

Joe Bradley Duckling Fantasy

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If you ask Joe Bradley how he became interested in art, this is what he will say:

“ I've always enjoyed drawing. When I was a kid, I would draw all the time. Cars, monsters, naked girls... fantasy stuff. When I got to school I didn't know anything about painting. My main area of interest at the time was comics. I was really into Chas Addams. I think I could have made it as a gag cartoonist, but somehow painting took over. I still love a lot of the stuff I was loving 15 years ago, but I'm always looking for something new too.”

Although it is sometimes difficult to uncover direct references to comics in Bradley's recent paintings, this is a lot easier in his drawings on paper. It is a technique which the artist loves using and which plays a key role in his paintings. Following on his early interest in comics, he sometimes invites his friends' children to work with him on some of his drawings, notably for a fanzine called *Tuff Stuff*.

Nevertheless, there is clearly still something childlike in Bradley's paintings, something linked to the energy emerging from the true pleasure of painting and the use of motifs that can seem slightly regressive, primitive or poorly executed, like giant doodles.

But as Joe Bradley himself says, he does not like repeating himself. He will focus on one or other series of works for a while before moving on to other motifs. He has no fixed programme in particular, and is happy to follow the natural evolution of his work, which leads him wherever it so pleases.

Thus, the first series of works he showed in 2006 consisted of monochrome paintings of various colours and sizes which were assembled together on the wall or on the floor. Thus arranged, they formed silhouettes composed of highly schematized torsos, legs, arms and heads. For some observers, it was a critical rereading of the minimal monochrome experimentations after the fashion of Ellsworth Kelly or Imi Knoebel, more ironic than the latter, although technically less perfect.

Presented in 2008, the second series of works was entitled *Schmagoo Paintings* (“schmagoo” is slang for heroin). This series did away with the early interpretations that had been given of the artist's practice. These pieces were indeed minimal works, but in a figurative register (an arrow, a mouth), and they no longer had anything to do with large coloured surfaces. These pieces consisted of a few black strokes on blank canvases. More recently, Joe Bradley has also produced very large silk-screen prints representing human figures in Egyptian-style poses, figures which in fact illustrate the shadowgraphs drawn from a magazine on how to break-dance.

The selection of works he is currently presenting at the Almine Rech Gallery is part of a new ensemble, consisting of large-scale paintings on unprepared canvases and for which he used oils, oil sticks and pencils.

As he explains, the artist did not handle these canvases with the utmost care:

“They are very rough. I've really been putting them through the ringer, so to speak. I've worked on them unstretched, mostly on the floor of my studio. They are abused. Walked on. When a painting won't cooperate, I wad it into a big ball and forget about it for a while. Although they could be read as abstract paintings, the human body is in there somewhere”.

These giant new paintings radiate both colour and dirt, and bear the traces of the somewhat performative process they went through. Their physical presence emanates something that is both primitive and great fun, between abstract expressionism and grunge, craftsmanship and pleasure. It is as if they mirrored Bradley's vision of the world as something “chaotic, full of contradictions and miscommunication”. As he says: “Humor is important. There's no humor in heaven, but here on earth we need laughs.”.

Nicolas Trembley