



ASHLEY BICKERTON

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STEVE MILLER: *Your early work used a lot of corporate imagery, such as logos, that have been noticeably absent for many years, excluding the “Bickerton” logos on some of the frames from 2010. It seems like those ideas of the corporate invasion of aesthetics are truer than ever; the notion of the gallery as a brand like Gagosian, for example or an artist, like Koons, as a brand. Bickerton as a brand? Furthermore, commercialism has more than invaded Bali. Since you left New York, is that a theme you think has been explored enough? You have featured a garbage dump in Bali as well tourist bacchanal as the excesses of materialism in “paradise.” In a way, I see the other side of the same coin in this recent work. Any thoughts on these themes in relation to your art in the era of uber commercialism? Back to branding: Social media is also a branding tool and you have been using Facebook and sometimes Instagram. Recently, you posted (in jest) that you were done with Facebook and using Mixed Martial Arts to spar with the opposition. Would you like to elaborate on this?*

ASHLEY BICKERTON: For me one of the primary callings for a work of art is that it has the ability to speak, to speak in a real way about the world at large and everything in it. Why should literature, film or music monopolize the ability to address lost love, yearning, the novelty of experience, human inequity, or the subjugation of an entire race, while art sits mute on exclusive walls as little more than a decorous trifle or trophy? For this reason I have long distrusted abstract art after its initial radical outburst. An artwork issuing out of the art world’s particular system of distribution is inherently incapable of having its voice remain uncompromised and unfettered. These are the contradictions I was addressing back then in my mid 20’s. There was a feeling that the artwork was trapped and needed to rail against its containment. But in the end, the whole notion of an artwork describing its own compromise and conflict is akin to listening to the endless lament of a hypochondriac. Ultimately a dead end game. I needed to break the loop of self-referentiality in which I had cornered myself. Also, the idea of generating a recognizable product or style would have trapped me in the very branding I was criticizing. Since that time I have made several bodies of work I refer to as ‘landscape’. Landscape seemed the obvious antidote and way out of the “culturescapes” of the 80’s.

The art world of today is ironically a far more revved up and insidious version of the one I was critiquing, but there has always been something fundamentally amoral in my world view. Both work addressing the artwork itself, as well as the work addressing the making of ‘landscape’ as the integrity of that land in crisis, has never been about wagging fingers and tut-tut-tutting. I have always liked something Holland Cotter once said in a review, “(Bickerton)...offers a worldview that is basically an end-of-the-world view, beyond solution, beyond revulsion, blissed-out on the terrible wonder of it all.”

SM: *In your East Village days at Sonnabend gallery and in the media, you were often grouped with Koons and Hirst, which I suppose made sense 30 years ago. It also put you at the center of a movement, Neo-Geo being one of them. Today, these artists seem antithetical to everything you do. So, now you stand alone. Do you see that, or is there (or was there ever) a school to which you would be a member? Is being part of a school an interesting context for you? Do you work against it in any way? How would you explain your singularity?*

AB: Funny you bring this up. With the advent of his Whitney retrospective, I was just thinking about the fact that even though Jeff and I appear on the surface to be such different artists, if you look closely, you will see

that many shifts in our bodies of work over the years have been uncannily similar. It is true that I have spent an enormous amount of time and energy trying to escape the art world's initial convenient packaging of my work. It felt limiting and constraining, and ultimately false to always read the same lazy introduction to articles on my work. "The Hot Four" and "Neo Geo" monikers were an airless trap that stifled the free ranging movement and ultimate understanding of what I really wanted to say. Now, some three decades later, it all seems rather funny. As for Hirst and company, that is also rather funny. The media had me comfortably pegged with the Koons, Halley, Steinbach generation though I am considerably younger. My real social world consisted mainly of the artists of the generation that followed, the YBA's in Britain, and the generation of Landers, Currin, Barney and Yuskavage in NYC. So yes, I was very close to a lot of the YBA.s. There was actually a kind of British Mafia in place in New York that orbited around the legendary dinner parties thrown by Clarissa Dalrymple. Being a dual UK/US citizen, (and along with Koons, one of the two NY artists the young Brits really looked up to), I was a natural landing strip. Damien and I have remained very close over the years. With both him and Koons, I don't always see such disparity in our work, more so the individual directions we chose to take it all. Ultimately I need to stand alone. Many artists I admire are extremely individualistic, from William T. Wiley and Francis Alys to Jimmy Durham and David Hammons.

What is also amusing is the fact that back then there were real battle lines drawn across the East Village. The hot handed Neo Expressionists and their ilk were in ascendancy, while we, the cool cerebral and conceptually driven opposition, were mustering our forces for the final showdown. There was this very real sense of us and them which seems pretty comical today. In fact these days I feel a lot more kinship for some of the artists that were supposed to be the enemy, than some that were so-called allies manning the same cultural trenches.

SM: *Part of the reason for speaking with you is because this issue of Musée addresses the notion of ritual in all its forms. In your work I see the family outing, ritual drinking, the mating ritual and the morning after. These scenarios are inhabited by your creative inventions of a mad and out of control protagonist and his agreeable consorts. Are these your personal rituals and or your alter ego?*

The construction of these scenes have their origins in photography which is of particular interest to Musée Magazine. Your use of Photoshop and paint is transformative. Would you discuss the setup, the body painting of your characters and the use of photography to capture your theatrical stylization?

