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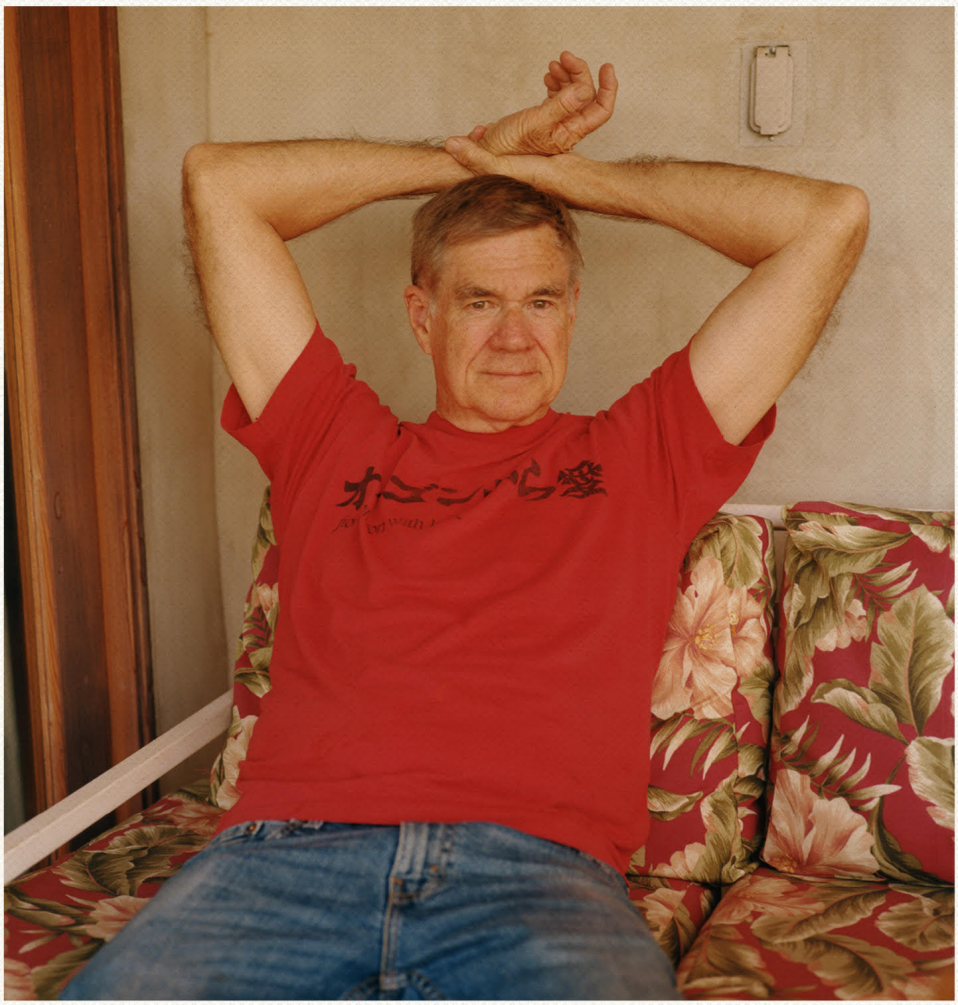

