

ALL YOU NEED TO DO is stand outside of David Brewster's studio to grasp the breadth of social issues that his abstract work expresses, as well as the numerous places where his paintings have been exhibited.

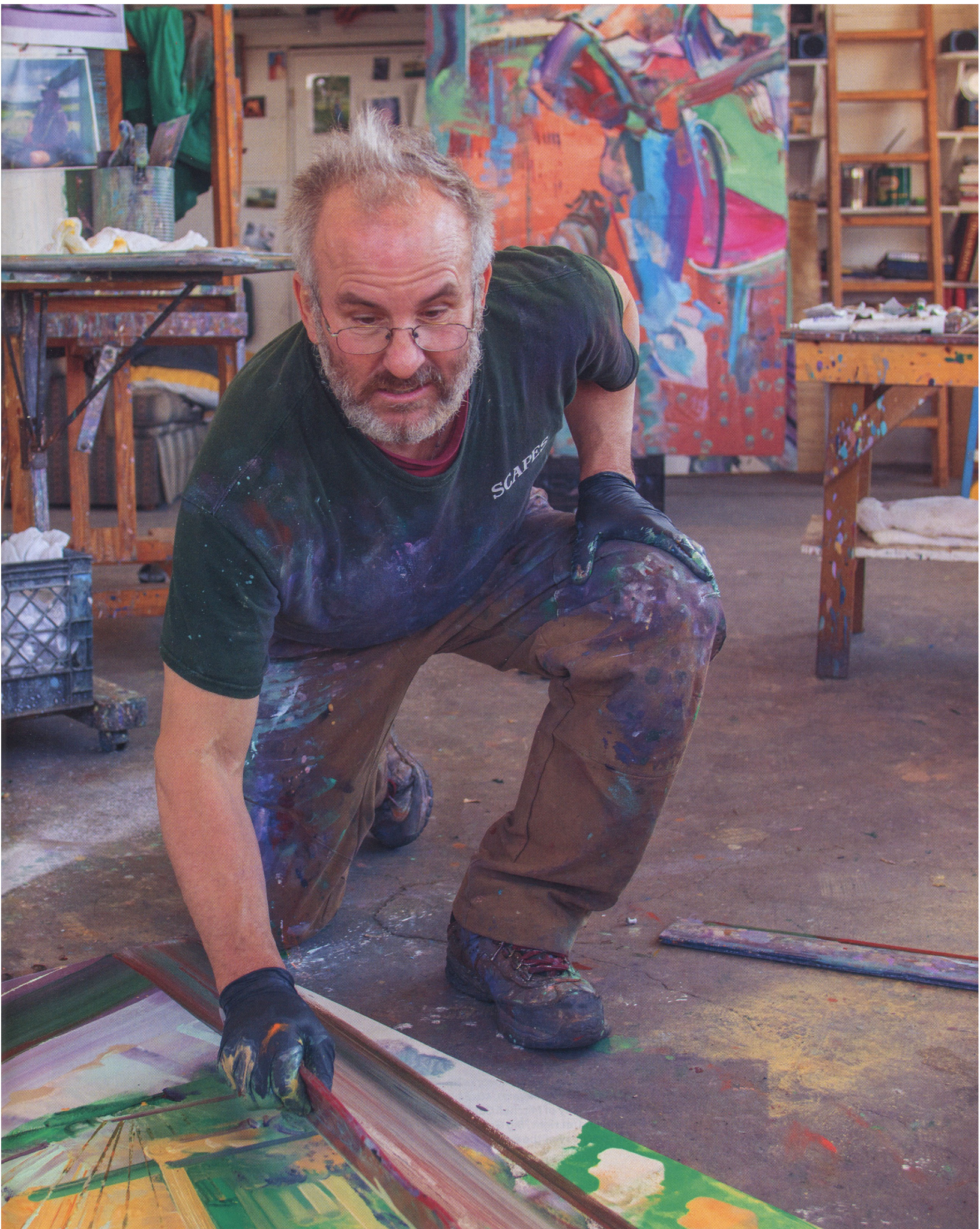
There's a banner heralding a 20-year retrospective in 2016, *Quixotic Encounters*, at the Southern Vermont Arts Center in Manchester. And *David Brewster Explores Maryland's Social Landscape* at the Maryland Center for History and Culture that ended in March 2019. There's a poster of Brewster's rendition of "The Glory Hole," the Harriman Reservoir Flood spillway on the Deerfield River. Look more, and you'll see that Brewster is drawn to the infiniteness of guard rails on secondary roads, or the swaths of open land where the power lines cut through heavily forested terrain. "I always loved that one little opening, like a missing tooth in the smile of a mountain ridge," he comments. "I'm deeply interested in that sense of space, in that spectator who's looking at my work to move through these walls, these walls of green."

Brewster's workspace is located in the 1880s Brushworks Arts & Industry Building in Florence, Massachusetts. Numerous other posters cover the studio's front wall and door—he lingers on a reproduction showing *St. Sebastian Brianna*. Brewster was inspired by an exhibition in 2016, *Splendor, Myth, and Vision: Nudes from the Prado* at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, and borrowed from the classic image of St. Sebastian's arrow-pierced body painted by El Greco. In Brewster's

BEAUTY AND THE MACHINE

ARTIST DAVID BREWSTER
FINDS HUMANITY IN CHAOS





painting, the arrows represent a transgender's self-inflicted wounds. "She told me what an internal struggle it had been, how she attempted suicide," recalls Brewster. "St. Sebastian was brutally persecuted and killed because of his religious beliefs. There are still people who are being persecuted. I wanted to express that in paint."

