GEORGE DUGAN
Burnham Salt Marsh  1980
Ink and pastel on paper  22 x 30
GEORGE DUGAN

University Art Gallery
State University of New York at Binghamton
February 24 – March 23, 1984
Cover:

*The Holy Mackerel* 1980
Pastel and ink on paper  21 x 26½

All dimensions are given in inches unless otherwise noted; height precedes width.

All works are in the collection of the artist.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express the most special acknowledgement and thanks to Nancy Hamme who wrote the text of this catalog. I met Nancy when we shared an office at Cortland State and she will be my friend forever.

Her time and work on this catalog went beyond professionalism and expertise in her field. She was receptive without condition or preconception.

Nancy’s ability to make things fit together was inspirational, yet I’ll always be astonished at her ability to seize upon the magic of the muse.

George Dugan
Contemporary Totem: West Tisbury  1981
Oil on board  10 x 13
THE ART OF GEORGE DUGAN

Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are remarks by the artist taken from a taped interview with the author on December 6, 1983. Some of these quotations have been minimally edited by the author, with the artist's permission, for the sake of brevity.

George Dugan paints images: the illusions of recognizable things from the real world, the world of our experience — seaside cliffs, swimming pools, cattle, peppers, and people. Yet there is no doubt that George Dugan's chief interest is in the making of art.

Making art for much of this century, and certainly in this country since the close of World War II, has been narrowly, but commonly understood to mean the using of art to call attention to itself. To put it another way, painting as a unique art form should concentrate on asserting those things which give it definition: the flatness of the picture plane and the physical properties of the medium. These factors have informed the codification of much of twentieth century mainstream modernism. Painting was stripped of extra-visual meaning and reduced to its literal qualities.

Although this view of modernism is terribly oversimplified and telescopic, it was from this narrow abstractionist aesthetic that the new image-makers emerged as part of a larger disaffection with its limitations and exclusivity. It would be folly to suppose that realism, in the sense of creating a recognizable and accurate representation of visual experience, was ever fully eclipsed by modernism. Viewed as dull, conservative, and old-fashioned, realism did become decidedly unfashionable. Because it lacked critical approval and the backing of the galleries (both powerful elements in the system of a capitalistic society that controls the production of art), realism was unprofitable as well. Nevertheless, in the late 1950s and early 1960s careers began in earnest for a number of artists, Alex Katz, Philip Pearlstein, Janet Fish, Robert Bechtle, and Alfred Leslie among them, who were beginning to opt for the recognizable image. Their so-called New Realism provided both an extension of and a viable alternative to modernism.

Although Pop Art of the 1960s was once called The New Realism, and Photo-realism which came to the forefront of the art scene in the early 1970s was greeted similarly, it quickly became apparent that the realistic component of each had been greatly exaggerated. Following the initial shock of confronting recognizable motifs, it was observed that Pop's detachment and neutrality, emphasis on surface and brilliant color, and the inherent banality of its recycled media images ensconced it within the camp of modernism. While Photo-realism's references to pre-existing signs created overtones of Pop, it has been more frequently associated with the then-dominant Conceptual Art. Since their direct lineage to modernism was useful to galleries and collectors, both Pop and Photo-realism have joined modern art's mainstream.

During the last twenty years the large number of younger artists who have begun to explore realist usages have created a situation so heterogeneous as to render any single designation meaningless. The number of terms currently in use to identify all the variants of the New Realism staggers the imagination. However, all of these artists share a concern for the importance of visual perception. Far from denying the aesthetics of modernism in favor of revivalistic styles — indeed, these artists come from the same roots as their Conceptual, Post-Minimal, abstract, and New-Wave colleagues — they seek a revitalization of modernist pictorial structure and procedure.

Painting representationally is no longer considered the form of deviant behavior that it was through the mid-1970s. Several American realists have been very successful, although none has achieved the status of a Pollock or a Kline. A fair number of others have been able to show their work in good galleries and make a decent living. However, even today the realists are continually asked to prove their modernity. It is still more difficult for the realist to gain gallery representation in the large cities than it is for their non-realist colleagues. As Jed Perl has recognized, realism has not been, nor is it now, an "easy" art. When George Dugan made his commitment to realism — or representationalism as he prefers — early in the 1960s, it was a bold move indeed.

