

RICHARD GRAY GALLERY

CHICAGO READER

At 82 years old, painter Jim Dine shows no signs of slowing down

Richard Gray Gallery opens a new West Town space with new work by the famous artist.

By Kate Sierzputowski



Jim Dine, *Errant Rays and Seeds Escaping*, 2015-16
TOM VANEYNDE / RICHARD GRAY GALLERY

In "Looking at the Present: Recent Works by Jim Dine," at Richard Gray Gallery's newly opened warehouse space in West Town, Jim Dine presents a series of figurative paintings made within the last two years. Earlier in his career, Dine was famous for his depictions of objects such as robes, tools, and especially hearts, but before "Looking at the Present" he'd spent several years working in a purely abstract style. The more recent pieces present a subtle return to the body, undefined figures and faces ground into the surface with power tools and a thick application of sand-mixed acrylic and oil paint. And the nine large-scale paintings ideally inaugurate Richard Gray's 5,000-square-foot space, a setting that provides room to take in the darker tone set by Dine's thickly painted skulls, twisted bodies, and even his own head.

During Dine's five-decade-plus career his practice has also included sculpture, printmaking, poetry, and performance, the last of which is the area where the 82-year-old artist received his first praise. Dine was one of several artists initially involved in New York City's happenings in the 1960s – spontaneous performances that blurred the line between performer and viewer – with contemporaries such as Claes Oldenburg and Robert Whitman. But Dine has been most closely associated with his paintings, where he works with recognizable and personal imagery largely originating from his childhood experiences in his family's hardware store in Cincinnati, Ohio.



TOM VANEYNDE / RICHARD GRAY GALLERY

Despite the breadth of subject matter and mediums that Dine has covered in more than 300 international solo exhibitions, his material has always maintained a common theme. As he explained to me, "I've always viewed my work as self-portraits, no matter what it's been." A more direct interpretation of this self-assessment can be seen in the use of his own bald head, which appears directly in the middle of more than half of the paintings in "Looking at the Present," such as in *Red Eye* (2016). A simplified

representation of the artist's likeness is found at the center of the canvas, a self-portrait that seems to illuminate the background imagery of solemn faces with an intense red glow. But Dine doesn't view his head as more intimate or personal than other items he could've selected.

"It occurred to me that my head is, for me, iconic, since I have looked at it for 82 years," Dine says. "It was easy to translate it into a kind of matrix to put the paint on. I thought it was as good as anything else. I could have used my dog too. . . . When I painted that I didn't know what I had, but I had found it so I didn't move from it. It found me."

Dine explained that his process is much more physical than it has been in previous decades. His gritty formula of sand and paint sits at the base of his paintings; Dine then uses sanders and other power tools to produce a sculptural surface, cutting divets and sanding down the applied paint into a rougher field of textures. This technique of application and erasure is common in his work regardless of medium, the artist creating a painting, poem, or sculpture and then continuing to destroy and rebuild additional parts of it until he deems it complete.

The largest painting in "Looking at the Present" is nearly 19 feet wide, and many others are more than seven, so it was imperative for the works to be given lots of space and for the exhibit not to appear overcrowded. Richard Gray's three-story warehouse gallery avoids that predicament, providing room for the sizable artworks. The new venue dwarfs its John Hancock-based alternate; the warehouse is charming, with exposed rafters and skylights that resemble a cathedral. Yet the West Town location also feels institutional – its expansiveness can only be matched by museums, not by other local, more modest commercial galleries. The room is ideal for Dine's contributions, but could potentially overwhelm the efforts of artists who operate on a smaller scale.

Gallery partners Paul Gray and Valerie Carberry are excited to see how their new space might create exhibition opportunities for their roster of blue-chip artists. "We were looking for a space that would be able to accommodate as many possibilities as we could imagine, and would in fact push artists to think about what they do and how they do it," Gray says. "We wanted a space that would impose as few restrictions as possible. I think a really good space, like this one, elevates your sense of perception."

The build-out for the new venue was conducted by Wheeler Kearns Architects, the firm that completed the construction of Richard Gray's Streeterville space. An outdoor garden in the back of the gallery – a strip located directly below the Metra tracks that

are behind the building—currently resembles a rock garden rather than a blossoming landscape. Although the garden is relatively small, the potential for outdoor programming and artistic collaboration for future exhibitions is attractive, and something that would be impossible at Richard Gray's other location, 38 floors above Michigan Avenue.

It's here, at the back of the gallery, that Dine has laid out *My Portrait*, a poem written in a mixture of charcoal, acrylic paint, and resin sealant on the cement wall facing Richard Gray's door. "This is me / running after my portrait / This is how I remember / (portraits) / This is the memory / This is me / running after / myself (portraits)."
Although Dine wrote *My Portrait* years before "Looking at the Present," the text speaks directly to what's in the show. It softly elucidates in eight short lines how even after 50 years Dine is first and foremost preserving himself in his practice, still chasing how he might represent a bit of himself in each of his artworks.