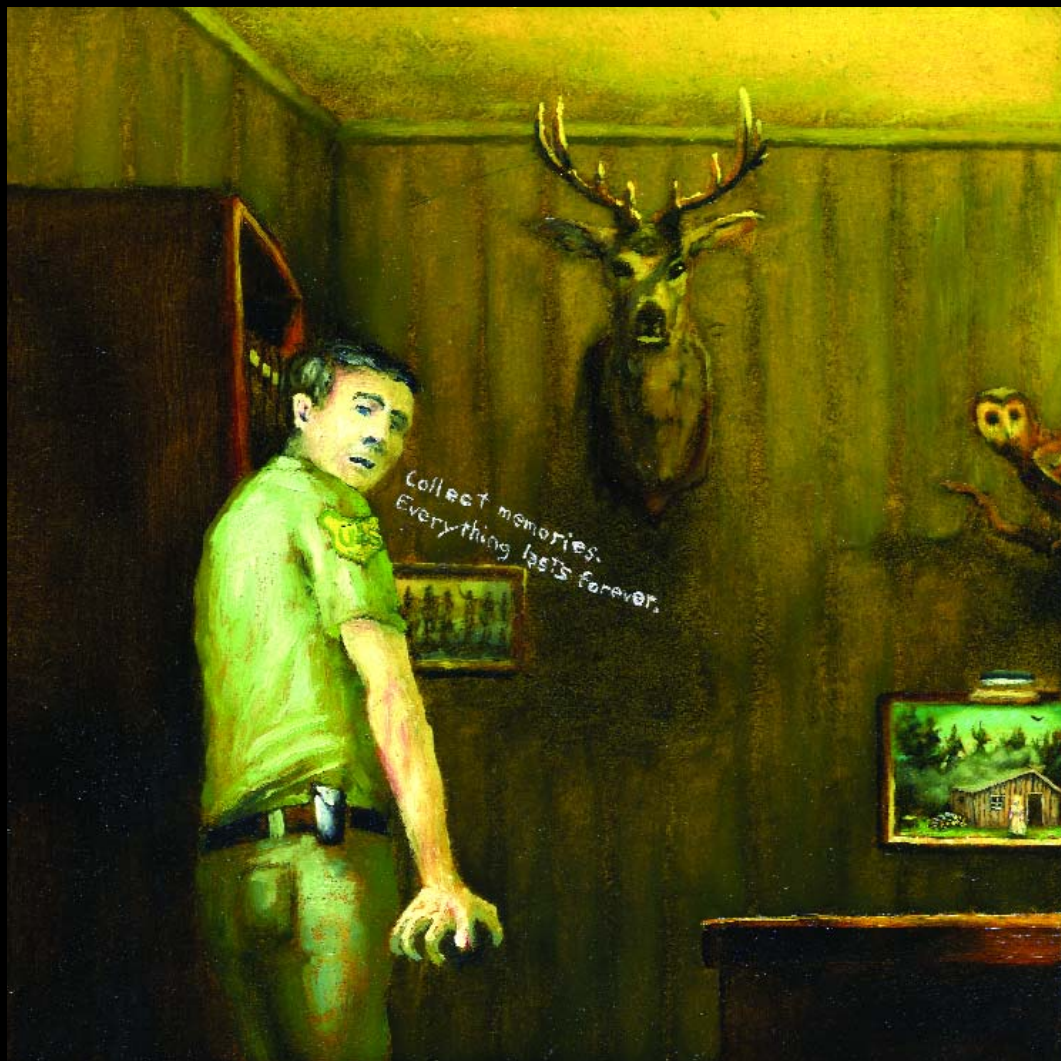




This looks like many things I've seen.

Dan Attoe





6. *Everything lasts forever*, 2005



I've been lying this
whole time.







12. *Bully in Metallica shirt*, 2003




18. *We are all disabled*, 2004

Sick of your
god damned
fucking
bullshit.

MIRVANA



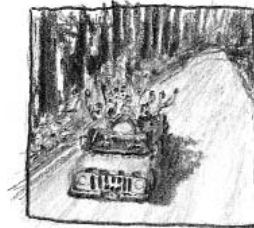


American Normal

By Cathryn Drake

Artist Dan Attoe (b. 1975) portrays his inner life and cultural milieu in small narrative paintings and drawings. Influenced by his studies in creative writing, psychology, and visual art, he creates one scenario a day as a diary of his experiences or thoughts or dreams or childhood memories or imaginary situations. Simultaneously he composes paintings on larger canvases to which he adds various elements—sometimes references to the daily works—over the course of one to three months. These are fantastical landscapes scattered with seemingly unrelated disembodied objects. *Accretion 26 (Everything Starts as Something You Don't Understand)* (2004) looks like some wacky medieval worldview: a globe of the Earth labeled “I’m Trying to Build Up a Tolerance” floats like a hot-air balloon surrounded by miniature images resembling windows into another spatial dimension. Below the celestial orb is an oculus viewing a sample of its population from above as

Teenagers in a truck
Headed out into the world
Saying things like: “Follow your dreams!”
Just like on T.V.



if through an extraterrestrial microscope. Birds, fish, and moths flying about further confound any conventional logic. The composition is divided into two distinct planes: ominous cloud formations emitting sun rays over a vast out-of-focus landscape represent great depth while a green plateau in the foreground hits us in the face with its flatly rendered textures.

