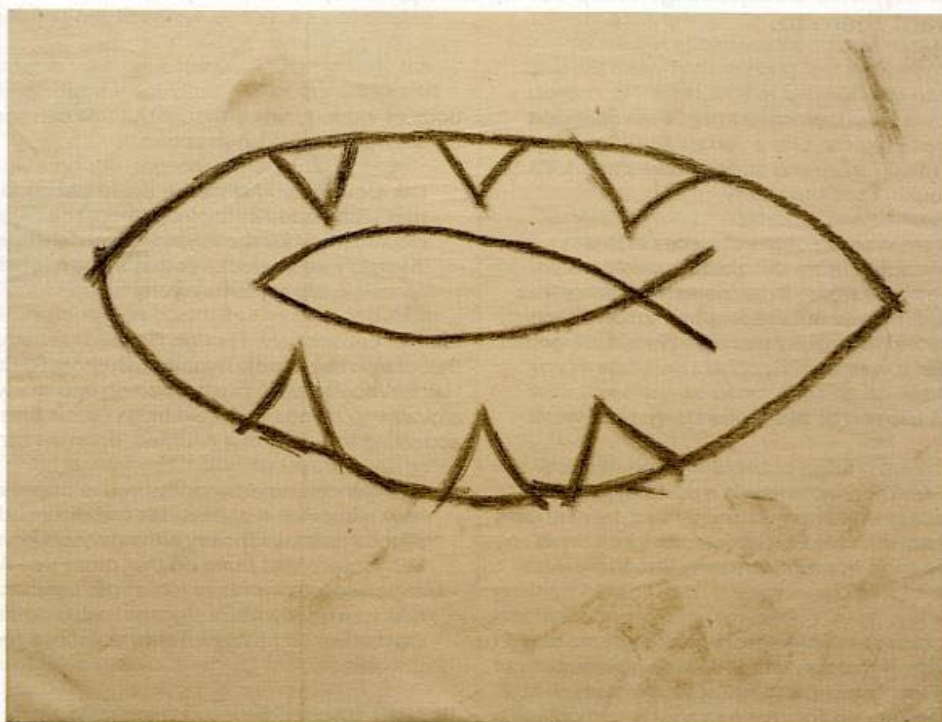


Bomb: 'A conversation : Dike Blair and Joe Bradley', summer 2009, number 108, p 81- 87

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JOE BRADLEY



Joe Bradley, *Abelmuth*, 2008, grease pencil on canvas, 40 x 60 inches.
Courtesy of CANADA, New York and Peres Projects, Los Angeles, Berlin.

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Joe and I talk about his recent paintings in the interview below, but this is also an opportunity to revisit some of the things I've said in the past about his older work. In 2006, I volunteered to write the press release for his first show, *Kurgan Waves*, at his New York gallery, CANADA. Although that wasn't Joe's first solo exhibition, it was the body of work that I felt represented his breakthrough stuff and I wanted to get behind it. The paintings were comprised of several monochromatic canvases arranged to form abstracted rectilinear human bodies and torsos. Their construction felt shoddy, the individual canvases stretched on thin prefab stretchers and the paint application flat-footed. I wrote about these big "guys," how they were including but transcending the binary operations of his earlier work: irony and sincerity, kitsch and the sublime, anarchy and aestheticism. I also said some things that, until this interview, I figured Joe was okay with. It turns out that my thoughts about those paintings as having elements of low-res game icons and being send-ups of Minimalism are not only unintentional but unwanted byproducts of those works. To his displeasure, my observations have stuck. Here, we try to unstick those bad memes, but probably create some new ones.

Joe's recent *Schmagoo* "paintings"—actually pictograms scrawled in grease pencil on untreated canvas drop cloths, which are sometimes stretched, sometimes not—are beautiful, funny, and compelling. They set up camp in my mind's eye and refuse to leave—not that I want them to.

—Dike Blair

Dike Blair: I was just looking at images of your latest show at Peres Projects, *Like a Turkey Thru Corn*. I got to that one titled *Turkey* and stared at the thing for a while but couldn't see the turkey.

Joe Bradley: There were a couple of pieces in that show that were cribbed from this poster, which is a collaboration between me and my friend Valentina's four-year-old son, Leif. I wrote out the text for him on sheets of paper, he worked his magic, then she pieced it together on the computer. It was a family affair.

DB: So the T has sort of a beak-like thing ... Oh, I get it.

