

ON THE COVER

The Collector by Damon Pla

This article is based on a video interview with the artist on February 20, 2025, and a review of his website (<https://www.damonpla.com>).

Readers of *American Psychologist* may be surprised to see cover art in a genre suggesting surrealism. What, no head or face on the woman? A bird in a cage, books under the dress! How can we understand the intent and impact of this complex and perhaps vexing piece?

The cover artist this month, Damon Pla, is based in Southern Delaware where much of his work features landscapes, capturing the beauty of the Delmarva Peninsula, particularly its lush golden light on coastal glades and ponds. A significant body of his work, however, focuses otherwise on paintings with a very different approach reflecting his keen observations of the natural beauty of this region and his wonderment about it.

Pla describes *The Collector* as being about himself, a self-portrait showing us how he observes the natural world and its evolution over time. He is someone who pulls over when driving and seeing a vibrant sunset, wondering why everybody does not do likewise to relish the fleeting beauty of the light and its reflections. Pla notes that the woman in *The Collector* is, like him, studying nature. The shadows, the detailed reflections of movement on the water, and the time of day are all parts of what she takes in. The origami bird represents art based on nature. The woman collects this as part of her connection with the natural world. Books are knowledge and integrated within her. The tree has a missing section of its trunk, evoking change and disruptions in the environment, some natural and some accelerated by global warming, development, and other human interferences.

Some may wonder why the figure has no head or face (I did). Pla notes that if the figure had a face, it would become like a portrait, and her facial depiction and expressions would alter our impressions of the painting. She is present, but it remains for us to step into her world, her dress and position. This prompts our own interpretations of the scene, independent of what we might project or how we might identify with her if she had a face.

Pla paints with acrylic paints, beginning each work by sketching ideas in pencil, adding and modifying selective elements that he has collected to complete the work. He is indeed a collector himself, with various notes and clippings that he curates, including a picture his daughter drew, quotes he likes, and so forth. He includes photographs as well to shape his art; the house in *The Collector* is based on a photograph of an abandoned house on Route 13 on the Delmarva Peninsula in the stretch of road approaching the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel.

When painting Pla tapes his canvas to a wall. He attributes his comfort with this technique to another longstanding aspect of his art. Pla's roots include many years of mural art, going back to the early years of his career. He was born and raised in South Florida. Waterskiing and surfing fostered his appreciation of the earth and of the changing temperatures and lights on waves and the coastal skies. He always enjoyed drawing and creating comic books. He took many art courses in high school, competing in programs sponsored by the Pratt Art Institute in New York City. Although he started taking courses at the New World School of the Arts in Miami, he did not pursue further formal education and began work painting murals.

The natural world is critical to our well-being and to the balance necessary in our ecosystems. Reflecting on a beautiful landscape is generally quite easy and evokes an appreciation of beauty and peace. By contrast, leaning forward and pondering the elements in *The Collector* invite us to first step outside ourselves to appreciate the apparent congruencies and mysteries in the picture. Then we may circle back to observe and appreciate the elements of the landscape from a different perspective. Pla indicates that he loves to wonder, and he hopes that people will share that with him through his art. Understanding how things work, why they work, and how they fit into broader contexts inspires him and his art. If we are lucky, *The Collector* might do the same for our readers.

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