

Infinite Water

A CONVERSATION WITH DAVID MOLESKY

My introduction to David Molesky's paintings happened at a little gallery being run by artist Rae Douglass. I was stopped in my tracks. Facing a painting of ocean surf invoked all the forgettable seaside paintings of beach town tourist galleries. But Molesky's painting—utterly free from irony—was simply magnificent. I stood there scrutinizing the canvas and I soon had to admit that it was one of the most striking paintings I'd seen in a long time. And the fact that this subject matter

had been worked over to death only made it more so. Wow! Leaving the gallery I made a note to self: look at more of this artist's work. Then perhaps a year later, at an art alumni symposium at UC Berkeley, a young man came up and introduced himself: David Molesky. Soon the connection to the painting I'd seen was made. We talked about the ocean and surfing. We talked about water. It didn't take me long to propose an interview. Agreed. Not long afterwards,

“I couldn’t distinguish where the water met my skin anymore. Then I got to a point where I couldn’t distinguish myself anymore; I was the water itself. I could feel the sensation of myself as the bottom of the water and the top of the water where the air met, and the fish that were swimming inside of me.”

I found myself straining to make out an address along Market St. in S.F. Finally I found it, the perfect artist studio-type building—completely nondescript, faintly down-at-the-heels and hidden in plain sight. David let me in and explained that the array of odd statuary and eccentric riff-raff scattered around the large open space belonged to his landlord. “One of these days, he’s going to open an antique shop,” he said. David pointed to a stairway. His studio was up on the mezzanine. Perfect, I thought.

Richard Whittaker: So tell me a little about your interest in water. Let’s go straight into that.

David Molesky: Okay. I got into painting water when I was living in Carmel for a couple of years. It was kind of a beautiful, epic moment. I was painting this rock called Seal Rock. I’d seen a beautiful photograph of Steinbeck and Doc Ricketts and I think Anais Nin all sitting on this rock together. And I’d found that particular angle. While I was painting it, there was a sound from the shore behind me. I turned and the sky had opened up a little hole for the sun to come through. It was spotlighting this beautiful rogue wave that had extremely weird forms. I had my camera

around my neck and I shot some pictures and when I got home and looked at them, I fell in love. It was like a landscape of these continuous organic forms all relating to each other and going off into the distance. And I started to do some paintings of that and had my first real commercial success as an artist painting water.

RW: Were there earlier experiences with water? Something that you were conscious of?

DM: Yes. There were lots of earlier experiences. I started to realize that as I was working these paintings. It was almost like I hit a nerve inside myself. I was wondering what other signs in my past could possibly lead up to this, and there are a number of things.

RW: So when you started painting the water, it started opening up these memories?

DM: Yes. It sort of went back into my memory and highlighted these experiences that were important to think about and how they contributed to my strong connection to the subject of water.

RW: So talk about some of those, if you don’t mind.

DM: I mean some of them were near-death experiences.

RW: You said near-death experiences, plural?

DM: Yeah, with water. Again and again and again.

RW: Really? Wow. Well, let’s go through those.

DM: Okay. When I was little my parents would take me to the beach. I don’t know how old I was, maybe three or four. I would always strip off all my clothes and then manage to sneak away from everyone. And I would end up going right into the breakers on the shore and just getting pummeled and tossed about.

RW: This is what your parents told you? Or do you...

DM: I have little bits of memories of that. My memory works sort of photographically. There might be like a couple of images of a particular narrative that I can remember. That’s how my memory of movies works, too.

RW: Okay. So how does that work? You're a toddler and you're heading out into the surf.

DM: Yes. I'm mesmerized and just getting pummeled and rescued multiple times by lifeguards and taken back to my parents.

RW: Wow.

DM: And then I learned to bodyboard. The waves really weren't big enough on the eastern seaboard to do surfing, per se. I just loved the feeling of the water, having to give in to this force. And I felt a kind of comfort. It wasn't something I would fight against. It was more like I'd just give in. And the sound of the water—I love that sound more than anything, really.