JB: Yeah, like T for "Turkey." There's a painting in the show called *Ecstasy* that was inspired by Leif, too. He gets a little overzealous with his Es. Sometimes a Leif E will have four or five extra horizontal strokes. *(laughter)* Just adorable.

DB: From looking at the images, I think that one might be my favorite. It had some of the same qualities of what I'll call the "smile painting" at your last show at CANADA. One stupid line that's strangely compelling. Your last couple shows have titles, the aforementioned *Like A Turkey Thru Corn* and *Schmagoo Paintings*. You obviously like establishing some kind of mindset.

JB: Yeah, titles are important to me. I keep a list of them going. A lot of times I will have a title for a painting before I begin, and that will be all I have to go on. So it's helpful for me as far as setting the tone for a particular painting or

body of work. I think a thoughtful title can sort of nudge the viewer in a certain direction.

DB: One of the qualities in those last couple shows that I felt—and I'm thinking about the Lightnin' Hopkins title for the Peres Projects show and the Twombly-esque look—is that there might be a nostalgic aspect to the work.

JB: Not consciously. Though I've had certain stuff from that era on my mind—Twombly, Guston, R. Crumb, the Hairy Who—I guess I've let it creep into the work. There's a quality to some of that old blues music that I find really appealing too. Sort of a haunted, doomed sense of humor.

DB: The canvas drop cloths you're drawing those new pieces on are yellowish and dirty and look slightly antique. Those paintings you showed at Kenny Schachter's that hung on that great Vito Acconci cage-like interior—they felt a little used as well. They had some early AbEx signage, palate-knife stuff, maybe like some Mark Tobey paintings found in the attic.

JB: Yeah. It's the "distressed" look, like those jeans the kids are wearing that come already peed in with holes in the knees. With the *Schmagoo* paintings, I really wanted to be able to be careless ... work on them for a while, crumple them up in a ball, throw them in the corner. It was a relief. I like the idea that someone could spill a glass of wine on one of these things and it would be no big deal.

This thing (*pointing at the recorder*) is like a fucking elephant, it's impossible to have a conversation. *(laughter)*

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DB: It ruins everything. We were having such a lovely time.

JB: I know, I know. We should have requested a court stenographer. Or maybe we should just forget about it and keep drinking wine.

DB: Well, speaking of wine and ecstasy, and "schmagoo"—which I now know is '50s slang for heroin—what are the drug flavors to these things? I can't quite put my finger on it.

JB: Pot, I guess. It's the only drug I've ever had any luck working on. But, really, anything other than drawing while stoned is just too confusing. I'll just spend half the day looking for the hammer or something. Mushrooms, too. I like the places my mind ends up on psychedelics. How about you—do drugs enter into your work?

DB: I like alcohol. Much of the luminism in my work, or the attempt at luminism, usually has something to do with that first martini glow, or the glow of the bar.

JB: I can see that in your gouache work, particularly the barroom still lifes. But the sculpture feels very sober and meditative.

DB: Probably, and the gouaches that most directly reference that kind of inebriated light were from a particular period, from the late '80s to the early '90s. But there were photo and painting works on glass from those days that also went for a kind of glow. In *My Last Sigh*, Luis Buñuel's autobiography, he writes this beautiful chapter on cocktails and bars and their power to inspire.

Backtracking to Twombly, he played with the look of written language, but you seem more interested in pictograms.

JB: Yeah, I've shied away from including text in my paintings. Too specific. I'd like these to feel more like hieroglyphs. I love looking at Egyptian hieroglyphs even though I have no idea what the individual signs stand for.

DB: I think of your big men—individual monochromes hung vaguely in the shape of primitive figures—as referencing Minimal art from the '70s, but also highly pixelated bad video games, perhaps from the '80s?

JB: The video game reference was completely unwanted by me, just a strange by-product. And although that body of work was definitely informed by Minimalism, as I started to get some feedback on it, I realized what people were focusing on—has that ever happened to you? Where you find that you're stuck in a conversation that you don't want to be in?

DB: I've never been in the spotlight, but I know what

you mean about things in print sticking to work. At some point I talked about ikebana and that won't go away. I have thought about ikebana structures and used them in early work, so it's my own doing. Hell, I put Noguchi lamps in some recent sculpture, so what am I complaining about?

JB: Were those the wall pieces, or sculptures?

