

Brett Bigbee: Paintings and Drawings 1989-1993: December 1993

By Jessica Nicoll

Portland Museum of Art

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Brett Bigbee's art echoes Gustave Courbet's declaration, "All I have tried to do is derive from a complete knowledge of tradition a reasoned sense of my own independence and individuality." Like the great French realist, Bigbee uses his knowledge of painting's traditions to create images that have relevance to contemporary life. His style marries subjects drawn from his personal life and immediate surroundings with such diverse elements as Italian Renaissance techniques of paint layering, early American portraiture's unvarnished directness, and modernism's emphasis on frontality and shallow pictorial space. The images that result are both suggestions of reality and appeals to the viewer's imagination.

Bigbee has chosen realism as the artistic language most natural to him. It is a language he first learned as a child from his mother, a portrait painter. This predisposition was encouraged at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, where he studied with Will Barnet, Arthur DeCosta, and Henry Pearson, and received a strong grounding in the traditional mechanics of painting. During that time Bigbee was deeply influenced by the figurative painting of Balthus. In 1985, following his graduation, he received a Fullbright grant to travel and study in Italy. That trip became a journey of self-discovery among Renaissance masterpieces that helped Bigbee to define what he was seeking in his art.

A literary parallel to the artist's style may be found in the "magic realism" of Latin American fiction, a style in which the fabulous and the fantastic often pierce through the surface veneer of everyday reality. Bigbee selectively combines and reorders elements from his personal environment to create luminous, dreamlike images that convey a heightened sense of experience. His painstakingly slow methods have led him, out of expediency, to use himself and his wife, Ann Binder, as models. Like other contemporary realists who repeatedly paint themselves and those closest to them, such as Gregory Gillespie, in the process Bigbee is also able to explore and understand his life and relationships.

Once he has an image in his mind's eye, Bigbee begins to work out the composition on paper. His preliminary studies gradually lead to a detailed drawing, which he transfers to canvas. After beginning the painting, he often continues to work on the companion drawing, creating a related but separate and complete work of art. A feature shared by his drawings and paintings is a surface like velvet in its smoothness, depth, and radiance. In the drawings this effect is created with densely interwoven line, while in the paintings it is achieved with the application of multiple layers of oils. The paintings are built up from a warm, monochromatic base over which colors are layered to create forms that are solid yet luminous.

Bigbee's techniques imbue his images with a profound stillness at the same time that they suggest life beneath the surface, setting up a tension between timelessness and immediacy. The precise rendering of the minutest details gives the works a surreal clarity. They are moments captured and frozen. Vaguely mysterious and unsettling, they

move viewers to an appreciation of the strangeness and wondrousness of life. Bigbee's gift is in creating distillations: brief moments that last forever. In looking at Bigbee's paintings and drawings one is again reminded of Courbet's words: "Beauty, like truth, is a thing which is relative to the time in which one lives and to the individual capable of understanding it. The expression of the beautiful bears a precise relation to the power of perception acquired by the artist."