

dovetail

Visual Art

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Big Sky

Daniel Gibson's paintings
honor the sublime

by Kate Mothes

"If someone wanted to describe my paintings quickly, it's just a horizon, some rocks, dirt, and plants—and, of course, a sky," says Daniel Gibson. Although such a facile summary wouldn't encapsulate the richly layered symbolism, regional influences, and attention to detail in the artist's dramatic landscapes. A deceptively simple begetter of wonder, our earthly atmosphere and the horizon provide the starting point for the artist's new body of work on view in *Big Sky*, Gibson's solo exhibition at Almine Rech.

Born in Yuma, Arizona, and raised in the southernmost region of California near Mexicali, Gibson grew up on the border. "I've been living surrounded by the Southwestern desert my whole life, and ever since I've started working, I've been painting my own version of how I see and experience the landscape that is so special to me," he says. The theme of the sky began to emerge when he made trips to New Mexico over the past couple of years. He adds:

Every time I'm there, I think about the connection I feel between the sky and the Earth. Standing out there is different. You feel a part of the huge expanse of the sky when you're high up in the mountains, or you feel small and grounded when you find yourself looking up at the giant cloud formations grazing above. I'm always drawn to nature and natural phenomena like that because there is so much that I feel and reflect on when I'm in it.

Gibson's saturated landscapes observe the experience of the sublime, connecting one to their surroundings and at the same time sparking an awareness of the vastness of what lies both above and below. There is a heft to the solid clouds that roll across the vibrant blue skies characteristic of the Southwest, or the way the sky "opens up" and drifts across the distance. Gibson challenges our Western left-to-right "reading" of the works by reorienting the direction that figures face, weather moves, and the eye travels to a sinistrodextral, or right-to-left, inclination.



Resting cloud catching rain, 2023. Oil on linen, 80 x 67 inches

Large flowers often dominate Gibson's compositions, becoming figural, even prophetic. "When I'm painting flowers, I usually ask them what they want to be before I put them down on the canvas," he says. Different blossoms in various colors reference specific things: "The white flower represents life to me. The red flower represents struggle, and the blue flower represents water. The purple flowers always remind me of my cousin who passed away. I think about her when I add a purple flower." Rather than represent specific species, the blooms comprise a kind of language to convey messages or moods.

You got to come from somewhere, you just don't fall out of the sky is one take on the life-giving force of nature, drawing on a quip many of us could imagine a child hearing from a parent or grandparent. In this painting, the portal-like petals birth a figure, delivering him confused and grasping to both the ground and the air in equal measure.

Gibson has often focused on the desert landscape, exploring the dramatic hues of the sun at different times of day, an array of flora and fauna, and people that commune or merge with their surroundings. Human profiles sometimes emerge from the edge of a lake or the crest of a butte, or patterns that look suspiciously like eyes emerge in an insect wing, like in *Butterfly over Rio Chama*. We begin to seek familiar features, tugging at threads that connect us to these vast and otherworldly vistas.

"Even though (New Mexico) has technically been a newer place to explore for me, there is a familiarity and comfort with it as well," he says. "I still feel connected to my roots and the places I know when I'm there but have been struck by its uniqueness as well. I keep going back, and I've fallen in love with it—the vastness, the mesas, and the big clouds and dramatic storms"

Big Sky continues through March 2 in New York City. Find more on the artist's Instagram.



Butterfly over Rio Chama, 2023. Oil on linen, 63 x 59 inches



Big Sky, 2023. Oil on linen, 80 x 67 inches



You got to come from somewhere, you just don't fall out of the sky, 2023. Oil on linen, 90 x 78 1/2 inches



Installation view of 'Big Sky' at Almine Rech NY



Moon closes earth's jar, 2023. Oil on linen, 90 x 78 1/2 inches



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