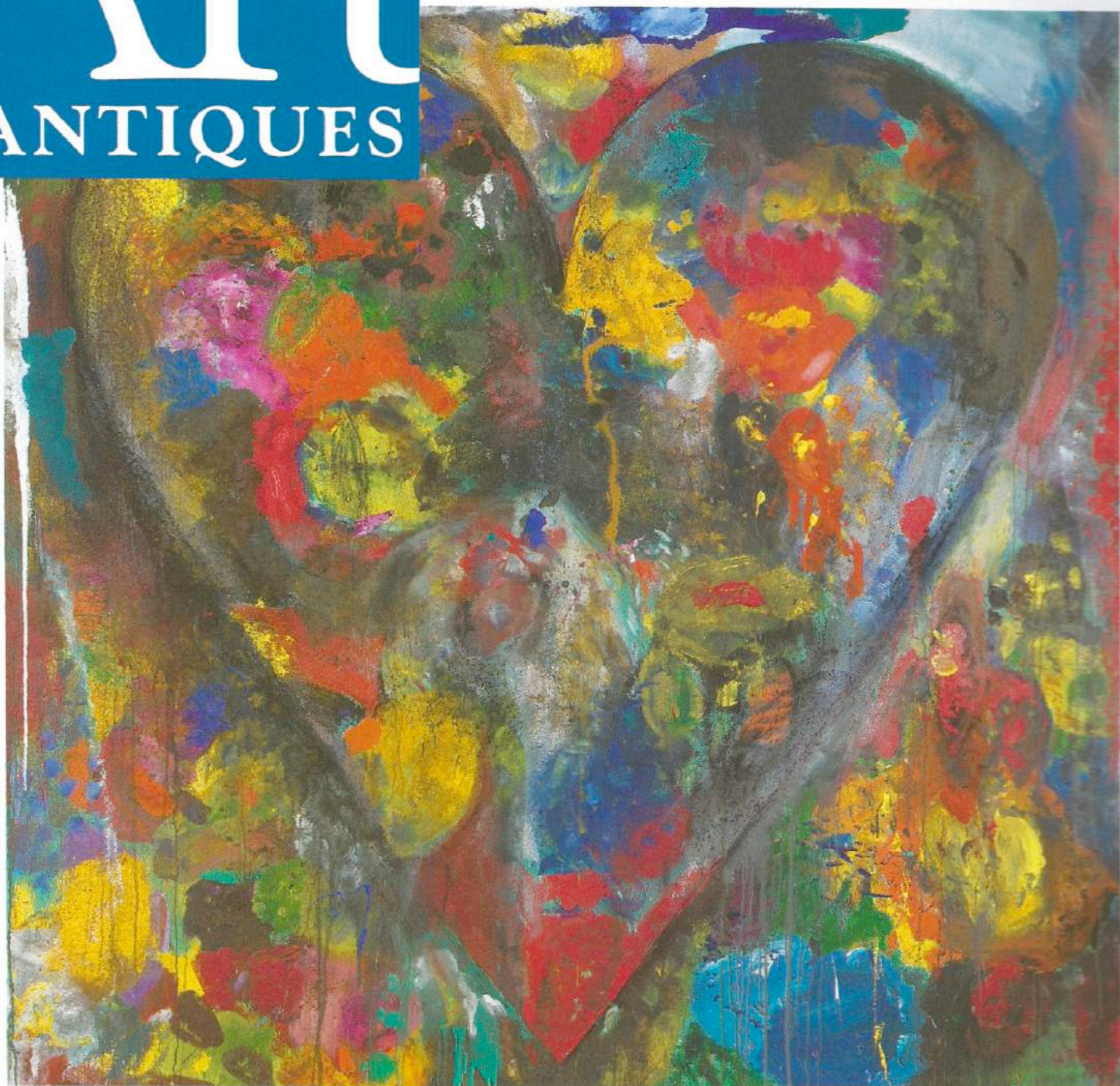


SEPTEMBER 2

Art & ANTIQUES

FOR COLLECTORS OF THE FINE AND DECORATIVE ARTS



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JIM DINE

the Worker

Jim Dine's art is an Expressionistic one, but he constructs it with the know-how and honesty of a workman with his tools.