Gus Van Sant

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A CONVERSATION WITH

# GUS VAN SANT

**INTERVIEW** *Edward Paginton*

**PHOTOGRAPHY** *Colin Dodgson*

**ARTWORK** *Courtesy of the artist and Vito Schnabel Gallery*

A CONVERSATION WITH

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*Gus Van Sant's America can be a confusing place. It's at once a candy-coated, unsaturated, hedonistic image of youth. Simultaneously, it is an unfettered and radical document of underclasses and pervading subcultures. It's these shifting polarities within America that still feed his endless curiosity with real people and real stories. In his own way, Van Sant has always had an instinct for the power of images in culture. From the early '80s until the turn of the millennium, using a refurbished Polaroid camera, he would spend time compiling a visual diary of future icons, capturing the actors he was working with at the time. His book titled* 108 Portraits *is exactly as described. Ultimately, it's the accumulation of images that really counts—each a story in its own right, full of energy. Famously, he found William S. Burrough's number and address in the phonebook, called him up and in turn sparked a collaborative friendship that would last until the Beat artist's death in 1997. It's these spontaneous encounters that have come to characterise the director. Often described as peripatetic, moving from one place to another, his films scarcely fit together as one body of work. A deeply introspective story about a teenager's involvement in a mystery death in* Paranoid Park *(2007) feels worlds away from his mesmeric early '90s film* My Own Private Idaho *(1991), about male prostitution. Yet, like most of his films, they share one thing in common—they are never far from the street. Van Sant has always found himself at home celebrating the bizarre world around him and the people that exist within it. As a painter, his stories from the street continue to find space to roam. During Colin Dogson's visit to Van Sant's Hollywood Hills studio, the director and artist sits down to show off more of his paintings.*

*Has it been easy to find time to paint?*

In the last 10 years, there's always been time to work on paintings—there was never schedule difficulty. Usually in film, the really tough time is during the shoot. But the shoot itself is limited to a few months. After that, there is time to work on other things.

*How has your ongoing Mona Lisa series changed over time?*

They've become a little more abstract. When you are painting, it becomes its own thing. Colour alone is always changing. Even though I'm working with the structure of one image, it comes out quite different.

*In other paintings, you also explore the iconography of Hollywood and Tinseltown. Where did this intrigue begin?*

It comes from just living in the area. In some cases, I've lived right near Hollywood Boulevard itself. The paintings are sort of images you see today. Even though you would expect Hollywood Boulevard to have changed, it seems to have remained kind of how Times Square used to be in the '60s. It's very chaotic and there's a lot of confusion on the street. There's a lot more tourists—I guess T-shirts are sold to them because the only draw is the walk of fame, those stars on the ground. There isn't much else to see except from inner-city squalor.

There's also those people who, in a sort of classic fashion, have "just got off the bus," and arrive to become movie stars. They end up on Hollywood Boulevard because it's, like, the only street. So, it's quite a confusing situation. Especially now there's a lot more homelessness. And those paintings are really about the madness of it all.

*These collage-style paintings remind me of* Drugstore Cowboy *and the image of pills raining over Bob. Is collage something you have always pursued in film?*

For sure, I'd like to do the whole film like that, in a Derek Jarman sort of way. But I've never been that brave. The collage elements in *Drugstore Cowboy* are from paintings I made.

*I read you were discouraged from becoming a painter. . .*

Yes. When I went to art school in Rhode Island, it was a period of change. The '60s had just ended and a lot of that aesthetic had bled over into the '70s. People were in flux, and even though they were practising art, they realised at school your art would need to lead you into something else. Other kids at the school, like the Talking Heads, were painters too. In my case, I was already interested in filmmaking and making films before college. A lot of the old students, including the painter Martin Mull, came back and told us that it is very difficult to make a living from painting. So, all of us were failing at painting.

