Brian Calvin.

Interview by Eric Troncy, portrait by Pierre Even, pictures by André Morain.

Let's start at the beginning: where did you study art?

I decided on it while I was an undergrad at the University of California at Berkeley and about halfway through, I finally came to the realization that I had avoided taking even one art class, because I think I was under the impression it was a bad idea to try to learn how to make art. Something I did, but then I probably realized to actually do it would be helpful, to at least have a studio space and once I had started I actually loved the educational part of it.

— Which means you knew you wanted to be *involved in art.*

In some way, I was always involved in art. I think when I was younger I was more involved in music and that seemed a more tangible way. I always enjoyed just drawing, making music, anything like that, with friends, making really stupid videos. Once I started painting, something just clicked right away and it felt very intuitive.

— *You were in a band?*

Yeah, I did play in a band when I was younger. I still play music.

— *You were playing drums, guitar?*

Guitar, we did switch around, but this was my primary instrument.

— *So, you were in Berkeley and then you decided to take art classes.*

Yes. T.J. Clark was still teaching in the art history program, it was a good art history program, opening my mind to the history of art, especially a lot on French painting. Once I finished there I knew I wanted to continue doing this, it seemed logical to go to graduate school just to get on some level, have a studio and avoid having a job for a while. So I moved to Chicago because I also wanted to have new experiences and ended up doing my M.F.A. at The Art institute of Chicago.

— *You always knew painting would be your medium or did you experiment with other mediums?*

I did, just in a kind of pointing in the wrong way. At a certain point I thought video would be something of more interest to me. I enjoyed it, but really music was something I felt very passionate about –and still do– and painting was the only thing that has that same kind of charge to it. I would do these other things I felt were interesting, but I think there was never that moment, like a passion, where you just know the next day when you wake up you want to do it again. It was never a conscious choice. I realised I was getting more and more into this practice where painting just became part of my everyday. Whether I'm making a show or not, if I don't paint I start to feel anxious.

— *When did you move to Chicago?*

I think I moved there in 1992 and I was there until basically 2000.

— *The first paintings of you that I know of are from 1997. I'm trying to figure out what happened between 1992 and 1997 in your work, in terms of style.*

It's funny, later this year there will be a show of that work at Corbett vs. Dempsey. At that time I was using Pop characters like Popeye, Charlie Brown, Olive Oil… a lot of these people, but these are very brown, beat up paintings. I was trying to take away the graphic quality of them and make them seem more kind of lived-in people. So they're different stylistically but I still feel like there is a similar thing, which was dealing with a level of realness and flatness or graphicness but still trying to find this part where the painting starts to emote. Making these well-known characters' eyes looking like animal's eyes. I was playing for a while.

— Why did you decide to show them now?

It's a good question. I have always wanted to, and Tommaso Corvi Mora always wanted to. When I was first proposed a show at Tommaso, we talked about it for a long time. And I finally came to the conclusion, especially since people in France haven't seen as much of the work, it seemed it would be almost too confusing. Even though I think once this is known, you see this, that it's a really tight system, the early work. These few paintings like Isaac at Abraham and A Path relate very much to these early works. And there are a few more, right in between. I did a series of paintings of John Wilkes Booth for an exhibition that really is kind of a transitional show. From Pop culture comics to an actual character, but in my mind it felt the same, because I though the story of John Wilkes Booth who assassinated Abraham Lincoln is so cartoonish already. I think at that time I was still very invested in some kind of point with the idea of a story. I didn't think that was narrative. I have always felt that wasn't interesting to me but at that time my style was a lot more, certainly wanting to invoke some part of that. But while doing those, of course they became a little more traditionally figurative and I don't think before that I had ever really thought that you could make a good contemporary painting doing that. And then I started to do it, play with the idea of a history thing and all these things that I thought were such bad ideas. I started to do that and have that perverse excitement, when you deal with a bad idea it seems so many more possibilities open up rather than, you know, being tasteful.

— Is that why you chose painting in the 1990s, which sounded like a bad idea at the time?

Yeah it's true, I just felt so excited by a lot of American figurative painters from the 1970s, like the work Phillip Guston made at that time, but also Alice Neel, John Wesley... I thought there was such a great kind of strange other arc of American art that seemed so strong and yet was totally ignored. It's funny because now it's not, but at that time there was a certain point where, you know, Alex Katz was successful but in the late 1980s and when I was in Berkeley it was considered tacky, bourgeois, and I couldn't understand that at all.

