2010

Play pretty

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PLAY PRETTY

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by
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1. Introduction

*Play Pretty.* I am wondering if everyone knows what this is, or if it is just something my grandmother said. It is anything colorful, demanding the attention of a child. It is the colorful thing kids reach for in Wal-Mart while their annoyed mother pulls them along. These can be toys or sponges in the cleaning aisle. The box I sat in and pulled as a toddler was not a play pretty. The wooden rubber band gun with my name on it was not a play pretty. Barbie, Hot-Wheels, beach balls, primary blocks, rings the colors of the spectrum, any doll with cartoon qualities; these are play pretties. Again, I’m not sure if the definition is standard, but it is what became a fact to me.

Considering my new role as a Father and the reaquaintance with childhood that I’m experiencing through the half-Brad of my daughter, this seemed an appropriate title and description of this new body of work. The charged palette of the life of a toddler is something we, sadly, leave behind the older we get. As exposure to sun tends to fade colors, so our attraction to colors of action and intense delight wanes with age. Most of us dress more modestly when we start middle school, certainly by the time we reach high school. We leave behind the neon and the bright. When buying a first car most young people fancy something flashy: bright red, yellow, or custom, something that grabs attention. By the time we reach thirty our spectrum of our wardrobe spans from dark shades of red and blue all the way to charcoal gray and black. We wear these colors while we sit on furniture of safely coordinated color in our safe, resalable house with our white, gold, or black car in the driveway. Why the fear of color? Why all the brown, black, and gray suits? Who effeminized expression? I’m jealous of my baby girl. Her outfits are so fly. I bet she would drive a hot pink car and live in a bright red house if given the choice. The afore-mentioned outfits have had a serious effect on my work. Dressing
Indie is like reading the comics. For eighteen months we have clothed her in something with a cloud, a rainbow, a heart, a turtle, an elephant, or some kind of brightly colored fruit. This palette and graphic imagery is surfacing throughout my work.

I make objects and images. Why? I am not sure. It is a coping mechanism of sorts discovered around the time I discovered stress. Perusing my portfolio I can see connections between the work and its contemporary life experience. I see why I began painting in pairs: I got married. I have noticed the changes in my palette influenced by moving across the country and falling in love. My sculpture is just a re-appropriation of blue-collar skills once used to earn a living.

The work finds me. I operate on instinct; a series of responses to my material and palette. I have never had a plan that succeeded. It is as if God laughs when I make a blueprint of a sculpture or a thumbnail of a painting. I am learning to trust Him and my instincts to guide my work and my life. Both have never been more exciting.

The wood pieces begin with a process. No plan. No agenda or concept. I simply make a box. Whatever appendages or operations performed within that piece usually surface around the time I take the clamps off of the glue-up. It truly is divinely inspired. Countless times someone will walk up to me and hand me something they found. “I thought you might could use this moose antler.” Usually within the day that object or mechanism finds it’s permanent home in one of my sculptures. I simply can’t roll with a plan. Life never works as planned. Why should art?

The concept of process dictating creativity seems to be a hot topic. For my sculpture it provides an approach much like stream-of-consciousness writing or painting. Many times over the past few years I have felt creatively dry and used up. