



Structure of the Old Wharf, 2007, oil on archival board

Daud Akhriev

The spirit of the place

SCOTT SELL

I snuck into Daud Akhriev's studio early one morning before anyone woke, to figure out what it is that is so compelling about his paintings. I stood before a spread of canvases that included stark portraits, Florentine rooftops and the harbor of Frenchboro and decided what was most remarkable was his ability to transform something enduring into something brand new, as if you're seeing it for the first time. His sense of the past—and from what I gather, parts of his own past—is apparent, and is woven together with the form and light and color from an artist who could only have been painting in the 21st century. But I also realized it's the man, not just his academic training or his worldviews, that shape each painting. When Daud speaks of beauty that only he has seen, you are there with him and that beauty is shared. And on Frenchboro, he has found a place that has inspired him, and in turn, anyone who stands before his canvases.

It's fairly easy to find Daud when he's on the island: simply look for the only person who is standing still. On typical summer workdays, while everyone else on Frenchboro is moving from one chore to the other, Daud is at the head



of the harbor or among stacks of traps on the wharves, working with plenty around him to feed his imagination. Daud and his family have been coming to the island during the summer months since 1993. His wife, Melissa Hefferlin, and his son, Timur, are also trained and talented painters, and in the two months they stay, they are constantly amazed at how productive they can be, how the place informs some of their finest work.

“There’s something very mystic, shimmering about a place like Frenchboro,” Daud says. “Every time I’m there, I’m that much closer to my thoughts.”

After almost two decades of painting on Frenchboro, Daud has adopted an intensive process, completing what he can *en plein air* in oil and then, using photographs and pastel and pencil studies, he returns to his home and studio in Chattanooga to continue working on his original ideas. Although he often wishes he could complete entire paintings on the island, he’s confident in his

memory of those hours at work and his ability to create a plan for himself once in the studio.

Once he’s there, Daud analyzes how it needs to be, how he remembers it best. *After the Rain*, for example, is presented as if from a recurring dream, as if the translucence of the water and the stones beneath it were all that filled his mind. The rendering of this piece, with its attention to distance and scale, offers us a profound sense of placement and movement within the island environment. In this way, Daud likes to start something that resounds with him and return to it again and again: the playfulness of the light on the Gooseberry Point rocks, the curious eyes of Frenchboro children standing on the wharves, the way the boats sit on the water. In others, such as *Frenchboro Harbor*, there is a learned and deliberate approach to his landscapes, a deep connection to the natural world and his willingness to work patiently within it. In these paintings, there is a sense of union between

the water and the sky and everything that exists in between that makes the island as sublime as Daud knows it to be. He continually reminds himself that nothing is for free in nature.

“You have to work for it,” he says. “You spend a cloudy day painting and the sun suddenly hits a few spots on the water and a breeze comes along and everything changes. I like that challenge—to be as connected to nature as possible, to let it help push me to try new things.”

Daud speaks of these challenges with joy. For him, the one “moment” where everything fits together like puzzle pieces is the very reason he paints. This is the moment when he forgets everything he knows and was taught and works purely from instinct, from what he has in front of him: the temperatures of the colors, the cool colors of the fog and water and the brightness of the sky.

“You’re like a thermometer,” he says excitedly. “You change the temperature according to what you see. It’s not the



Danny, 2007-2008, oil on linen



Mainer, 2007, oil on linen



Harbor Sunset, 2005-2009, oil on linen



Melissa Writing Letters, 2005, pastel on paper

brightness that's incredible, it's the combination of colors and how the neutral colors bring out the more unusually bright ones. That's what nature does. And it gives you what you need and the effect you want is there all of a sudden."

I first met Daud and his family at the end of a summer on Frenchboro. A dinner party was being held out on the point, and we sat next to the fire, watching a sunset that was, for lack of a better word, unreal. It sunk slowly behind Swan's Island and Daud and Timur gasped, shook their heads in disbelief and made notes on what they liked best about the way the sun and the sky looked as it changed ever so slightly. "This is the time of day that is so exciting to paint," Daud said, turning to me and grinning. "I like to try to catch the light as it's going away. And it goes away so slowly here."

What struck me right away about Daud was his boundless enthusiasm. No artist I have ever encountered has spoken with such honesty and certainty about what it is that motivates him. It

is his almost childlike joy and giddiness about each facet of the natural and social world he experiences that becomes so evident in his work. His eyes flicker at the mention of something comical or exciting or profound. He is a man who talks quickly with his hands, as well as his mouth, and his tight smile is something that seems to never go away. And it is his voice that demands attention, a purposeful and heavy Russian accent that strangely never feels out of place in Maine.

Before he emigrated to America, Daud grew up in the former Soviet Union, his roots going back to Ingushetia, a region in the Northern Caucasus. Being born in exile in the village of Pavlodar, and growing up in the city of Vladikavkaz, Daud knew his opportunities would be limited. His own parents, military officials and architects, were forced to become laborers. But his family and friends recognized his talent early on and urged him to pursue his education in visual arts. Despite it all, he was able to study classical painting

and drawing for 14 years. "They didn't baby me much at the academy," he says. "My teachers would help me develop, but never through praise, mostly critiquing." Under the tutelage of Andrei Mylnikov and the late Piotr Fomin, this method of teaching only reinforced Daud's skill, and he became a steady and serious worker.