DB: The early '80s wall pieces had a lot of japonaiserie, which I'm now slightly embarrassed about. Hiroshi Teshigahara's daughter, Kiri, brought him to a show of those things and I was so excited. He hated them. He knew the history of things that I used simply because of a *look*. Pure aestheticization. In the mid-'90s when I first started making those carpet and light sculptures, I simply didn't have a clue as to what they were or how to begin them, but I knew that I wanted a certain set of materials and a certain set of sensations. So to structure them, I went back to the ikebana. But in truth, I didn't think about ikebana again after the first several sculptures.

You're not above aestheticization yourself. I think you get away with making highly aestheticized stuff that doesn't come off as that because the objects are also aggressively stupid on one level.

JB: What do you mean?

DB: Well, I won't necessarily say it's strategized, but, for example, scrawling something on a drop cloth that's absolutely seductive. You pull it off because of an immense amount of practice and a particular sensitivity to materials. But they also look like monkey paintings and there's some element of, "You fool—you're standing in a room looking at a drop cloth with three grease pencil lines on it." That puts an interesting anarchistic edge on a lovely painting.

JB: Well, I'm not interested in making anyone feel like a fool. In general, I try not to anticipate how people will react to my stuff. I think the way to go is to make the work you want to see, you know? Some people will like it and some won't. I was standing in front of this Fontana painting at MoMA a little while ago that I thought was just beautiful. It was crowded in there, and after a while I found myself pretending to look at the painting while eavesdropping on what other people were saying. No one liked it. This Fontana that I had read as this quiet, totally elegant little affair was just pissing everyone off!

DB: Maybe a lot of this has to do with context or venue. Curating is always a kind of self-portraiture, and that show you curated at the Journal Gallery last year was really fun and irreverent. But you hang that show at the Whitney, and it feels like a "fuck you."

JB: I don't know. I thought that show had a pretty friendly

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vibe. More of a good-natured ribbing than a “fuck you.” I feel like you’re stuck in the role of interviewer. It’s one of your moonlighting gigs, right?

DB: I’m trying to write something for Roger White, for *Paper Monument*—have you seen that magazine? It’s really good. He’s a good painter, too.

JB: Dike will go on the record giving Roger a good ball-licking.

DB: For the next issue he thought it would be great, or maybe a funny idea, if older artists instructed young artists on etiquette, a kind of Miss Manners for the art world.



JB: So what’s your advice, in a nutshell?

DB: Well, I started an anecdote about how when I was young and obnoxious I violated rules of etiquette with an older artist, who displayed very good manners in not making me feel badly. However, the etiquette involved the telephone, so the advice is obsolete because of technology. So much for this sage’s advice. I need another approach.

JB: I know the Japanese stuff was something that you didn’t want to hold onto, but there’s also kind of a haiku quality to your sculptures—is that off the mark? And with the gouaches, too—both have that sort of feeling of a frozen moment.

DB: I titled the sculptures with haiku fragments for a while, until Bud Light started using haikus for their TV ads. Maybe we’re touching on the mixture of irony and sincerity that both of us are stuck with to some degree.

JB: Yeah. I like the idea of a work of art containing both. Let ‘em fight it out.

DB: Sincerity may be optional in art, but I have to think that for anyone under 60, irony is nearly unavoidable.

My stuff is pretty romantic and can almost slip into sentimentality, and that’s simply an outcome of what happens when I make things, of who I am. I’d be insincere if I tried too hard to avoid it even though I’m not necessarily a fan of romantic art and certainly hate sentimentality, so I’m sometimes grossed out by my stuff. But the fact that I’m aware of its romanticism leads to decisions that are implicitly ironic. My emphasis of the decorative qualities of my work would be an example of that. Your sincerity/irony quotient is different from mine.

JB: I find that oftentimes I’ll approach a subject with a certain degree of irony or distance, and then through the process of working and spending time with it, I come out the other end a true believer. For instance, when we first met, I was making paintings of lighthouses and sunsets that began as sort of a snarky revisioning of “bad” Thomas Kincade-style calendar art. I ended up really investing myself in the genre, and along the way discovered Marsden Hartley, Joseph Yoakum, and all these other great landscape painters. The project ended up becoming something way more complex and weirdly earnest than I had intended.

DB: Why did you drop color and painting and go to the drawing on canvas?

JB: I wanted to try something new. My studio practice was starting to feel like manual labor, just staple gunning all day long. I felt like someone else’s assistant! So I made a bunch of paintings with an inkjet printer that were terrible and ended up drawing directly on canvas.

