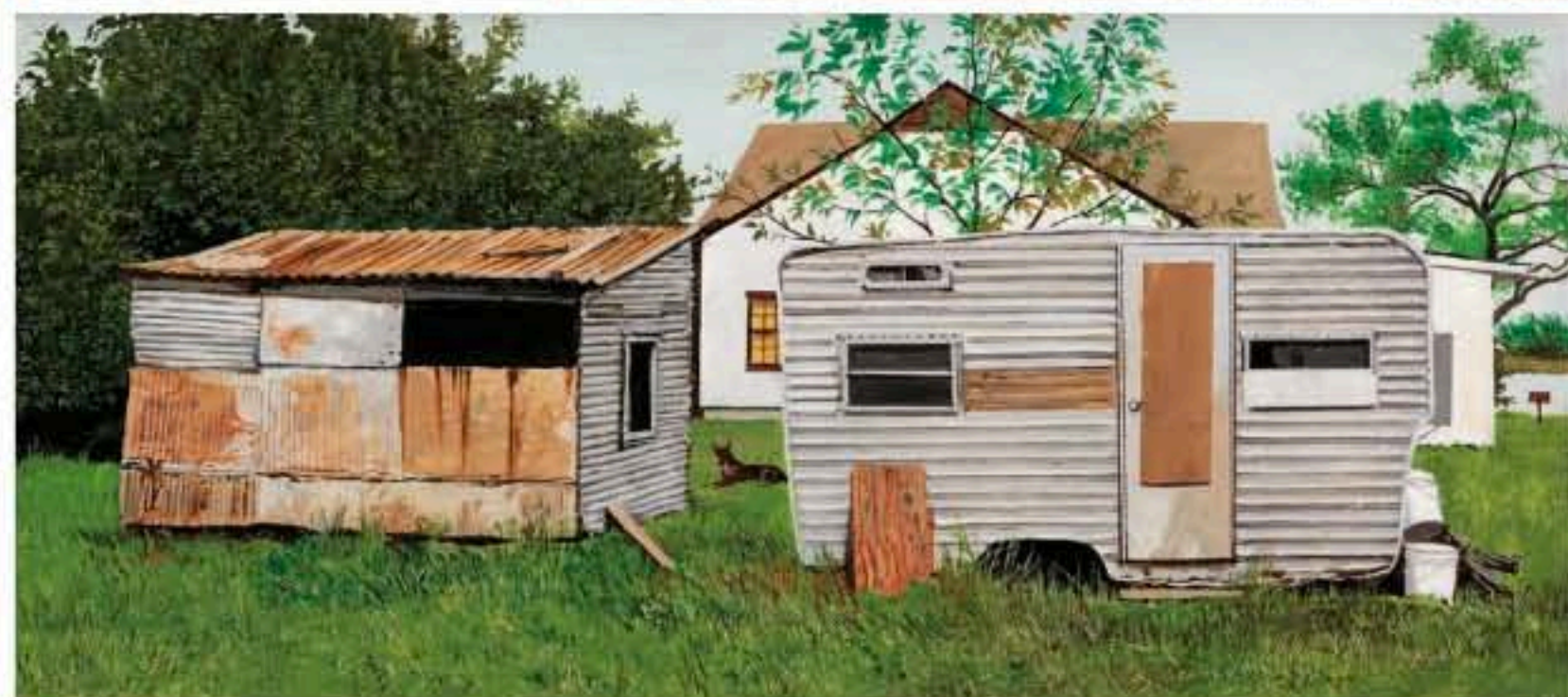


SURREALITY CHECK From top: *Wishful Thinking*, oil on canvas, 60" x 90," 2009; *Off the Grid*, oil on board, 12" x 24," 2009.



Canvasing the 'Hood

A solo exhibit of Daniel Blagg's gritty landscapes depicts the decrepit, the everyday and his take on the American experience | *By Steve Carter* |

Decaying, once-garish signage from Las Vegas' glorious yesteryears, choking the desert floor of Sin City's boneyard; nature's inevitable encroachment on the crumbling remains of a drive-in theater marquee and screen; the uneasy exterior visage of a home at night, overgrown foliage crowning a trio of empty question marking windows—all are components of Daniel Blagg's vision, haunting denizens of his studio/gallery in downtown Fort Worth. Blagg, 58, is a loquacious, gregarious raconteur and host, as colorful as his canvases themselves, although his personality seems antithetical to them. "I think all these things I do are just about me," he philosophizes. "That's one of the things I liked about Georgia O'Keeffe, when she said, 'Everything is a self-portrait....' I want to paint about my

life, my experience of the world, my take on it. That's really all I'm doing. These are self-portraits, they're about me and my reactions. This one, *Irrational Exuberance*, is a reaction to last year's news, and *China Girl* here, is a reaction to being on guard duty in Saigon." Although his work has occasionally drawn comparisons to photorealists like Richard Estes, Blagg's are more painterly, more visceral. His true forebears might well be Edward Hopper's psychological quietudes, the yearning Americana of Aaron Copland's sonorities, and the metaphysical poetry of William Blake, whose familiar "To see a World in a Grain of Sand/And a Heaven in a Wild Flower..." seems to speak to the artist's dignification of the quotidian.