RW: How old were you when you started bodyboarding?

DM: I was six or seven.

RW: Okay. Just being in the water in the surf is such a profound experience, isn't it? But we don't usually hear people talk about it that way.

DM: I think most surfers know it and that's just an understanding each one has and they don't like to go too deep and get philosophical.

RW: It's not really a topic of discussion usually, I agree with you. But it's kind of a primal thing, isn't it?

DM: I think Freud talked about how there was something about the ocean and water that subconsciously brings us back to the experiences of being in the womb, and the comfort of that. I know that my mom did a lot of swimming when she was pregnant with me. She told me that. So that might have been an influence. I didn't grow up on the coast, so my surrogates to that were the Potomac River and the Great Falls—a part of the river that just roars through the trees. You can hear it for miles as you approach it. I can remember going there for the first time. I was five and hiking with my friends. I remember some of the puddles that I fell in. I always wanted to go back there. We moved away to New Jersey when I was six, I think, and then moved back to the area when I was nine. As soon as I was strong enough to bike there on my own—about

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ten miles each way—I would go there as often as possible, sometimes every day.

RW: You said you could remember some of the puddles you fell into.

DM: Yes.

RW: So give an example. What do you remember about falling into a puddle when you were five?

DM: I remember it was cold out. And there was a little bit of ice on the puddle.

RW: You can see that now, in memory?

DM: Yes. I can see the mud. I can see the roots. I can kind of see the pitch of the hill that the trail was on. And I can kind of see the presence of trees and the presence of the adults walking with me. And then more clearly I can see the friend of mine who was my age and my height traveling through the space with me. And the distraction of communicating and interacting with him making it difficult to traverse the space. I think it was something like that where I was talking and wasn't paying attention. And I walked over



DAVID MOLESKY, *REFLUX*, 2012, OIL ON TWILL LINEN, 15" X 50"

a thin piece of ice and went through the puddle and got wet.

RW: That memory from so long ago, you're able to just go right into it?

DM: Yes. I really enjoy the experience of going back into my mind and seeing the image and feeling that space again and then being able to tell that story. I find that just to be wonderful. My grandmother is a great storyteller. She can tell a story about the most everyday things, but with the amount of detail and grit that she brings to it, it makes you sit on the edge of your seat.

RW: Because there is something compelling about our actual, real experience, I think. I mean you must remember when that ice broke and all of a sudden you're wet.

DM: It was exciting, you know, but uncomfortable. But just to have that kind of interaction with space. It was educational. It made me more alive. As a kid I was really rough and tumble. I mean I would go off in the woods or whatever exploring and climbing trees. I had vertigo pretty bad when I was little. My brother and my father also had vertigo, and they were afraid of heights. But with me it fueled a curiosity. I would fall down the wooden steps again and again, and I can

remember that, too. I can remember crossing over the top of the steps and having this thought in my mind, "I wonder if I am going to have that weird feeling again if I look down?"

RW: All right. I want to hear more about your near-death experiences. As you got older what were some of those experiences?

DM: You know, it was just kind of a regular thing where the water was much stronger than me and could hold me under in the washing machine. That was just the usual experience at the beach every day.

RW: So those would be scary moments. But are there experiences that really stand out as near-death experiences?

DM: Yes, right. Well, when I was about 13 or so, there was a big hurricane coming to shore. I'd spent most of the last couple of summers at my grandmother's beach house, and I had a cousin two years older than me. He'd spent all his summers there since he was like one, and he was very familiar with the landscape. We went from my grandmother's out to the coast and found a little spot we really liked. It hadn't been dredged. So the waves were breaking pretty far out, which made for good wave-riding. So this hurricane was

coming; I think it was Hurricane Bob. And not really understanding the concept that I could die, and how it would affect my family and all that, I had said, wow! I bet the waves are going to be amazing tomorrow! We should go out. And we did. And it was just unreal.