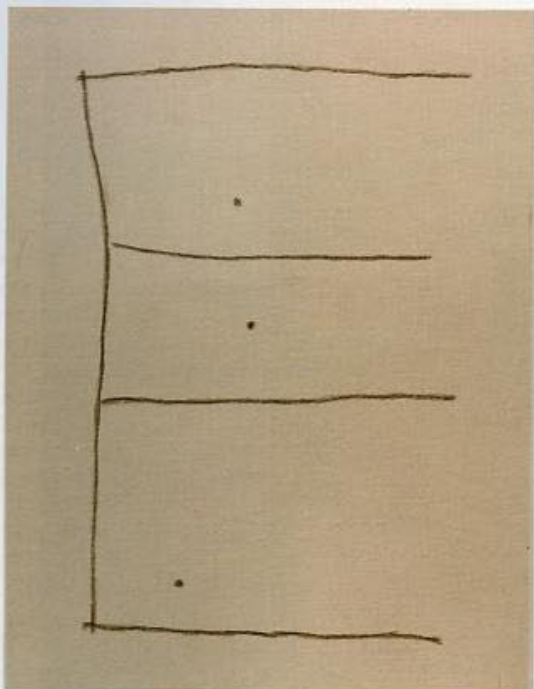
DB: I felt that you had painted yourself into a corner with that vinyl work you showed in the Whitney Biennial, but I was confident that you’d work your way out. So drawing was the answer?

JB: Yeah, it felt like a good endpoint for that body of work. After the Whitney, I decided to take a break from painting and focus on drawing. Drawing feels like a very direct way of thinking on paper. It’s a good way to generate ideas. With painting there are so many variables—how one color plays off of another, how the line between the colors works or doesn’t work, composition, blah, blah, blah. And more often than not, I’ll paint for six hours and end up with nothing, which I find maddening. So yeah, drawing seemed like the obvious solution. Then I also wanted to hang on to the physical—I wanted whatever I did to have the physical presence of a painting and that sort of scale.

DB: When I’ve gotten stuck I go to the figure because it’s something I’m absolutely uncomfortable working with. I don’t know if I ever showed you that Epcot show that I did back in the early ‘90s.

JB: I’ve seen photos of that.

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DB: For me it was sort of a culmination of everything I'd done in the '80s, and I finally felt I'd gotten it. So I started painting strippers and did the *Gray Goo Lounge*, a simulacrum of a strip club. It wasn't great art, but it moved things along. A few years ago I got to a similar place. I'd been pairing paintings of botanicals and windows, and had been doing the carpet and light sculptures for about ten years; everything finally felt done. So that's when I started painting women's eyes. And the sculptures changed dramatically, at least to me. That's a long way of saying that I'm incredibly uncomfortable with the figure and that's where I go when I'm stuck because, if nothing else, it sort of shakes things up.

JB: Well, I think it's kind of a natural catalyst. The human body is the starship we're all operating from. *(laughter)* Do

you feel like you reach a point with a certain body of work that you smash it, then pick up the pieces; or does one series suggest another?

DB: It does seem to go in steps, but I'm a formalist, so it tends to work that way. The change in sculpture came a couple years ago and was more of a design problem. I got sick of storing awkward shapes and repairing a sculpture every time I showed it.

JB: Those more polished sorts of things?

DB: Yeah. So I started doing the crate pieces where some amount of damage to the container is anticipated and even welcomed.

JB: I love that idea. Sort of building damage into the work. I can't stand the idea of things needing a conservator. Something that can have a little wear and tear and not be in a state of ruin is appealing to me.

DB: I think Richard Prince's hoods were somewhere in the back of my brain. If those get damaged, he just throws some Bondo on it, just like a dent in a car.

JB: Yeah, I definitely thought of Prince's work when I saw those painted crates in LA a year ago. He has a similar approach to paint handling—even his most painterly stuff has a super-controlled feel to it. I remember you touching on that in an interview for your 2007 show at Feature Inc.—did you call it “restrained expressionism”?

DB: Repressed expressionism. *(laughter)*

JB: You're just too uptight. While we're on the subject, I don't respond to everything the guy does, but I love how he's created this world for his work to live in. It seems like he could throw just about anything into the mix and make it work.

DB: He does. I certainly used to envy Richard's audience. Let's face it, one of the nicest things that an artist can have is an audience's expectation or image of what you do. Then the newer work can reverberate against it. In terms of tools of communication, it adds all these new clubs to your golf bag. Of course people want just a certain amount of change, but if you change too much, it can flop. That's one reason I really admired your *Schmagoo* shows. They seemed to actively court failure. Is flirting with failure also a part of it?

