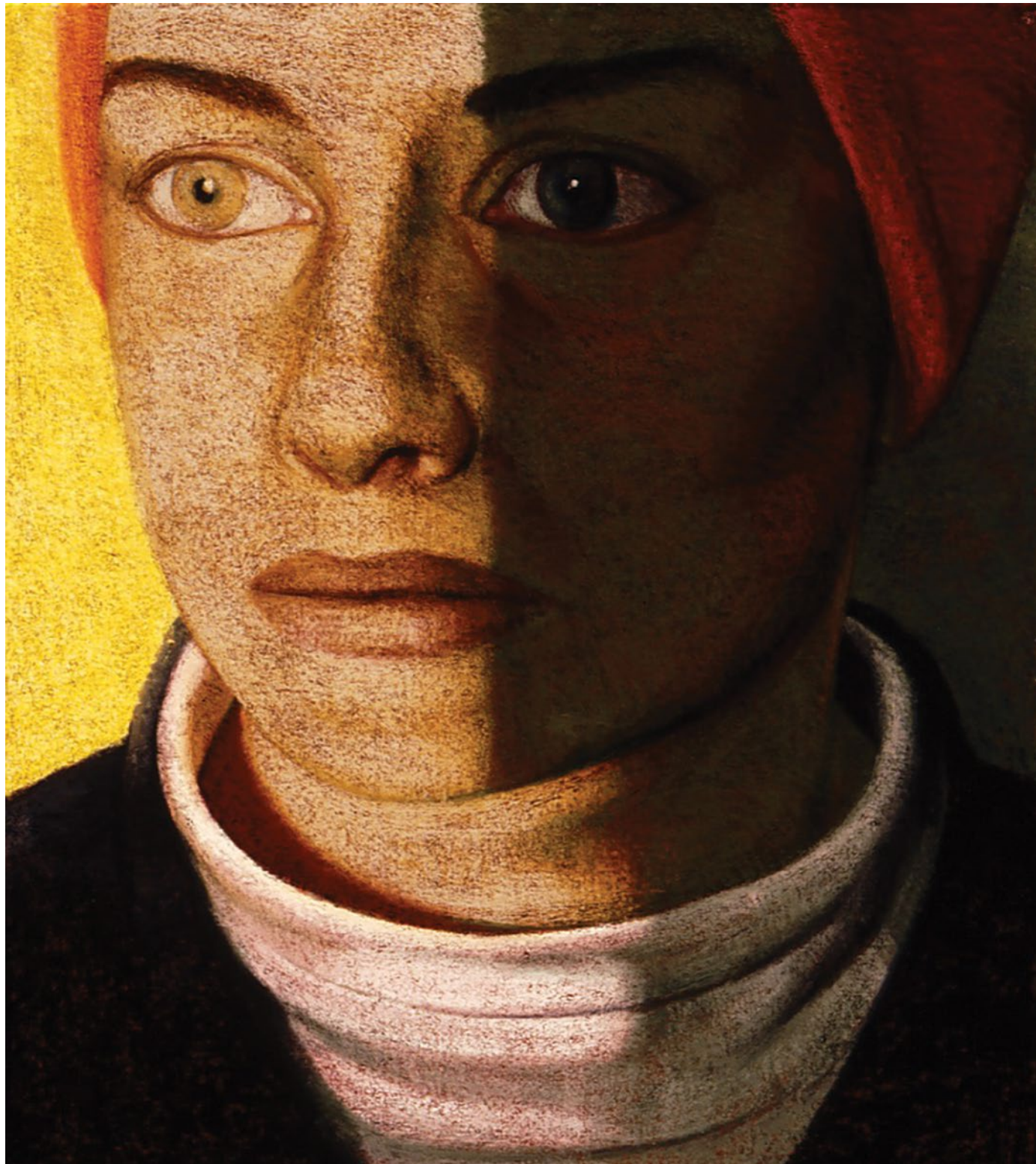


SUSAN MOORE

Mannequin, 1991
Oil and Paint Stick on Paper, 80 x 70 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

DAVID DENNY

Leaf, Flower, Boll

On a hot July afternoon, I slip into the air-conditioned classic movie theater. The orchestra seats are packed, but up in the balcony there are only a few others besides me, and we are spread out, each in his own little zone of popcorn and soda and Good & Plenty.

The movie is a depression-era drama, set on a dilapidated farm in the Deep South. A widowed sister has come to live with her brother and his wife, who are struggling to bring the cotton in on time. In the opening scene, as the sister steps off the train clutching her carpetbag, a hailstorm sweeps through, damaging the crops and prompting the locals to wonder aloud if the sister has perhaps cast some sort of curse upon their little town.

The sultry heat that follows the hail makes it impossible to work through the afternoon hours. The husband rises well before dawn and works hard through the morning. His wife and sister shoulder all the house and barn chores. It's an impossible life, but life nevertheless. To top it off, the locusts are coming—a plague-sized brood sweeping down from the north.

There resides an unspoken tension between the sister and her brother, but the nature of the problem is never made clear. The brother has made room for the sister in his home but not in his heart. The wife makes subtle attempts at diplomacy, but neither the sister nor the brother seems interested in airing the problem, much less working toward a resolution. They labor in stoical silence.

I drift off to sleep, chin on chest. The movie becomes my dream. With the locust cloud on the distant horizon, the sister lugs an ax from barn to house. She goes inside. The dream camera never enters the house. It is fixed, for the moment, on a long tripod shot with the house on the left and the barn on the right. The large, dusty expanse between the buildings fills most of the frame, with that ominous cloud of insects occupying a gradually darkening piece of the sky.

After a long silence, noises can be heard from within, but they are indistinct, no more significant than those coming from the barn ... horses shuffling, pigs snorting (or is that me snoring?), a muffled cry, a sudden rooster. Here and there a small twister of dust picks up and settles down.