I had never seen waves that big, ever. The whole ocean was just full of waves, and they got progressively bigger. So I put on my flippers and my little, short Farmer John wetsuit and jumped in. We jumped in together. But within a few minutes I didn't see my cousin anymore because it was a fight for my life. And it was a very long fight for my life. It took every ounce of energy just to keep alive out there. I would be held under and I would pop back up. And as soon as I popped back up, there was another wave on my head and back into the washing machine. It seemed like it would never end, and my lungs were fighting for air. I was trying to keep them calm while waiting to resurface.

I would get to the surface and then I would go back under for who knows how long? Luckily one of my favorite things was to do laps underwater and see how far I could go. So I think that was good training. But man, it was a fight. It was really scary. And by the time I got out past the breakers I was bobbing over these enormous waves. I looked back to the shore. There were a few people, and they were like tiny ants off in the distance. And that was really scary, because now between me and the shore was this whole mess that I had just spent all that energy and time trying to survive. And there was no way back but to ride a wave in.

RW: Right.

DM: So I was contemplating how should I do that? The waves that I was bobbing over were terrifying me. Should I come in? I thought, if I go in a little closer, the big waves will crash on me, and that could be the end. And just as I was contemplating all that, an even bigger wave than I had positioned myself for appeared—and it was going to break. There was no chance of going over it or through it. So I took it.

RW: And you had a bodyboard?

DM: Yes. And it was amazing. It was like sledding down a hill covered in ice I was going so fast. I was catching air on the chop of the waves. And the fear



turned into this just amazing delight. And I decided to start turning with the wave, because why not? So I started turning along with the wave and kind of went back up closer to the top of it. I could hear the wave sort of catching up to me. It was like a roaring sound and the lip started to create a shadow over me, so I knew that it was about to close out.

RW: Right.

DM: So I went up a little bit more and then cut straight down the face. I was going so fast that it threw me way out in front of the wave. I was catching air and then the whole thing just exploded behind me and spray hit my neck. And a few seconds later this giant white wall, like ten-foot white wall, just nailed me. It threw me around like a rag doll. And it seemed like it wasn't ending. It just went on and on and on. And then it was almost like being reborn, like you had this crazy chaos and then there was a stillness. Then all of a sudden, you're back on the surface again—you know, feeling happy and excited for this other chance!

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And then it was like being in a pinball machine, being bounced back and forth, because there was so much energy going into shore that fairly good-sized waves were coming back off the shore.

RW: Right, right.

DM: And there were waves going sideways and all colliding with each other and exploding. So it was just this long, crazy ride of taking one wave and then catching another wave off of that wave and eventually I got to shore. It was amazing, but I was so happy to be back on the shore. I crawled up onto the beach and looked around and saw my cousin walking down the beach towards me. I probably had this giant grin on my face and we didn’t really talk that much about it. We were just really happy to see each other.

RW: Well, that’s an amazing experience. And I can truly relate. When I was younger, I got in trouble body-surfing in heavy surf. I won’t describe it all, but there was a life or death moment I’ll never forget.

DM: Yeah. It’s that kind of moment and that kind of

internal dialogue that is a big part of, I think, the near-death experience. You have this kind of conversation with yourself—okay I have this option or that option.

Another good example comes from this marine biology research trip in the Bahamas when I was in high school. Towards the end of the trip we went to San Salvador, which is the island farthest out on the chain. It’s apparently where Columbus first landed. We were on the side of the island where the Atlantic was coming in. It was really deep and the water was rough, and there were these tall columns of coral—most of it was fire coral. We were looking for a long-spined sea urchin they thought was extinct. And they thought that this was the last place where we might find it. I was diving down, but there weren’t any other people interested in swimming the way I was. So I ended up kind of being alone.

RW: You were just snorkeling?

DM: Yes. And I started doing crazy things like swimming down 20 feet or so and then finding a cave. And then swimming into the cave and not being able to see.

