

“Just Dandy” : Review of *I’ve Seen the Future, and I’m Not Going: The Art Scene and Downtown New York in the 1980s*, by Peter McGough (Pantheon Books; 2019; 287 pages; \$29.95)

Review by Michael Quinn (published by Drizzle Review, August 2020)

Peter McGough and his partner (in business and romance) David McDermott rose to prominence in the 1980s New York art scene. Their paintings have a vintage feel with a contemporary twist (a still life of flowers has the blossoms arranged into the shape of a dollar sign). Their later photography has a much more mysterious feeling, truer to whatever periods they were aping. Mentored by Julian Schnabel, their work appeared in three Whitney Biennials and graced a 1986 cover of *Artforum*.

Their work is significant because they made it following the rules of their “nineteenth-century ‘time experiment,’” McGough explains in his fascinating memoir, *I’ve Seen the Future, and I’m Not Going: The Art Scene and Downtown New York in the 1980s*. Eschewing electricity, they worked by candlelight. They donned linen smocks while painting and headed to their openings in high-button shoes. The book—an account of McGough’s youth, his meeting McDermott, and their creative partnership—is a kind of fairy tale of living self-determined lives in a self-created world.

Neighborhood drug dealers adopt them as a mascot, which allows them to move through the East Village streets unmolested. Living upstate for a spell, they come up against the sharp edges of the outside world. McGough writes, “We had learned to walk the backstreets because, on the main street, we were ducking rocks thrown at us from mocking children.”

The book opens in 1998. After losing almost everything to the IRS for tax evasion, McDermott has sailed for Ireland. At the same time, McGough, nearly forty and suffering from AIDS, picks up the pieces, living alone in a ratty apartment near Times Square. Yet even at his lowest, a romance permeates his worldview. Propped up on a feather mattress, he looks out the window and admires a jeweler in the nearby diamond district illuminated in his room by the blue flame with which he works.

McGough’s 1960s suburban childhood in upstate New York seems an unlikely source of this romantic purview. One of seven children, he was “a shy child, with a fear of strangers and unfamiliar places,” raised to believe “Everyone was equal in God’s eyes...Except for one group, the homosexuals,” whom his mother explains are “a sad and lonely people who don’t know if they’re a man or a woman.”

A burst appendix puts teenage McGough in the hospital for six months, but rather than develop his craft *à la* Frida Kahlo, he watches TV, deepening his obsession with actresses like Marilyn Monroe. Back on his feet, he cruises the local gay bar, gets picked up by an older man, and loses his virginity at the YMCA.

For college, McGough heads to New York’s Fashion Institute of Technology. His mother sewed “a cloth pouch for me to keep my money in and had me safety-pin it to my underpants.” The City

in the 70s is full of garbage and “collapsing piers where men went to have sex or sunbathe nude.” Most important for McGough are the “characters, from the old cocktail queens to leatherman to bohemian artistic types from the past.”

McGough hangs out with friends at the Chelsea Hotel, Studio 54, and Danceteria. He drops out of school, gets occasional work doing fashion sketches, and moves a lot since most of his apartments get robbed. Somehow, he still finds time to work on his art. He writes, “I thought that if I could just make paintings, someone would see them, show them, sell them, and it would be easy, just like that. I later found that was not the case.”

After passing out in the gutter one night, McGough is taken home by a stranger and raped, an incident McGough plays for laughs. Although he acknowledges it as a low point, he shows no compassion towards his younger self.

McDermott is first glimpsed in a friend’s apartment as a framed photograph “staring out at me with pomaded hair parted down the middle.” Warned that McDermott is “crazy,” McGough is charmed by his charisma when they meet. McDermott, who found acceptance in the burgeoning punk scene whose music he hated, “wanted me to understand how serious he was in his conviction of stopping time and living in ‘another dimension.’ The modern world held no interest for him. It bored him, and he found it cheap and vulgar.” Just as a vampire needs to sleep in a coffin in a bed of dirt from his burial plot, McDermott couldn’t live anywhere unless he ripped out the wiring and plastered over the fuse box.

Their creative partnership begins when McDermott suggests they collaborate on an abstract painting for his mother’s house in New Jersey. They sign the painting with both of their signatures next to an older date (a practice they’d continue), both “to save it from obscurity” and to connect it to “other planets in different portholes”; McDermott believed in alternate realities, and that every year had its corresponding planet.

The men have an open relationship, and a love triangle later upends the partnership. McDermott, prone to emotional rages, had “slashed and kicked in paintings, thrown chairs into mirrors, and overturned fully set tables.” His temper is an invisible fence that keeps McGough corralled and perhaps keeps a lid on what McGough is willing to disclose even now. He notes, “I wrote this memoir as I remembered this time in my life. I never kept a journal, and there may be parts others will remember differently.” McDermott’s interest in the book is a topic not broached.

Considering their partnership has defined all of their work, it seems strange that only one accounts for their shared lives. When McGough tries to speak for both of them, it feels forced, like an awkward artist statement: “We felt that our paintings expressed our theories on time, homoeroticism, and history while the new photographs were a record of our lives.”

While McGough visits McDermott in his new home in Ireland, no picture of life on that side of the pond emerges. Without McDermott’s influence, McGough obtains a fridge, a computer, social media: a life like many others. More comfortable, maybe, but indeed less extraordinary.

This pressure to conform is virulent in the 21st Century, where the Internet acts like a light on overhead all the time, the better for sweeping all the romance out of the corners of the room. Surely no one misses “streets filthy with garbage; men...passed out lying on the sidewalks...human feces everywhere and many rats scurrying about the decrepit buildings.” But with that squalor came a possibility: the ability to live differently from the prevailing norm that is increasingly squashed down on us and self-reinforced by plugging into our devices to be brain-washed. McGough recalls McDermott saying, ““The modern world wants more and more and newer and newer. And they can’t even deal with what they have!””

McDermott, absent and everywhere in the book simultaneously, emerges as a visionary. McGough gives form to those ideas, writing, “For him, everything modern was disposable. His past was about permanence.”