The musical soundtrack is a moody, roots-style slide guitar and mouth harp—not at all the traditional

orchestral score of the actual movie. It suits the grainy cinematography of my dream. The camera is stationary. The long silences and the small changes that gradually fill the frame are totally engrossing. Every element of the composition—the sinewy house and barn; the dusty, yawning expanse of the cotton field; the darkening sky—speaks with a spare elegance. Of what does it speak? Poverty of spirit. The husk of dignity upheld under enormous pressure. Perseverance tinged with despair. A looming sense of menace that underlies the mundane action. An artful plot of yearning or revenge, or both.

The sister emerges from the kitchen door with blood on the ax and a few buttons missing from her gingham dress. The screen door bangs shut behind her. She leans against the house and gazes vaguely over at the barn. She tucks a stray piece of hair back behind her ear. For a moment, it looks as though she might melt into the weathered siding, as certain lizards take on the camouflage of their rocky habitats. She absently leans the blood-stained ax against the house. Then she crosses the lonely space between house and barn, disappearing into its shadowy interior. Once again the camera lingers in the hazy light, the interior left to the viewer’s imagination.

It is time for me to enter my own dream and play my part. I see myself enter the frame in worn slacks and work boots, a flannel shirt with the sleeves turned up. I wear a felt hat that needs to be cleaned and reblocked. I come into the frame as if from the road and saunter up to the kitchen door, brushing dust from my shirt and wiping my forehead with a bandana. I play the drifter, a familiar enough character in that period, an itinerant farmhand who has wandered onto the property looking for work, or so it appears.

A psycho-cinematic quilt, the dream movie sews together swatches from a few different genres—the Dust Bowl tragedy, the western, the family melodrama (with a touch of film noir), and maybe even the erotic crime spree romance. These familiar elements coalesce and somehow fit, but they leave the narrative direction open-ended. Is this a dream about a woman who snaps under the stress of hard work and extreme conditions, or is it a dream about a ruthless killer who stalks her prey then takes them unaware, or is it a dream of misguided greed fueled by desperate times?

Although the camera briefly favors me with a close-up, the brim of my hat casts a shadow over my eyes. I don’t notice the ax. It’s just a farm implement, after all. I knock on the edge of the screen door. I scan the scene, taking it all in as the camera, now from my perspective, from the drifter’s POV, pans around to the house, the barn, the expanse. I notice the dark cloud looming in the distance but register no alarm, even though the soundtrack has picked up a low hum.

I cup my hands around my face and peer into the kitchen. I take off my hat and reach for the door handle. At that moment, a few chickens emerge clucking from the barn ahead of the sister as she steps out from the shadows and into the hazy sunshine. She wipes her forehead with the back of her hand. It’s you, finally you, her face seems to say, as she recognizes me. She picks up the hem of her dress; her steps quicken. She has been anticipating my arrival. We have known each other, known and loved each other, loved and murdered together, murdered the sister’s husband. She crosses the expanse with reckless urgency.

We kiss and whisper in the ecstatic tones of those who have sacrificed all to be together. Finally, the sister takes the hand of the drifter, my hand, and leads me into the house. The camera remains outside and records the stillness of the afternoon. The guitar and the mouth harp explore low tones in a minor key. The farm animals maintain their restless noisemaking in the background. They sense something, as animals often do.

The only thing moving within the frame is the rapidly increasing size of the insect cloud as the sky slowly drains of color. The gradual looming becomes a sudden engulfment. It becomes clear that the locusts have descended upon the cotton field. The music gives way to the deafening sound of the ravenous insects. In no time they strip each stem of leaf, flower, and boll—down to the fibrous roots.

The drifter and the sister emerge from the house. They turn to face the darkness. She takes up the ax once again and swings wildly at the onslaught. She weakens as she realizes her futility. The drifter takes the ax from her and leans it back against the house. Their clothing is ruffled as if by a great wind. Their mouths are agape and their faces writhe. The drifter pulls her to him in a final embrace, turns her body to the house. He covers her body with his, attempting to protect her from the swarm. The frame is

consumed by the dark, swirling mass. Time slows. It seems this darkness and din will never pass.

Slowly, the cloud thins. The din recedes. The frame empties of chaos. The music can be heard once again: the low, slippery vibrato of the guitar, the moaning of the mouth harp. We see the silhouette of the lovers in their final embrace. No, it is only their skeletons we see, balanced tenuously against the siding, stripped of skin and muscle and blood and organs. The landscape has been purged utterly.

I awaken to the credits as they crawl up the screen. I am back. The orchestral violins of the actual movie soundtrack have awakened me. For a moment my mind is still full of desperation and loss—a doomed conspiracy of one murder to get free, another to gain a household. The sister and the drifter lost in the end, but lost together in the manner of romantic tragedy—in a lover’s embrace.

I sit up straight. My throat is parched. I sip at my soda and savor the burning sweetness. I taste the salty dregs of my popcorn. There is another feature after the intermission. An inept fool will spend the night in a haunted house on a bet. He will uncover a gang of thieves by accident. He will bungle things hilariously and win the love of a pretty girl in the end. I’ve got half a box of Good & Plenty in my pocket. I am happy to be alive. Happy to sit in the air-conditioned sanctuary of the classic movie theater on a hot July afternoon.

David Denny’s fiction has recently appeared in *New Ohio Review*, *Stone Voices*, and *Clare Literary Magazine*. His first short story collection, *The Gill Man in Purgatory*, is now available from Shanti Arts Publishing. He is also the author of three poetry collections, *Man Overboard* (Wipf and Stock), *Fool in the Attic* (Aldrich Press), and *Plebeian on the Front Porch* (Finishing Line Press).