

ON THE MOVE

The visual humor of Matt Duffin

by Beth Rush

IF YOU HAVE EVER WATCHED *PBS's MYSTERY!* you will remember the illustrative opening by Edward Gorey. This is the first thing that struck me about artist Matt Duffin's delicately rendered, illustrative, and narrative encaustic paintings. At first glance, the precision and comedic vignettes are reminiscent of Edward Gorey's illustrations, the silly and macabre meeting in fine line drawings. While Gorey used pen and ink, Duffin, who began with pen and ink, now employs wax, heat, and pigment to create stories that make the viewer laugh and question.

Duffin, like Gorey, plays on our sense of the mysterious and what can make the mysterious lighthearted and funny. Tinged with visual humor and surrealist sensibility, Mr. Potatohead becomes an outlaw, the Kool-Aid Man a faceless giant, and an empty La-Z-Boy a solo rider on an amusement park ride.

On the Move at Gilman Contemporary explores an interior world of contrast and contradiction. There is a darkly humorous innocence throughout Duffin's body of work; his figures are unexpected and quirky. Giving life to inanimate objects, we are treated to visual narratives that are uneasy yet lighthearted.

These labor-intensive paintings are smoothly executed, there are sharp planes and high contrast, and they have a

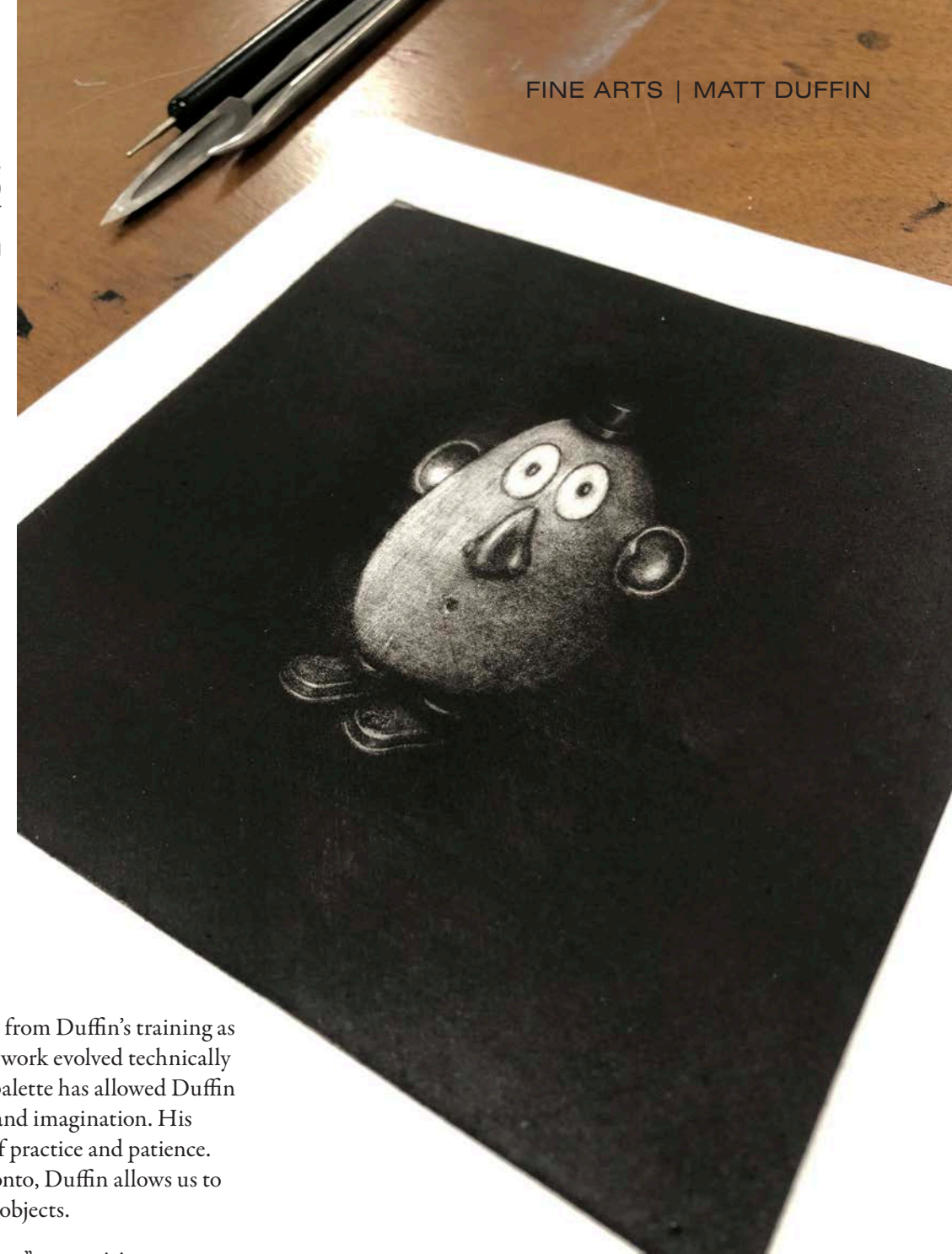
Chupacabras
Encaustic on panel
19.5" x 19.5"