The term realism... is too utterly confusing. I'm critical partially because it has too many different historical associa-
tions — Courbet and angels, nineteenth century ideas of socialism, the social realism of the twenties and thirties . . . I don’t want to seem revivalistic. I would like my work to be thought of as new, because I’m new . . . This is 1983, and it’s a different world from Courbet’s. I’m not trying to represent things to cast out everything that’s been done in the twentieth century and go back. That kind of thing frightens me . . . with religious attitudes as well as aesthetic ones . . . Also, I think that realism is too often popularly associated with photographic likeness. That would be really misleading because my work has nothing to do with photography. I prefer the term illusionism or representationalism.

I gravitated to representationalism very early as probably most beginning art students do. But I did not take kindly to what seemed to me to be another dogma once again being shoved down my throat . . . that is, theories of abstract and modern art . . . My biggest criticism was not of the artists or their work, much of which I still have great admiration for, but of the art critics who were educating that the only valid, intelligent contemporary art necessarily excluded figurative elements . . . And I became perplexed as my ego was getting stronger that art historians could refer to Cezanne as “the father of the twentieth century,” or Picasso as “the master of the twentieth century,” when it was only 1960, and there were forty years to go; and I wasn’t dead yet, nor were a lot of others . . . So my move to representational art was a rebuttal of the wholesale advocacy of modernism and what it represented in art critical and art historical terms.

Dugan began his formal study of art when he was twenty years old. He now recalls this decision as “thoroughly existential” and the first occasion when he consciously began to assume responsibility in a positive sense for his own life. Dugan grew up in a fairly typical Irish Catholic middle-class household in Stamford, Connecticut. The youngest of six children, he remembers a home always filled with the love and warmth generated by family members and close friends as well as the additional “special” attention he received as the baby of the family. He attended parochial schools through junior high and entered Stamford’s public high school in his sophomore year. It was assumed that he would complete school, go on to college, establish himself in a suitable occupation, and settle down to a comfortable middle class existence. While he was still in adolescence, the support system which had nurtured his childhood and defined his expectations crumbled. Within the space of a few years Dugan’s father died, the last of his brothers and sisters left the household, and his mother’s full-time job necessitated a move from Stamford to nearby Darien, Connecticut, where he began his junior year. Now virtually on his own, Dugan began doing poorly academically in a school system that placed high emphasis on academic achievement. Following graduation in 1959, he wandered for two years. Finally rejecting the absolutes of Catholicism, he was drawn to the attitudes of existentialism as were many others of his generation. When he returned to Connecticut, he accepted employment in a company that offered on-the-job training in computers. Initially determined to succeed, he rapidly became disenchanted with his career choice and its attendant middle-class aspirations and enrolled in night classes at the Silvermine College of Art. Although Dugan’s move toward art was based on his perception of an artist’s lifestyle, “it didn’t take twenty minutes into the first class for me to realize that this decision had been the right one.” Silvermine provided Dugan with “an exhilarating sense of esprit de corps” with his fellow students and “fairly stringent Bauhaus training” from the faculty, most of whom were the students or assistants of Joseph Albers who was then at nearby Yale.

Upon completion of his program at Silvermine, Dugan began work as an illustrator for a Manhattan-based firm and, later, as a designer for the Famous Artists School in Connecticut. Having already made his commitment to realism, he was attracted to the University of Pennsylvania by the strong presence of Neil Welliver. In 1968 Dugan began working toward his MFA, while simultaneously completing the necessary requirements for a BFA. The following year he was awarded a teaching assistantship which he held for two years while painting under the tutelage of Welliver, whom Dugan recognizes as having been a major influence on his career, and with whom he still maintains contact. Hoxie Gorge, Cortland, 1977, is a kind of personal tribute to Neil Welliver painted the year the SUC-Cortland Art Gallery hosted a show of Welliver’s work.