Attoe’s paintings are often set in sublime, distinctively Northwestern American landscapes that are so heroic that they become characters in the scenarios, echoing Romantic paintings. The composition of *Accretion 32 (Everything Is More Complicated Than You Think It Is)* (2005) has an uncanny resemblance to Caspar David Friedrich’s *The Lonely Tree* (1822), a metaphysically charged landscape wherein the central oak tree is seen to link the earthly and heavenly spheres. The melancholy *Dragging Myself* (2004) is reminiscent of Friedrich’s *Monk by the Sea* (1808-10); but in the place of the lone romantic figure contemplating

the horizon is a tiny man hauling a body across a sinister blackened foreground. Sometimes the lurid hues and sensibility of macabre religious paintings are employed. *Fire Rescue* (2004), an overview of a forest consumed in vivid red-and-yellow flames, resembles a fundamentalist depiction of purgatory. In another, three people on a cliff stare awestruck at a spectacular unearthly cloud formation—like a terrifying vision of either heaven or hell—bursting forth and bathing them in a splendid light; the confessional handwritten caption below reads: “I am working through things” (2004).

The artist frequently places dysfunctional characters preoccupied with deep emotional issues in these grandiose natural settings; the dizzying perspective of the insect-like figures dwarfs their commonplace concerns, introducing a comic bathos. In a detail from *Accretion 34* (2006), one of two tiny cars seen from above—swimming in a big green landscape—has captions that could be random snippets of an overheard telephone conversation: “You are out of control.” “Sensitivity is the most important thing.” In another painting a long-haired barfly with holes in his jeans stumbles out of a remote tavern at dawn and laments, “Nothing fucking changes” (2004); the overwhelming boggy landscape dramatically illuminated by a moody Romantic sky embodies the enduring nature of time. The drama of unsettling or nightmarish experiences is often undermined by humorous images or ironic captions. A cartoonish young man—dressed in a rock-band T-shirt and desperately flailing his arms so that he

appears to have six of them like the Hindu goddess Kali—looks as if he is about to unintentionally fall over the edge of a cliff in *Accretion 34* (2006); the scene is labeled “Mental Leap.” In *Your Brain Is Changing Like a Flower* (2005), a truck driver has stopped his rig precariously on the curve of a road along a rocky cliff and climbed on top of the trailer, poised to jump off the front. Other scenes are merely touching, such as an elderly woman with a walker alone in the middle of a forest, who says, “I can hear you” (2004).

Although his renderings have the kitschy tone of illustrated rock album covers, Attoe’s allusion to art historical archetypes universalizes his contemporary subjects. For example, in *Apartment Living Room* (2004), a listless reclining dude on a couch—with a pale skull-like head and the obligatory rock-group T-shirt—has dropped his video-game control on the carpet, mirroring the melancholic youth in Henry Wallis’s *The Death of Chatterton* (1856), who has just taken his life because he has failed in his literary career, a vial of poison on the floor in front of him. It would seem that Attoe’s contemporary protagonist does not have such high expectations, but he is no less tragic—or dead to the world—in his disengagement with life, symbolized by the discarded joystick. Paintings of interiors—bars, strip clubs, and living rooms—depict everyday scenes with a stark Hopper-esque realism. A woman with a mane of blonde hair and red pumps sits on a bar stool smoking a cigarette with her back to us and says, “What we know as kids is all we ever will



Everything lasts forever.

know” (2005). Her tattooed back, the long wood bar, and the jukebox are all brightly lit in an otherwise dark barroom. Adolescent angst is acted out in *Disabled* (2004), where a young man wearing a blue mask and a flowered shirt kneels on a tiled kitchen floor with his hands in a scary-monster gesture. Underlined by the comment “We are all disabled,” the image is at once tragic and tender.