Several of Daud's paintings maintain a strong semblance to his homeland, images rooted deeply in the Russian classical tradition. *After the Party*, an ethereal scene seemingly out of a myth, depicts a group of women strolling down a hillside, a brilliant sky spreading behind them. This may very well be Daud's homage—one of many—to the female form and to women themselves. And to Daud's women as well. Included in the painting are his friends and family: his longtime model, Kate, several acquaintances, and Melissa, who has been his primary source of inspiration for close to 20 years now, appearing in countless paintings and always by his side.



Melissa With Quilts, 2005, pastel on paper

The two met at a party in 1991, when they were both attending the Repin Institute of Art in St. Petersburg, Russia. Melissa liked Daud right away and, in him, she found the artwork that spoke volumes to her. “We went into his studio and I immediately loved what he was doing,” Melissa says. “It was the kind of stuff that I had gone to school to learn how to do. They had spirit and purpose, not just aimless representations of things from life. I understood his life looking at those few paintings.”

The following spring, when Daud received his degree—with honors—the two left Russia together. Daud received a visa and they moved to the United States, intending to go to California so Melissa could finish her schooling. But instead, they stayed in her home state where she received her degree from The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and created a home and studio next door to her childhood home. After establishing themselves in Chattanooga, Daud and Melissa began traveling extensively, teaching painting and art

history, and exhibiting their work internationally. Most recently, Daud won an award of excellence from Oil Painters of America. This is something that he often keeps to himself because, in keeping with his better qualities, he maintains an extraordinary humbleness.

One could comment on Daud’s late arrival to Frenchboro, that his roots are not deeply planted in Maine, or that he is merely a summer person who paints. But simply put: he does Frenchboro justice and communicates something very special about it. His commitment to accuracy and revealing the spirit of the place is clear, particularly in *Structure of the Old Wharf*. Here, we are able to see the geometry of the island wharves as they once stood and what they have become, a simple examination of time and what nature and man have both been able to do within it. This acts as a microcosm of the island itself, showing its elemental beauty not only through his choice of colors or composition, but his intense study of Frenchboro as a place in time: how it has seen count-

less changes while retaining the qualities of over 200 years ago, when the first houses were built on the hills on either side of Lunt Harbor. Indeed, it was the history of the islands, as well as their splendor, that pulled he and his family in right away.

“The northeast, and Maine in particular, has always been mysterious and ancient to me,” Daud says, “and in some way, it has always been connected to the Wyeth family, because of their images of traditional art. Along with the Italian and French masters, Andrew Wyeth has had a big influence on our family. We owe a lot to him and the guys who worked in the field of realism. I talked to my friends from Russia and passed on the news about Andrew’s death and they said, ‘Tonight, we will have a toast to the Wyeth family.’”

Like the Wyeths, the thing that is most striking about Daud’s landscapes are their ability to present a complex idea about Maine and its coast: its wildness and isolation, but also its familiarity and captivating grandeur. They also



Mist, 2005, oil on linen



After the Rain, 2008, oil on linen



Clearing, 2007, oil on linen



Frenchboro Harbor, 2006, oil on cradled clay board



Resting Boats, 2005, pastel



After the Party, 2005, oil on linen

speak to the inhabitants of the coast, often depicting their presence subtly: a buoy, a skiff, a lobster crate. Years ago, Daud painted a collection called *Weathered People* which dealt with the fishermen and mountaineers of Northern Russia, those who worked off the land. Much of the material he drew from what he saw and, of course, his own imagination. But on Frenchboro, he has had the good fortune to get to know the people he is painting and understand the intricacies of their lives and their home that much better.

“These guys humble me,” he says. “They’re up in the middle of the night and going out in terrible weather to fish for hours and then they come in and help fix a boat or the wharves or build new traps. How can you not respect someone like that?”

“Harbor Sunset,” as well as others, speaks of the admiration Daud has for the people making a living on Frenchboro. Here, the harbor lies behind the Sawyer’s house, the sky above drawing more from the Impressionist tradition, the clouds swirling in a way that brings Alfred Sisley to mind. The shore in the foreground is covered with rope and buoys and the essential trappings for lobster fishing. Seeming to be debris at first glance, everything here has its place on the island, as Daud realizes each time he paints within Frenchboro’s daily goings-on.

“I actually like when you get on the wharf to paint and everything is sort of messed up,” he says. “The guys come ashore after being out and they take gear off their boats and drop it anywhere, but they know exactly where everything is!



Joe Thomas

Daud Akhriev

I was painting near the town wharf once and finished up for the day and came back to the same spot in the morning and Nate [Lunt] said, ‘Oh, jeez, I’m sorry. We thought you had finished and we moved stuff in your way.’ And I said, ‘You live your life the way you live it. If you move something, I’ll move it in the painting. I want to do exactly what you do.’ Everyone is always looking out for us, which makes us feel very welcome. It’s wonderful to be working in a place like that.”

Every year, a few days before leaving the island, Daud laments about what he wasn’t able to accomplish, but excitedly thinks about a plan for the following summer, thinking about the light and the people and the hold Frenchboro has on him. This is what feeds Daud Akhriev: noticing with eyes that see possibility in everything, documenting a world he feels nothing short of appreciative to be a part of. And after all of these years of noticing and appreciating and creating on the island, Daud’s favorite thing is the fog. One only needs to go as far as *Mist* to notice the delight he takes in rendering a scene that is shrouded in fog.

“In the fog, it’s not like a chocolate cake, not one large mass,” he says. “It’s more like salt and pepper and bread. The water is moving, the fog is moving, there’s plain, weathered buildings and there’s bright colors from the oil clothes and buoys. And there’s silver everywhere. What I like best is that the island is what it is.”

2009