— I think the first "Little black dress" painting is from 1960, so it was already more than 30 years later.

Totally, well this is the thing; there is this famous anecdote –how true it is, who knows– that when Warhol made his first Marilyn painting he said it looked like an Alex Katz.

—Yeah, and obviously Warhol's Double Elvis reminds us of that Little Black Dress painting of Katz with 7 Ada. But, coming back to your own work: the paintings you were doing in the 1990s, right after the ones you described with the cartoon characters that emote. Then the overall manner started to look like Isaac and Abraham and so on.

Yeah those ones are just in-between, it's more like that they seem they have a foot in each. And definitely for me *Isaac and Abraham* along with a few other paintings that happened around the same time were some kind of shift. Because even though of course using Isaac or Abraham, there is this story that I'm hanging the painting on, the excitement for me came in the fact that it looked contemporary, or that it was not historical. In fact I think the other version of it that I made was shipped to Tokyo, I think I ended up calling it Two Hippies. Last I knew it was in Hiroshima.

— When would you say your painting went in more radical directions in terms of style? Was there a particular moment? It seems like between Isaac and Abraham *and the big portraits that you're now famous for, there was a period that was more David Hockney-inspired –or am I making this up?*

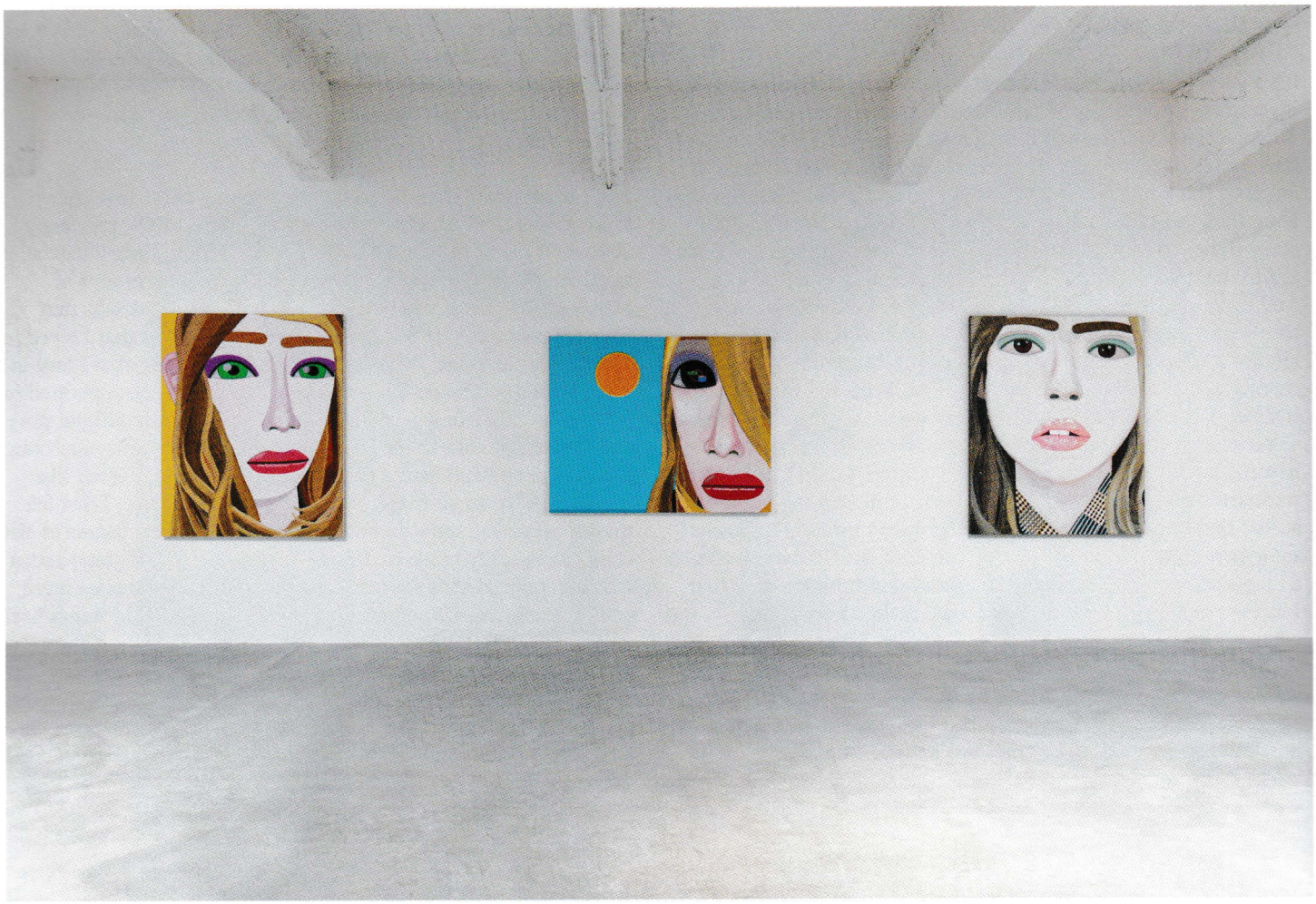
No, I think that's true. It feels to me, looking back, that after the kind of Isaac and Abraham and into those late 1990s, very early 2000s and the first show I had in L.A. with Marc Foxx where all of a sudden there was attention, there definitely were groups of people doing things, often in interiors with certain details that were influential. A lot of that was homage to things that I loved in Hockney's paintings, that I love in Katz's paintings, that I love in Alice Neel's paintings. But at the same time, how that operated in the works ... like how few details can I have to really tell the story rather than say (like in the painting titled A Path), how much can I put in here and still have a painting that is coherent? It felt like trying to make an all-over painting but with an image. I just felt myself becoming more and more excited by those expanses of flat color, these really minimal details. That process kept going and at a certain point details started going out and things became more and more simple. On some level I always think I'll add things back in, but I keep finding that the more I simplify and take things away the more I keep discovering some other new places. It's like constantly falling into the sun. It's funny because I know for a lot of people they look at that and it's just shallow, meaningless, flat, all of these things, and I think that's fine. If it were pleasing everyone I would be more worried.