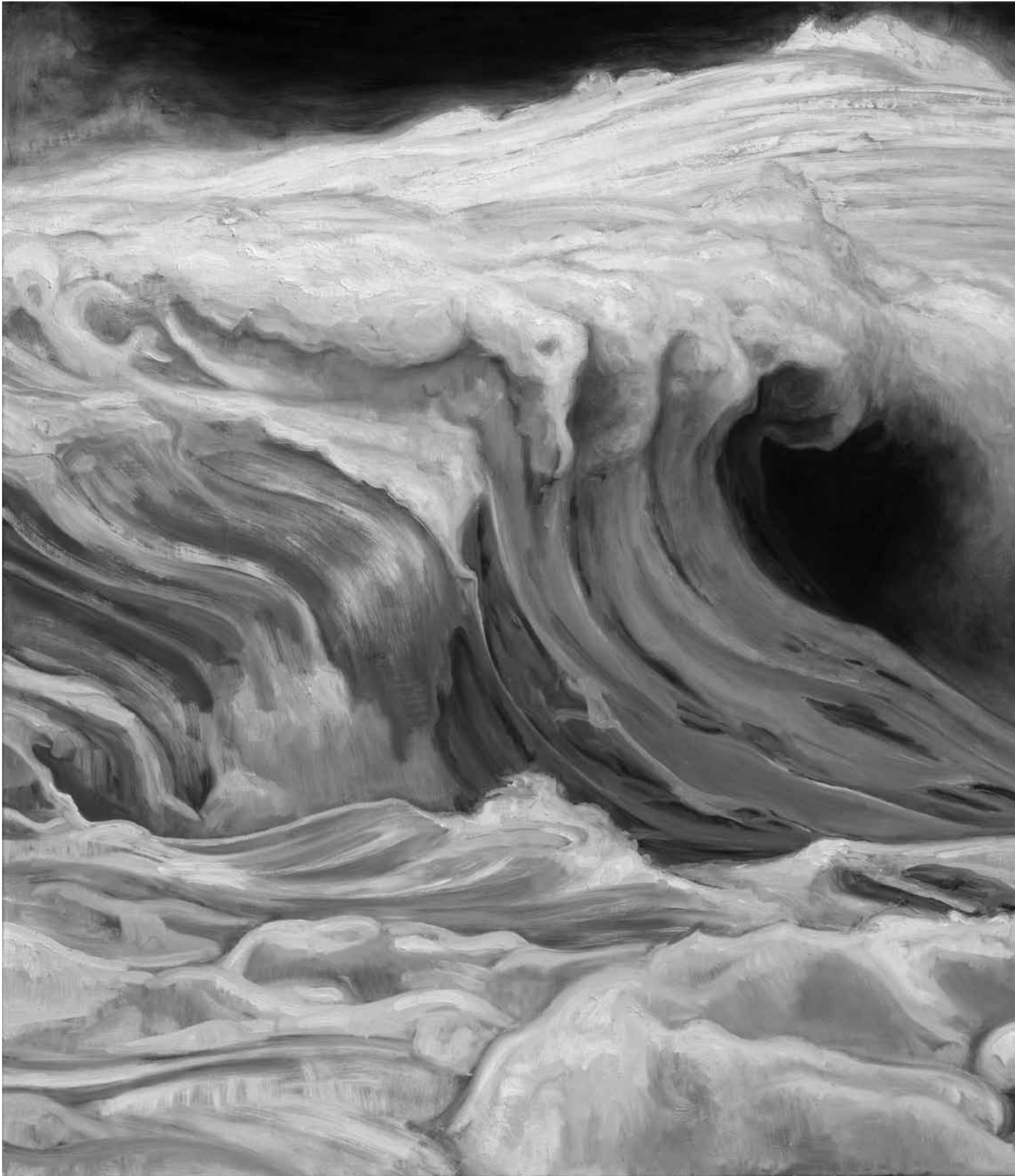
RW: Oh, my god!

