

Art in America

Cave Painter: Joe Bradley

by Yasha Wallin 01/05/11

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The new works, whose vocabulary draws from Basquiat, Guston and Paleolithic cave paintings, are for "Mouth and Foot Painting," Bradley's first show at Gavin Brown Enterprise. A separate show, "Human Form," opens across town at his longtime gallery, CANADA, a week later. After graduating from RISD in 1999, Bradley's work has shown subtle variety in size and levels of referentiality, but he's always left their symbols and impacts open to the viewer. This loose approach to his droopy canvases might make you imagine Bradley as the underdog, even as he approaches universal themes and codes.



YASHA WALLIN: What work is left for you to do in advance of the forthcoming shows?

JOE BRADLEY: It's going OK. I'm still wrestling with a couple of them. As luck would have it, the largest pieces in the show keep giving me grief.

WALLIN: Are you treating the CANADA and Gavin Brown shows the same?

BRADLEY: No, this is work for Gavin Brown. The CANADA show is different. It's not painting—well, I guess it's painting, but it's not... like this.

WALLIN: What does that mean?

BRADLEY: It's a surprise. No, it's not. They're silk screens. They're these kind of silhouetted figures in kind of ridiculous Egyptian-style poses.

WALLIN: Is that a reaction to CANADA's tomb-like gallery space?

BRADLEY: I'm not sure why [the work] ended up divided like that. There's just more space at Gavin's, and the paintings are fairly large. And CANADA is so game. It's a good place to test things out. They're wonderful when it comes to that, and they don't ask too many questions.

WALLIN: The symbolism in your paintings has always seem to invoke incredible simplicity. With their scratchy rendering biomorphic forms, these newer works seem to take on "primitivism" as their avatars. They look like cave paintings.

BRADLEY: "Primitive," that word has been coming up...whatever you say... To me, there's usually a tether to the body, or a part of the body. I mean that one [POINTS] reads like a cock and balls to me. Then again, I don't know. Sometimes people will pick up on that and then sometimes it just comes off as entirely abstract. I hold onto the body because I just can't make an abstract painting. There's just always a story that I have to make happen.

WALLIN: Your earlier work seems very masculine—video game renderings of generic but male athletic figures, for instance. Some of your newer work—Triangletits, at Peres Projects—have taken on new more feminine biomorphisms.



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WALLIN: After the 2008 Whitney Biennial, you stopped working with monochrome panels, and moved to untreated canvas and linen. What precipitated the change?

BRADLEY: I met some interesting people through that, and some interesting opportunities came up. It was the end of the line for those modular pieces. They were a lot of pre-production. There wasn't a lot of play involved once formal decisions were made. I wanted the freedom that a painter has to let anything happen in the space of a rectangle.

WALLIN: Would you say the subsequent paintings are about release?

BRADLEY: Relatively speaking. I try to go into it with no idea. So theoretically anything could happen. Anything can happen! All of these [paintings] have work on both sides so a lot of the stuff you see is kind of like bleeding from the other side. It ends up being a

competition. Usually one wins. And sometimes both sides lose and I fold the canvas up and put it away.

WALLIN: Often, you conceive titles first, which dictate the painting's outcome, correct?

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WALLIN: I first saw your work at Kenny Schachter's in 2003, shortly after your first show with him. There was this beautiful circular painting surrounded by a rope that hung in his office. All the work there was relatively small. Over the years, your paintings have grown in scale. Is that decision making about means?

BRADLEY: I don't know about the scale thing. Once you start making paintings at this scale it gets difficult to make smaller paintings. They feel hemmed in. But you don't want to come off as heroic. Earlier, I was interested in hand-held object-like, little paintings. And that's changed. Mostly it's a matter of putting yourself in uncomfortable situations. And this scale is harder for me to manage. But I think this is as big as it goes. There's a limit to it, as far as I can tell, and it gets absurd, or obnoxious.

WALLIN: You recently became a dad.

BRADLEY: He'll be a year in February. He's great. And [my girlfriend] Valentina has a six-year-old boy, Leif, who is a terrific child. So we have two boys. There's lots of testosterone in our little apartment. Not counting me, I don't have that much testosterone to offer.

WALLIN: Has having kids around changed how you work?

BRADLEY: One has to manage time more efficiently. But I've been wondering about this very question lately. I think that in my day-to-day life I have to really have my feet on the ground, and the studio is becoming more of a place to come and dream. I mean not that my life outside of the studio isn't fun. Harmony [Korine] and I were talking about this; he has a young kid and the movie that he made after becoming a father was *Trash Humpers*. It didn't seem like he's losing his edge or anything. He's just getting more and more bizarre, but now more people are involved.

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