

# DIRTY

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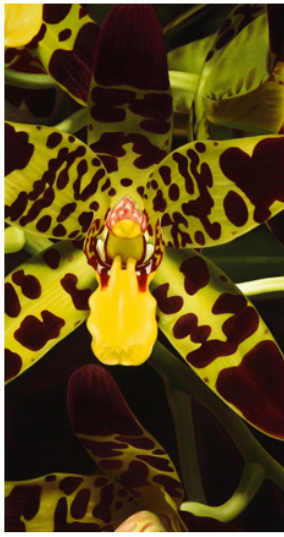


MASTER PAINTER MARC DENNIS PROVOKES OUR COMFORT ZONES IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE; HIS PAINTINGS ARE SKILLFULLY EXECUTED, LABORIOUS STILL LIFE MASTERPIECES OF DISTURBINGLY BEAUTIFUL SUBJECTS, USUALLY DIRECTLY OR INDIRECTLY INFLUENCED BY NATURE — MUCH LIKE HIS DIET. AS AN ENTOMOPHAGIST (ONE WHO CONSUMES INSECTS AS PART OF THEIR BALANCED DIET), MARC IS GAINING A SORT OF NOTORIETY FOR HIS INSECT DINNER PARTIES, IN ADDITION TO HIS KILLER PAINTINGS.

DIRTY CAUGHT UP WITH MR. DENNIS, JUST AFTER HAVING BEEN INVITED (AND ATTENDING!) HIS MOST RECENT BUG DINNER, WHICH WAS FILMED FOR THE COOKING CHANNEL'S SHOW *MY LIFE IN FOOD*. AFTER HAVING TRIED HIS EXOSKELETAL DELICASIES FIRST HAND, WE HAD A FEW QUESTIONS OF OUR OWN — ABOUT HIS WORK & HIS APPETITIE FOR ARTHROPODS.

TEXT *Paul Bruno* / PHOTOGRAPHY *David Kimelman*





**D: SO I READ THAT YOU WERE BORN IN DANVERS MA. TELL ME, IS THAT A CITY, A SUBURB?**

MD: Yes Danvers, MA. It's a suburb of Boston about 20 minutes north, known as the North Shore. It's where witches were burned. It was first known as East Salem but changed the name. Salem got all the tourists and money.

**D: DID YOU GROW UP THERE?**

MD: I was born there, and moved at 6. We moved to Sharon, MA and then to Guilderland, NY and then Puerto Rico, until I was bar mitzvahed in Newton MA and then onto another town in MA. After that on to NJ and then finally to Brooklyn.

**D: BY THEN YOU WERE HOW OLD?**

MD: After I graduated college. I was 21.

**D: DO YOU HAVE ANY BROTHERS OR SISTERS?**

MD: 4 brothers, but no sisters.

**D: WOAH! A HOUSE WITH 5 BOYS! WHERE DO YOU FALL IN LINE OUT OF 5?**

MD: Woah is right. My dad used to joke around and say our family was like the five sons of Abraham.

**D: ARE YOU THE ONLY ARTIST / CREATIVE IN YOUR FAMILY?**

MD: I'm the only artist in my family. Although, I think my grandfather studied painting at one point but never took it past his teen years. My uncle from Havana was an engineer and studied drafting/architectural rendering, etc.

**D: THAT COUNTS! WERE YOU A CREATIVE KID, DOING CREATIVE THINGS, OUTWARDLY?**

MD: I was always creative. Big time. I drew on all the walls in our house as a kid. I drew bugs, birds, lizards, etc. I was the kid in 2nd and 3rd grade who did all the holiday decorations, etc. I asked the teacher if I could delegate responsibilities to other students to make the experience go faster and to engage the other kids.

**D: WERE YOUR PARENTS SUPPORTIVE OF YOUR DECISION TO PURSUE ART?**

MD: My parents were very supportive in the sense that they never said don't pursue it. It was clear I was skilled and talented. My teachers told them. They saw it. The neighbors saw it. I was always drawing. Since I was five or so, I'd spend hours drawing. I don't think they ever thought I'd do

anything else.

**D: GET INTO TROUBLE AS A KID?**

MD: Yeah, I got into fights, broke into abandoned warehouses, cabins in the woods, stole boats and went out on joy rides, stole stuff from stores, and finally was arrested at 16 for grand larceny for robbing cars, stolen property, etc. I was told to go straight and I did. I wound up dating a girl who's dad was best friends with the chief of police.

**D: SOUNDS LIKE TROUBLE!**

MD: (LAUGHS) I never started a fight, I never taunted, or bullied anyone. I was always the guy who got picked on (big mistake for just about all the fools who did it ). I had long hair, and looked rather mellow. I looked like a half-breed apache.

**D: SO 21. YOU MOVE TO BROOKLYN AFTER GRADUATING FROM WHERE?**

MD: I got my BFA from Tyler School of Art near Philly. I moved to Greenpoint to be exact. In a big old building on the Newtown Creek with a few buddies. We fixed up a really crazy industrial massive loft, like 3400 sq ft. We did all labor, landlord paid for all supplies and a free year rent.

