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Joe Bradley, *Jubilee*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 108 x 144 inches

Joe Bradley Begins Again

Joe Bradley has been having solo shows in New York galleries since 2003. But his latest at Petzel — his first in six years — feels like the first show of the rest of his career.

His new paintings are strong-colored works that balance gracefully between representation and abstraction. They may be the most conventional of Bradley's career, but they are also the most engaging.

Bradley devoted the first decade of his CV to what might be called ironic, anti-painting paintings. They were post-conceptual and challenging: You had to decide if they qualified as paintings. The best of these bare-minimum works was a series of enormous raw canvases that boasted a single motif outlined in

black oil crayon. While monumental, they had the intimacy of doodles and were drawn all at once without adjustments, which was impressive.

Then came a transitional phase during which Bradley started applying paint with a wide brush to dirty canvases whose footprints and paint drips were part of the composition. These were rough and beautifully scaled. But the play of intention against accident was familiar, from somewhere between Julian Schnabel and Abstract Expressionism.

Not by coincidence, Bradley's trajectory accelerated: In 2011 he left Canada, after three solos, for Gavin Brown's enterprise and another three. In 2016 he joined Gagosian, a pinnacle of success not known for carefully handling younger artists. After one show in New York and three elsewhere, he left in 2021.

Now Bradley is just making paintings, self-aware, funny but unironic. He covers most of the canvas, working with a narrower brush, which eliminates big gestures and pulls you close to the surface. The colors are of equal heat; white lines course through them, creating shapes, separating areas into broad patchworks that include mountain-like profiles or suggestions of flat fields. This happens most poetically in "Jubilee," where three fields of different greens and two mountains wobble between flat and deep.

Now there are adjustments aplenty; often he brushes one color over another, or adds clusters of dots to this or that shape. There's a marked disinterest in closing anything off; glimpses of what's beneath are actively present.

Art history is evoked obliquely. Toward the center of "Fool's Errand," a rectangle of dark blues brightened by some white dots floats above a field of red; it's a Monet in a box.

The center of "Cameo" is a skirmish of bright yellow, jabs and dots in red and two black lines. The battlefield is a pair of big overlapping crosses, black and red, amped-up versions of those of the Russian Constructivist Kazimir Malevich. Elsewhere, motifs seem to have just materialized in the process, like the suggestion of a brown face wreathed in laurel and the pizza slice in "Outline."

This show is titled "Bhoga Marga," which Bradley translates from Sanskrit as "the enduring path of experience." The question that hovers overhead is not "Is this a painting?" but "How was this painting made?" The answer is clear: The artist made it up as he went along, point by point, in a continuous circuit of looking and thinking (or feeling) and doing. You need only open eyes to retrace his steps.