By Carter Ratcliff



Throughout a career that is well into its sixth decade, Jim Dine has often assembled his paintings from panels. *Four Ears* (2016) has two, and there are five in *Errant Rays and Seeds Escaping* (2015–16). Moreover, a single-panel painting often has internal divisions, clearly marked in patterns as rectilinear as the surfaces where they appear. A *Color Chart* (1963) fills the canvas with 12 brightly-hued oblongs in orderly rows. Dine, it would seem, likes partitions. That the divisions he creates are at least partially architectural in spirit is suggested by *Four Rooms*, a painting from 1962.

Here, four vertical panels abut, each covered by a layer of quietly bravura brushwork. An armchair stands in front of the left-hand panel, its gray upholstery establishing a chromatic note that carries, with variations, through all four panels. Shifting passages of light and dark gray on the left become lighter in the next panel, still lighter in the next; then, in the right-panel, Dine recapitulates the full range of tones he has deployed in this painting. Instead of picturing four rooms, he has evoked their unique atmospheres. An exuberantly allusive painter, he is also a literalist. The chair in *Four Rooms* looks like a recent arrival from a department store show room—albeit a department store from the early

1960s—and the two hammers suspended from upper edges of the three-paneled *Summer Tools* (1962) are the real things. His literalism notwithstanding, Dine described his art as “Romantic Expressionism” in an interview given earlier this year. And he noted that his early belief that he would be an artist was confirmed when he discovered, at 17, a book of German Expressionist woodcuts. The imagery of Ernst Kirchner, Emil Nolde, and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff gave him an abiding sense of what art could be. Dine is their heir, but not a dutiful one. He has expanded, even redefined, the possibilities for Expressionist art.

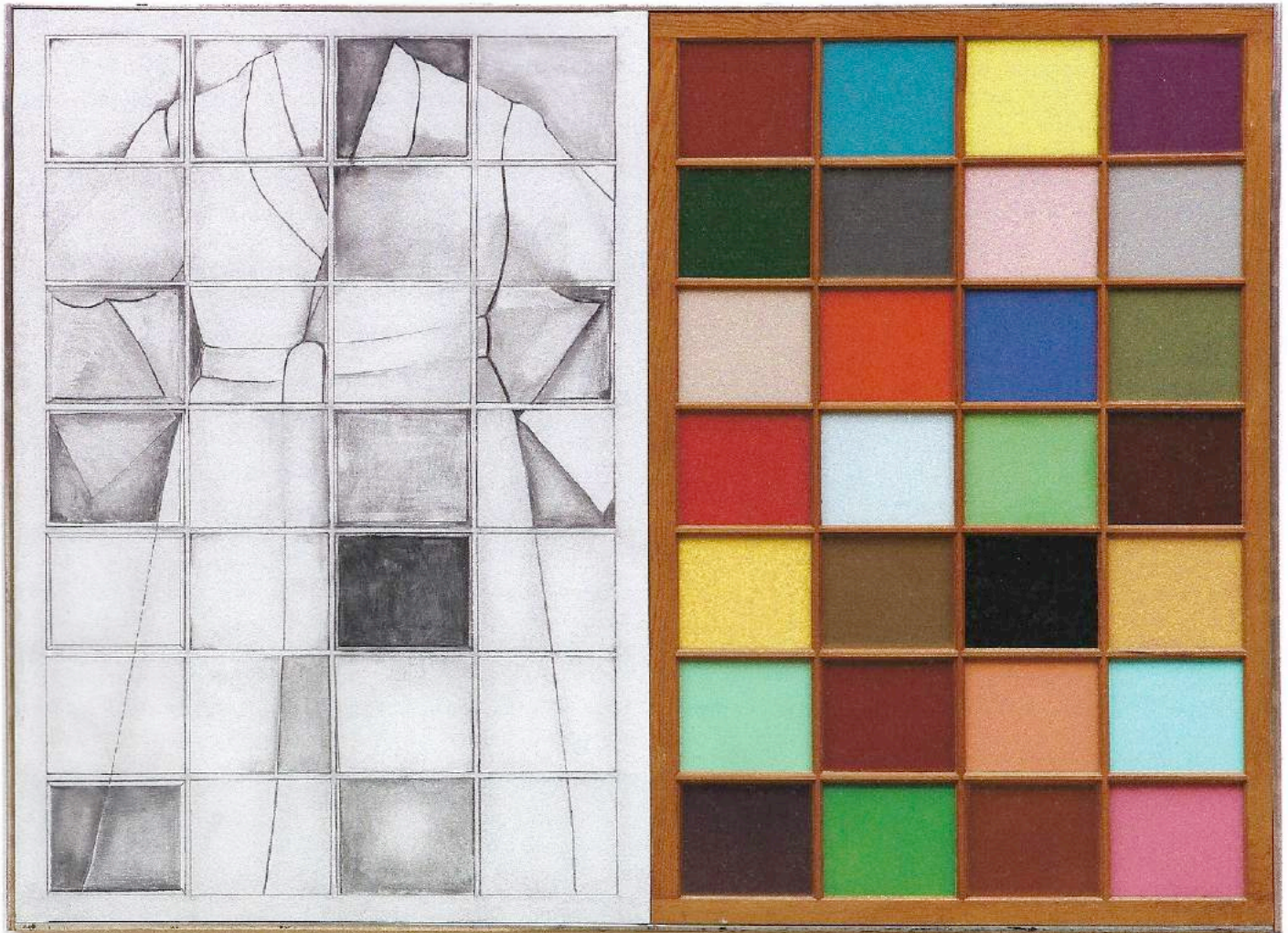
Born in 1935, Dine attended the University of Cincinnati by day and took evening classes at the city’s Art Academy, in those days the teaching wing of the local art museum. In 1957, he earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Ohio University, in Athens, Ohio, and two years later appeared as the sole performer in a Happening staged at the Judson Dance Theater, in downtown Manhattan. In response to Harold Rosenberg’s “American Action Painters” essay of 1952, Allan Kaprow was proselytizing the late 1950s for a new art form. Painting could progress, he wrote, only by moving into three dimensions and, in the process, dispensing with static imagery. The canvas laden with the residue of a paint-