DM: Swimming in and then seeing light coming from above, and then swimming up this chimney to the surface, catching air, but then finding that the fire coral went all the way to the surface. So the only way back was to dive down the chimney again into the cave and then find your way out.

I did this to myself multiple times that day. Sometimes I would swim down and then find that in the darkness I couldn’t find my way back out. Then there was this dialogue inside myself, “Okay, if you panic, you’re going to die. You have so much energy associated with the amount of oxygen in your lungs. And if you panic, you’re going to use it all up. So you found your way in. You’ll find your way out. Just be as calm and as relaxed as possible.” Then I would find my way out and stupidly, I would do it again. I would go into another one.

RW: Well, that’s amazing. I mean, I don’t know what to think about that.

DM: Luckily I stopped. I stopped doing things like



that when I was twenty, twenty-one years old, which is apparently when your forebrain finishes developing.

RW: There was something in you that had, maybe still has, a very deep trust in something.

DM: Yes, yes. That's a good call. It's this very strange deep trust in nature.

RW: Have you ever had the kind of near-death experience that you read about where a person is going into a golden light?

DM: Strangely, yes. I forgot about that. It does relate to water, too. But it happened in my sleep, where I symbolically died in my sleep.

RW: When would this have been, more or less?

DM: Right around when I was 14. It's a story I've shared with a lot of people. And when I've shared it with Native Americans—because I've had some experiences with them—they always say it was my coming of age vision that would sort of guide me for my life. It was definitely a very transformative dream. After I had the dream, all of a sudden I started maturing very quickly like intellectually, artistically, athletically. Everything just like went up many notches. And so in this dream, it was almost like I was studying dream symbols and had designed a dream based on dream symbols. It was kind of perfect in a way.

It started out with me as a baby. My parents were carrying me to a river. It was a very small river, and they put me in the water. The power of the water was proportionate to the strength of my figure. So it wasn't moving very quickly. It was very languid and I could stand in it as a toddler and sort of splash and kind of walk around. It wasn't enough to make me unstable. And when I looked back to them, they sort of gestured "Go, go on." I started to walk down the river. And as I walked down the river, I aged and the river kind of grew with me proportionately in its depth and its power. As I walked, I got to a point, probably in my teens or so, late teens, where I got very excited about what was down the river. I wanted to get there quicker. So I started to push the water in front of me and move more quickly down the river. And as I did so, I got into water that was stronger than I was ready for. It swept me off my feet and took me into these

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rapids. And it was really pretty fun. Sometimes it was pretty scary, too. But for the most part, it was a good experience. Then I remember getting into a state where I was starting to get used to the rhythms of the river—like I was almost in a trance with them. It was very comfortable even as I went over rapids. I kind of understood the movement, and I was getting older. I was in the later part of my life.

RW: Like in your 50s, 60s? That kind of older?

DM: Yeah. And I was getting older, still. It was almost like I had kind of Zenned out on the river, or something. And as that was happening, the boundary between me and the water itself was deteriorating more and more, and more and more—and then to a point where I couldn't distinguish where the water met my skin anymore. Then I couldn't distinguish myself anymore; I was the water itself. I could feel the sensation of myself as the bottom of the water and the top of the water where the air met, and the fish that were swimming inside of me. Then at that moment, all sense of gravity just left. It was like weightlessness. It was like I had gone off a waterfall. There was this kind of quiet sound that was spreading out. It was the little molecules in myself that were going farther and farther apart into this silence, for a long time. So in this dream, there was this long period of nothing but silence. Then all of a sudden, I found myself again in water, but now in a more ideal and perfect form of myself, like in my physical prime, in a stagnant body of water. It was like a canal. It connected into a bigger body of water ahead, but I knew I wasn't ready to go to that bigger



RUDDY RUSHES, 2012, OIL ON CANVAS, 28" X 20"

body of water. So I got out onto this bank, and there was a chest of drawers all of a sudden. Inside were these small animals. They were small animals that I had as pets—amphibians and reptiles and things like that. My parents didn't let me have any warm-blooded animals other than my dog.