AB: I have often been asked if the blue fellow is me. No he is not, and that is why I have hired others (including an incredibly obese model) to play him as well. Does he have any of my traits and contradictions? Name a writer who can develop a central character that shares nothing with the author. I see the blue man as a refugee or an escapee from the 20th century suddenly adrift in this new millennia. He carries all the baggage of the 20th century's essentially European and male existential antihero. He is now adrift and somewhat befuddled in a far more relativist new century. The idea first came about after years of hearing reviewers and writers making references to Paul Gauguin, for the simple reason that we had both left the center of the art world in our day to build a new working life on some far flung tropical island. That is where the similarity ended. While I have always loved and admired the work of Gauguin, his enterprise and the Tahiti of his day could not have been more different than mine, and the snarling chaotic capitalist hell-bent new Asia I found myself in. But the comparisons kept coming till finally I said, "OK, you want Gauguin, I'm gonna give you Gauguin!" So I did, my way. I saw these not as pretty scenes, but images to decorate the apocalypse. This was end times work with absolutely no faith in any 400-year cannons. I was just happily counting down the clock on human stewardship of the planet. They were just big gaudy gallows humor as paintings with nothing better to do than enjoy the free-fall.

As for the more or less equal use of painting, photography and sculpture in a single artwork, this derives primarily from the fact that I am equally uncomfortable with all three. Painting feels too cartoony, photography too clinical, and sculpture very often presumptuous. It is only in the interface of all three that I can find my real artistic comfort zone. There is also the simple fact that I get bored very easily, so it works to break making of the artwork into several very different operations. There is nothing as mind numbing and drudge like as sitting for hours a day, day after day copying a photograph photo-realistically as I did for a full decade in the 90's. My process is divided into smaller very active and entertaining segments that include, making sculptures or painting directly on human models, photographing, Photoshop, and painting. You move your art as close as possible to your lifestyle choices, not the other way around.

SM: *While you take the photos and print them on canvas to be reworked as a painting, you have also*









Ashley Bickerton. Above: *Bed*, 2008. Following Spread: *Preparation with Green Sky*, 2010.

used photography as the final format of your work. I'm thinking specifically about a series, a few years back, done in black and white, a small edition that also included a specific frame to surround these images. Is there a distinction you make in letting the final artwork remain as a photograph as opposed to using them as a base for a painting?

AB: Not really. That was only one series. It happened that I had been invited to participate in my first art fair ever and I was being given a whole booth to boot. Since I believed that art fairs were grotesque carnivals of consumerism, I decided to play with that idea. The works were actually never originally intended to be artworks per se, but huge advertorials for a fictitious "me" to decorate the booth. It seemed everybody had these ideas that I was living in some primordial Eden blissfully existing and making art amongst the simple and sensual island folk. These were send-ups and they led directly to the blue man series.

SM: *In your most recent work, you start with a representational photograph and eventually move to near painterly abstraction as seen in your last show at Lehmann Maupin. What's interesting for me is that Titian, in one life time, went from the studied refined realism, as an assistant to Bellini, to loose paint handling and very atmospheric abstraction in his late work. You seem to be on a parallel path. I love the idea of comparing you to one of my favorite artists but this impulse to painterly abstraction was a process of both Titian and Monet as well. By the way, both suffered from poor eye sight in their old age. Have you been to an eye doctor lately? The question is; What's propelling this beautifully mad indulgence with painting?*

AB: Well, I am certainly flattered by the comparison to the great Venetian master, but sadly my eyesight is fine. I do think that many artists who begin their youthful journey with a desire to exercise real control over their medium seem to tire of it later in life. All through the 90's I used to sit 16 hour days, six days a week fighting against an ornery and bad tempered airbrush in the pursuit of perfectly realized hyper realistic paintings. As a result today I cannot stand to even look a photo-based realism. It seems like absolute donkeywork. The artists I have admired over the years have been many and the list is always in flux. Lately though, artists who evolved their language to an easy flowing patter that is capable of carrying great weight seem to ring the loudest.

SM: *Since you dabble in the visual deterioration of the flesh, do you want to comment on the mature artist looking out to the horizon of age? I want to contradict the last question and respond to your youthful athleticism. You are also well known as a devoted surfer, moving your studio to the best surf beach on Bali. I've seen the photos of you on monster waves in the pipe. Is surfing a ritual? Do you have other rituals in your life that have personal meaning? Your beach has been discovered. Your island is overrun. You are no longer anonymous. Gauguin had to embark for an island farther out. Are you planning the next move?*

AB: Dylan Thomas' "Do not go gentle into that good night" is a poem I often find myself muttering lately. My parents are both physically and mentally active well into their 80's; I hope to take it further. My career path and choices have been so complex that it may well take that amount of time to sort it all out and put it all into perspective. With all the risk-taking and self-destruction of my past, I was probably a good candidate to die young. I didn't, so now we go for the opposite extreme. That's how rock and rollers seem to do it, go out early, or stick around long past your sell date. And I didn't really choose tropical islands as such; I was born on one and grew up on a succession of others across the globe. Some flora thrives on alpine hillsides, others in humid brackish lowland swamp etc. This is just my natural habitat. NYC was something I did as long as I could take it. Love it madly, but some of us were not made for the harsh N.E. winters. My heart yearns for coconut trees and Trade Winds the way another's might yearn for the turning of the leaves.

The surfing is just something I grew up with in Hawaii. Many of my surfer friends live for other sports when not surfing, while I have no such interests beyond what I see as a cross between a lifestyle and possibly a mystical pursuit. It is an extremely difficult activity to pursue in one's later years. Competition and aggressive mind games with hungry 20 somethings for a very limited resource is the norm. Underwater beatings like a chew-toy being shaken in a doberman's mouth are at every corner. And then here in Bali is the ever-present flesh-loving reef lurking just below the surface. It takes all sorts of regimens from diet and nutrition to yoga, to stay in the game at a reasonable level beyond a certain age. But it is that endless sitting in the salty water staring deep into an empty horizon that is a constant form of solace, and may be the only religion I have ever known.