Like Welliver, Dugan belongs with the more painterly of the New Realists. For many of these artists, the physicality of the paint and the personality of the brushstroke share an equal visual importance with accuracy of the reality portrayed. In Welliver’s paintings in particular — one might recall the large landscape, Big Flowage of 1979 — the gestural brushstroke, richly textured paint, and the vivid impact of color thrust attention forward through illusory space to the surface where a pictorial structure strongly formalist in reference creates an overwhelming sense of pure fluid abstraction. Dugan’s work indicates that he also has
great respect for the medium; he revels in its physical texture and fluid viscosity, as well as its descriptive capabilities and evocative potential. However, Dugan’s manipulation of pigment is restrained, less effusive and brushy than Welliver’s. He is not insistent on exploiting the medium for the purpose of displaying the exacting nature of his modernist integrity.

On the other hand, Dugan’s brushstroke and handling of paint are not as subservient to the demands of illusionism as Phillip Pearlstein’s Sharp-Focus realism that is characterized by an exact and smooth finish, or Jack Beal’s intense naturalism. This can be observed in the large landscape, *Slea Head* of 1977, painted entirely from studies carefully prepared on location in Ireland, where Dugan and his wife were living at the time.

Dingle Peninsula in County Kerry in southwest Ireland is a landmass reaching some thirty miles into the Atlantic Ocean. From Dingle, a little port and principal town on the peninsula, westward, the terrain becomes increasingly wild and bleak. It culminates dramatically in the savage promontory called Slea Head, where arable lands are so scarce that fields are planted on thinnest layers of soil all the way to the edge of the cliff. Beyond lie the Blasket Islands, the westernmost land masses in Europe. Tucked under the cliff’s edge at the very tip of Slea Head is an immaculate, handkerchief-sized beach called Coumeenoole. It was from the cliff’s edge at this spot that the painting developed.

Using four separate panels, Dugan allows large scale to convey the grandeur of the landscape and to accommodate the strong pervading sense of light and space. He allowed the basic organization of masses within the painting to remain as they had already been articulated by nature. The principal forms are held in rhythmic equilibrium by the undulating ground line which swings from left of bottom center to halfway up the right edge of the painting, answered by the almost imperceptible swell of the sea along the horizon.

There are ample quantities of observed detail. Grazing sheep, farm cottages, dry-stone walls separating tiny patches of cultivated land, sheer cliffs, fallen boulders, sandy beach, sliding surf, and islands, forlorn and lovely, are described through the rich medium in subdued painterly terms. The effects of capricious weather have also been carefully recorded. The moisture-laden atmosphere and
Kids Walking Over Art 1983
Oil on canvas 76 1/2 x 60
scattered, dense, moving clouds describe a climate where showers are frequent and not necessarily brief. The air is cool; the sun patches through warming the hill to the left; diffuse light refracting through tiny airborne particles of moisture creates a softly shimmering haze. The entire painting is redolent of the sensuous appreciation of matter, air, and light. Not only does it project a pleasure in the sensory world, it affirms a presence, a strong sense of place. However, nature is not presented as immutable fact but as process. The alternating swell and concavity of the ground surfaces, rugged folds, striated rock, and eroding cliffs describe a landscape shaped by the activity of ancient volcanoes, glacial fretting and smoothing, Atlantic gales, and the passage of time.

Human presence does not insinuate itself into this process; it is a fundamental and organic part of a landscape constantly in the process of redefining itself. There is strong evidence for this in the foreground of the painting. It is particularly significant since it is this part of the landscape which was contrived by the artist. In reality, the cliff’s edge overhangs the pathway and stone wall which descend to the beach and, therefore, was not visible to the artist from where he stood. He included these elements for both formal and informational reasons. The second wall in the immediate foreground is typical of the kind that had been constructed along the edge of the cliff itself. It is composed chiefly of rocks and some soil; vertical wooden posts were sunk into its center at regular intervals, around which wire fencing was wrapped to discourage cattle from clambering over and falling off the edge. Although it functions in the painting as a formal device, it no longer makes sense in the context of the landscape itself. It appears as broken, no longer functional, a shifting, eroding, resolving mass of rock, soil, timber, and vegetation. Dugan paints a similar image in prose:

