

Mutable Approach to

Joe Bradley has learned that showing up faithfully—and sometimes just switching tools—can lead to unexpected breakthroughs.

THROUGH TWO DECADES of sustained practice **Joe Bradley** 99 PT has shown himself to be anything but predictable in the studio. “Even dedicated fans of his work have inevitably faltered at one or another of his forking paths over the past 20 years,” notes **Cathleen Chaffee**, chief curator at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, NY. “Bradley... shifts gears without pause: from starkly minimalist to gestural abstract paintings, from discomfiting assemblage sculptures to boldly graphic silkscreens and from jagged, sometimes comic drawings to obdurate geometric sculptures.”

A large-scale survey exhibition of Bradley’s work—organized by and first shown at the Albright-Knox and now on view through January 28 at the Rose Art Museum in Waltham, MA—offers an opportunity to see the “conceptual connective tissue” behind his divergent approaches. “I think that time moves slower in painting,” the artist says by way of explanation. “And maybe that accounts for a lot of the anxiety around painting in the last 40 or 50 years. You have... everything moving at this breakneck speed [but] painting is still walking. It’s just a very human activity that takes time.”

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Making

The following exchange between Bradley and fellow artist **Carroll Dunham** is excerpted from a longer conversation published in the exhibition catalogue. It sheds light on the interesting breakthroughs—some minor, others major—that keep artists coming back to the studio day in and day out.

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CARROLL So when you went to [RISD],...do you remember what started to grab you about painting? Were there particular teachers or artists who caused that?

JOE Well, when I got to RISD I found that I just really enjoyed looking at painting, thinking about painting. And I hadn't absorbed that much in the way of art history, so there were a couple of years there when it was like a feast, just getting to discover the whole thing.

Historical things?

Yes. I spent a lot of time at the library. I was really into underground comics at the time—the '60s stuff, R. Crumb and the Zap guys. So I gravitated toward Pop art. Claes Oldenburg, Peter Saul, the Hairy Who....

There's a clear bridge.

Yeah, it's not much of a stretch.

