



ON THE MOVE

Denver-based painter
Desmond O'Hagan's
wanderlust inspires
his oils and pastels,
cityscapes and
figurative scenes

BY VIRGINIA CAMPBELL

IN THE 19TH CENTURY, when the West was being settled from the East by people who had recently or not so recently emigrated from Europe, there was a driving force of restlessness that compelled individuals to brave the uncertainties and exhaustion that pioneers of any sort must overcome. That restlessness combined elements of hope, frustration, optimism, aggression, and sheer excess of energy in varying mixes, depending on the person, but one way or another it amounted to a need for room to move that was distinctly western. Today, of course, the frontier is a concept steeped in nostalgia. People who come west these days by SUV or 757 and end up staying are often souls with little wanderlust. They find a place that feels like the true home which by some cosmic mistake they were not born in, and they put down instant roots. If these people happen to be painters, their adopted landscape often becomes their ultimate subject, and their concept of beauty is intricately bound up in its poetic resonance.

Desmond O'Hagan is not one of those people. He's restless. Though he came to the West from elsewhere and now makes his living in Denver, CO, as a painter, he has as many ants in his pants as any frontier man who bristled at fences. There is not a whiff of nostalgia anywhere in the many oil and pastel works that have established his reputation as an award-winning artist over the last 15 years. His restlessness is of the eye as well as the spirit, and it seems, at this point at least, to be bottomless. It is also remarkable for the way it skews away from negative aspects like rebellion and dissatisfaction toward the exuberant



LEFT: A VIEW
OF THE LOBBY
(DENVER),
PASTEL, 18 X
14.

RIGHT:
EDINBURGH
AT DUSK,
OIL, 30 X 40.





BUNGALOW IN SUNLIGHT, DENVER, OIL, 9 X 12.

side in impulses like curiosity, eagerness, and love of variety. This optimistic restlessness can be seen in his brushwork in oil (strong and dynamic), his use of pastel (sizeable sweeps of pigment), his need to go back and forth between oil and pastel (a matter of liking both sets of possibilities equally), his joy in new places in the Old World as well as the new (he paints all over Europe as well as America), and his choice of subject matter (just about anything as long as it isn't just one thing).

O'Hagan's background sounds at first like that of a genuine 19th-century American. Both of his parents were born in Ireland. But the rest of the emigration story is pure 20th century. His father came to the United States as a teenager and ended up enlisting in the Air Force, after which he returned to Ireland and married an Irish woman. After rejoining the Air Force, he and his wife were stationed in Wiesbaden, Germany, where Desmond, destined to have dual Irish and American citizenship, was born in 1959. The family moved around from one base to another in the United States—Virginia, Alaska, etc.—until Desmond's father retired and settled in Albuquerque, NM. A teenager at the time, Desmond finished high school as a southwesterner and stayed in the Southwest.

The kids of military officers tend to respond to the rootlessness of military life in one of two ways: The business of constantly pulling up stakes either becomes a habit or engenders a deep desire for stability. O'Hagan took a middle ground. He liked where he ended up—he married and now has two children, ages 7 and 3, in Denver—but he likes everywhere else, too, and travels with ever-fresh

enthusiasm. He appears less likely to paint the characteristic vistas of the Southwest—the drama of mountain and desert wilderness invested with longing for transcendence apparently has little resonance for him—than quirky Irish or Scottish street scenes. In fact, he's often less interested in landscape than in urban scenes, be they in Denver or Dublin. "It's the energy of the city I love," offers the 44-year-old.

If you study O'Hagan's recent oil *EDINBURGH AT DUSK*, you can see his cheerful

restlessness at work. "I find tremendous beauty in dusk," O'Hagan says, but while many painters who'd say the same thing are responding primarily to a quiet emotional quality of the light, O'Hagan's feeling is for the jazzier edge of it. In the *Edinburgh* painting, you can see the famous, ancient castle far up on the hill above the city lit up with last light, but it's really just a skillful daub of paint not very different from the similarly sized, brighter daub of paint that forms the headlight of a double-decker bus in the middle of the painting. O'Hagan doesn't leave out the castle in favor of the contemporary urban swirl—he has nothing against it—but he clearly loves the slick gleam of metal and electricity.