That piece was commissioned by the Maryland Center for History and Culture in Baltimore (mdhistory.org), one of a group of paintings juxtaposed with the historical collections. In addition to social, political, and environmental issues, Brewster's work references agriculture, urban landscapes, and commercial development—often their decline and abandonment. He goes to the museums like the Clark to sketch artwork by masters such as Toulouse-Lautrec's *Carmen*, or paintings by Winslow Homer. "I try to add to their vocabulary because we live in a different age and different epoch with different visual challenges," says Brewster.

Brewster received an artist fellowship grant last year from the Mass Cultural Council, and his work has been the subject of over 25 solo gallery exhibitions. From October 6 to November 13, Brewster will have a solo exhibition of new paintings at Chase Young Gallery, 450 Harrison Avenue in Boston (chaseyounggallery.com). The opening reception is November 6.

Like other prolific artists, Brewster's studio is filled with many finished works, as well as ones that are still in play. He delves into topics of the vanishing small farm, "McMansions," a mega shopping mall, transgender rights, brutal arrests, a pregnant man. He uses symbols like the Golden Arches and Colonel Sanders as a backdrop for tragedy in our culture. His method can be described as brash and aggressively working the surface. It is

reflective of what it is to be human today, as he quickly works through his pieces—creating large strokes by hand or by paint roller, strategically placing strips of blue painter's tape, and painstakingly using a razor knife to peel away the upper layer of the mat board. (Canvas is too soft and absorbant.) In one painting, Brewster shows mundane motion of daily life—a young man corraling shopping carts in a Walmart parking lot.

He began to explore the human condition in greater depth while living in Philadelphia for 15 years, where he also received his master of fine arts at the University of Pennsylvania. "I was so fascinated by the urban dwellers going around with shopping carts and salvaging recyclable metals, literally taking a kitchen paring knife and taking the black insulation off wiring to get the copper. Yet what was so fascinating about these people is that they were not harvesting wheat or digging potatoes in the fields; they were collecting the automated waste from our mechanized society. I was inspired by Jean-François Millet who, earlier in his career, was interested in those who worked directly with their hands. To me, that was key. I was honoring their human dignity first and foremost. That's what my attempt was then, and now."

Brewster is equally drawn to the work of artist Edvard Munch, who taps into the despair of modern man in the machine age. Munch's *The Scream* was a reaction to Krakatoa's eruption in Indonesia and the ash's affect on the atmosphere. Even within the context of modernization and a synthetic world, there exists a human fierceness to survive. Brewster not only is moved by the art he views in museums; events around the world often are a part of his repertoire. A father cradling his child who was killed in a suicide bombing in Syria is one of



THE HUMAN CONDITION Pictured here are a few works by David Brewster. Above, *Adirondack Chairs Akimbo*, 40x64 inches, oil on Mi-Teintes, 2020, courtesy of Mitchell Giddings Gallery in Brattleboro, Vermont; and, at right, *Big Gulp*, 47x32 inches, oil on Mi-Teintes, 2019, courtesy of the artist.



his moving depictions that hangs in Brewster's studio.

Brewster creates works in a single pass in the spirit of the American Action Painters of the mid-20th century, putting himself in public spaces to paint—like on the streets of Holyoke and West Springfield. In that way, it is not only the painting itself that is important, but how and where it was painted. “This guy was walking by really fast with his headphones on, and then he stopped to see what I was doing. That moment was a gift to me. He looked at me and said, ‘I can hear it, Man, I can hear it.’ And then he carried on. That is one of the main reasons why I love being an outdoor painter in urban and suburban arenas, because for an instant, people forget their troubles, their cares, and become interested and excited. They’re drawn into what I’m making. Art teaches us how to live and to love.”

Brewster is known to draw plenty of attention, like when he set up in the parking lot of Table & Vine in West Springfield. “The management came out. They were not concerned about a suspicious person in a black Nissan van, but they had just resurfaced the parking lot and they were concerned about getting paint on the new jet-black surface.”

He has a sense of urgency to create every day, and his painting and method are constantly transforming. At 61, Brewster is more reflective in his practice and is delving deeper into himself. He still goes out to do his sketches—his form of note taking—but returns to the studio to paint. “I want to get closer to that place in my imagination where I’m totally in command. I’ve been working religiously for 45 years, so I have this vast reservoir of knowledge. I don’t want to be seduced anymore. I want to be impacted by something, then bring it back to my studio and go from there.

That way, I’m able to get closer to how the world appears to me.”

Fluorescent colors now appear in almost every painting, as they do in our daily life—workmen on the side of the road in lurid yellow vests, joggers in dayglo orange, police officers wearing fluorescent green while directing traffic.

“I’m looking for a way for that synthetic color to co-exist with the muted tonality of nature,” says Brewster. “I’m intrigued when you’re driving down the interstate and you glance at your side-view mirror to see what’s happening with the traffic alongside you and behind you. There’s actually a section of the mirror that captures a pristine landscape. It’s the margin. It’s the woodland and sky along the interstate where there’s no cars. It’s a new experience of the traditional landscape.” One of Brewster’s paintings comes to mind, his *American Sorrow: Chasing Trump’s Tornado*, in which the former president’s raging face is reflected in a limo’s sideview mirror.

On the walls of Brewster’s studio are dozens of completed works, as well as stacks of other finished paintings. Each one has a story; there’s a beautiful portrait of a woman drinking from a Big Gulp-sized cup—something he saw just outside of Cumberland Farm where plastic lime-green parasols already were breaking down. The simple act of someone sipping from a straw, albeit super-sized, conveys a common human experience that you would also see in a painting by Alice Neel. That everyday scene feels familiar and transcends time.

Brewster is responding to how the world appears to him.

“We live in a cluttered and fragmented infrastructure. I’m committed to try and find order and beauty in the chaos.”

See more of Brewster’s artwork at davidbrewsterfineart.com ■