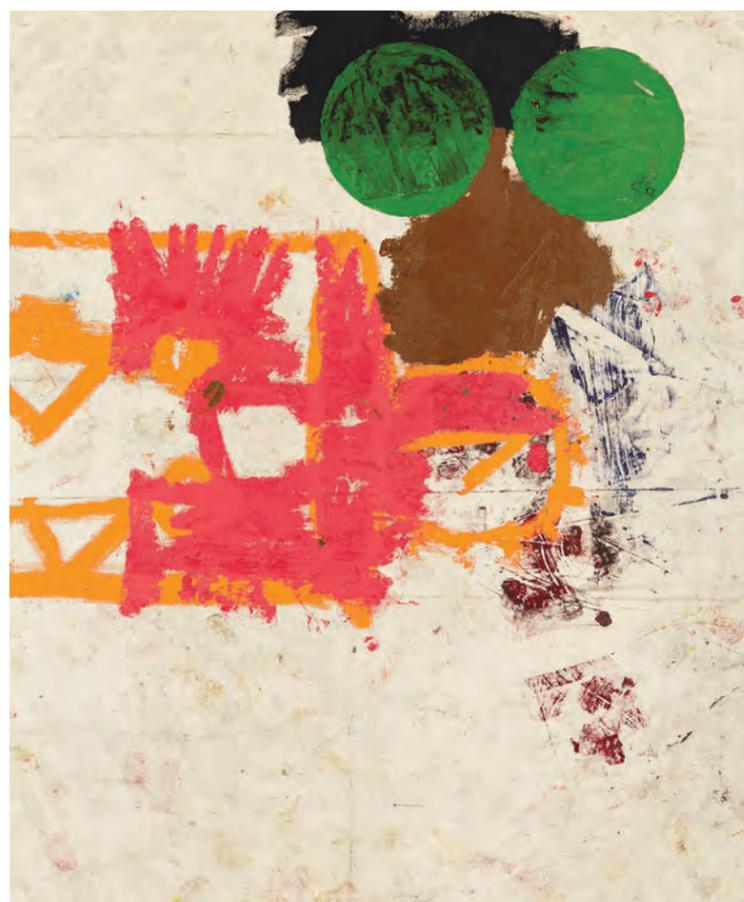
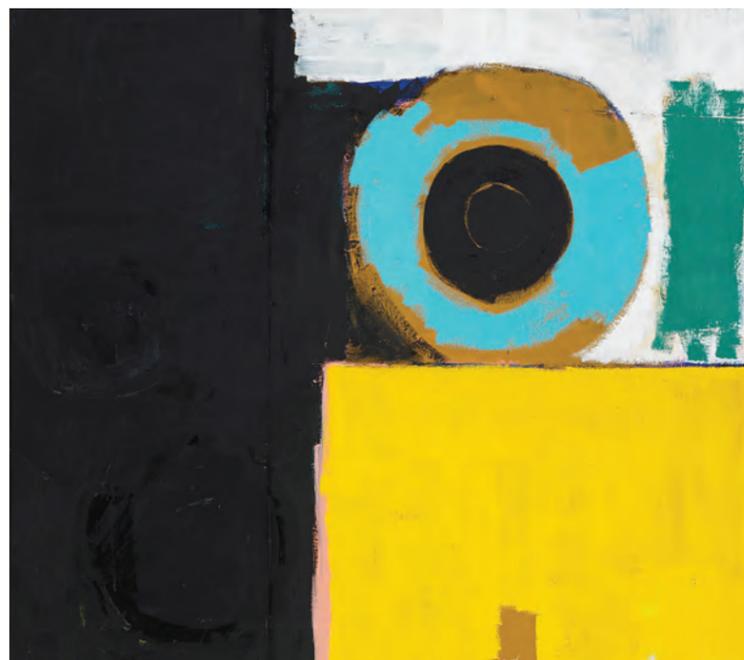
Were you making work when you were at RISD that was under the influence of the Hairy Who?

Kind of. I was making these sort of goofy, cartoony, quasi-abstract paintings. Funny shapes. Then around junior year I had what felt like a breakthrough, at least at the time: I started painting landscapes.

I had no real interest in landscape as subject matter, so there was a kind of remove—a distance between the work and me. There was something empowering in that. I remember painting this harbor scene, sort of in the style of Thomas Kinkade, and it really felt like "Art."

Can you remember what was driving that?

I was frustrated. I felt hemmed in by my own personality. At this time in my life I was playing around with identity... so introducing a sort of role-playing was exciting.



opening spread:
Untitled (2006–07,
gouache on paper,
11 x 8½") and The
Fisherman's Friend
(2006, acrylic on
canvas in four parts,
105½ x 36" overall)

left: Canton Rose
(2016, oil on canvas,
86 x 96") and Maag
Areal (2015, oil on
canvas, 94 x 78")

right: untitled works
shown in 23 Skidoo,
a 2014 show at Karma
in Amangansett, NY



When you finally got out of your art-school head and got into your grown-up-artist head did you start to feel [part of an arts] community here in New York?

Well, it was good to have friends—to find like-minded people. None of us was working too hard at that point, so it was easygoing. It wasn't competitive.

Having a place to exhibit really ups the ante. Seeing your work outside of the studio, in a public place—the problems become pronounced. You see where you fell short and then you clean things up the next time around.

I think some people get really crushed by that, and other people find it very energizing. Obviously you weren't crushed by it.

I enjoy it, for the most part. My first couple of shows got no response at all.

Meaning no one wrote about them?

No one wrote about them. Nothing sold. That was, you know—demoralizing.

Pretty much the artist's life.

One let-down after another.

Exactly. As we now know, that's pretty much how it goes.

[Making art is] a peculiar form of communication. You make these things alone in a room, then leave them alone in another room. It's difficult to know whether you are connecting or not....

I think artists find who they are through community, really. It's something I wonder a lot about with the change that so-called social media has brought. It's easy to think you're having contact with people and things when you're not, really. Can the same kind of things happen?

