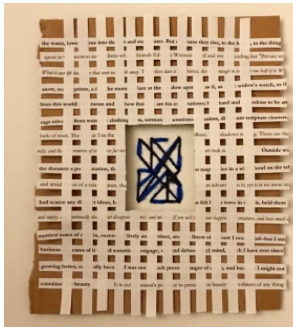


Inside the Artist - Darren Higgins September 2016



Tell us about your journey in art / as an writer/artist.

With art, my mom was a big influence. Both she and my grandmother are artists. Mom would sit me and my sister down as kids and have us sketch and do drawing exercises. She taught us about different pencils and paints and I took to it eagerly. I can't quite remember, but I believe it was in sixth grade that I received an art award and I felt so proud and excited about it. In first grade, my teacher, Mrs. Mauer, started a publishing company of sorts. She had us come up with book ideas and then write the stories and illustrate them. She would laminate the pages, bind them, and display the finished books throughout the school with library cards so that they could be checked out. That combined my love of art and writing at an early age and I never really let go of either one.

I first tried writing poetry in high school because a girl I liked wrote poetry—it seemed like a worthy endeavor at the time! I majored in English at college and spent most of my time writing some truly awful poems. It hurts to go back and look at them now. But for some reason, I got encouragement to continue from my professors. After graduation, I drifted away from poetry, focusing more on short stories. I was living in Boston, where I met the woman who would become my wife. After a year or so, we decided to move and started driving across the country, eventually winding up in Seattle, where we lived for five years. There was a large and active literary scene in Seattle. I was involved with the Hugo House, a great place that offered the opportunity to participate in a true writers' community. Toward the end of my time there, I applied for a writing fellowship to a writing seminar in St. Petersburg, Russia. I was there for two weeks during the White Nights (Belive Nochi) in June. What an astonishing time. I'd stay up all night writing and then pass around the stories I had written to everyone else. But when I returned from St. Petersburg, I found that I could no longer write fiction and I haven't written another story since. That was 2003. It's so odd. It was like everything I wrote or tried to write fell short of my experience there and I could no longer use language in the

same way. For a while there I couldn't write anything at all.

I had moved to Vermont with my wife, Emily, just before leaving on my Russia trip, and it was Vermont that actually got me writing again. I returned to poetry. The fractured lines of poetry worked well with how my brain was operating at the time. I found myself inspired by working in my garden, becoming a parent, and the feeling that I had finally found a home. Emily grew up in East St. Johnsbury, but I'm from Long Island, where there is not the same sense of place that I felt immediately after moving to Vermont. I started to write poetry rooted in nature. And I started exploring my life in Vermont and as a father in a series of essays for local newspapers, which gave me the opportunity to write prose without the pressure to create a "story."

In 2013 I graduated with an MFA in Writing (poetry) from the Vermont College of Fine Arts (VCFA). I worked closely with Jody Gladding and Jen Bervin, as well as Nance Van Winckel and Mary Ruefle. Jody and Jen ran a "visual poetry" workshop where they encouraged us to essentially treat words like any other art-making material. I saw a profound transformation in all of us when we were freed from focusing exclusively on poetry as literature—the artistic ideas that developed were amazing and when we did write it was energized by the incorporation of visual art. There is something about that connection between creating something with your hands and trying to also express it in words. It inspired me to create art work again.



What is the medium/genre you most like to work with/in?

What draws you to this medium/genre? What do you like about your materials (in visual arts)?

I immediately think of poetry as my genre. In terms of visual art, I started out drawing and painting but I am now drawn more to making and constructing collage/assemblage pieces. When I was at VCFA, I started taking materials (yarn, paper, paint, etc.) and fitting them together to make something visually appealing. Poet/artist Mary Ruefle encouraged me to take it further. I started creating a series of shadow boxes with nails, thread, paper, and wire.



At the same time, I was reading *That This*, a book of poetry by Susan Howe. Her book has such a visual quality to it that I thought, "What if I created artwork that gave physical depth to the page—creating a portal into the book and its creative space." I spent a winter working on these pieces in my mudroom. Our second child had just been born and sleep deprivation really had an impact on my ability to make any sense linguistically. In that cold mudroom I was engaging a different part of my mind when I could steal a moment and it was satisfying. I got a chance to

Speak with Susan on a few occasions and she told me that she considers all of her work to be poetry, whether she's making art, writing essays, or writing poems.

I've been longing to get back to making things. We own a home in Waterbury Center that was built in the 1870s and it often seems like every available space is filled, making it challenging to find a place to work! (That space in the mudroom is now piled with kids' coats and boots...) And I'm sure that all parents can relate to the feeling of having no time to get to everything you wish you could. I was freelancing for the last few years (see website for his business GRMMR). Now I'm with Driven Studio in Burlington, where I write for Vermont companies like Ben & Jerry's and Cabot Creamery. It's amazing work but the hard part, again, is finding a balance between that and all the personal projects I'd love to spend more time on.