Opposite: Jim Dine, *Four Rooms*, 1962, oil on canvas with metal, rubber and upholstered chair, 182.9 x 457.2 x 38.1 cm. This page, from top: *Nancy and I at Ithaca (Straw Heart)*, 1966–69, sheet metal and straw, 157.5 x 182.9 x 35.6 cm.; *Four Ears*, 2016, oil on canvas, 139 x 226 cm.

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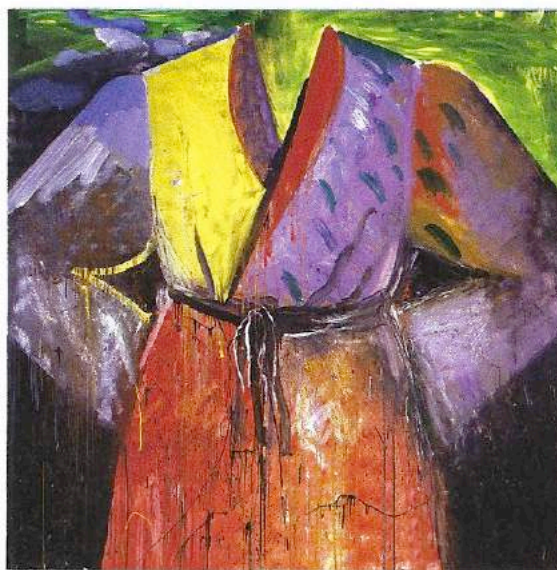
the Worker



From top: *Self-Portrait Next to a Colored Window*, 1841, charcoal, canvas, oil, glass, and wood, 180 x 252.7 cm;
Blood's on the River Now, 2005, oil and charcoal on linen, 274.3 x 274.3 cm.

er's gestures must make way for the work of art as a loosely planned sequence of actions—a Happening, in Kaprow's terminology. According to this account of postwar American art, it was as an heir to the paint-slinging Jackson Pollock that Dine performed at the Judson in the role of *The Smiling Workman*. Dine disagrees, arguing that he and Claes Oldenburg, another early producer of Happenings, “came out of the theater that we knew; we were literate young men. We came out of Brecht, Artaud. We looked to Genet.”

