

Brett Bigbee | Essay by Sylvia Yount: January 1999  
From the catalogue of Brett Bigbee's 2011 show at Alexandre Gallery

I FIRST ENCOUNTERED the work of Brett Bigbee through an announcement for his 1996 New York gallery exhibition, his most recent solo effort. The iconic image of his infant son – a detail of *Joe (Self-Portrait)*, 1994 – 99 (cat. no. 2), at the time a work in progress – stayed with me, both metaphorically and literally, throughout my forthcoming pregnancy, even serving as my “focal point” during labor. To me, this almost talismanic representation symbolized all the tenderness, fragility, and miraculous grace associated with a new life. It also recalled, to my mind, the quiet power of a great Piero della Francesca *Madonna and Child*. Such is the personal and universal resonance of Bigbee’s haunting work.

This exhibition of thirteen paintings, drawings, and prints, produced between 1990 and 1999, marks the artist’s fourth solo showing in New York. Heralded as Maine’s leading figurative painter, Bigbee’s national stature has been on the rise since his professional debut at the beginning of the decade. (Significantly, this exhibition will travel to the New Britain Museum of American Art, in New Britain, Connecticut, and the Butler Institute of American art, in Youngstown, Ohio.) That an aura of rarity has attached itself to Bigbee’s work – in light of the size of his oeuvre and infrequent exhibitions – not only has led to a waiting list for his paintings but also has shaped the way we experience them. A sense of timelessness critically informs their meaning as viewers anticipate the artist’s next move. Echoing Bigbee’s statement that he has “always been attracted to things that require a lot of time and thought,” his imagery encourages one to slow down, to experience the work at its own singular pace as it unfolds through myriad detailed, sensual effects.<sup>1</sup>

At a time in which much contemporary art is darkly alienating to the general public, Bigbee’s traditional method of painting – with all its requisite skill and labor-intensiveness – fascinates audiences, producing visual illusions that evoke a disconcerting otherworldliness. To be sure, it is the works’ heightened sense of reality, verging on the surreal, that first strikes the viewer. Yet, unlike some contemporary realists whose bravura technique overwhelms any emotional or intellectual content, Bigbee uses his Old Master approach to personalize his meaning. Painting in layers of oil, he creates velvety surfaces and subtly luminous hues that activate expressions of his inner life and personal relationships. The focus and patience required of the artist who chooses to work in this painstaking manner suggest an involvement with subject matter that goes beyond an effort to merely record its appearance. With hardly a brushstroke in sight, Bigbee conveys his interest in “visual power” and “emotional impact.”<sup>2</sup>

Bigbee trained in the classical manner, first at home under the tutelage of his portrait-painter mother then, more formally, in the classrooms of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and the art galleries of Europe. That this education critically shaped the artist’s practice in both form and content is unsurprising. Like his mother, who frequently used her own children as models, Bigbee’s primary subjects have always been his family: in the early years, his wife, Ann Binder, and later his son Joe. The artist has explained his choice of subject matter in light of the “excruciatingly slow” nature of his work – who else could he ask to pose for months at a time? – but there is clearly more to this decision. Bigbee has claimed that he is most interested in “reflecting the spirit of life, the essence of life,” an intent that manifests itself in a myopic yet rich vision of family relations.<sup>3</sup>

Bigbee's domestic idylls which chart the growth of his son Joe with a radiant warmth – Joe (18 Months), 1996, Toy Truck, 1996 – 97 (cat. no. 3), Bird II, 1998 – 99 (cat no. 5) – or lovingly depict his wife's physical and psychological states – Standing Nude, 1991 – 99 (cat. no. I), Morning Street, 1997 – 99 (cat. no. 7) – are grounded in the rhythms of the artist's daily life and environment. Portland, Maine, has been Bigbee's home for more than eleven years. A city imbued with a distinctly New England light ranging from cool grey to honey gold, Portland emerges as a major player in the artist's visual dramas. One could argue that the quiet stillness and technical reserve of Bigbee's work are reflective of his time in this Yankee regional center – far from what the artist has described as the frenetic streets of New York and Philadelphia.<sup>4</sup> Surely, the tranquil quality of life that emanates from Bigbee's work is a major part of its appeal from more urbanized viewers.

Bigbee's years at the Pennsylvania Academy, where he studied with Will Barnet, Arthur De Costa, and Henry Pearson, had a profound effect on his future work. There he learned the fundamentals of drawing through an emphasis on figurative study, while absorbing the symbolic realism of Barnet, the indirect painting technique and still-life focus of De Costa, and the formal precision and subtle palette of Pearson. The receipt of a 1984 William Emlen Cresson Traveling Scholarship – The Academy's most prestigious award – allowed Bigbee an extended period of European study, followed one year later by a postgraduate Fulbright grant. Bigbee spent his Fulbright in Florence, Italy, living with Ann in a medieval villa amid the splendor of Renaissance art.

The impact of Bigbee's Florentine apprenticeship revealed itself in later paintings such as Spring, 1988 (figure), and Ann with Plant, 1990 – 91 (cat. no. 6), which suggest updated reworkings of Botticelli's Flora and Venus types. In these and other works, Bigbee crossed the poetic style of the Italian primitif with the early American variant through an emphasis on linear directness and frontality that, simultaneously, connoted a modern pictorial syntax. Similarly, the non-narrative quality of Bigbee's pseudo allegories points to his interest in a broad-ranging interpretive field. For, unlike that of the Old Masters, Bigbee's iconography is not always apparent but multifaceted, layered with personal as well as larger meanings.

Bigbee's work undoubtedly reveals a deep knowledge of and reverence for artists of the past – particularly the fifteenth-century masters of melancholic gravity, Botticelli and Piero – yet, it also owes a debt to the reclusive twentieth-century painter Balthus. The 1984 exhibition of Balthus's work at the Metropolitan Museum of Art had a powerful influence on Bigbee.<sup>5</sup> While disquieting moods and a cool eroticism are shared features of both artists' work, one senses a greater depth of feeling in Bigbee's art, a more concerted effort to distill the "truth" of his realities through painting that is at once meticulous and vital. If Bigbee's work is traditional in technique, it is no less modern in its unsettling intensity.

In many ways, Bigbee represents an unusual contemporary phenomenon: an artist who resists the pressures of the art world to conform to a certain type of practice; who produces only one to two canvases a year; who chooses to lead a disciplined existence far away from the hue and cry of an artistic capital. Unapologetic about the gentle quality of his work and his desire to make paintings that are celebrations of life, Bigbee proves that the art of introspection can be both placid and provocative, classical and contemporary in equal measure.

SYLVIA YOUNT is Chief Curator at the Museum of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. She has lectures and published widely on late 19th- and 20th-century American art and culture, and is currently curating a critical retrospective of the work of Maxfield Parrish, scheduled to open at the Academy in June 1999.

1 Quoted in Amy Killinger, "Preview," *Maine Sunday Telegram*, December 5, 1993, page IIE.

2 Quoted in Edgar Allen Beem, "Nothing is Revealed," *Maine Times*, August 7, 1992, page 24.

3 See "Artist's Statement," November 1998, and Killinger.

4 See Edgar Allen Beem, "Nothing is Revealed," page 23.

5 *Ibid.*