

JOE BRADLEY *Lotus Beaters*

GAVIN BROWN'S ENTERPRISE | MAY 17 – JUNE 29, 2013

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Joe Bradley's solo exhibition, *Lotus Beaters*, features an array of the divisive New York artist's drawings and monumentally large paintings. One could separate the show into three distinct movements, delineated by the confines of each room in the exhibition space. Upon entering, the viewer is greeted by a single wall on which four massive, painted canvases hang; these pieces seem to be the most chaotic. "Muggles #3" (2013), involves large, vaguely geometric swathes of gray, white, pink, and black, resting atop a more defined, figurative series of thick brown and black strokes. The background for this strangely organic scene is an unprimed canvas, spread imperfectly across its simple frame, as though to emphasize the creases and warps in its surface that most painters seek to obliterate with coats of gesso and fastidious stretching. Closer examination yields a gold mine of tactile imperfections: shoe prints crisscrossing the surface, bits of loose thread hopelessly stuck and halfblowing in the air conditioning, thick clots of paint and detritus, hesitation marks of all sorts, dirt, and oily bleedthrough from what may be some secret masterpiece hidden on the reverse of the canvas.

After viewing several of these blurry, primal behemoths resting on creased, dirt-caked backgrounds, it seems apparent that we are meant to become aware of this typically invisible surface thanks to Bradley's clear refusal to treat the canvas as something pristine. Such a nod to the potential of this simple material somehow makes the artist's hand visible in a way that the pervasive, overt brush strokes can't; perhaps it is in the act of truly exposing the complete nature of his painting process, rather than

simply presenting one concept or gesture, or seeking to conjure an emotion, that Bradley's images refute the label of Abstract Expressionist so casually lobbed at some of his recent work. The concept of "transparent process" painting, which unflinchingly exposes the viewer to the entirety of its existence, from its origins as canvas lying on a studio floor through to its conclusion stretched on a wall, is a curious concept—especially as art in this digital age holds the potential to become increasingly seamless.

Bradley's work revels in its exposed seam, which seems to be the overarching theme in the second room of the exhibition. "Repo" (2013) reveals a method of editing in which canvases have been stitched together mid-form, interrupted by a swatch of blank (but slightly dirty) canvas. This action suggests that Bradley has excised parts of paintings that didn't work, instead patching in sections from other canvases, creating a sort of Franken-painting that functions as a unified piece (and a figure that now seems to be in motion, thanks to the addition of a canvas patch marked with dry, frantic, and red brush strokes).

In the final room, "Love Boat" (2013), further expands on the Franken-painting concept, combining four rectangular panels of equal sizes, one blank, one with a cut off vivid blue organic shape stretching across the top horizon, one packed with perfectly shaped yellow circles, and the last containing a dynamic brown figure atop crisp black lines, partially filled in with blue. The piece as a whole suggests a narrative—the forced combination of distinct and quite different images feels something like pieces of unrelated filmstrips taped together that, once run through a projector,

would somehow make logical sense as a short story in which the figure sails across a bright seascape. "Untitled" (2013) pulls the viewer away from narrative and back toward the figure and the artist's process. Here a bright green organic shape dominates the center of one paint and matter-flecked panel, but it is surrounded on three sides by a vast, imposing field of blank canvas. This functions as a natural segue into the final wall of the show, consisting of 40 simple drawings of similar size, most dominated by central figures, all marked by thick, clean, and assured lines.

Bradley's work is almost casually raw; not in process—his process is irrefutably "finished"—but in intensity. There is an unavoidable smashing of the fourth wall in his paintings—the viewer is given a sense of his studio practice and even how paint-caked the soles of his shoes might be after examining a piece. Yet his drawings are pristine, almost defiantly so, when placed adjacent his manhandled painted works; it doesn't seem presumptuous to say that an artist's small sketches are generally less refined, polished, and restrained than his or her gigantic, finished paintings. Bradley's paintings, however, offer a far more candid and intimate glimpse into his brain in motion than his carefully presented, detached drawings, and one might wonder how or why a carefully wrought large-scale work could feel less polished than a simple sketch. It's a curious odyssey into this world of Bradley's. ☞

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