As the Smiling Workman, Dine wore a painter's smock smeared



with red, gold, and blue. There were matching smears on the bald dome of his head and a clown's mouth painted in black around his mouth. Behind him hung a backdrop painted with crude faces and other graffiti. After dipping a brush in a bucket of paint and writing “I love what I'm doing” on the backdrop, he poured the rest of the paint—in fact, it was tomato juice—over his head. Then he leapt headfirst through the backdrop. Looking back at his performance, Dine has said, “It's about obsession—and the obsession remains. I was put here as a worker and I find a romance in working. I work with my hands every day.”

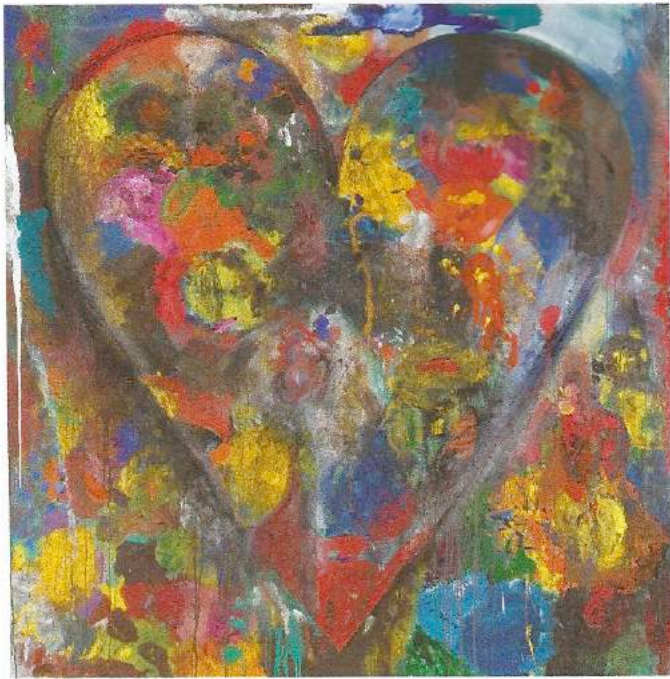


Clockwise from top left: *The History of Screams* - Bernini, *Damaged by a Crack*, 2015, acrylic, sand and charcoal on canvas, 213.4 x 213.4 cm.; *Green Suit*, 1959, mixed-media assemblage, oil, cardboard and man's corduroy suit, 166.7 x 73 cm.; *The Yellow Painting*, 1972-73, oil, crayon, charcoal, wood shelf, artist's paintbrush, spatula, pencil, wire cutters, wrench, metal hooks and eyes, and string on canvas; 159.39 x 117.48 x 10.8 cm.



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the Worker



When he talks of “work,” the artist means what we all do: productive activity. He also means something more: all that we do, physically and imaginatively, to endow the everyday world with meaning and some degree of order.

The Smiling Workman’s paint can often appeared among the hand tools and paint brushes that Dine hung from his canvases in the early 1960s. Sometimes the objects themselves were present, in all their palpability, and sometimes he represented them in outline. To build *The Hammer Doorway*, a three-dimensional piece from 1965, he extended the handles of two hammers and mounted them to suggest a doorframe, complete with threshold but lacking a lintel. By then, Dine’s use of furniture, tools, light fixtures, and other bits and pieces of ordinary life had attracted the Pop Art label. This made an art-critical kind of sense. After all, Pop was called “common object art” when it first attracted notice, and Dine, Tom Wesselmann, Roy Lichtenstein, and Andy Warhol were giving common objects more art-world clout than they had ever enjoyed.

Still life painters from Jean-Siméon Chardin to Stuart Davis had made brilliant images of everything from raspberries heaped in 18th-century bowls to the 20th century’s latest achievements in the field of egg beaters. But the “common object” artists—the inventors of



Clockwise from top left: *Abyss of The Good Soldier (for Harry W.)*, 2010, acrylic, charcoal and sand on canvas, 274.64 x 275.27 cm.; *Dying Thistle*, 2014, charcoal, pastel, and watercolor on paper, 124.5 x 102.9 cm.; *Black Venus*, 1991, black stain on maple wood, 200.7 x 68.6 x 66 cm.