So I would take each one out, look at it in my hand for awhile and then put it on the ground and let it go. I went through the whole drawer like that. Then when I was finished, from behind the chest of drawers came this like sort of white wolf pup. When I saw it, I went from this state of only knowing that I couldn't

go to this big body of water and being in this sort of empty, confused, directionless state to like, oh, I've been waiting to see you—you know, *forever*. Like just this great rejoicing! Okay, now let's go to this big body of water!

When I turned towards that, all of a sudden there's a road that went there. So we took the road and went to the edge of the water. There was an island nearby and there was a fox on it that would sometimes turn into this very bad kind of grimy, chubby kid. They were smashing flying bugs. And they were in this big shadow made by these trees. That was a very scary place. Then my eyes started to peer across this body of water. It was almost like my vision was telescoping and zooming across the water. It was going into a sparkly and more intensely bright light, and then it was like I had travelled all the way into this very distant shore where there were these enormous, like 100-foot tall, white wolves. There were three of them, and they were dancing in this weird motion where they were kind of going in and out of one another. They were just in this swirl where it was hard to tell where one began and where one ended. It was incredibly hypnotic and blissful, too, at the same time. It filled my body with this intense feeling of bliss. It was probably the most amazing feeling I've ever had.

Then after that, it kind of waned. I came back to my stance on the edge of the water and looked towards this white wolf pup. The white wolf pup stepped into the water and started swimming. Then my vision changed to the white wolf pup swimming in the water.

RW: That's an amazing dream.

DM: I couldn't believe it when it happened. I think I got very quiet after that. I wasn't really talking with my friends. I was trying to digest it and understand what it meant.

RW: Carl Jung says we have, at times, big, big dreams. That's clearly a big dream. It's so interesting sitting here surrounded by your paintings of water and hearing your stories. Do you reflect about that at all? How long have you been doing these paintings of water?

DM: I started painting water in 2005.

RW: And how has that been for you?

DM: It was just wonderful. When I started the body of work with water, it just felt so suited to me. And the responses I was getting from people were really strong. It confirmed that as a subject; it really works with me and my personality and my energy.

RW: With paintings of water, the shore and all, I mean there's a small industry of the tourist shops and people out there doing their paintings of the ocean. I don't think there's anything wrong with that, but you know what I'm saying. Right?

DM: Yes. Especially living in Carmel, where I started them.

RW: When I first saw that one painting, I mean my first reaction was, "can't go there." But then almost immediately it was, "Wait a minute... ." And then, "Wow!" Now having listened to some of your stories, I'm feeling that there's just some really profound experiences of the water, of the ocean. I mean this is coming from someone who has been there and sometimes feels this thing, which is almost impossible to describe. Does that make sense to you?

DM: That's wonderful. Yes.

RW: I'm trying to figure out how to have a conversation about this, because I feel there's something really basic that we're missing. And the same thing is true in other ways, as well. Some of the things that are most basic and most a part of our lives, we simply don't see them. There's something about water that fits here—and light.

DM: Yes. I have a very strong love for and curiosity about science. Especially when it gets into the more philosophical points of science or when science leads up into seeing these great mysteries about our planet and the life here. That's the science that I love. And water is one of those things. It's unique to our planet. Just look at it in the way I do for painting, the forms that are in aerated water are... I read this great book that Ray Douglass recommended, *Sensitive Chaos* by Theodor Schwenk. It's a Rudolf Steiner Press book. He talks about how water is this medium that the energies from the universe act upon. It kind of manifests and harnesses these universal forms onto the planet's surface to interact with everything.

RW: Wait a minute. You're saying that water expresses these forces?

DM: Yes. Water is a substance that kind of collects and absorbs the energy from the universe and puts it into motion.

RW: Okay. So, in a way, water, in expressing these energies, kind of makes them visible?

