



Jeff Davies

STRAIGHT FROM THE HEART

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERIES
November 8, 2012 – January 6, 2013

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Curated by David Prince

Special Thanks:
Don Deschamps
Lore Davies Fuller
George Haux
John and Rose Phillips
John Stage

COVER: *The Demon from the Paducah Club-Self-Portrait*, 1987

JEFF DAVIES: STRAIGHT FROM THE HEART



Unlike some unconventional characters, Jeff Davies was consciously eccentric. He chose to be different, to not blend in. His desire to be an artist and his own man caused him to abandon a comfortable suburban lifestyle and relocate alone from Marcellus, NY to Syracuse. He resided in different apartments in the greater Westcott Street area subsisting on sales of his paintings and modest stock dividend checks.

Davies was born in East Liverpool Ohio in 1938. The town is on the state's northeastern edge, close to the Pennsylvania and West Virginia borders. His mother died at an early age in an automobile accident leaving Jeff at three years old largely in the care of his aunts. A high school athlete, he was an Eastern Ohio champion on his school swim team. He learned about the power of images when he was suspended in sixth grade for drawing critical portraits of his teachers. "At that point I perceived that art had power... I had made those teachers angry, angry enough to throw me out of school, just for a drawing. I realized that, at the same time, you could make people laugh, which is what my friends did."¹

After high school, Davies attended Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, a three and a half hour drive southwest of East Liverpool. He continued his artistic development, eventually earning a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree. Following graduation Jeff enrolled in the Army and spent two years in Germany where he was stationed in Zirndorf, a western suburb of Nuremberg. He signed up and played football for the base football team which gave him the chance to travel the country playing against other American stations. His recurring trips to local bars were often underwritten by exchanging instant portraits or scenes on request for drinks and food. He completed his enlistment at Fort Sill, Oklahoma where he continued his habit of frequenting bars and bartering drawings for drinks.

His life experience and personality created an artistic style that combined a quick, sure use of line with a blend of surrealism and social commentary. For

subjects, Davies never met a shopping mall or fast food restaurant he didn't hate and they became two of his favorite targets. To him, they represented society's homogenization and the rise of a mass culture that stifled regional distinction and individual expression. A 1986 painting titled *MacDonald's and Skyway Mall* presents three cars nearly underwater next to one of the original design restaurants. One of the golden arches has broken and vines have begun entangling the building. A low sandbar juts into the foreground and in the background the unrelieved block and entrance of a shopping mall appears to be sinking into the quagmire.

Davies finished his enlistment in 1962 and, unable to find work in Ohio, moved to Syracuse where a relative helped him secure a position as a car salesman at Midtown Imports on Erie Boulevard, a dealership specializing in high-end European autos like Porsche, Bentley, and Mercedes-Benz. Davies compared the expensive cars to works of art, "They offered that which a painting gives you: it lifts your spirits." His interest in foreign cars merged with his daredevil sensibility and he began regularly racing an Austin Mini Cooper at Watkins Glen.

The dealership closed and Davies worked a couple of different jobs for short periods of time before being hired in 1965 as a draftsman for the Onondaga County Water Authority (this was a Civil Service position which guaranteed lifetime employment). Co-workers discovered his aptitude for drawing and pressed him into creating, among other things, images for department events. It's clear that he wasn't especially happy about his work as shown in drawings critical of his superiors. Perhaps he felt like he had sold out and become one of those faceless drones tied to a job with no meaning earning a paycheck to maintain a materialistic lifestyle in the suburbs.

Whatever his thinking, Davies made a life altering decision in 1977 to permanently leave his wife and family and move back alone to Syracuse where he'd make his life as an artist. He had a modest income from regular dividend checks received from his family's ceramic china company which he supplemented with occasional sales of paintings.

Davies continued to work in ink, a medium he was already comfortable with, and began to use watercolor as a way to inject more color into his imagery. He used full sized (32 x 40 inches) sheets of illustration board onto which he designed smaller compositions. Among the earlier works is a surrealist ink and acrylic titled *Death of a Tourist*, 1979. It describes a Southwestern landscape with two buttes beneath a

broad swath of sky. A set of train tracks emerges from the distant horizon and ends at the lower center of the composition flanked by platforms. The left platform brings to mind a Victorian ball and claw bed on which stands another bed containing the body of the deceased tourist. A woman with a terrifically large bouffant hairdo is tiptoeing off the platform behind the bed while a man in a Hawaiian shirt sits on the platform's near corner. Across the tracks the other, smaller platform has a descending stairway with a covering marked "Entrance" and three suitcases.

