

OCTOBER 2016

CLOSE-UP

SCRAWL SPACE

DAN NADEL ON JOE BRADLEY'S "KRASDALE," 2016



Joe Bradley, *Mother and Child*, 2016, oil on canvas, 83 × 101"

THREE RECTANGLES of blue, yellow, and black underpin Joe Bradley's *Mother and Child*, 2016. In the top left corner of the painting, a yellow crescent is crowned, or perhaps being eclipsed, by a great gray disc, and strokes of red shore up the circular forms. This might feel like familiar modernist territory. But look closer: Weirdness seeps in.

At the far left edge of the canvas, a violence of red and black strikes a patch of tan. In the center, a single red stroke obscures a second yellow crescent. Blurts of green intrude into the blue, as does a substratum of yellow, which lurks in the blue and black areas. Step back from the work, let its design dissipate and the blue field recede: The doubled discs become heads, or perhaps wheels, and that brushy black space opens up like a stage, containing so many tones, strokes, scrapes, and flourishes that it seems to await an actor's entrance. If it is a narrative space, Bradley withholds obvious clues, diverting our attention with a title that refers to an obvious but nevertheless still powerful visual motif, just as he does with the tidily effective composition.

A recent show at Gagosian Gallery in New York titled "Krasdale" highlighted Bradley's particular way of suspending fixed meaning in his artwork. He is at once earnestly engaged with the narratives of emotive meaning and autobiography and also aware of the humor and absurdity of seeking and depicting those modes via painting. Balancing these two states of mind, Bradley creates a narrative arc across media that has, as its backbone, a particular kind of cartoon drawing. Cartoon not so much in the Pop or comic sense, but rather in its definition as an efficient, open-ended, shorthand mode of drawing, and as the scaffolding for representation in any media. Bradley's cartoon line veers into abstraction and out the other side, unscathed. Narrative always seems on the verge of coalescing, or perhaps on the verge of breaking down.

Bradley's work over the past dozen years shares breath with Philip Guston's turn toward the figurative that began in the early 1960s and culminated later that decade with works that both embraced and examined the limits of '20s comic-strip languages—using a knobby knee, for example, as a departure for a picture about psychological fragility.

Two other lodestars for Bradley are H. C. Westermann and, in Bradley's most recent abstractions, Alexander Calder. Westermann, like Guston, examined his life and surroundings via a graphic contour and decidedly unorthodox approach to sculpture, which grounded surreal juxtapositions in immaculate craftsmanship and North American vernacular symbols. Calder, who in his '50s and '60s cosmos paintings used imperfectly rendered geometric forms to create a whimsical galaxy, was, like Bradley, Westermann, and Guston, a master of scale and the provisional line.

All of these concerns and references are visible in another complex painting from "Krasdale," *Day World*, 2016. A mountainous black wave bisects the picture, engulfing the bottom half of a windblown fleshy circle and rimming the top of a thickly painted green orb sitting in a yellow clutch. The connection between these two orbs, or heads, is both narrative and compositional. *Day World* asks us to imagine what the two heads are talking about, there in those monumental, variable spaces. Who said what to whom, and why? They may indeed be related to the floating forms we see in early 1963 in Guston's work, or just as easily to the orbs in Calder's starscapes. Here, Bradley does not appropriate these painters, but rather joins them—his antic cartoon sense drains the angst from Guston and the whimsy from Calder, leaving behind bemused mystery.

Mother and Child and *Day World* are carefully ambiguous paintings, conceived to reward multiple viewings, uncanny in how determinedly they escape easy contemporary readings as riffs on modernism's various ends. They defy being understood as fashionable nods to technology, networks, immateriality—all those things by which some artists conceive of relevance. Bradley's mode of painting, like those of his peers Michael Williams, Amy Sillman, and Chris Martin, is indifferent to notions of historical inevitability, aesthetic hierarchies, or medium-specific rules. In this sense, he was a perfect fit for the Museum of Modern Art's 2014–15 exhibition "The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World"—embodying the idea of historical suspension put forth by curator Laura Hoptman. And because Bradley's sensibility manifests in so many kinds of visuals, looking at a broad swath of his work can be frustrating if one is searching for a clean narrative.

Instead, Bradley is best tracked via the line of the cartoon, carrying his sensibility from one medium to the next, muddying the waters of any divide between drawing, painting, and sculpture. He revels in those smudged distinctions—in the uncertainty of his pictorial world and process, the flux of it. His physically imposing, ominous, robot-like "Modular" works, begun in the mid-2000s, are, in spirit, cartooned examinations of the absurdity of blankness and the categories of painting and sculpture. And in his "Schmagoo Paintings," 2008–2009 (displayed in the MoMA show) he replaced pencil and pen with grease pencil, and the elbow motion of drawing with the full-body movement of gestural painting, in order to make potent, seemingly broken-down cartoon icons of masculine turmoil (Superman, Jesus Christ, caveman stick figure) at a scale normally reserved for more self-serious painting. The "Schmagoo" works are among the finest and most nakedly emotional paintings of the past decade, but they are also absurd, funny, and knowing.