JB: Oh yeah, definitely. The entire thing is more exciting if there's a distinct possibility that you're going to make an ass of yourself. I've always admired the kind of commitment I see in an artist like Agnes Martin. She just honored this stripe thing to the very end, you know? I don't think I can work that way, though. When I reach

above: Joe Bradley in his studio. Photo by Ben Handzo, 2009.
below: Joe Bradley, *Ecstasy*, 2009, grease pencil on canvas, 81 x 63 inches. Courtesy of Peres Projects, Los Angeles and Berlin.

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Dike Blair, *Untitled*, 2009, gouache and pencil on paper, 24 x 18 inches.

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the point where I'm refining an idea, I tend to get bored. Maybe I'll just keep starting from scratch and hope it all makes sense somehow.

This is apropos of nothing, but do you read comics? Did any influence from comic books cross over into your adult life?

DB: I painted quite a few still lifes that featured comics, usually Marvel. At some point in the '80s, when I was in my third or fourth childhood, I saw a Jim Lee cover for an X-Men book, and it really staggered me. It was sexy and very Ukiyo-e. I started buying the books again. I don't draw very much, or maybe my snapshots are my drawings. Anyway, I've always thought the best drawing is in comic books. So painting those brilliant covers was a kind of removed drawing or a homage to drawing. Does that make any sense? This was at the same time when there were all sorts of great graphic novels and underground stuff coming out, but I've always been more attracted to the mainstream books.

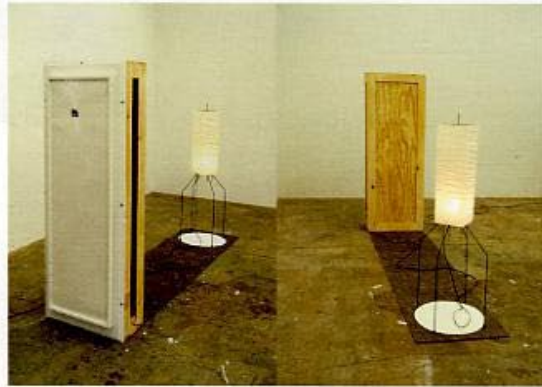
JB: I collected Marvel and DC as a kid, then discovered Crumb as a teenager and traded all my superhero stuff for underground comix. I think some of the best artists working today are making comics. Rick Altergott, the guy who makes *Doofus*, is a total genius. Reading comics has definitely informed my work, particularly this new stuff. After I had installed the show at Peres, I was standing in the middle of the room and I realized that the paintings felt like individual panels from a comic book. Back to that repressed expressionism, your crates are getting this mannered, painterly look.

DB: I'm throwing buckets of paint and resin at them. Most of that gets sanded off, there's a lot of editing and erasure that's very traditional, painterly—

JB: This is all pretty recent, right? Is this something you've been denying yourself?

DB: When I came to New York in the '70s, I really looked up to a generation of artists older than I was: Mary Heilmann, Ree Morton, John Torreano, David Diao, and a bunch of other artists you probably wouldn't know. I looked an awful lot at what might loosely be called lyrical abstraction and I played with it when I was a student, and I stunk. I also want to paint abstract gouaches. I've made stabs at it for 20 years, and it never quite works or feels right. It may just be a matter of the little homunculus in the back of my brain still figuring out how to paint them. But I still want to express that stuff.

I saw CANADA's booth down in Miami at NADA, where you collaborated with Eunice Kim. It was about the most exciting booth there. Do you like collaborating?



JB: It can be fun. In general I prefer working on my own.

DB: And nobody wants to own a collaboration.

JB: Yeah, of course. Collaborations sometimes seem more useful to the artists involved than to the viewer. But they're nice because you get a chance to let go of your ego a little. You don't have to take responsibility for every decision made, which can be a freeing experience.

DB: You and Eunice did a show together at ATM, when it was on Avenue B more than a few years back, that seemed to presage both your and Eunice's recent solo shows and the Miami collaboration.

JB: Yeah, *Joy to the Max*. I liked that show. It ended up looking more like Eunice's work than mine, in retrospect. I was the de facto editor in our combo. I was the guy saying no, no, no, no, no. Eunice will throw just about anything in there. Like I said, it was nice because it didn't have to make any sense as far as my own body of work and my own practice or whatever.

DB: I think we're getting into trouble with this thing.

JB: Yup, we're fucked.

DB: Probably. Oh, no, we've still got another bottle. *(laughter)*