Sometimes comical and cartoonlike, sometimes mysterious and foreboding—often both—Attoe’s compelling scenes elicit the meeting of the everyday with the extraordinary. Underlying these remarkable yet ordinary situations is a sense of uneasiness—with a touch of *Twin Peaks*-style surrealism—conveyed through sickeningly vivid colors dominated by cold blues, greens, and yellows as well as the deadpan texts and desperate expressions of the characters. An isolated log house surrounded by tall pines and lit up at night—a Christmas tree in the window, a snowman and plastic Santa on the front lawn, and icicles hanging from the roof—has a fairytale quality. We see it from above, dwarfed by a looming yellow-gray storm cloud with a witchlike female head whose mouth emits the words, “We are all memories” (2004). Thus a feeling of impending disaster hovering over a happy home pervades this mythic portrayal of a childhood memory. Attoe’s depictions of otherworldly beings evoke a childlike sense of wonder at the mystery of life as well as its dark side. Things often take anthropomorphic form: animals and birds make mocking comments (“People whisper about

you” and “We look for your weak spots,” both 2005); an evil garden gnome with an erect penis says, “I am going to get you” (*Accretion 32*, 2005). In *Thought Clouds* (2004), a man wearing a baseball cap and clenching his fists walks under giant devil-shaped clouds commenting, “I need them. I am stuck.”

The small scale of the canvases intensifies their powerful effect; because they must be viewed up close to read the details, you are drawn into their peculiarly American world. The discrepancy between their photograph-size format and the painterly medium also creates an emotional resonance evoking pathos and irony. Ranging in size from five inches square, the paintings could read as postcards from middle-class rural America—or snapshots of a family vacation on LSD. As outlandish as some of the scenarios may seem—in a life-is-stranger-than-fiction sort of way—their deadpan presentation and dead-on colloquial dialogue make them entirely believable. In *Accretion 33* (2005) a group of female nudists in a forest listens to a man standing on a rock saying, “God.” The caption reads: “The word ‘believe’ makes me cringe, but the phrase ‘butt bang bonanza’ does not.” Philosophical platitudes spoken by unlikely characters ring true: in *Everything Lasts Forever* (2005), a forest ranger in an office decorated with a stuffed deer and an owl says, “Collect memories. Everything lasts forever.” A similar sensibility is conveyed with banal conversation inscribed on an idyllic scene of a lakeside restaurant, for example, in *Accretion 34* (2006): “You were always loaded,

I'm not
coming back.