*Has travelling played much of a role in your work throughout your career?*

I've travelled through the United States many times, because it used to be a lot

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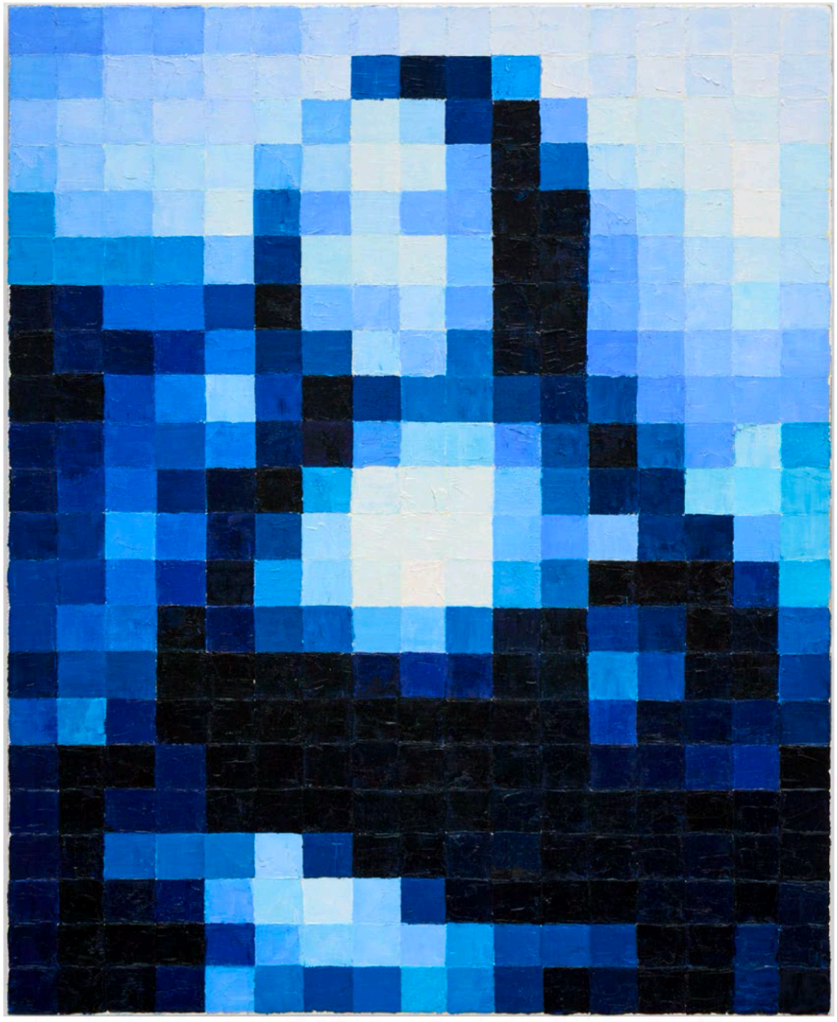

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cheaper to travel by car. Flights were out of range expense-wise, but a car was a lot more affordable. There's that kind of travel. Then there's flying to cities around the world to be part of festivals. Recently, there was a play I helped put on in Lisbon, so I stayed there for two months, but I've travelled mostly with films.

*Does travelling professionally have its limitations?*

I mean, it's usually short, but whoever's bringing you there normally tries to show you their favourite things. Sometimes you meet people, say, at an event that will pretty quickly take you into the heart of these cities. Most of the time, it is film-orientated, though I remember going to Berlin when the wall was still up. I was very quickly drawn into all the club-life parts of the city. It was an amazing experience. It was a very gay place—I was drawn into the gay culture and films with gay themes.

*Have real places and people always been central to your films?*

It used to be very important for me to be authentic. I guess the film *Elephant* was reminiscent of that. You're meeting kids of that period in 2003, who were in high school, and you're trying to understand what their own orientation is toward—in that case, school shootings. It was the same with *My Own Private Idaho* with the kids on the street, it wasn't really safe to be on time because you could be set up. So, people were often early or late, but as a defence mechanism. Which isn't really in the film, but these are the types of things you start to see when you're hanging in that particular place in the world. For *Drugstore Cowboy,* we tried to get as much information and meet as many of the people in the original story as possible. There was quite a culture in Portland at that time. It had its own environment that was sort of a semi-criminal structure. Most of the people we were talking to were in prison.

I think I'm drawn to their stories. In *Elephant*, they were all non-actors. If I'm making a film about a kid on the streets of Idaho, the ones I really know, you realise they are also friends with other people who have interesting stories. They have their own world and their own rules, so you're finding that out and I naturally incorporate this into my stories. Whether it's people I know personally or legendarily, my work is usually guided by a real person.

*Do you include a lot of unscripted material in your films?*

Yes. There's a way to jolt yourself out of the written word you've memorised by speaking about something entirely different or something similar. Again, in *Elephant*, all

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the dialogue was made up by the kids, in some cases they had told us stories. The three girls who are walking in *Elephant*, they're talking about a few different things, all from a videotaped conversation of our first meeting where they were talking about their lives. They started speaking about what it meant to be best friends, how hard it was because they needed to spend a certain amount of time together or else they wouldn't be best friends anymore. So, they started putting percentages on the time being needed to spend together. It was quite funny. And when we got to the set, I'd just say, "So, talk about your friendship when walking to the cafeteria," or "Talk about your first driving lesson." I regurgitated their original discussions into the scene. For the movie, the dialogue wasn't specific to the story. The dialogue was going along at the same time as the story, as an accent to it, but not really the point of the story.