The "Schmagoo" series explicitly highlighted Bradley's comic-drawing mode. But all of Bradley's paintings are underpinned by his drawings, which, in their immediate brain-to-page feel, remind me on the one hand of Henri Michaux's mescaline-induced works on paper and on the other of the thousands upon thousands of pages of drawings in R. Crumb's sketchbooks. Crumb, a favorite of Bradley's, is a prime example of an artist who drew on decades of popular art (from James Gillray to Little Lulu) to arrive at multiple modes of rendering. And like Crumb, Bradley is related to a larger lineage of the scrawl that stretches back a century—yearbook doodles, cement inscriptions, fanzine illustrations, barroom graffiti, CB-radio cards, Tijuana bibles. Krasdale, the house-brand supermarket supplier, could also stand in as a home for this universally understandable scribble. This kind of drawing tends to be "dumb," but no less pleasurable than its sophisticated sources. It's here that we find artists such as George Hansen, who, like other hippies in North America and Europe, produced Crumbesque underground comic books in the '70s with titles like *Choice Meats*, which treated Crumb's cartooning as an all-purpose vernacular. As if embodying Hansen's zeitgeist, in 2011 Bradley himself produced "Natch Suite," a group of six canvases each silk-screened with a German bootleg image of Crumb's Mr. Natural character. Another countercultural scrawl habitué was Fugs founder Tuli Kupferberg, who published Beatnik drawings with gag lines, like wonderfully stoned abstractions of New Yorker cartoons. While Michaux was experimenting with drug-hazed automatic drawing and abstraction in order to cleanse and make sense of himself, Crumb and the scrawl artists were trying to communicate in an established set of languages. Bradley does both.



Joe Bradley, *Day World*, 2016, oil on canvas, 77 × 101".

His drawings are one-take affairs in swift and confident calligraphic strokes. He will draw and redraw the same images, discarding sheet upon sheet until he arrives, after hours or days or weeks, at just the right version. They are frequently funny and always revealing—antic manifestations of an artist's psyche. A car crashing into what looks like a bathtub could be Exhibit A in any parenting nightmare scenario (bathtub drowning, car crash), while a giant hand sprung from mountains in front of a stick figure couldn't spell out artistic anxiety more clearly.

The directness of narrative in Bradley's drawings becomes the surreal design of his recent turn to sculpture. His sculptures are less interested in occupying their contemporary (and loaded) category of art than they are in bringing drawing off the wall and into open space. They give spatial presence to Bradley's cartoon impulses. A ridiculously chunky boot (shades of Crumb and Guston pulling from Mutt and Jeff) placed daintily next to a thrift-store lamp, a Jamaican-style carving of a Rasta head driving a wooden toy car—these are gag cartoons made real, with the goofy humor of the old arrow-through-the-head. They are funny because they look funny. And they sit well with the drawings because Bradley, like Westermann before him, is following his sensibility into sculpture and enacting it in works that use and sometimes resemble the vernacular objects from which they draw inspiration.

The weird beauty of Bradley's recent large and highly colorful paintings expands on the psychology of his drawings. They're made with thick brushes (a change from the artist's earlier preference for oil sticks, grease pencils, and rollers) in order to engage the edges of the surface and to more aggressively activate his broad expanses of color by visibly pushing and pulling the paint across the canvas. Where Bradley is linear on paper, these paintings absorb and solidify those pictorial ideas into shapes, transforming images and achieving a brutish elegance. A wheel from that bathtub-crashing-car drawing migrates to *Canton Rose*, 2016, while the nervous, glancing chicken and lunging insectoid caught between a wheel and a fan in two 2016 Untitled drawings seem to manifest as errant underdrawings, or unconscious muscle-memory cartooning, amid the deep blacks of *Earth Show*, 2016, a painting dominated by a spacious and variably colored black bracket. And while they incorporate the lessons learned from drawing, these paintings are not about scrawl or speed. They are slow works—painstaking agglomerations of colors and shapes coalescing to the moment when they are all read to play with one another.

In *Earth Show* (and, to a lesser extent, *Canton Rose* and *Baba*, 2016), Bradley, pictorial tool kit firmly in hand, edges closer to the cosmic abstraction of Calder's paintings—a green earth, a blue sea, and black space—but is unwilling to name an actual locale for these things. He prefers interpretative strangeness to concrete symbolism. Why a bathtub?

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Why a green sphere? In Bradley's work, these two elements exist together without the need for seamless explanation. There are red specks or blue skeins where the "earth" touches its containers, and a small riot of colors whenever a horizon appears. There is no illusion of smooth transitions, communal points, or calm spaces, no meditative blackness that doesn't contain the ghost of a crashing car. The scrawl goes on, finding new and surprising forms, but never resolving them into a singular narrative or settling into ease of use or interpretation. It is, for some of us, a reassuringly anxious vision.

Dan Nadel is a writer and curator based in Brooklyn. His most recent projects include the exhibitions "Suellen Rocca: Bare Shouldered Beauty, Works from 1965 to 1969" (currently on view at Matthew Marks, New York) and "What Nerve! Alternative Figures in American Art, 1960 to the Present" (Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art, 2014–2015, and Matthew Marks, New York, 2015).