

William S. Dutterer

...Alligators

February 01 - March 15, 2025

In collaboration with Joshua Abelow and the William S. Dutterer Trust, Michael Benevento Gallery is honored to present *...Alligators*, an exhibition of mid-career paintings, celebrating the life and legacy of American artist, William S. Dutterer.

When I think of Hagerstown, Maryland I think of my father's floor covering business and the motley crew of employees who sold or installed carpet for him. I was 5 years old when he opened Carpets Unlimited in 1981. It was a big deal for our family. Owning a small business was the American dream and we were now a part of it. Early on, my parents seemed to think the sky was the limit. I went along with that idea until my teenage years. I knew one day I would not take over the business. My dad knew that too. He didn't involve me in much of the goings on aside from providing an afterschool job to do janitorial work like emptying the abundance of overflowing ashtrays, which I didn't mind because I was very interested in cigarettes.

Something of the roll-up-your-sleeves, do-it-yourself ethos of a small business owner has remained in me and my approach to life as an artist.

Last February, exactly one year ago, I accidentally encountered the work of William S. Dutterer (known to his friends as Bill). My wife and I, along with our nine-year-old son, took an outing to the Washington County Museum of Fine Arts in Hagerstown to see an exhibition of children's book illustrations. In one of the hallways, I saw two large paintings that struck me as unusual. One was titled, "Daddy Diver Takes a Peek," (1982) and the other, "Mask," (1978). I was picking up on shades of Guston, Basquiat, and Susan Rothenberg, but these paintings were not derivative or deferential. They were coded and mysterious, inward looking, with a weird humor that was hard to pinpoint. A "small town" meets "big city" energy that was familiar to my own lived experience.

I was surprised to learn that this major talent was born and raised in Hagerstown. I felt an instant kinship with this man and his work and decided to learn more. I contacted his widow, Jamie, who was kind enough to share. We met at the storage facility in Jersey City where she lovingly cares for decades of work - most of which has not been seen, certainly not by a large audience. It was there that I discovered the alligators.

The alligators (1986 - 1993) have the formal rigor of canonical American abstract paintings by Barnett Newman. And yet, these are sly works that do not visually or conceptually reveal themselves upon first glance. There seems to be a desire (on the alligator's part) to observe, yet remain concealed. Each predator calmly waits in a diagonal sea of color. I can't help but think of the alligator as a stand-in for Bill. And, I can't help thinking that these alligators (even in Bill's absence) have been patiently waiting for this precise moment to strike.

Bill and Jaimie moved to New York in 1979, living there until Bill's untimely death in 2007 (turns out, he was also interested in cigarettes). Bill made this body of work (and many others) in his SoHo loft, the beating heart of the New York art world of the time. He didn't get much visibility for his work in those years. In Jamie's own words, "...studio visits by gallerists were a painful challenge, so he walked away from them. What was really important to him was his work."

I think a lot about visibility and what it means for artists today. The art world is oversaturated with artists, galleries, and social media accounts, etc. I can understand and relate, especially in this historical moment, to an artist's desire to remain hidden, to carefully observe the waters without drawing too much attention to oneself, at least not in obvious ways. It's interesting to "drop out" but geographically remain in the center. I think that's what these alligator paintings are about.

-Joshua Abelow