



Brian Calvin by Moira Tarmy

Brian Calvin is a figurative painter in the original sense of the term, which expands beyond portraiture to include all representational art. We caught up with him at his studio in Ojai, an old Hollywood prop storage facility.

BP : As a California artist, how does that perspective manifest itself in your paintings?

BC : I was born here and grew up here, so the perspective is homegrown. It's funny though how many people have come to California and made defining art about it: Ed Ruscha and David Hockney come to mind...

BP : Do your pictures operate differently when you have a single figure as opposed to pairs?

BC : Inherently two figures start to interact with each other which will then suggest a narrative. Personally, I'm not interested in narrative. It's just not compelling to me. Looking back at painters like Piero or Giotto, it's not the subject matter but the intensity and specificity of their painting that we remember and admire. I strive for those qualities in my own work: the light, the believability. Most of the time with my figures, I'm striving only for believability, the sense that there could be a soul in there. I try to achieve this and then get out of the way. The viewer can then free associate or project whatever they want onto the paintings.

BP : I asked David Salle what is the difference between painting and illustration to which he replied, illustration is painting with a forgone conclusion. Do you agree?

BC : It's interesting. I've been reading the de Kooning biography. Gorky repeatedly praises de Kooning for being "an excellent draftsman," such a backhanded compliment. Calling someone an illustrator might be along the same lines.

BP : For your Anton Kern exhibition last year, a few of the paintings showed tightly-cropped facial features. What was that about for you?

BC : It felt a natural progression of simplification. Warhol and Katz reclaimed a visual language from advertising, and Katz in particular harnessed the poetics of billboards as well as the scale. Then for someone my age who initially experienced their work through reproductions in catalogues, it speaks to a bastard form of learning.

“WHEN PAINTING, I DON’T CONCERN MYSELF WITH EITHER SIDE OF THE EMOTIONAL SPECTRUM. NO TRIUMPH. NO TRAGEDY.”



BP : Do you remember deciding that you wanted to become an artist?

BC : I drew obsessively growing up, but never thought of it as art. When I was in high school, I visited an older friend at UC Davis, a guy I’d played music with and really looked up to. We went to his studio and I saw all of these large canvases and it was, like, electric. Turned out, one of his teachers was William T. Wiley, which then got me interested in Northern Californian Funk art. This was an unusual introduction, but one that still feels intuitive to me.

BP : There’s a large figure in your studio painted on what appears to be a chair?

BC : The idea was to make a sort of totem sculpture. If you look at it from the side, you get more of the Artschwager reference. My daughters refer to it as my “statue,” which I quite like.

BP : Tell us about your museum show at Le Consortium this summer.

BC : It is titled “End of Messages” and spans from 1997 to 2014. I had an answering machine that would declare “end of messages” in a robotic voice after you’d listened to your messages. It always sounded so resolute.

BP : But “End of Messages” is also the name of a self-portrait you painted?

BC : Yeah, that came first. The painting is loosely a self portrait with my wife. But the image is based on the Egyptian sculpture of the Dwarf Seneb and his wife. It’s one of the only non-royal, large-scale sculptures from that Egyptian period. In the sculpture, his two children are depicted underneath the couple. I toyed with using my kids but things became too literal.

BP : I asked Ugo Rondinone why his subjects always look sad and he said, it’s not sad, they’re just passive, so I wanted to ask you about the expressions in your faces.

BC : That really resonates with me. I would probably use the term neutral. I’ve never really set out to make a happy or sad painting. When painting, I don’t concern myself with either side of the emotional spectrum. No triumph. No tragedy. If anything, there is a slight melancholy to the paintings.

BP : John Currin says art is about thwarted joy.

BC : It’s hard to keep joy hot on the griddle. Sitting down to make a painting is actually a very boring process much of the time. And yet you have to be ready to suture things up when inspiration hits.

BP : Tolstoy argues in *What is Art?* that it's a battle between the good and the beautiful.

BC : It's refreshing to use the term "good" as a goal. Then it can hover between these larger concepts.

BP : People have sometimes said your figures look like slackers. How do you feel about that descriptive?

BC : It has felt like an albatross at times. But honestly, it's fine. Whatever. Never mind.

BP : Jeff Koons says that in portraiture, gender is the first segregator for the viewer.

BC : I'm ambivalent about gender in my paintings. For years, I have tended to think of the figures in my paintings as women. I think that painting is a very feminine thing, at least, for me.

BP : Don't tell the AbEx guys.

BC : Obviously painting isn't strictly masculine or feminine, it's neither. But those guys were performing masculinity. Overcompensating maybe? You still see so much of this today.

BP : Gender aside, most of your subjects are anonymous figures. Is there a down side to that for you as a painter?

BC : Sometimes it can feel like trying to find a house without directions, but at the same time it allows me the freedom to get lost, more abstract.

BP : You once made a painting of Dennis Wilson from The Beach Boys and then another painting of a young Matt Dillon. Is there some overlap there?

BC : There is a damaged elegance to both Dennis and Matt Dillon. Once, while discussing this very type, Bruce Hainley coined the term "wounded quarterback," a great way to describe the vibe in both paintings. The wounded quarterback is a classic American archetype.



Brian Calvin's studio