— You were mentioning your first show with Marc Foxx in 2000. How did it happen? How did you go from having no show and no gallery to doing your first show?

It's kind of crazy. When I was in Chicago I used to show in a gallery there and it wasn't a particularly great experience for me. They were fine but we just weren't in a good synch. I did the John Wilkes Booth show there and then I started making these paintings with people and interiors. I decided to leave that gallery and then I really liked these paintings that just opened up, and I didn't have anywhere to show them, nothing was happening really.
Shortly after I graduated school, I had a show at the University. Then a woman named Junko Shimada, she was working at 303 at the time, she bought a piece and said, "Next time you're in New York, come by". And so I did and she bought more work. She worked at 303 and then she moved back to Tokyo, to open a gallery. This, right after I left my gallery in Chicago, just like, "I can't deal with this situation anymore, I'd rather not show than stress out about this." Then, they said, "We want you to know we received this fax."

— Oh! I'll have to explain what a fax is to our youngest readers!

Yeah, a kind of printed out e-mail.
She was asking me to do a show in Tokyo. I shipped all the paintings un-stretched, and they all shrank. When I went to put them back on, all the stretchers were to big. Anyway, it was a terrific experience, great show, and that's when these works started happening. When I did my second show in Tokyo I basically painted it in Chicago, shipped it all up, and moved back to Los Angeles in 1999. Sixteen years is a short period, but at the time there was not a lot of figurative painting going on. I think there was a certain quality. When Marc first saw it and sent people over, there was an excitement because it was something unusual. I was very curious all along because of course I had no idea, and I



was pretty ignorant, for some reason I always believed this would… Again, because I was looking at these people predominantly from the 1970s –and a lot earlier– like Piero della Francesca, Giotto, and then Balthus, Matisse, Picasso, John Wesley

— Well Balthus and Wesley are very interesting people to mention here. It is so much more meaningful than Katz.

Yes! I think with Katz there is this obvious thing that people see, and I'm always happy to talk about it. For a lot of people it's a more tangible, obvious thing but someone like Wesley certainly got into my way of thinking a lot more. My friend Jon Pestoni gave me a catalogue of a Wesley show at Fiction Non Fiction and this was the first time I could see some of Wesley's works from the 1970s and it just blew my mind.