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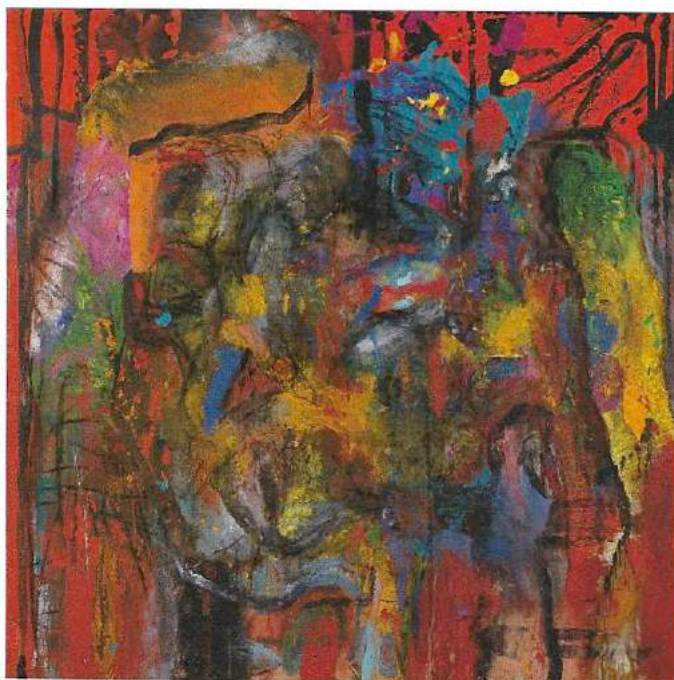


Pop, as we now know them—presented everyday images and objects largely untransformed. Pop Art was the first of the hot new developments that roiled the New York art world in the 1960s. In the company of Warhol and the others, Dine was a rising star. Yet he felt uneasy. In their brash, American way, the Pop artists were no less ironic than Marcel Duchamp, who had, with Gallic offhandedness, granted art status to a bicycle wheel, a bottle rack, and a few other readymade objects. The irony of Pop Art generated detachment, and detachment surrounded its practitioners with the aura of the cool. “I was never cool,” Dine says, with good reason. His brushwork is as heated as that of any Expressionist, German or Abstract. Yet he doesn’t fit easily into any of art history’s well-defined slots.

All the varieties of Expressionism carry on with the Romantics’ exalted task of self-expression, as does Dine. Last year, he showed over 60 self-portraits at the Albertina, in Vienna. He said at the

time, less to explain himself than to make a frank acknowledgement of the obvious, “I paint who I am; I paint what I am.” As for the precise quality of the Dinean *who* and *what*—that is for viewers’ powers of empathy to grasp. A fully-felt response will be as personal as the art itself, and Dine imbues even readymade objects with his intense, sometimes frantic feelings. He gives hammers and screwdrivers personalities as passionate as his own. Yet one of the devices in his repertory brings a note of impersonality to his art.

Speaking of a sequence of self-portraits that includes *The Poet Singing Beautifully* (2016), Dine says that he used “my big ears and bald head” as “a matrix.” Doubled, this image occupies the two panels of *Four Ears* (2016). Rendered with varying degrees of realistic detail, this emblem of the artist has been appearing for decades. And it has introduced a rich complexity into the artist’s aesthetic, for a matrix, designed to be repeatable, is at odds with