THE UNTROUBLED open-mindedness of O'Hagan's approach to subject matter is of a piece with the gradual way in which he arrived at his calling. As a child he avidly drew pictures and studied illustrations. He loved architecture from a young age and began college with the idea of entering that field. But his interest in art overtook his initial idea, and he went from the University of New Mexico to the Colorado Institute of Art to become a graphic artist. Throughout college and beyond, he traveled as he had all his life, and spent hours in museums everywhere he went. "Travel was my real education," he points out. After working for three years as a graphic artist, O'Hagan left his job to paint full time.

O'Hagan's earliest work had the same variety of subject matter he favors now but leaned more toward pastel. "What I love about pastel is the amount of pure pigment in it," he says. His pastels are unusual in the way they exploit the intensity of pigment. He doesn't



draw shapes as much as define them with broad strokes of color that benefit from a sure, architectural eye; he can render a stone embankment in setting sunlight with great conviction in a few sweeps of burnt-orange chalk. His sensual attachment to pastel has its parallel in oil. "With oil I love the fluidness, to the point of a buttery quality," he contrasts. "The chunks of color going in different directions have a great expressive quality."

In both pastel and oil, O'Hagan shows a strong leaning toward abstraction within his basically representational approach. "I always appreciated the abstract in graphic design," he says. "I like the immediate impact of abstraction." It's not surprising, then, when you see in one of his small oils of a shaded bungalow in Denver that the light catching the white stucco wall is captured in one bold, wet brush stroke so thick it rises up from the canvas to advertise its existence as paint even as it is passing for a wall. It's interesting, too, to note that the paint depicting the white wall is not white. "I never use white in its pure form in either pastel or oil," says O'Hagan. "It blanks things out. I make a more visually exciting white by using other colors. For the same reason, I don't work in pure black either."

AFTER WORK, OIL, 11 X 14.

Someone recently commented to O'Hagan that his work struck them as a cross between Paul Cezanne and Edward Hopper. It's an interesting view for a number of reasons. For one thing, Cezanne was the French master who sent western art hurtling into abstraction, while Hopper was the American master who refused to abandon representational painting for cutting-edge abstraction and was underrated, if not dismissed, throughout his life for his trouble. All contemporary representational painters come to grips with the history between those two masters one way or another. For another thing, though one can see things in O'Hagan's work that recall Cezanne and Hopper, their meaning in his work tends to be entirely different. Particularly in the pastels, O'Hagan's surfaces break into geometries that look like Cezanne's incipient cubism, and large flat areas have Cezanne-like shaded textures. But in his move toward abstraction, Cezanne was waging a fight against the inability of constricted, imposed modes of representation to get at real life, and

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this is not O'Hagan's concern. O'Hagan is notably un-belligerent. Hopper's fascination with urban existence and bold use of deep color can be seen in both O'Hagan's pastels and his oils. But the individual isolation one feels in Hopper's canvases of city life, and the disquieting effect of his reds, are not at all what O'Hagan conveys. In the pastel *A VIEW OF THE LOBBY (DENVER)*, in which we peer down from a steep angle at a woman striding through the ground floor of a Denver hotel, there's nothing alienated about the figure, despite our distanced perspective, and the ultra-bright red of light catching her purse is wittily pronounced to make the bright red velvet chair in the bar to her right all the more pleasing.

Ultimately, O'Hagan's restlessness is of a benign rather than rebellious nature, which seems appropriate, since the problem art presents today is not that of imposed boundaries but rather the absence of boundaries altogether. And for all his wandering, O'Hagan has constructed a comfortable niche for himself in Denver. A few years ago his father helped him build a 600-square-foot studio onto his house in the residential neighborhood where he lives, and he works there from sketches, memory, and photographic notes when he's not painting *en plein air* or off traveling. He's prolific and avidly collected, which is a good formula for artistic happiness. As long as the restless eye and spirit keep their part of the bargain, which in O'Hagan's case they seem to. □

Virginia Campbell, the former editor in chief of *Movieline*, also writes for *Departures*, *Traditional Home*, and *Hollywood Life*.

O'Hagan is represented by E.S. Lawrence Gallery, Aspen, CO; Navarro Gallery, Sedona, AZ; Gore Creek Gallery, Vail, CO; Saks Galleries, Denver, CO; and www.desmondohagan.com.