*One of my favourite moments in* Elephant *is when the girl kisses Eric on the cheek. The moment almost feels suspended as you let it drag out.*

That's the trick, to keep rolling. A lot of filmmakers have used that, particularly Clint Eastwood. I spoke to an actor who worked on *Letters of Iowa Jima*; he said that they would be doing a scene, running through it and they'd realise, "Oh, he's filming now." There was no slate, no "Action!" or anything like that. He'd get the background moving, and all of a sudden the actor would realise they were in the scene. It happens often in every film; unfortunately, you do the scene, and then when you say "Cut!" the really fun stuff happens. The reality sets in and they start talking in a way that's much more realistic than they were before. I often have to ask them to incorporate what they do after a take into the next one.

*How did your early films shape your approach to filmmaking?*

Well, *Alice in Hollywood* was a light-hearted comedy that didn't really work out that well. Nobody really liked it—I didn't really like it. But it was really sort of my first film. After making that, I liked the idea of making something that just couldn't be made. A lot of my friends would say, "Well, it's good as a book, but you can't make it into a film." So, just defiantly, I went on with that approach.

The next was another street film in Oregon, but using a story by Walt Curtis called *Mala Noche*. That particular project was a very anti—just anti-everything—but set in an area where everyone is desperate. It was a strange world that existed in Portland. We shot the film on the same street that the author had originally worked on as a grocer, selling fortified wine to alcoholics.

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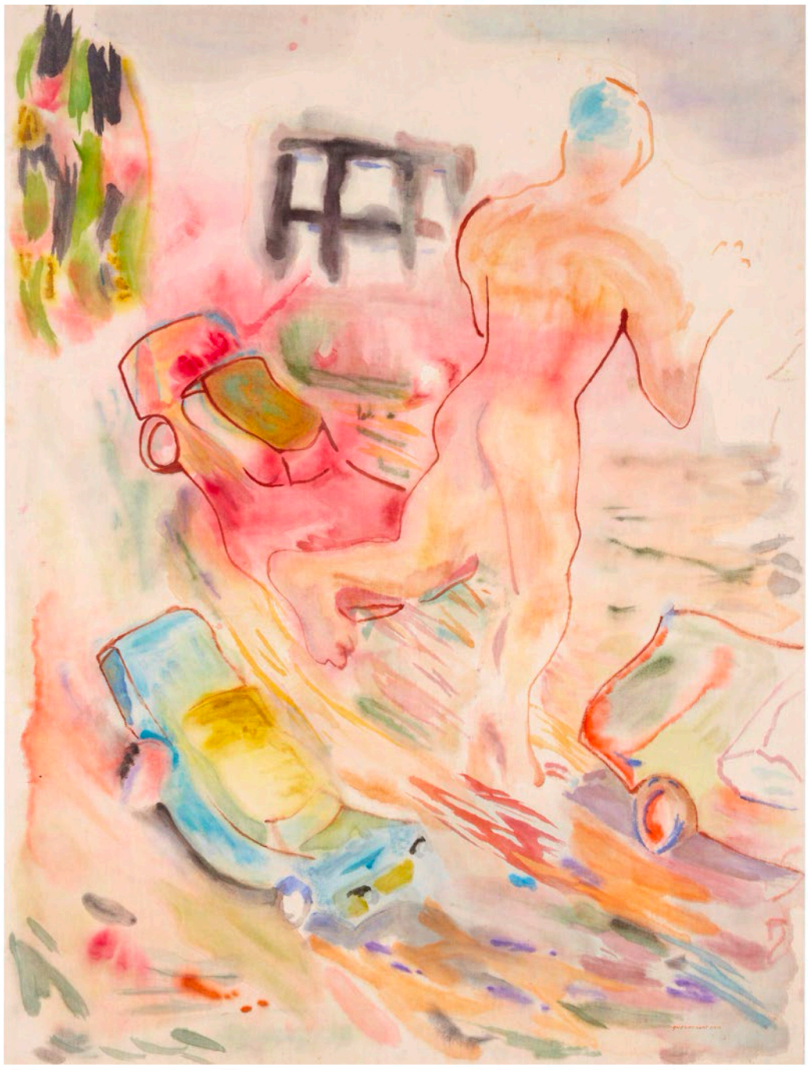