Born in Oklahoma, Daniel Blagg hails **CONTINUED...**



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1. *Neighbors*, oil on canvas 36" x 50," 2009.
2. Daniel Blagg in his studio, working on *China Doll*.
3. *Irrational Exuberance*, oil on canvas, 58" x by 80," 2009.



...CONTINUED from a large family; several of his siblings are practicing artists or at least artistically gifted. His identical twin brother, Dennis, is also a realist painter whose Southwestern and Big Bend landscapes are astonishing. The Blaggs' father worked nights in the oil fields, so mom encouraged the 10 kids to draw quietly at the kitchen table while dad slept during the day. Daniel recalls long hours spent copying from books on Leonardo and Michelangelo as "like tutoring from two great masters." He never consciously decided to be an artist, adding, "It's what I was; it's what I've always been—from the age of six, it's what I identified with, and it's how people identified me." The family migrated to the DFW area during the Kennedy years; then in 1970 the twins were drafted, with Daniel serving as a military artist in Vietnam and Dennis similarly in Korea. On his return, Daniel pursued art at UTA, but never finished his degree. Influenced by Rauschenberg and Johns, he experimented with abstract works in college, but dismisses the results as "dancing for professors." He maintains that realism isn't dead, despite reports of its passing that first sounded back in

the '60s. "Everything's been done to death in some way, fashion or form," he observes. "I prefer the challenge of something they say is dead, and making it interesting and alive and my own."

Daniel and Dennis founded Fort Worth's Artspace 111 in 1980, and have since added a select roster of artists. Daniel's current *Thrashing About* exhibition is only the second solo show he's had in the history of the space. "Over the years I've been fortunate enough to have people come in off the street and buy my paintings," he acknowledges, "so I couldn't ever get a bunch of paintings together." Most of the 20 or so recent works involved are oils, along with a few watercolors.

One highlight of the show is *Irrational Exuberance*, a large canvas whose title is borrowed from a now-quaint Alan Greenspan coinage. In it, Blagg turns his rueful gaze on the country's ongoing economic crisis in a subtle commentary of razorblade concision. The painting's ironic focal image is of a castoff "Golden Nugget" sign from Las Vegas, its twinkling lights long since burned out. A deadly coral snake slithers toward its promise of big payoffs, while a nearby sign reading "0" and "9" marks the year. Another sign, this one of a smiling laundered shirt, suggests losing one's shirt, or being taken to the cleaners. "It's so us, it's so American, that waste of America, and capitalism and ill-gotten gains," Blagg enthuses with a laugh. "And in this consumer society we just run through stuff, and there's something desperate in that mindset. I think in that desperation there's a truth about ourselves... Are we creating something that's going to make us extinct? Is this overkill? What are we doing with what we have, and where is it going? There's something revealing in that limbo...it really says something about us." ■

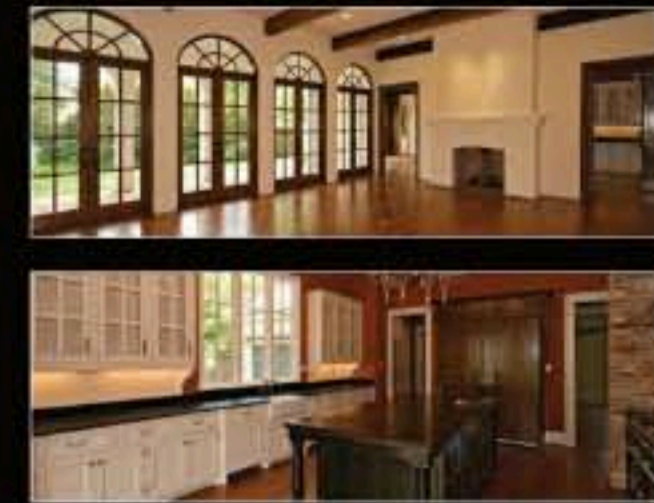
View the exhibit Sept. 12-Oct. 14 at Artspace 111, 111 Hampton St., Fort Worth. 817.692.3228 or artspace111.com.

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