

# Art in America

## MEMENTO MORI CAN BE FUN

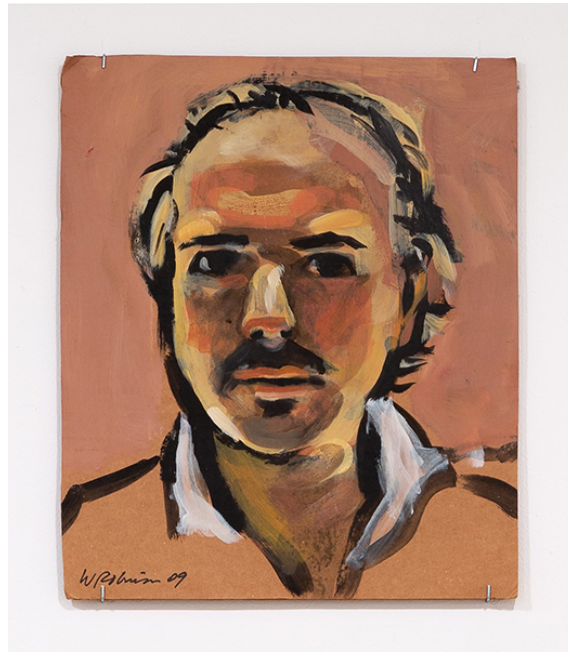
By *David Ebony*



View of the exhibition "Doomed and Famous: Selections from the Adrian Dannatt Collection," 2021. COURTESY MIGUEL ABREU GALLERY, NEW YORK. PHOTO STEPHEN FAUGHT.

A disparate assortment of paintings, works on paper, and sculptures, plus several vitrines full of memorabilia, the show "Doomed and Famous" samples an eccentric art collection that engagingly—and quite precisely—reflects the life and times of its eccentric owner. Hung salon style at Miguel Abreu's Orchard Street gallery, the items belong to the London-born critic, curator, sometime actor, onetime *Flash Art* editor, and full-time bon vivant Adrian Dannatt, who assembled them over the course of some four decades.

Most of the works are small or medium-size, including a number of intimate portraits of Dannatt by art world colleagues, such as Duncan Hannah, Ena Swansea, and Walter Robinson—the last, channeling Courbet's *The Desperate Man* for his striking likeness. Also among the show's highlights are abstractions by artist friends like Jan Frank, Paul Pagk, and Olivier Mosset. Yet the exhibition, on view through March 13, is neither a self-aggrandizing autobiographical exercise nor a strictly commercial effort. The collection was clearly not put together for the sake of monetary gain. It features, rather, a surprising number of crosscurrents—art historical and personal—that lend the show considerable conceptual weight, and a rather broad appeal.



Walter Robinson: *Portrait of Adrian Dannatt as Courbet's Desperate Man*, 2009, acrylic on cardboard, 13 1/8 by 11 1/2 inches.

Several works on view are of significant critical interest, such as Richard Smith's imposing *Slices* (1964), a key example of British abstract Pop. One of the late artist's first shaped-canvas compositions, this eight-foot-tall arrangement of jagged panels in hot pink, trimmed with scallop motifs of turquoise and other bright hues, has appeared in public only once before—in "The Shaped Canvas," a 1964 exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Directly after the show, the work was acquired by art book publisher Harry N. Abrams. In a gallery printout and online commentary, Dannatt offers provenance details like this, and also shares personal anecdotes and reminiscences about each work. In this case, he notes that Smith himself hung the painting in Dannatt's Tribeca loft, after the two had become friends and neighbors.

Dannatt mentions that Donald Judd wrote appreciatively about Smith's shaped canvases of this period. The ghost of a Judd artwork is also present in the exhibition. One morning in the early 1990s, Dannatt rescued from Judd's Spring Street studio trash a large plywood object closely resembling one of the artist's signature Minimalist sculptures. Whether or not it was a studio reject remains a mystery. With tongue in cheek, Dannatt simply states in the provenance note that the object "came directly from Judd's building."

The fact that *Slices* had been in Abrams's collection greatly appealed to Dannatt, and the connections he makes among visual art, writing, and publishing form a constant thread that unites the show. Published to coincide with the exhibition, *Doomed and Famous* is a book of Dannatt's obituaries that appeared over the years in the *Art Newspaper*, *The Independent*, *Artcritical*, and elsewhere. Among the entries are write-ups for art world luminaries like Alexander Iolas, Dorothea Tanning, Ray Johnson, Martin Kippenberger, James Lee Byars, Rene Ricard, and lesser-known figures, such as dealer Guillaume Gallozzi, who died of brain cancer in 1995, age 37. Gallozzi always hung works salon style in his New York townhouse gallery—a look that Dannatt aimed for in this show. An Adam Fuss photo portrait of Gallozzi, from 1992, featured in "Doomed and Famous," pays further homage to Dannatt's close friend. The work adds to the underlying elegiac—though by no means morbid—tone of the exhibition.

In the introduction to the book, which was published by the gallery's Sequence Press, Dannatt mentions that years ago a friend dubbed him an "obituarist," a term he does not disclaim. On the contrary, he has a sideline project, "Living Obit," in which obituaries may be commissioned by the subjects while they are still alive and can collaborate with him. At the end of *Doomed and Famous*, Dannatt includes his own obituary. He writes that one of his "largest collections was of people, the odder and more improbable the better . . ." The people and objects that inhabit the exhibition "Doomed and Famous" may be specific to Dannatt, but the way they were acquired over the course of a lifetime might pertain to everyone.