



What Remains: Sentinels and Relics

Francis DiFronzo

Above: Francis DiFronzo, *Crossing Paths, Part 2*, oil over gouache and watercolor on panel, 25" × 59".

In Francis DiFronzo's paintings, titles often work like the last line of a haiku, opening up the world of the painting, or presenting a completely different point of view. Like haiku—a poetic form that often celebrates the natural world while illuminating concepts of deep spiritual emptiness and impermanence—DiFronzo's paintings are full of both beauty and existential loneliness.

Using oil over gouache and watercolor, Francis DiFronzo paints highly realistic, delicately rendered landscapes—most often dusky deserts—strewn with the detritus of human culture and industry. Railroad cars and tracks, telephone poles, boats, rocks, and roadside signs. An abandoned Chevy station wagon under a derelict streetlight. On a sign isolated on a scrubby range, Bob's Big Boy holding aloft a fiberglass burger. The paintings are extremely open, extremely spare. They feel lonely, mysterious, even ominous, frequently inhabited by railcars but never an actual human being. One begins to wonder about their absence—are any people left in DiFronzo's worlds?

Like two of his major creative influences, Andrew Wyeth and Edward Hopper, Francis DiFronzo is a storyteller. The

subjects of his paintings look as if painted from life, as if they must exist *somewhere*. DiFronzo says that with his realism he wants to create a feeling of authenticity, even if that feeling is completely fabricated. "It allows the viewer to go into the world," he says, "and wonder: 'Why is he painting this place? I wonder where this is? I wonder what happened here?'" It pulls the viewer into a world that they presume exists in real life. And that's all in the art of storytelling."

DiFronzo's paintings are so realistic, so convincing, that it's difficult to accept that he works primarily from imagination. He has a nearly photographic memory—once he's painted something, he says, it's committed to memory, and he can re-create it later. He then can also mix and remix various elements of things he's painted into new paintings. The deserts, for example, read as real places but are actually amalgams of a number of different Western deserts. "I'm just sort of imagining them, and I don't know what deserts they are," DiFronzo says.

"I live in California, so there's the Mojave. But I'm not sure I'm painting the Mojave desert. . . . The feeling is more important than the place."



Francis DiFronzo, *Crossing Paths, Part 3*, oil over gouache and watercolor on panel, 36" × 72".

"I've always loved the landscape in painting," DiFronzo continues, "because it's where we live. The environment is where we live our dramas out . . . I do very much see the landscape as a stage." Then, to tell his stories on the stage of the desert, he uses the things he finds in the desert. "They become my subjects, and depending on how they're composed, how they're lit, they tell different stories."

After spending some time with DiFronzo's paintings, you start to notice that the objects have a subtle gestural quality that makes them feel like characters. However, DiFronzo deploys these gestures with such a light touch that his paintings read almost less like paintings than as photos in which a very lucky photographer's eye has happened to capture a moment that humans can't help but read as a relationship, a mood, an intention.

"I think, as an artist, you have to be generous and give people things to respond to," DiFronzo says, "and not be too opaque—you have to let them in. But not be so obvious at the same time. To let their emotions and feelings roam through the work, and feel what they feel. I love Hopper

because of the way he simplifies things; it's like he's refining his ideas to balance the most essential elements. And then he's giving them to you, and he's letting you go with them—and go whatever direction you want to go. But I love the simple isolation—the loneliness. Not lonely in a bad sense, though. There's just this quietness to Hopper, a peacefulness that lets you think and reflect upon what he's painted."

DiFronzo began his *Proof of Life* series four years ago, after the death of a friend. Attempting to process her passing, he says, "I was painting a desert dirt road. It was a night scene. And there was a telephone pole, and there was a streetlight . . . but I decided to not paint the streetlight, and just painted a light. It was like a floating orb in the sky." It brought to mind for him a painting by Henry Ossawa Tanner, *The Annunciation*.

The *Proof of Life* series has since become DiFronzo's conversation with Tanner's 1898 painting. He transposed some of its elements and themes onto the deserts of the American West, and the relics humans might leave there once we're gone. "I have a lot to say on this matter," he says. But how to interpret what DiFronzo has to say is up to the viewer.

And the trains that continually reappear in DiFronzo's paintings? He loved trains when little, as many boys do. "But," he says, "they sort of evolved for me. I became obsessed with them as being these really frightening objects." He used to dream about them. Then, early on in college, while experimenting with filmmaking, he and his crew had a near-death experience while shooting a short film.

"We were filming on what we thought was an abandoned train line," DiFronzo says. "We were filming in a tunnel out in the Mojave desert. And all of a sudden, the tunnel was lit up. We heard this roaring noise, and we all jumped off the tracks and put our backs up against the tunnel wall. And suddenly this train was going by at, like, 70 miles per hour, sucking us toward the tracks. It was terrifying."

"We all survived," he says, "but it was really just an awful experience. We all thought we were going to die. This thing was, like, two miles long. It just kept going and going and going at this very high speed, with a deafening noise. It was like a nightmare. It was like being in a tornado."

After that, DiFronzo became even more fascinated with trains. He began to think about how trains fit into humans' lives, and how they have a history all their own—"how they'll outlive us," he says; "how they'll just be sitting there through the centuries. . . . I like how they're these sentinels of the desert." Sentinels surrounded by gravel, track, wispy clouds, and washes of sundown sky. Perhaps a boxcar's doors are open to the sky beyond. Perhaps there's a crossing sign. The incessant, incalculable emptiness of the desert is acutely present.



Francis DiFronzo, *Zero Hour, Part 2*, oil over gouache and watercolor on panel, 24" × 48".