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Profile of an Artist

VF ARTISTS AY

by Timothy Burton

Jennifer Ditacchio is having a cup of coffee and a croissant. She's seated on a couch in the studio she shares with artist, M. P. Landis; their art work covers the walls, easels and floor. Her light olive skin offsets a pair of warm brown eyes. She brushes her curly brown hair from side to side while she talks about her work.

"I think my work is about memory," Ditacchio says. "It's a lot about memory and places that I've been. It's distilling different memories of those places. When I'm painting what I do is open myself up to the paint and let the paint sort of move me. I follow it and it starts to feel like a certain place, so I go with that a little bit. It's a push and pull relationship with the painting, but it's usually reminiscent of a place I've been and seen."

The places Ditacchio presents in the paintings she's showing at Gallery matrix are places we have all been to or seen at one time or another: railway stations and tracks; telephone poles and wires; piers and wharves. Her paintings represent sights that many of us walk by often, without the thought of a second glance. But to Ditacchio, they capture her, hold her gaze until the lines, the shadings, the spaces fill her memory and capture her attention. It is then that the telephone pole becomes more than wood and wire; it is then that the telephone pole becomes art.

"People have looked at my work and told me it's too dark, too depressing or melancholy. They say things like I should try do some things

that are a little more light. But I don't think my paintings or etchings are about being happy or sad. They're about being in a quiet space. That's what I have to do as an artist. I have a responsibility to myself to show it the way I see it, the way I feel it."

The way Ditacchio feels her landscapes, the sensations they provoke in her when her eyes scan the horizon, all of these come across wonderfully on her canvases, etchings and woodcuts. Her canvases are



done in a process called *encaustic*. It involves a base of melted beeswax into which paint, linseed oil and varnish are added. This mixture is applied to wood and then burned in with a torch. The wood is then framed in copper strips. The mood this process creates is nothing short of atmospheric. Her compositions present a play of light and dark, of parallel and perpendicular lines creating intense spatial relationships. She has developed an eye for showing us what we see every day and making it new; her eye can help our

eyes make the commonplace seem out of the ordinary. It is a skill she has developed since she was a child.

"I've wanted to be an artist since I was five," Ditacchio says. "My mother was an artist and I watched her work. That's what I wanted to do. My great-grandmother was an artist. She painted the trim and flowers on trays and that was considered decorative, but I consider her an artist. She was creating something. And my grandmother was artist, too. When I figured out that you could do something that was fun, like art, I knew that I wanted to do it."

The tradition of women artists in Ditacchio's family gave her the opportunity to surround herself with art. The constant exposure to creativity and the creative process placed her in a position that few children are allowed to enjoy - being immersed in a family where the women were at the forefront of the creative process.

"I guess I never really thought about the fact that the women in my family were artists. It was just the way it was. Like my great-grandmother had the money to do the artistic and decorative work that she did. Back then it was all right for a woman to decorate and paint on trays - that's what she did, art work on trays - because people didn't really consider that art. They didn't, but I do. Her work wasn't threatening. Women have just been artists in my family and I haven't really questioned it."

Not only was she surrounded by artists in her family, but she was surrounded by artists in her hometown. Ditacchio grew up in Provincetown, where native born

Jennifer Ditacchio

artists have the luxury of seeing art in all stages, from its inception to its completion. A constant exposure to art also fanned her fire to become an artist.

"Growing up in Provincetown had a really big influence on me," Ditacchio remarks. "There were gallery openings all of the time and I used to love to go to them. Being here as a kid gave me a chance to go into artists' studios and see them while they did their work and be able to ask them questions. I also got to see women artists opening along side men artists. More of the kids here should have gone to openings, but a lot of them didn't pay attention to the art."

While the thriving art community was a nice part of growing up in Provincetown, it wasn't always a pleasant experience. "This is a rough place to grow up, but I guess in a way, it's just like any other place. For a small town, you see a lot here. It makes you grow up fast. There's a lot of open sexuality here but as a kid, there weren't a lot of outlets for it. There weren't a lot of activities structured here for kids except school. It wasn't talked about in school. It was pretty much ignored. There was also the townies versus the tourists idea, too. The two of those together were tough. I wasn't a bad kid in school, but we had nothing to do, had no outlet so we'd walk down the street and bump into people. The kids stole stuff and broke windows. We did it because there was nothing else for us to do."

But where many young adults can find themselves caught up in a cycle of anti-social behavior, Ditacchio found a way to escape it. She went to

the Putney School in Vermont, a boarding school which concentrates on the arts. "I was lucky to get away when I was young," Ditacchio says. "It was in Vermont and that was beautiful. You had the ability to change things there. While I lived in Provincetown I had taken classes at the Art Association where we used live models. But we didn't have those at Putney. When I asked them why, they said we were too young. I spoke to some people there, along with a few other students, and they let us have a nude model. It was a great experience to go there. But when I got back, my old friends thought I was weird. They had stayed here and done the same things and I had gone somewhere else."

Ditacchio's experience at the Putney School showed her how important it is to be able to leave home, if only for a while. This led her to attend Bennington College, where she had the opportunity to travel to Italy and France. The visual experience of those two countries became a part of her artistic memory. "When I was Italy, I was really influenced by the poplar trees there. And in France, there were the bridges in Paris, the big arches. And that's not counting all the art I saw in both of those places."

So now some of those images, some of those experiences have blended together in a strong collection of work for Ditacchio. It's a collection she knows will have people trying to figure her out, trying to guess what she's trying to say.

"What does this show say?" she asks aloud. She looks around the room, her eyes sliding over a few pieces of her work. "I think more

than saying, this show is asking. It's asking you to come in and experience what I've experienced. Where some people's art seems to be out there saying something to you, confronting you, mine is just asking you come in and look. That's what it does."

Jennifer Ditacchio's recent paintings will be showing at Gallery matrix, 168 Commercial St., from August 7 - 20. Opening reception is Saturday, August 7 from 7 to 9 pm. Gallery Matrix is open daily 12 - 4 and 7 - 11 pm.