Matt Duffin in his
Barcelona studio with
his muse "Jupi"



Señor Papá
Edition 1/30
Mezzotint on paper
5.5" x 5.4"
18.5" x 18.5" framed



spatial understanding that stems from Duffin's training as an architect. Using this skill, his work evolved technically and visually. Limiting his color palette has allowed Duffin to challenge our sense of reality and imagination. His medium is one that takes years of practice and patience. In giving us something to latch onto, Duffin allows us to wonder at the lives of inanimate objects.

Whether referencing "Chupacabra," a vampiric creature that haunts livestock throughout the Americas, Pinocchio, or a seemingly endless amusement park ride, Duffin engages his viewer with tongue-in-cheek humor. With deft execution, an almost drained bright red Kool-Aid Man looms over suspicious lambs, one of whom has a pale blue pacifier, bringing a sense of the absurd. Black and white dominate, but the subtle shifting in the detailed sheep and the bright red of the Kool-Aid Man draw the viewer closer and highlight the smooth and luminous surface.

In Duffin's hands, Mr. Potatohead stares with baby blue eyes that meet ours as he sits across a table laden with both his missing ear and a pile of coins; across from

"My process stems from a fascination that I have with darkness and the myriad feelings that it evokes—melancholy, tranquility, mystery. I always start with this as a backdrop."

—Matt Duffin



Listen, I know they're pricey, but hear me out
Encaustic on panel
19.5" x 19.5"

him, Bigfoot stares him down. Entitled *Listen, I Know they're pricey...*, we see Mr. Potatohead's conundrum but are given the chance to interpret what exactly that conundrum is. A wheel of bright red boxing gloves seems to propel an empty classic La-Z-Boy up a steep wooden roller coaster etched into a black surface; with the title *Haymaker*, we are led to wonder at the imagery. Duffin's work holds both light and dark, silly and serious, and gives us a mirror of our memories.

For Duffin, "Visual humor is a universal language—everybody gets it. No matter what your level of schooling with regard to art, the only thing that matters when the art is about humor is whether or not the piece is funny. If it accomplishes that goal, then it is successful."

Each painting is a narrative capsule subverting our expectations of commercially familiar characters. Kool-Aid Man and Mr. Potatohead are given new life; they are goofy yet ominous. About the origin of his imagery, Duffin says, "My process stems from a fascination that I have with darkness and the myriad feelings that it evokes—melancholy, tranquility, mystery. I always start with this as a backdrop." Whether a familiar character or the suggestion of light in darkness, Duffin captures a neurotic humor that will make the viewer chuckle. ■



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