It was a barn for so long — a dirty small cave. The shed was eventually being reclaimed back to the earth in an organic procedure. Stone three feet thick wavering and lopsided. Rebuilt wall sections done with optimism possibly for when the next generation inherited the farm, and then ideals of rebirth given up. Falling stones covered with mustard, umber, and white lichen. Hundreds of years of thatch rottting, grayed, leaking, and bird and mouse infested, growing tufts of weeds, contrasted with a new spot of rebuilt golden corn. Rust tin sheets leaning here and there. Random spots on the barn concreted, seemingly without purpose, but an attempt to try out the “new art.” Boarded doorways changed to windows and former windows to doorways. Enlarged, partitioned, then consolidated — indicating good and bad times. Testaments of generations decorating the interior with “the way things go.” Clay floor built up two feet thick with feed, straw and manure, webs, tins, and toes broken and outdated with the rotten leather straps hanging. “Save, it’ll come in handy.” A dirty, small, dark cave.

Dugan Bovine (Portfolio), 1982

Both of these images serve to intensify the idea of nature, or reality, as a continuum in which even birth and death, “the ideals of rebirth given up,” are themselves processes. As cliff crumbles to rocks which erode to sand that extends under water which melds into air, the eye is led easily to the translucent mother-of-pearl haze of thin pigment on the surface of the canvas that gently, yet effectively instructs that the image is first and last a painting, a work of art, itself both artifact and process.

I love painting. I am very much interested in the visual perception of things. And I am interested in communication. But it’s so important to see... It’s important to be able to see what you’re looking at; and it’s important to see what you’re creating, too. There have to be judgements made by the artist about his subject and about his work.

The work I do is representational... but rather than thinking of stayed images and time stopped, I’d rather be associated with formal compositional terms. This is not exact because the images created are, in the end, most important. The subject is selected, observed, and translated — three separate actions — not unlike a collage. A piece of form moving — re-examined — in constant change to the work progress. Three separate elements, the subject, the artist, the work — or the you, me, us — and again, the yin, the yang, and the Tao. A kind of Trinity. I see pieces as the separate parts and in synchronization — some pieces good, some bad, strong or weak — but all records of the truth. I also see the genuine creative act as an impulse of birth or death...

Dugan Bovine (Portfolio), 1982

Representationalism is important to Dugan because it stresses art’s reference to the world. It also strengthens and confirms his own relationship both to art and to reality. However, a painting is not, nor can it ever be, purely an objective record of visual fact. This is true for two reasons. First, while one can accept the idea that all things, including man, exist prior to and outside of man’s interpretable faculty, it is not possible to perceive reality without those
interpretations that sustain one’s sense of it. The real world is significative as well as concrete. Secondly, the translation of external reality to a flat surface involves the artist in a series of mediations that involve choices about color, light, line, form, and scale that can never be totally objective. These choices charge the painted image with a complexity that goes beyond verisimilitude. The painting becomes a separate reality, prompting a response to the subject and to the work itself.

Dugan is well aware of the communicative power of images.

I am interested in communication and connotation. I represent things because they assist in this process.

He believes that the subject "charges" the artist's perception, "energizing both intellect and spirit." Dugan frequently makes notes to himself when he draws. Besides objective data such as place, time of day, color, etc., he annotates the drawing with associative impressions, clearly indicating that meaning goes beyond visible fact. However, he is not interested in elaborate statements. He does not engage in theatrical attempts to convey a sense of the profound; nor does he inflate his images with what Donald Kuspit calls "a sense of hype" so that they appear unquestionably meaningful. Rather, he relies primarily on the image's presence to convey meaning through the human system of referential signification.

A case in point is the large diptych, Fish/Fresh Fish of 1983. Both panels are similar in format. They each depict the image of a single fish against a flat ground in the upper half of the canvas. Underneath each, in the lower half, are the painted words "FISH" on one panel, "FRESH FISH" on the other. While the pictorial elements of the diptych are simple, the painting itself is subtly complex. Yet with only this fragment of information one begins to see a number of relationships appearing based on one's perception — or concept — of the subject as "fish" and the subject as painting. When one refers to the actual artwork, the number and nature of possible relationships seem endless. There is no resolution, no final definition, only a series of possible mediations existing together at once. The diptych format enhances this idea. The panels do not fuse into a coherent whole: neither are they entirely separate, but they exist together in a harmony of dynamic tension.

