

# VISUAL ARTS JOURNAL



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Q + A

## Dante Tomaselli

BY DAN HALM

For screenwriter, composer and horror-film director Dante Tomaselli (BFA 1992 Advertising), tapping into things that go bump in the night is just part of his normal routine. This New Jersey-born filmmaker has directed three feature-length films and been compared by *Variety* magazine to well-known Italian

horror-film masters Mario Bava and Dario Argento. Tomaselli recently talked with fellow scream-film lover and *Visual Arts Journal* writer Dan Halm while in production on his latest film, *The Ocean*.

**When you were at SVA you studied advertising. How did you make the transition from ad man to movie director?**

I started off at Pratt Institute as a film major, and then in January 1990 I transferred to the School of Visual Arts and changed my major. I felt that I needed to learn more than just filmmaking. What if it took longer than I imagined to break into the film world? At least I could fall back on advertising. I was going to use advertising copywriting and television commercial production as an indirect route to break into moviemaking.

And it worked: that's exactly how I've survived, creating cable-TV commercials and industrial films. Luckily, I've made three independent horror films that have all gotten distribution. *Desecration*, my first feature, developed a cult following and was an Amazon.com Top 10 bestseller when it was released by Image Entertainment on DVD in 2000.

**Were horror films always in your veins, so to speak? I do think there's something in my blood, because my cousin directed the 1976 slasher film *Alice, Sweet Alice*. I've been a fan of the macabre practically since birth. I always knew I wanted to be a horror filmmaker.**

My mother was a horror fan, and she'd take me to the drive-in to see the scariest titles. Most: kids in grammar school scribbled football teams and rock-band names on

their notebooks. I had *The Exorcist*, *Carrie*, *The Omen*, *The Fog*, *Let's Scare Jessica to Death*—those kinds of movies—illustrated on my notebook in the same exact fonts as the posters. I was obsessed. My bedroom was decorated like a funhouse. You'd turn on the light switch and eyes from masks would blink and glow. I loved retreating into my imagination and fantasizing. I'd see visions as clear as slides projected in my mind.

**What skills did you learn while at SVA that have helped you as a director?**

My class with Amy Taubin, called Women in Film, really opened my eyes. It was there that I experienced my first Maya Deren movie, *Meshes of the Afternoon*. Also, the psychology classes with Judith Kuspit were terrific. I felt transported, invigorated and excited to learn. All the art direction and copywriting courses were very challenging and competitive. What goes on in an advertising class is really a blueprint for what happens "out there." People are very competitive. To have to get up in front of students and present work to be critiqued was a real learning experience.

**Who influences you as a director?**

Well, there are a lot of subliminal influences like Salvador Dalí, Maya Deren and early John Carpenter. But mostly ◊



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:  
DANTE TOMASELLI on the set of *Desecration*, 1999;  
Film still from *Horror*, 2002; Film still from *Satan's Playground*, 2005; film still from *Horror*, 2002.



Film still from *Desecration*, 1999.



I'm influenced by the endless childhood nightmares I had growing up. I have this uncontrollable urge to replicate those nightmares. Many times I tell stories through a series of dreams, flashbacks and hallucinations. My films are about peeling back layers of pain and guilt buried in the unconscious mind.

**Besides writing and directing your own films, you also score your movies. Tell me how you came to do that.**

When I was about three years old, my family had an electronic organ. I used to play it all the time, always pressing the low and high notes to create creepy moods. Above the organ, I had a chalkboard and I'd draw haunted houses on rolling hills with graveyards everywhere. It was just instinctual. The music and imagery go hand in hand for me; I couldn't conjure one without the other.

The sound track is 50 percent of the film's equation—I can't imagine leaving that up to someone else. When I'm writing, shooting and editing, I hear the sound design; it's echoing in my mind. I usually have the sound track pretty much planned out before the movie is even shot. I play with tones, samples and natural sounds—like earthquakes, volcanoes and avalanches—to create a kind of emotional violence.

**Tell me about your latest project, *The Ocean*.**

It's about the ocean taking over the earth, God's wrath. At the core there is a family in deep psychic pain. It's got a very strong script, co-written by Michael Gingold, the managing editor of *Fangoria* magazine. I believe this film has the force of a tsunami and everyone in my camp seems to think this will be my theatrical breakthrough. Dee Wallace from *Cujo*, *The Hills Have Eyes*, *The Howling* and *E.T.* will star as a medium haunted by visions of a watery apocalypse.

**You have worked with numerous scream-queen legends, like Felissa Rose (*Sleepaway Camp*) and Ellen Sandweiss (*The Evil Dead*), and you've worked with both Wallace and Judith O'Dea (*Night of the Living Dead*) on your latest project. How does it feel to work with such industry icons?**

It's wild. It's like being in a time/space dislocation. I feel like I'm a little boy again watching their films in theaters. Fast forward to the future and here I am directing these ladies. It's a thrilling and sometimes intimidating feeling.

**As someone who is working outside the studio system, how did you get the financial backing for your first film?**

In 1997, *Desecration*, the short, was screened at the Independent Feature Film Market at the Angelika Film Center in Manhattan. I positioned the short as a trailer and it caught the eye of an investor who eventually paid for the entire feature, which I completed in 1999. After the feature-length version of *Desecration* was released on DVD in early 2000, there was a surprising amount of press, especially on the Internet. The gates opened and I was able to secure financing for the next feature and the next and so on. Somehow my films always find an audience and a distributor. You just have to be relentless and never give up.

**After tackling the Jersey Devil, drug-pushing cult members and nuns in your previous three films, is there anything that scares you?**

I'm scared of getting older, aging, pain...dying. I guess those are universal fears. I think about being buried under rocks, drowning, being suffocated...I'm mostly scared of my filmmaking privileges being taken away. Nothing could be scarier. As long I'm able to continue to make films, I'll survive; it's part of my heartbeat. □