

# HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

## When Natural History and the Artist's Studio Collide

by [Robert Cicetti](#) on October 5, 2012



Adam Cvijanovic, "Wapiti" (2012), flash acrylic on Tyvek, 12 x 18 feet (all images courtesy Postmasters Gallery unless otherwise noted)

The [American Museum of Natural History](#) in New York is legendary for its examples of exquisite taxidermy and assemblages of bones, but these artifacts owe much of their vital aura to the museum's *trompe l'oeil* murals, which offer sweeping panoramic visions of a land before time. Despite their flat surfaces, they can be more immersive than any faux-fur facsimiles, and yet, by virtue of their own being, readily fade into the scenery.

In his current exhibition at Postmasters Gallery, [Natural History](#), artist Adam Cvijanovic foregrounds these murals and in doing so, gives center stage to his process as a photorealist painter. Described in the press release as "addresses[ing] the essential ideas of time, extinction, human presence and

intervention into the natural world,” *Natural History* offers a lot to think about, and in terms of subject matter, all that one might expect from photorealist murals attempting to play with the imagination. But I’m more concerned with Cvijanovic’s “meditation on painting and its meta-capacity to transform the real, the historic, and the imagined space.” In the exhibition, Cvijanovic toys with expectations of photorealist painting by representing the real and imagined as one cohesive scene that calls attention to its maker.



Adam Cvijanovic, “Discovery of America” (2012), flash acrylic on Tyvek, 15 x 65 feet (click to enlarge)

Cvijanovic’s paintings might be more easily understood apart from their process if they were complete, but the majority of the works on view appear in a state of becoming. By leaving out the portions you’d expect to be perfect and adding in the details that are unfit to be seen, Cvijanovic asks us to read in between the lines. “Discovery of America,” the colossal (65 feet wide) centerpiece of the exhibition, appears to be coming apart at the seams, thrown off its supporting lattice work as it falls into the gallery space. The work shows two giant wall paintings that are colliding, in the process delivering a grand narrative about time, space, man, and beast. But then the paintings are also made to look like they are in Cvijanovic’s studio. The trompe l’oeil style used to give lifelike depth is effectively deployed in both scenes, which paradoxically negates the effect altogether by calling attention to the artifice. This in part plays into Cvijanovic’s idea of achieving a kind of honesty that strict photorealism abjures. The installation setup that Cvijanovic has created below one of the murals portrays the artistic process and gives a glimpse into his interior life that is more telling than a self-portrait.

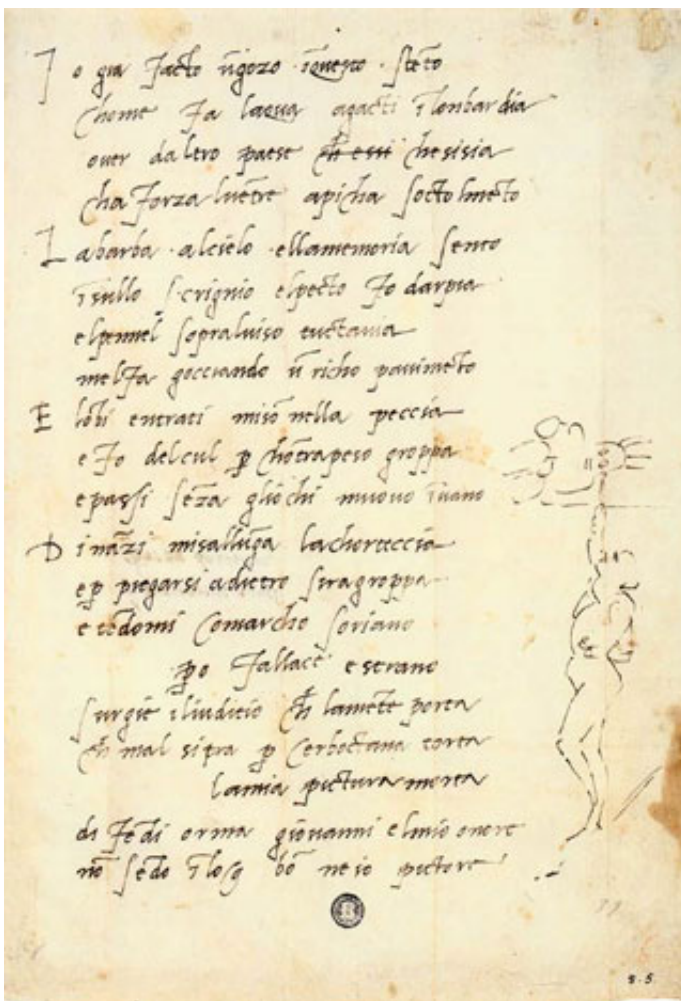
Cvijanovic’s face is nowhere to be found in this show, but his presence is felt through the objects strewn about within his paintings. Some of these things belong at a construction site: an industrial lamp, a circular saw, a step ladder, a box with extensions cords. Others imply the artist’s presence more clearly: there’s a ram’s head ready for study and rolls of paper waiting to be added to the scene. Most revealing are the discarded pizza box and the empty beer bottles, some still standing, perhaps still full, others long forgotten on the floor. A lone beer rests precariously on a rung of the ladder. This isn’t a photo shoot; it’s a living studio. The dripping paint looks fresh, the pizza box still appetizing, and even though the stuffed ram’s head is no more real than the woolly mammoth painted on the wall behind it, it’s hard not to feel as though Cvijanovic has recently descended the ladder, put down his paint brush in one hand and beer in the other, and stepped away to assess his work in progress while standing beside you.