Occasionally Dugan uses this format on a single canvas, for example, First Man/Last Man (Self Portrait), 1983, and My Sister's Pool, 1983, which he views as "possibly two separate paintings." In fact much of his work falls into groups which consist of a number of unique images standing in non-sequential relation to one another, which are related thematically. These images do not represent a single idea reworked, but perception expanded. In this light, it is interesting that Dugan has depicted himself in a series of three small paintings as Billy Pilgrim, the goofy, time-tripping hero in Kurt Vonnegut's novel, Slaughterhouse-Five itself several stories in one. Billy travels back and forth in time paying random visits to specific moments in his life that, when seen all at once, produce "an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep." (K.V.)
Dugan never allows his subject to dominate matters of form and means. Neither do formal artistic conventions create an image that is detached and mechanical. He is vitally concerned with the process of negotiations that go on involving the relationships between what he sees and how he, as an artist, chooses to paint it. Therefore, those little painted marks, the subtle distinctions between what goes on the canvas and what stays on the outside, taken together form an on-the-spot document of the artistic process. As a result Dugan’s images all appear fresh and hand-made, avoiding the neat, clean, sterile look typical of much of the American New Realism. Even the smoother surfaced Children Walking on Art, 1983, and Jack on Ice, 1983, and the painted sign “FISH” in Fish/Fresh Fish, 1983, appear consummately crafted rather than mechanically reproduced.

When viewing Dugan’s work in chronological sequence — one might compare Sea Head of 1977, with Fish/Fresh Fish, 1983 — it becomes apparent that there has been a shift in emphasis.

There was a time when I was interested in naturalism, but I’m not any more. What this means is that I was faithful to my observed perceptions as best I could be... I was interested in subtler and subtler nuances, but things started breaking down. I’ve some little pastels that I did in Ireland, and to me they’re monuments; they’re real big paintings. It was just that they had to be small because that was all that I could do. I know that if I continued along that line, they probably would
Fish 1983
Oil on canvas 62 x 48
have gotten smaller and smaller until I couldn’t make an image any more. It was all terribly too hard. If it’s too hard and it doesn’t get done, then what good is it? So now I’m consciously avoiding naturalism. I’m feeling confidence as an artist in my interpretable rights. I’m trying to stimulate a sense of joy... a little fun. I’m thinking about content, and hoping that having served a twenty-year apprenticeship to formalist concerns, these matters will take care of themselves.

The individual motifs in *Children Walking* and *Jack on Ice*, both 1983, have been rendered from life, but their relationships within the paintings have been intellectually contrived. They are essentially still life images, in which discrete objects have been selected and arranged by the artist. The viewer’s recognition of them as such is important. Dugan, like most of the contemporary realists, embraces artistic tradition with an openness that would have been unthinkable thirty years ago. He relies on the viewer’s knowledge of past styles and iconographic systems within the still life genre to make these images work. An awareness
of traditional still lifes' sensuous appreciation of objects, the
deer's eye or oblique views of the Post-Impressionists,
Picasso's and the Dada-ists' collage, and the paintings of the
Pop artists prepare the viewer to accept comfortably these
images as paintings and ideographs to be embraced visually
and conceptually.

Dugan's shift away from naturalism as he describes it
ultimately has to do with his philosophical rejection of
absolutes in favor of the dynamic.

When one works naturalistically, it is not only important to
be able to see, but to see fast, because it's all fleeting.
Everything is fleeting.

He has described his frustrations in his attempts to make
detailed and accurate records of single moments in the
natural, or real, world which exists in a state of constant
change. One suspects that he recognizes that such attempts
are not only impossible but logically inconsequent.
However marvellous a single moment might be, it is never
enough. While Slea Head provides one solution to these
problems in the landscape genre, painting such as Jack on
Ice or Children Walking are less restrictive because they
have been freed from the superimposed structure of the
natural world and its attendant notions of linear time: past,
present, and future. These paintings re-enforce the
significance of visual experience through the carefully
observed and accurately rendered motifs whose inter-
relationships give rise to a series of simultaneously
presented cognitive moments. In such images Dugan is able
to describe the nature of the perceptive process itself.