DM: Yes. It's like when the energies hit the water, they bring this molecular substance to life in a way that mimics the processes that exist in the universe. And these forms that you find in moving water, they all relate to that kind of mysterious equation of *pi*.

RW: Let's see. That ratio gives us a number that seems to go on forever: 3.1415—and on and on.

DM: Yes. And so in some ways that number relates to the infinite possibilities and organic forms that can be found in water. And these infinite organic forms that can be found in water relate to every single muscle and organism on the planet, anything that moves actually has these forms that can be found in water.

RW: Okay.

DM: So because water contains these infinite forms, it kind of goes back to these other things like Rorschach ink blot tests or the Chinese scholar stones.

I use a camera to capture these forms because they are very short-lived. They are constantly changing into those infinite forms. It's like with the milk drop, the guy who took a photograph of the milk drop. It was a common thing that happened every day in front of us, but we never were able to see what was actually happening.

RW: Right. That's a very famous photo.

DM: Yes. And so it's the same with the ocean. I mean these forms I like to paint are just kind of constantly moving and changing and rolling in. For example, I lucked out with the first wave composition, but I'll go through thousands of photos that I take of moving water. And maybe I'll find one where I'm interested in a particular form, where I like the structure of it and maybe it's suggestive of something else—it doesn't look

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exactly like a horse. Maybe it feels like many different animals, but it's not distracting to the point where you'd say that it looks like that.

RW: There's something about water in its infinite manifestation of forms that expresses something profound about the mystery of existence. I know I'm waxing a bit grandiose, but there it is. And the way you're talking about it seems connected with that—the infinite, endless, different shapes that it's always taking. I mean it's hard to craft words to catch that.

DM: I know. I've tried to write about it a million times, but it's hard. I'll write 20 pages and just crumble it all up and throw it away.

RW: But you paint it.

DM: Yes. That's it. I can't write it too well.

RW: You know there's certainly beauty here, too. Do you have many thoughts about beauty itself? Sometimes I like to ask people about that.

DM: I thought about it. I did read Kant's *Observations on the Beautiful and the Sublime*. And I was surprised. I didn't think that I was going to jibe with Kant very much. I think that book was maybe from his earlier years. I could relate to it. But how to talk about beauty?

RW: Well, when I look at this painting, I could

describe it in different ways. But one thing I could say is that it's beautiful. And I have a feeling about it. The feeling relates somehow to something kind of mysteriously beautiful. How much does feeling play a part for you in all of this?

DM: It plays a huge part. I don't really use much of the conscious word-forming part of my brain while I'm working. It's kind of the back and forth dance where I'll make a few marks and I take a step back. And I look. And I go back to the canvas. I have a very visceral system of painting where I use my gut as a way to check in with the painting's development. If I step back and there's a part that when my eye goes over, it just doesn't feel right in my gut, I go back in and I change it. And I keep working like that until the painting is adjusted, so that my eye continues to travel over the whole surface and I have that sort of good, satisfied feeling in my stomach. And when I don't trip over something that makes me lose that, then I know it's done.

RW: That's a very interesting topic. Basically, you're using parts of yourself as a guide. It's from the body and from the feelings—a kind of intelligence or something that we all have, but the culture doesn't tell us anything about it.

DM: Right. Because we're in a very rational culture now. And that relates to Rudolf Steiner. He knew that with the rise of this age of reason and science, we were losing some of our faculties, at least in terms of their development in the educational system. People were being pushed away from those things and ignoring parts of themselves that rooted them more deeply in nature. I've definitely felt that it's my duty as an artist to make objects and work that helps remind people of these faculties they have that make their existence more beautiful and mysterious. And so they don't get swept away in the rational, analytical part of modern life.

RW: Yes. Is there a joy there?

DM: Joy? Yes. There is a great, immense joy to feel and be a part of some kind of mystery. I mean I live for that. ♦

Learn more at <http://www.davidmolesky.com/>