Davies' early drawings often contained imaginative mechanical devices. Working in a larger format afforded him the opportunity to develop bigger and more complex machinery. In these newer, larger images there appears a clear knowledge of Rube Goldberg's cartoons from the 1940s and 50s of complex machinery performing simple tasks. Davies borrowed the idea and added his own dash of grotesqueries and figures that created a design dense with line and carefully placed bright color. *Happy Days are Here Again*, 1986 exemplifies the artist's playful inventive machinery and *Big Brother is Watching*, also from 1986 displays Davies creative use of figures. Also visible in the latter is his greater use of color to develop a more compelling picture.

In the 1980's Davies began to make public murals. His first was in the men's lavatory of the Barge Inn. He portrayed a group of people bringing corpses to a Burger King where they were ground into hamburgers that come back to life and sexually assault the staff and customers. Later murals included the exterior south wall of what is now Boom Babies on Westcott Street (that were later painted over) and his best known series at the Dinosaur Bar-B-Que in downtown Syracuse.

He also painted smaller canvases; preferring acrylics because they dried quickly, were relatively odorless and could be thinned to resemble watercolors. A new subject depicted two sides of an imaginary picture postcard complete with a fictional note. One undated example was titled *Mrs. Wodehouse-Nijinsky dances the Minuet Allegro in front of Burning Bibles London, 1938*. The front portrays a woman, arms raised above her head posed beside a pyre of burning books. The note on the back describes a tryst between two men, one of whom (the card's receiver) was a highly placed reverend living in Alaska. Another, from around 1997 and titled *Woman Shot at an Organ Donation Party*, portrays three women seated at a table with glasses of wine and a bloody, bulbous center piece. The woman on the right looks up just as a bullet slams into her right eye spattering blood over her hat brim.

The back contains a sexually graphic note from “Candi” to a Mr. Malmo Bibb. These paintings illustrate Davies’ lifelong interest in language and storytelling. The majority of his works have titles or captions that are either a play on words, a pun referencing the image or a social comment. In the mid 1970s he along with a few friends published a short lived free monthly journal called *Your Father’s Magazine*. In the inaugural issue, Davies drew a scene of Jefferson Street for the cover, a two page center spread describing Marshall Street, and four cartoons, two with captions.

Later in life Davies began writing short stories. In a 2003 tale titled *The Patternmaker*, Davies recast the Adam and Eve story as a science fiction drama in which a student inventor in a different dimension experiments with two Master Figures named *Automatic Defrostedbreathing Adventure Module (A.D.A.M.)* and *Extended Velocity Energiser (E.V.E.)*. Realizing he’s late for his next class, the student activates the two figures after having teleported them onto the “Trial Object”, figuring he can check on the experiment after lunch, a mere fifty million years later on the experiment’s time recorder. “What could go wrong”, he muses, and if anything does he can simply start over.

Davies began to have health problems in the early to mid-2000s. He had experienced recurring flare ups with gout since leaving the service. More recent visits to the V.A. hospital for treatment revealed he also had diabetes and a heart problem. Davies began taking heart medication but he so disliked the V.A. that he rarely went for regular checkups. According to Bill MacDowell, his friend of over thirty years, Davies did lose weight and cut back on drinking to the point where he began to look much healthier. Despite these efforts, Davies had a fatal heart attack and passed away on February 12, 2006. MacDowell reminisced saying that Davies was an “ornery kind of guy, but you never knew how serious he was, because he just liked to get into confrontations and argue... He enjoyed being a controversial figure. In a way he felt that his mission in life was to stir things up. He got expected reactions to the more outrageous work that he did and it was intentional.”²

1 Katherine Scobey. *The absurd is a canvas for artistic free spirit*. *Syracuse Herald-American*, July 25, 1993, p. B5

2 Walt Sheppard, *Brush Hour*. *Syracuse New Times*, March 8, 2006, p. 43



top: *New Hope Mill, New Hope, N.Y. as seen in 1976*; bottom: *We'll All Go Together When We Go, n.d.*



Glenn, 2004



Big Brother is Watching, 1986



[Galerie des Chiennes], n.d.