Besides working as a professional artist, George Dugan is
an associate professor of art at the State University College at
Cortland, New York, where he has taught drawing and
painting for the past twelve years. He admits that teaching is
a very important part of his life. Asked if he ever felt any
conflict in his role as a teacher and his role as an artist,
he responded:

Frank O'Hara, the poet, has said that artists think in words
and poets think in images. But one might suppose that if you
gain a word you may lose an image. I've had a pretty strong
conviction that that's a possibility... that a word is an image.
There is nothing more exciting than a gut-level need —
almost a primal need — to get it out visually. Teaching has
cultivated me verbally; and I wonder how many pictures I
might have lost in the process. I also think, sometimes, that
I've painted my better pictures while teaching. I think a great
deal about that one.

Dugan lives in Fairfield, Connecticut with his wife Nina
who is also an artist. Unlike many of his colleagues, he has
avoided living in the large cities, particularly New York, find-
ing the less confined communities of rural Cortland and
suburban Fairfield more congenial to this personality and
his work. For most of his career he has chosen to remain
free from the pressures of New York galleries, which he feels
limit the artist in their demands for images which are
demonstrably marketable. In an age of professional
specialization he has opted for versatility. In addition to
drawing and painting, he sculpts, writes, and has a strong
interest in theater. Although occasionally criticized for his
apparent lack of focus, Dugan has consciously avoided
association with mainstream styles and descriptive labels
which would impose too narrow a definition on his work.
Instead, he identifies himself with what he and his wife
humorously refer to as "The Cake and Eat It Too School."

The refusal of Dugan's art to be easily pigeonholed into
pre-existing schools or categories is one of its chief
characteristics. Yet it cannot be considered iconoclastic or
simply provincial. Although Dugan doesn't avoid intellec-
tual questions about the nature of visual reality and its rela-
tion to art, his work is not issue-oriented. It conveys instead
his strong personal affection both for his subject and for his
medium. Democratic and easily accessible, his images
speak in contemporary terms of a world close to home, a
world in which human presence and the variety of human
experience are everywhere implied.

George Dugan paints images: the illusions of recogniz-
able things from the real world, the world of our experience
— seaside cliffs, swimming pools, cattle, peppers, and
people. Yet there is no doubt that George Dugan's chief
interest is in the making of art.

Nancy Steele Hamme
1984
Dasher Cox's Pub  1981
Ink on paper  22 x 30

Bovine: Calf  1981
Ink on paper  22 x 30
Painting the Hull  1980
Ink on paper  15 x 22

The following are offered as suggestions for further reading:

*Art In America* (September 1981) Special Issue: *Realism* includes articles by Linda Nochlin, Donald Kuspit, Lawerence Alloway, Gerrit Henry, and others.


Lady In Black  1974
Oil on canvas  70 x 70
My Sister’s Pool  1983
Oil on canvas  70 x 70
BIOGRAPHY

Born: December 19, 1941, Stamford, Connecticut

EDUCATION
University of Pennsylvania, M.F.A., 1971
University of Pennsylvania, B.F.A., 1970
School of Visual Arts, New York, 1964
Silvermine College of Art, A.F.A., 1964

ONE-MAN EXHIBITIONS
1983, 82, 81 Field Gallery, Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts
1983 Betty Tarnoff Gallery, Norwalk, Connecticut
1981, 78, 71 State University of New York College at Cortland
1981 Hanover Gallery, Syracuse, New York
1981 New York State Arts Council, Cortland, New York
1974 Prince Street Gallery, New York City
1973 Johnson State College, Johnson, Vermont
1973 Silvermine Guild of Artists, New Canaan, Connecticut
1972 Wells College, Aurora, New York

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS
1983 Painted Light, Artist Choice Museum, New York City
1980 Gaelicth Annual Exhibition, sponsored by Irish Arts Council, National Gallery, Dublin, Ireland
1976 County Kerry Artists, sponsored by Irish Arts Council, National Gallery, Dublin, Ireland
1974 Figure Painting in America, Westminster College, traveling show including work by Philip Pearlstein, William Bailey, Alfred Leslie, Jack Beal, Neil Welliver
1972 Regional Artists of Central New York, Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Utica, New York
1971 Graduate Thesis Exhibition, Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Geraldine of Cooleen (The Dancer) 1980
Pencil on paper 21 x 15
Nina 1979
Pencil on paper 22 x 30