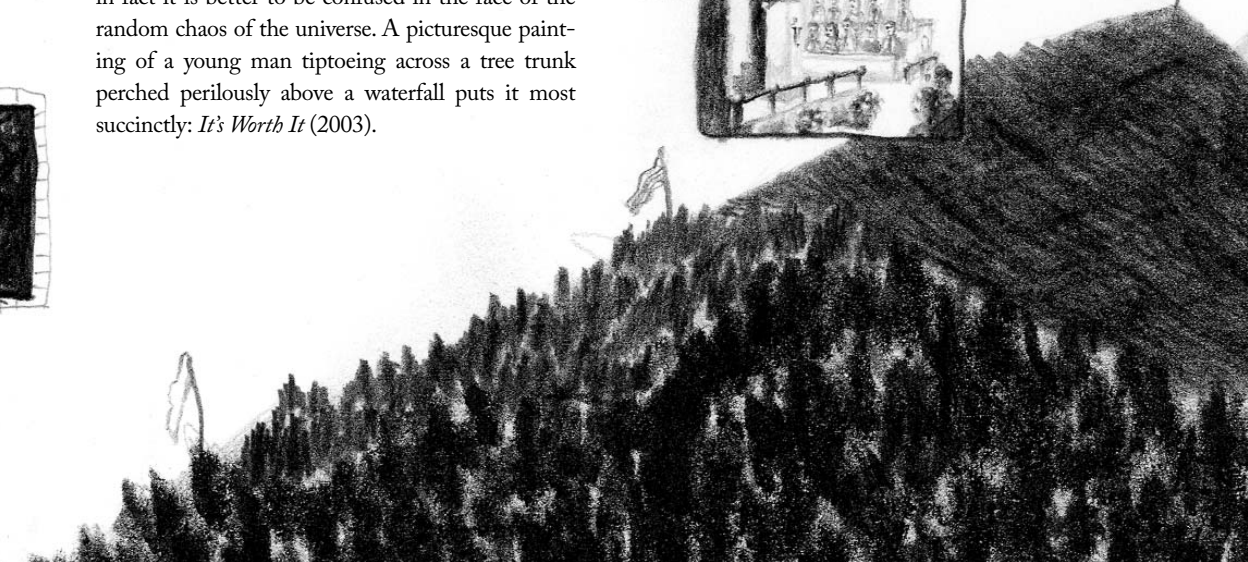
de-pen-den-cy

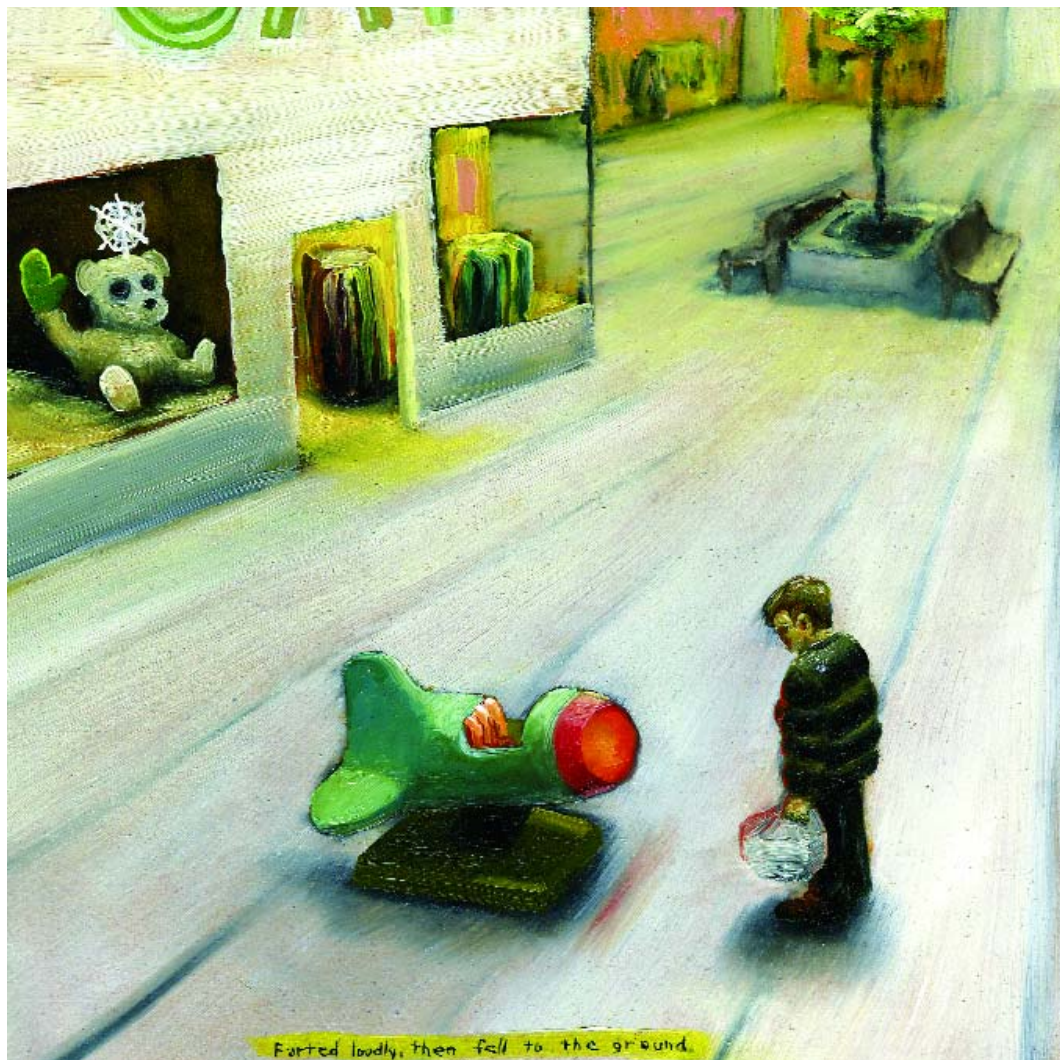
getting nailed and short on cash.” Attoe accurately targets a characteristic Midwestern understatement in *Accretion 33* (2005): an image of police surveying a house cordoned off as a crime scene is captioned, “Maybe, just don’t get yourself in that type of situation to begin with.” Some off-the-wall scenes make you laugh precisely because they should not: in *Accretion 33* (2005) a sweetly painted forest with a group of scared lost children on the watch for wild beasts in a clearing is emblazoned with the tattoo-like design “Live Love Die.”

Attoe’s paintings can be read like pages from a book—and like good short stories, they suggest the vulnerability and absurdity of life with a few simple gestures. With his extreme sense of reality—and unique brand of American-style surrealism—Attoe seems to say that we are all squirrely losers motivated by anxiety, but it is okay to be not okay: in fact it is better to be confused in the face of the random chaos of the universe. A picturesque painting of a young man tiptoeing across a tree trunk perched perilously above a waterfall puts it most succinctly: *It’s Worth It* (2003).

implants

I Love you guys.
I may not make it.





Farted loudly, then fell to the ground.



25. Iceberg, 2005



Dan Attoe

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Opposite: I. *Dragging myself*, 2004