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JEFF DAVIES
American 1938-2006

A Sunday Afternoon Ride, 1982
ink and crayon on illustration board
19 x 29 3/4 inches
Courtesy of John Stage/ Dinosaur Bar-B-Que

America's Prom Night, 2000
acrylic on canvas
18 x 24 inches
Courtesy of the Estate of Jeff Davies

"Baptism" in Ohio, 1999
acrylic on canvas
18 x 24 inches
Courtesy of the Estate of Jeff Davies

Big Brother is Watching, 1986
crayon on illustration board
18 3/4 x 28 inches
Courtesy of the Estate of Jeff Davies

[*Cowboy and hair*], n.d.
acrylic on canvas
36 x 48 1/4 inches
Courtesy of the Estate of Jeff Davies

Death of a Tourist, 1979
acrylic and ink on illustration board
22 5/8 x 29 1/2 inches
Courtesy of the Estate of Jeff Davies

[*Galerie des Chiennes*], n.d.
acrylic on canvas
36 3/4 x 44 1/2 inches
Courtesy of the Estate of Jeff Davies

Glenn, 2004
acrylic on bar table
29 1/2 inches diameter
Courtesy of the Estate of Jeff Davies

[*God Bless America*], 2003
acrylic and STEN Mk.V submachine gun on canvas
44 x 33 inches
Courtesy of the Estate of Jeff Davies

Happy Days Are Here Again, 1986
acrylic and ink on illustration board
19 5/8 x 26 7/8 inches
Courtesy of the Estate of Jeff Davies

[*McDonald's and Skyway Mall*], 1986
acrylic on illustration board
18 x 24 inches
Courtesy of the Estate of Jeff Davies

Mrs. Wodehouse-Nijinsky Dances the Minuet Allegro in Front of Burning Bibles, London, 1938, n.d.
acrylic on canvas
20 x 16 inches
Courtesy of the Estate of Jeff Davies

New Hope Mill, New Hope, N.Y. as seen in 1976
acrylic and ink on canvas
22 x 28 inches
Courtesy of John and Rose Phillips

Night Train, n.d.
acrylic on canvas
18 x 24 inches
Courtesy of the Estate of Jeff Davies

Our Beloved Mayor Offers Us His Cultural Meal, 1998
acrylic on canvas
18 x 24 inches
Courtesy of the Estate of Jeff Davies

[*Pizza*], 2006
acrylic, mosaic tiles and poker chips on canvas
45 3/4 inches diameter
Courtesy of the Estate of Jeff Davies

Rachmaninoff, 2003
acrylic on canvas
42 x 59 inches
Courtesy of George Haux

Self Portrait, 1991
acrylic on illustration board
8 3/4 x 10 3/4 inches
Courtesy of Don Deschamps

[*Still life*], 1989
acrylic on illustration board
19 7/8 x 19 7/8 inches
Courtesy of the Estate of Jeff Davies

The Brown Derby Hotel, 1970
ink on wove paper
15 1/4 x 20 1/4 inches
Courtesy of Lore Davies Fuller

The Demon from the Paducah Club-Self-Portrait, 1987
acrylic on illustration board
15 x 20 inches
Courtesy of Don Deschamps

The Jealous Sister, 1999
acrylic on canvas
42 x 72 inches
Courtesy of the Estate of Jeff Davies

The Martini of Life, 2000
acrylic on canvas
18 x 24 inches
Courtesy of Don Deschamps

[*Two figures*], 2001
acrylic on canvas
24 x 18 inches
Courtesy of the Estate of Jeff Davies

untitled, n.d.
acrylic on canvas
50 x 19 1/4 inches
Courtesy of the Estate of Jeff Davies

We'll All Go Together When We Go, n.d.
acrylic, watercolor, ink, Chinese white on illustration board
21 1/2 x 32 inches
Courtesy of the Estate of Jeff Davies

Woman Shot at Organ Donation Party, n.d.
acrylic on canvas
20 x 16 inches
Courtesy of the Estate of Jeff Davies

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JEFF DAVIES: STRAIGHT FROM THE HEART

Jeff Davies (1938-2006) was a Syracuse area artist who gained a near cult status among local collectors. Davies developed a style that incorporated elements of Surrealism with Rube Goldberg inspired machines often in service to a sexually charged visual theme. As he gained experience he enlarged the size of the images, ultimately making murals, the most famous of which are on the interior and exterior walls of the Dinosaur Bar-B-Que restaurant in downtown Syracuse.



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