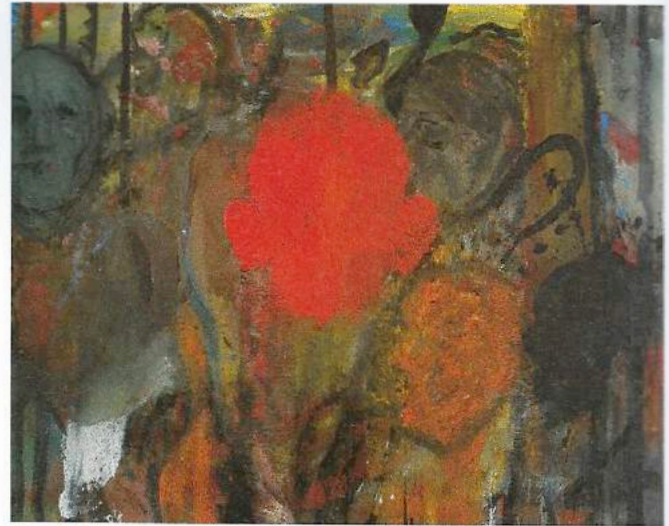


Clockwise from top: *Errant Rays and Seeds Escaping*, 2015-16, acrylic and sand on linen, 195 x 575 cm.; *Late Friends*, August-September 2012, 274.3 x 274.3 cm.; *Coming from the Darkness, I Hear Your Laugh!*, 2016, oil, acrylic, charcoal, and sand on linen, 244 x 244 cm.

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the Worker





Opposite: *My Tuxedo Makes an Impressive Blunt Edge to the Light*, 1965, oil, charcoal, and tuxedo jacket and pants on wire hangers on canvas, with a pair of shoes below, 182.9 x 182.9 cm. This page, clockwise from top left: *The Garden of Eden*, 2003, cast 2004, stainless steel frame with painted bronze elements, 205.6 x 279.2 x 61 cm.; *Red Eye*, 2016, acrylic and sand on linen, 121 x 152 cm.; *Oslo, Midsummer with E.*, 2016, acrylic and sand on linen, 150.5 x 201 cm.

the Romantic-Expressionist imperative of absolute, unflagging originality. Of course, no one from Delacroix to Nolde to Pollock could live up to that ideal, and Dine's use of matrices acknowledges that art-making, no matter how inventive, always develops routines—or, one might say, repetitive rituals.

Among the most frequently recurring images in Dine's repertory is the bathrobe, an item of clothing that may trace its origins to the business suit he suspended from a blank canvas in 1959. Though the work is entitled *Green Suit*, the garment's original color is nearly lost beneath a flurry of smudges in a palette-full of colors. This once-green suit looks like the outfit The Smiling Worker might wear if he had an office job. The jacket and trousers hanging from *Tuxedo* (1965) are pristine and crisply pressed, with a pair of black shoes neatly arranged on the floor below. Images rather than tailored objects, Dine renders his bathrobes in schematic outline. Flat and frontal, with arms akimbo, they are always assertive stand-ins for the artist. Yet assertion permits a wide range of moods, and sometimes he fills the outline of a bathrobe with an array of subtly modulated pastels. Other times, he overloads it with brushwork reminiscent of *Green Suit*. Always, though, the bathrobe is a friendly presence. Even at his most boisterous, Dine is never aggressive.

It is stretching a definition to include Dine's hand tools among his matrices, yet that is how they function in his art, as stable, recurrent forms—or objects—amenable to endless adaptations. Moreover, these symbols of Dine-the-Worker

infuse his art with autobiography. When he was 12 years old, Jimmy went to live with his maternal grandparents. Dine's grandfather had a hardware store and so, the artist recalls, "I grew up with plumb-ers." Intuiting the seriousness of everyday work, he transposed it to art-making, an activity that encourages free-wheeling ruminations. Thus, it is not entirely surprising to hear him say, "I feel the mystery of tools, the romance of tools not having been designed, but having evolved through use. For that reason, they are beautiful. They are also metaphorical. A screwdriver isn't always a screwdriver."

Though Valentine's heart is always a heart, Dine has turned it into a hard-working matrix. In nearly numberless paintings, drawings, and prints this lush and familiar form provides a sturdy framework for astonishing bursts of pictorial energy. Dine fills his hearts to overflowing with colors and gestures open to whatever interpretive chances we want to take, though some of the hearts have their primary impact as displays of virtuoso brushwork. A Dine heart can change, as one views it, from an expression



of his feelings to an abstraction and back again. A further ambiguity is to be spotted here, as well. Dine's bald, big-eared heads are indubitably self-images; so are the bathrobes and the tools. But it is not so certain that the hearts always mark the artist's presence in his art. Maybe we ought to see them, now and then, as painterly mirrors reflecting our own feelings in all their roiling uncertainty. Obsessed with who and what he is, Dine nonetheless gives us glimpses of ourselves. 

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