— Did what you saw in this catalogue help you flatten the surface of the paintings?

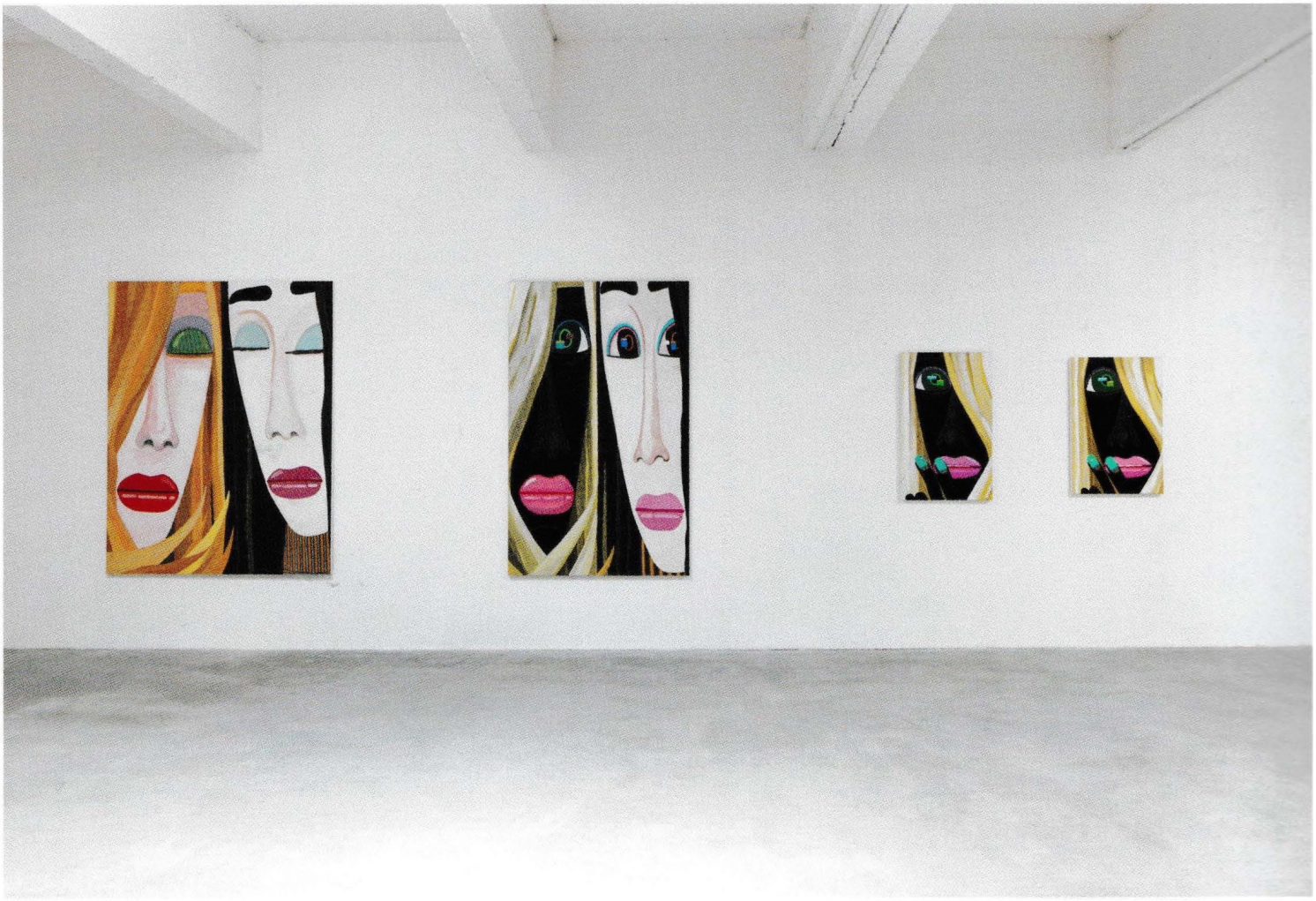
All these references we've been talking about, I started to think, "Why am I always trying to fill up space?" or "Why do I have this idea that a space should in any way reflect the complexities of living in a space?" That started to seem so pointless. As I started to play more with these things it started to fell so much more musical to me, the visual equivalent was like when you write a good pop song and you just add way too many plugged-in instruments and finally you start taking them all away, and you realize it should just be an acoustic track. At the time, right around 1983/1984, I saw Laura Owens' paintings. We had mutual friends, I saw someone make work on a bigger scale that I would ever –and I still don't make works on that scale– it made me think, I became so excited by the ambition of someone else close to you, of the same age (well she is younger, but), then you think this isn't just the 1970s, and this isn't just me.