Adam Cvijanovic, "Santi's Ladder" (2012), oil on canvas, 11 x 20 inches

The ladder might be seen as a stand-in for Cvijanovic himself, since it is the one tool particularly required for painting on a colossal scale. This link is visualized in "Santi's Ladder," wherein a mountain range and a ladder are shown in a landscape, topping out at the same point. Both appear on the same canvas and somehow they coexist, but only in the painter's mind. Cvijanovic's offering of self-expression and psychological exploration in *Natural History* is refreshing, given that photorealism and especially murals can often lack, in being objectively faithful, a subjective entrance for the viewer.

"Discovery of America" and the other works on view collectively appear to me as the pages of a torn sketchbook writ large, a fragmented portrait of the artist found in deliberately placed marks, traces of incomplete gestures, and portions left missing. At times *Natural History* offers a sort of slapdash approach to rendering the real that you might find somewhere off canvas, like a preliminary drawing or a mindless doodle. Often that's all we get from realist masters, who are so technically proficient they seem to be incapable of showing a degree of interpretation, a little imperfection.



Michelangelo's "Sonnet with a Caricature" (c. 1510)  
 (click to enlarge) (image via [www.wga.hu](http://www.wga.hu))

A colleague of mine called my attention to a work by Michelangelo that is not nearly as well known as the Sistine Chapel but was made around the same time. Found in the margins of a sonnet lamenting the task at hand, it is a caricature of the artist himself straining to paint vertically. I see the same sort of tongue-in-cheek self-awareness in Cvijanovic's work.

Despite *Natural History's* seemingly cosmic ambitions, the grand narrative that at first overwhelms the main gallery becomes merely a background for the show's true focus, Cvijanovic as painter. The viewer-turned-voyeur can't help but be engrossed by the artist's willingness to be seen, on the surface in pencil marks and dripping paint, as well as behind the scenes in a way that isn't self-aggrandizing — Cvijanovic could hide behind a curtain, but he'd rather have us know that in his case, becoming God requires a ladder. *Natural History* offers an intimate portrait of the artist as human, not some divine entity attached to a signature.

That being said, some works on view here veer off from self-representation by offering something closer to what the press release calls a "meditation on painting." Three pieces in particular stand out for expressing an ire for abstract art, a cause that might still have some sympathizers but is by now a boring lament for the days of yore. Using provocative titles that give shout-outs to the most revered of landscape painters, Cvijanovic calls forth his inner abstract expressionist and puts paint wherever he pleases. A resulting painting such as "Savage State (after Thomas Cole)" looks like a four-year-old could have done better, which I think is the point, but it comes off like an infomercial dramatizing the perils of

using a competitor's product — it's almost comically absurd in its overblown rendition of AbEx's pretty-filthy gleam.



Installation view, Adam Cvijanovic, “Natural History,” featuring, left: “Osborne Caribou” (2012), flash acrylic on Tyvek, 8 x 12 feet; right: “White Tailed Deer” (2012), flash acrylic on Tyvek, 8 x 10 feet

I'm also a little befuddled by his juxtaposition of “Osborne Caribou,” a realistic portrayal of a caribou standing over a carcass (its own?) and “White Tailed Deer,” a faithful depiction of the cast of Bambi. I can't imagine the connection is as obvious as I see it — fantasy of bushy white fur vs. reality of blood and guts — but as in the case of Cvijanovic's attempts at abstraction, I'm worried these are all that meets the eye.

*Natural History* might be a bit too far flung in scope, but the work is successful when it remains subjective and open to the viewer's imagination. The moments when Cvijanovic reveals himself are honest and meaningful; when he tries to be instructive, the message is too obvious and leaves nothing for the viewer to explore. Cvijanovic's art not only questions notions of time and space with paint, but also the possibility for self-expression in photorealism.

Adam Cvijanovic: *Natural History* is on view at *Postmasters Gallery* (459 West 19th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through October 13.

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