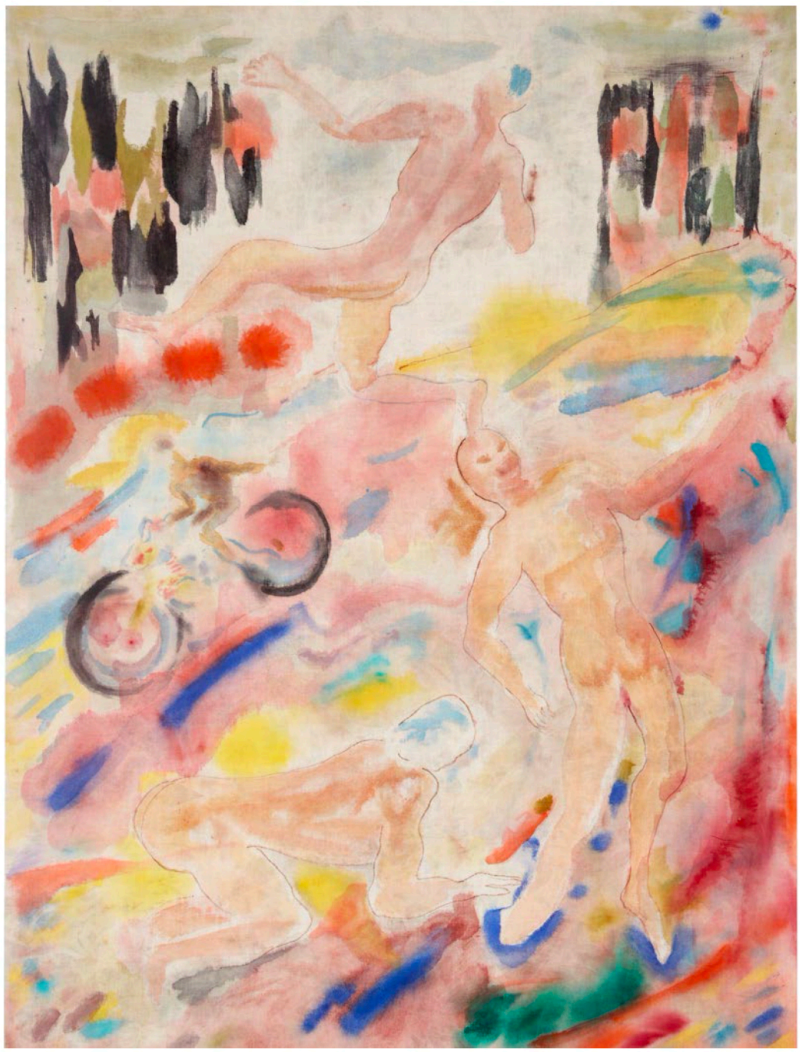

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*Drugstore Cowboy* was an unpublished novel, again about coming from the streets of the Northwest. It was meant to be a low-budget film, but then we found financing. *Idaho* was next, so it was like a string of street movies.

For *Idaho*, I'd written a lot of different stories, and was showing three different scripts around Hollywood to get them going. One was Shakespearian, one was sort of the River Phoenix story with the German auto-parts salesman, and then one was about these two kids who travelled to their home town in Spain, where they have relatives. So, I combined the three while we edited *Drugstore Cowboy*.

***You're often characterised by your observational and non-judgemental style of filmmaking. Is there a fine line?***

Yes, but there's also, 'How much am I using the film as exploitation?' You can go that direction. But then you can also humanistically investigate, which is different from exploitation. A lot of people maybe wouldn't agree with that, but that's what I tried to do in those films. James Fogel, who wrote *Drugstore Cowboy*, his whole concept and idea was to sell it as a true crime novel, which was essentially exploitational—pulp fiction basically. But I leaned more into the humanistic side of what he was writing about—their lives. There was a fine line. But there's always a fine line to everything. •