— Were you aware of Lisa Yuskavage or John Currin's work at the time?

I do remember, I would say more John's work, back then. I did not feel connected to that work. I enjoyed it, but it didn't influence how I thought. I really did have a stubborn cluelessness about using figuration but again, especially because I was really excited about John Wesley, who was not a joke about figuration. On some level I see that work and I think the equivalent is Jacques Tati, it's using something very light and beautiful to also get at something that can feel heavy in its lightness. And that was a lot more where I wanted to go, rather than using the traditional skills of painting to play with it. Plus I think I felt too inept, I didn't know how to paint and I felt like I would never know how to paint. On some level, of that generation, a little bit older, I think I was excited a lot by Sean Landers, the written pieces, the drawings, and later when he started making figurative paintings I just thought it was really great. The show at Regen Projects was a total flop at the time but now I think everyone sees them very differently, especially in this kind of environment now of painting. I love their sort of anarchic spirit.

— How would you describe the subjects of your paintings now?

I don't know, this is something I struggle with all the time and I feel it's why I paint. A few times every week people are, "What do you paint?" and I answer "People". I didn't try to create these



iconic characters, they kind of developed slowly over time, and then they were just there. Sometimes I can feel pretty ambivalent about how some of them look. Recently I think they are taking a different turn and they're starting to have a more naturalistic quality again. But certainly the kind of bigger eyes, bigger lips, so simplified, it sounds ridiculous but it wasn't intentional. By stripping things away and not looking at real people, just making the painting, just going back and forth, they kind of developed, and then I wanted to paint the universe they inhabit. I think it's one reason why for someone like Wesley, or William Copley –who became influential later– what could be called style seems to be an organic one that comes I don't quite know why because they don't look natural, but then all you do is kind of inhabit that universe and all of the innovation and stuff comes from within that closed system. As opposed to, you know, artists who every few year develop an all-new line. It might be very exciting but that not how my brain works. I keep finding what feels like new life in repetition, falling deeper down the rabbit hole.

— Is the fact that you do "covers" of your own paintings a way of dealing with this very literally? I must admit I don't know many figurative painters who make the same painting two or three times.

On some level I think it was born out of some kind of practicality: sometimes the journey to make a painting would be such a strange rough road and once it finally found a resolution… So I found myself sometimes finishing something and thinking, "What if now I tried to make a painting of this painting?" Then on some level you're not doing the journey anymore, or you're doing a

— They are actually not exact reproductions; let's say you do not Sturtevant your own work as sizes differ from one canvas to another, as well as framing.

For someone doing non-representational, non-figurative work or abstract work, these slight tweaks seem very natural. With Mondrian, for example. But when you're adding an image, and you're not Warhol or Sturtevant, or using it in certain way that is calling out for attention, for some reason it seems so much more peculiar. It feels peculiar when I do it, but I'm also thinking, so many people who don't deal with representation, that's really what they are doing. For me sometimes it feels like a cover, sometimes it just feels like a way of starting. At some point what I found exciting was my process was starting to eat itself, in that way. It's also a way of not stopping, and not getting stopped. If I'm having trouble with one painting I'd start from a small detail of another. It's become easier now that we have smartphones. Each stage of a painting, if you want to move forward you have to destroy it. Now you can have these endless snapshots which sometimes allows me, as a painting develops, at a certain point you fell this kind of fork in the road and you think "Should I develop it this way? Or that way?" And you choose this way but sometimes that goes terribly and the painting just goes away. But then you have this image of an earlier state that I can start a new painting with and see what happens. What grounds it for me –and I feel this is always an un-hip thing to say– but I'm always looking for "the soul" in the painting that I can connect to. If I can feel it, someone else can feel it.

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