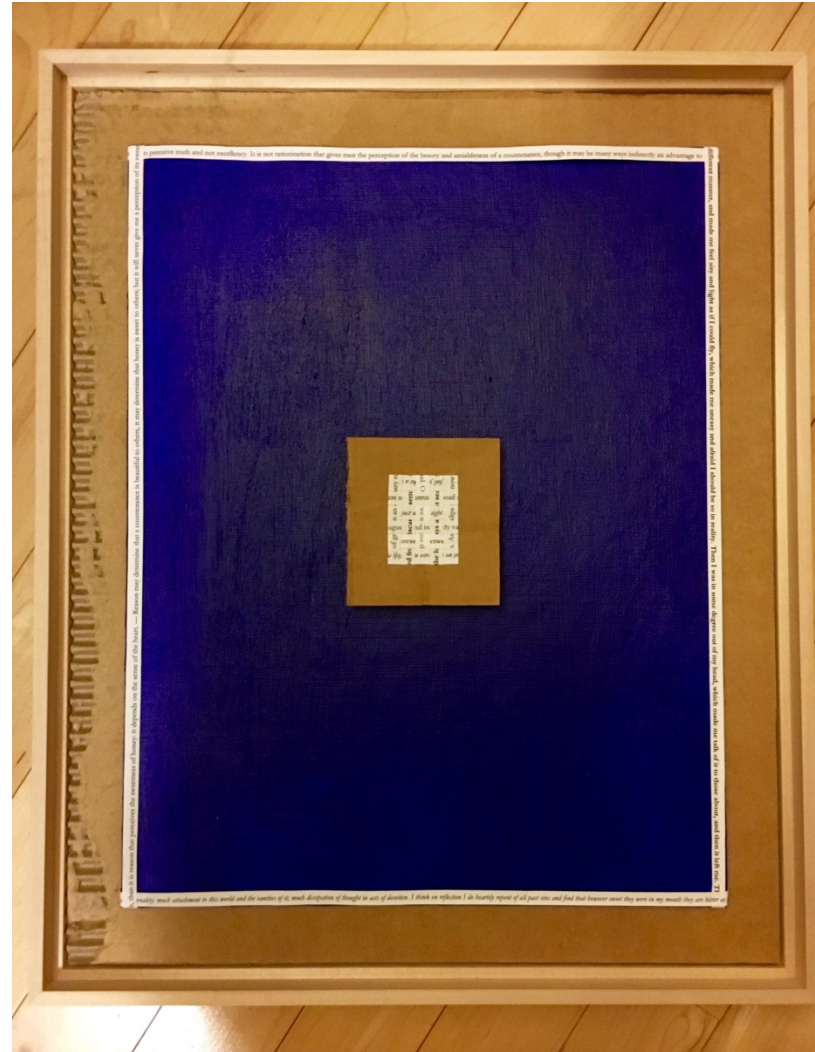
What most inspires your work? Has there been anything that has been life changing or that has influenced your practice?

I've been working on a long-term project inspired by my fascination with extinction, both the concept and in reality—in particular, the extinction of the passenger pigeon. I had heard from my parents when I was a kid about how there used to be massive flocks of passenger pigeons darkening the sky. When Martha, the last pigeon, died in 1914 the birds were simply gone forever. I've always loved birds, inspired again by my mom, who was not only an artist, but also a big birder. I started thinking that I should do something with my love of birds in a more focused way and combine it with my extinction research. I want to add artwork to the poems and essays I've already written eventually.

Something life changing? Definitely the birth of my first child. Prior to his arrival, I always managed to find an excuse not to pursue my writing. I wrote every day, but without dedication. As he grew and asked me more and more questions, I thought that I would hate to have him ask me someday about why I never pursued the thing I loved the most. So in that way, he inspired me to apply to VCFA. That program was more about becoming a better person and fully exploring who I was than necessarily becoming a better writer (although it was about that too). VCFA changed my life. I've come to believe that if you commit to your passions, then you're better able to give more of yourself to the people you love.

What blogs or books are you reading or would you recommend?

I've been reading a lot of books about passenger pigeons and extinctions over the past couple of years, but I'm taking a break now with *We Are Gods*, a new book by Kate Daloz (who is also a friend). It's about the back to the land movement in 1970s Vermont. Fascinating and well-written. I also always enjoy dipping into the artist Walton Ford's *Pancha Tantra*: his paintings are sort of like Audubon on steroids and I can't get enough of them.



POETRY by Darren Higgins

BEAST

Leaves scatter crackling across the yard
until pinned by the woodpile or stamped and snapped
by the neighbors' black dog loose
in the far field again

He moves like the shadow of no dog
digging under the hydrangea
under the gray fence rail nose mudded and wet
taking the fox path, coyote, every other shade of dog
and howl and squat and tongue

These are the panting days, thick heavy wet
winds, leaf-ripping end of days
The shadow of no dog at an odd curving angle to the damp
smudge of sun, well, we track the trace of hours
back to the dark source

The woodpile breathes in its deep snags
The earth sways under every slobber and stomp

THE MARSH ECHOES

Bittern, at the root, a blade
clattering
with the song it plays
against the peat
and rot
of the bellied sump

Froth and cracked cattails,
a call,
bittern, breathing
the reed down to a whistle
bottoming wick
salt-thick
a call, bittern, a call