unfinished state for so many months, so when you talk about pace and think about a fossil or a boat with barnacles on it, for instance, there's a lot of inaction that happens when making paintings too.

[Dana Frankfort: And Jugs Paint Reuse](#) is on view at Inman Gallery in Houston until July 16.

Margaux Ogden is an artist based in New York City.

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