**D: HAD YOU BEEN TO NYC BEFORE?**

MD: Only a few times while in HS. And of course during college I went in a lot. I visited galleries and museums constantly. In both Philly and NYC.

**D: WHAT DID YOU DO FOR WORK WHEN YOU GOT TO NYC?**

MD: I did some freelance illustration jobs, sold some paintings, but mostly construction. I worked on detailing, spackling, painting, etc for hotels and private apts in Manhattan.

**D: SO WHEN DID YOU EAT YOUR FIRST INSECT?**

MD: I ate lots of moths at a party once in high school. Five bucks each. We were drunk. Then I ate a cockroach in Italy during my junior year abroad in Tyler (college). It was on my plate. It must've fallen off the grill. I ate it. The waitress flipped out - she thought I was nuts, but gave me a free meal. Then I think I ate another bug or two during college and then not for another few years.

**D: AT WHAT POINT DID YOU START TO EXPLORE IT AS**

## A PART OF YOUR DIET?

MD: It wasn't until 2006 that I took it seriously and realized it was productive, with respect to the environmental impact of livestock, ie cattle, pigs, etc. Eating bugs, it seemed, was one of the many solutions to the massive problems we face when it comes to water supply shortages, water pollution and methane gasses. I baked a cricket pie for a pie social and it sold out fast. People were curious and they were excited about being able to tell others they ate bugs. It was shortly thereafter I began some heavy research and in 2008 I founded Insects Are Food.

## D: I KNOW THAT YOU HAVE A WIFE & A DAUGHTER - HOW DID THEY ADAPT TO INSECTS IN THE KITCHEN?

MD: The crickets are usually kept out of sight but they can be heard! It's a pretty chirping sound though. And to have crickets chirping in ones Brooklyn apartment makes for a more romantic environment, a kind of warm feel... The wax-worms and other bugs are quiet and are usually refrigerated or put in the freezer shortly after they are brought home or delivered.

## D: BACK TO YOUR PAINTINGS, WHAT WERE YOU WORKING ON RIGHT OUT OF SCHOOL, WHEN YOU FIRST MOVED TO NY?

MD: I was painting fairly large canvases, 5ft x 5ft, or 6 ft x 6 ft of a variety of images that often fell into a kind of tic-tac-toe pattern. Each object or thing in its respective place on the canvas was intended to mean something individually as well as in a group. The images ranged from frogs and toads to apples and plums to hearts and stars. The paintings looked like a kind of game board. They were very colorful and painted with lots of precision and detail. I really miss those paintings. I liked them a lot. I have them rolled up in a big tube in my upstate studio.

It's cool to look back over all my years and see that I was very much attracted to, almost locked into nature. I've been painting bugs, birds, bees, and other creatures since I was a kid.

## D: HOW WOULD YOU COMPARE THE WORK YOU'RE DOING NOW WITH THE WORK YOU WERE DOING WHEN YOU FIRST GOT TO NYC?

MD: Many of my images are taken from direct observation. I have beetle specimens in my studio. I work from taxidermy mounts, etc. I choose to work from nature now, just as I did then. In fact it hasn't stopped. I included humans in the work

along with animals, during grad school ('93), but all of the work on some level was about detail. I guess it's true what is said about the devil being in the details. I think the only difference was that back in the day, my objective as a painter was to simply strike the eye and seduce the mind, without clear intentions. Today my intentions are to make hyper-naturalistic, highly detailed and obsessively delineated paintings that explore the subversive potential of beauty distilling something otherworldly from within the realm of nature. I'm very clear on that.

I still aim to provoke, but now I know I go into each work carefully balancing the grotesque with the beautiful. Death with life. Brevity with gravitas. I used to be on the fence about taking a stance regarding beauty, but I jumped off the fence seven or so years ago, and now stand firmly in the garden of earthly delights. I now know there is a very thin line between most things. I paint that space. (LAUGHS)

## D: ARE YOU WORKING ON ANYTHING NEW RIGHT NOW?

MD: I'm working on a series of both large and small paintings of meat, flowers, skulls and toys.

## D: WHO ARE SOME ARTISTS THAT INSPIRE YOU?

MD: Caravaggio, (The Calling of St Matthew and his Conversion of St. Paul), many paintings by Rubens, and Rembrandt, Pieter Claesz, Goya, Manet's small flower studies, Arshile Gorky's Summation at MoMA, DeKooning, Chaim Soutine, George Bellows. Man, the list goes on! Richter's Betty, Warhol's Mao, Koons, especially his stainless steel balloon dogs and rabbit, Matthew Barney's, Cremaster Cycle. I also liked Damien Hirst's tiger shark in the tank. I forget the title, but it was really a killer piece, no pun intended. And of course, how can I forget Robert Rauschenberg's Erased DeKooning drawing. Brilliant. Maybe one of the best pieces of 20th century art.

## D: YOU SEEM TO BE INSPIRED BY A NUMBER OF POP ARTISTS. DO YOU LISTEN TO POP MUSIC?

MD: I was listening to Lady Gaga recently, and really liked one song in particular that put me in a groove through a painting. I don't remember the name but she mentioned love, disease. She says, "Row row rowowowo!"

