

A Brilliant Contemporary Limner : 2011
From the 2011 catalogue of Brett Bigbee's show at Alexandre Gallery
by John Yau

Before focusing on Abby (2005-2010), which represents a major step in Brett Bigbee's relatively small but remarkable oeuvre, I want to sketch in a few salient details about his project. Bigbee paints meticulously detailed, life-size portraits, mostly of himself and his family, which deserve serious consideration for two related reasons. The first is that Bigbee is able to break free of all the clichés associated with the genre of portrait painting, as well as elevate it into a distinctive realm, which he established early in his career and has gone on to explore with increasing acuity. This brings me to the second reason, which is that his work is driven by long and repeated observation of his subjects, rather than by the sole use of photography (Chuck Close or Gerhard Richter) or the exercise of willful distortion and caricature (John Currin or Lisa Yuskavage). In a society that prizes production, the artist finishes between one and two paintings a year.

The act of rendering what he observes places him in the company of older contemporary artists that includes Europeans such as Peter Dreher, Antonio Lopez, and Isabella Quintanilla, as well as Americans such as Catherine Murphy, Philip Pearlstein, and Sylvia Plimack Mangold. Nearly a decade younger than the youngest of these extraordinary observational painters, Bigbee began defining and exploring his singular territory in the late 1980s, in paintings such as Spring (1988) and Ann with Plant (1990-1991). Drawing is key, the means through which Bigbee defines the look of his subject, the particular expression. His detailed graphite drawings lead to the paintings but at the same time form a distinct body of work within his oeuvre.

As the curator Sylvia Yount noted:

“In these and other works, Bigbee crossed the poetic style of the Italian primitif with early American variant through an emphasis on linear directness and frontality that, simultaneously, connoted a modern pictorial syntax.”[i]

Painting, Bigbee clearly believes, is about a heightened mode of looking borne out of curiosity and the desire to know and honor all one can about another individual. Working on a painting, often for years, Bigbee always places his labor-intensive process at the service of a particularizing expression, at once direct and elusive, relaxed and introspective, open to the world and yet separate from it. In the case of children, the look is also about change, the periods of awkwardness and transition that children and adolescents are constantly undergoing.

Until Bigbee began working on Abby (2005-2010), his models have been himself, his wife, and his two young sons. He has done full-length, frontal portraits of each, both nude and clothed, and a double full-length portrait of his sons. (Bigbee's large graphite drawing, Joe and James (2001-2003) is both a study for the slightly larger oil painting, Joe and James (2001-2003), and a work that stands on its own and—I might add—belongs in a museum.) The frontality of the poses endows the subjects with a self-possessed dignity, as well as underscores their willingness to be scrutinized so closely. Increasingly, Bigbee is looking for the natural moment when the subject relinquishes control and reveals something that the artist must be true to, something that tests his capacity to get it right. He shares something with the Dutch photographer, Rineke

Dijkstra, who said about her work: “I try and look for an uninhibited moment, where people forget about trying to control the image of themselves.”

In his desire to explore a brief moment and passing expression, Bigbee’s refusal to settle for any of the obvious choices—to generalize or caricaturize an individual’s features—is exemplary, and places in closer proximity not only to Dijkstra but also other contemporary photographers such as Katy Grannan and Sally Mann. Like them, he wants to both recognize and honor a telling instant when the subject is unaware of how he or she looks, and the self-protective armor of the pose fades away.

The bond between artist and subject is unspoken and paradoxical, with the space between them at once intimate and immense. This paradox is mirrored in the paintings, where the subject is simultaneously open to the viewer’s prolonged gaze and cosseted within the painting’s scrupulously described space. The recognition of this contradiction leads us to intuit other impossibilities that, to this viewer, at least, border on the metaphysical. For one thing, stillness and change lie at the heart of the artist’s portraits: the aching desire to slow time down is spelled out in carefully effaced brushstrokes, which literally and figuratively caress each surface and trace each contour. Bigbee’s labor -- an act of devotion -- is essential to the meaning of his work. This, more than anything else, is what distinguishes the painter’s work from that of the photographers.

Abby is the most accomplished painting of Bigbee’s career. The subject, a prepubescent girl clad in a flower-print bathing suit, is standing in the left foreground, before a landscape of dirt and leafy green plants that stretches back to a bay and the far shore. A crepuscular light suffuses the landscape, against which the girl glows, as if possibly lit from within. And yet we don’t read the disjuncture of light and dark as wrong; rather, it feels inherent to the rightness of the painting. The violet rubber ball that is lying on the ground a short distance from her bare feet underscores the sense of separateness underlying the painter’s vision. Both Abby and the ball, which also seems to glow, exist in their own world, even as they are connected by their illumination in the encroaching darkness. This feeling of separateness and unity resonates with the fact that the subject is on the brink of puberty; her awkwardness and sense of hesitation manifested through her insecure gaze and the unsure positioning of her right leg and left wrist. Her expression is a complex of emotions caught in an instant of time.

Abby is both an individual and an archetype—everything about her evokes the singularity of her being as well as the paradigms of Egyptian and Indian sculpture and Northern Renaissance painting. Bigbee recognizes that we are unique yet reoccur throughout history, that we are both our own personas and parts of a larger pattern. In Abby, he applies thin, transparent layers of ivory-colored paint over blue to get the skin tone just right. For all the importance he places on individual expression, he is not after likeness but something deeper and more comprehensive. His ability to render naturalness of the flesh and hair as convincingly as the artificial materiality of the bathing suit and rubber ball is nothing short of astonishing. Paint enables Bigbee to push back against time, and to honor those moments – their brew of innocence and awkwardness -- that we all endure. Abby is at once glorious and heartbreaking.