I wonder. I find the social media phenomenon totally alienating. There's something manic about it.

In the end, there is no substitute for being in the same room with another human being. Or for visiting a friend's studio and just hashing it out. I don't think social media can provide that kind of intimacy.

“So changing tools—working with a brush on stretched canvas—was a way of pressing reset.”

When you were working with CANADA gallery and beginning to have exhibitions, do you remember a point when you sort of felt like, “I’m really an artist now”? Was there ever a feeling of a phase shift?

The first show I had with CANADA, *Kurgan Waves*, felt “real” in the sense that people outside of my circle of friends saw it and responded to it. It was written about. I quit my day job.

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You seem to be in a phase where you really kind of know what you're meant to be doing and you're establishing quite a large territory for it. Does it feel like that?

On a good day, yes. I do feel a momentum in my work. One thing leads to another, paintings suggest more paintings.

They have to feel a certain way in order to work for you?

I want them to feel like they have always been there, if you know what I mean.

The first time I came to your studio you had all these canvases—very large things—spread over the floor and I had an image of you walking around in your stocking feet dropping material onto large areas.... Now, there are a lot of stretched canvases on the wall, taking up vertical pictorial space, like paintings. To me, it's like you're owning the fact that these things exist as paintings and that you're working on them this way all the way through.

Yeah, I am attempting a more “proactive” approach. Part of it is just practical. I was getting tired of crawling around on my hands and knees all day. I had a sense that I was hitting a wall with that body of work—that I was relying too heavily on accident.

So changing tools—working with a brush on stretched canvas—was a way of pressing reset.

When I started making these paintings, I knew I wanted to work on stretched canvas and I knew I wanted to use a brush. I wanted large passages of color that extended to the edge of the painting. I wanted the painting to project into the room in a more assertive manner... all of these formal things. But I didn't know what they would look like until I painted them.

As for the scruffy quality [you mentioned earlier], I do like the surface to feel fucked up. It's like a kink. There's a part of me that wishes I could just make beautiful paintings like Brice Marden or something... but I'm kind of an asshole and that should be addressed—or at least acknowledged—in the work.

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left: Bradley's Brooklyn studio and East Coker (2013, oil on canvas, 100 x 102")

right: Despair (2017, bronze, 13 1/2 x 9 x 10 1/2") and Untitled (2016, charcoal on paper, 24 x 23")



“I take issue with the notion that I am ‘expressing’ myself at all.... I’m more comfortable with the idea that I’m channeling—or facilitating—in some way.”

The thing that I find so interesting about what you're up to is that I don't think you're illustrating a position. I think you're finding it by doing it.... Your approach to me seems.... about actually participating in what has to happen in order to even have anything to say about it....

Right. That's what makes an interview like this difficult. Or getting up and speaking in front of students or something. I'm not sure I have anything to say. I can kind of talk around it.

Well, we're living through a period of time when there is... an expectation that all of this can be translated into verbiage that would actually “explain” what you're doing. Mostly what we've been talking about here is what it feels like to

be an artist, how things get made, the fact that you have to show up every day in order to see a result. That's very different from having ideas and then illustrating them.

I take issue with the notion that I am “expressing” myself at all. At least it doesn't feel like that's what's happening. I'm more comfortable with the idea that I'm channeling—or facilitating—in some way.

I think there is a big change—a big development in your paintings within the last five years even though descriptively the parameters haven't changed that much. But whatever it is, you're homing in on it. I think it's very difficult to put the content of paintings like yours into language. Maybe you are just an asshole who likes to schmear paint around....

I just play one on TV.

No, but how would you know? I mean, you wouldn't know what your work was if you didn't make these.

It's mysterious—a life in art. It's a double life—or a decoy life, if you know what I mean. We can play out impulses in the studio that are considered unacceptable in “real” life. There's a great Flaubert quote: “Be regular and orderly in your life, so that you can be violent and original in your work.” I think that is sound advice. ■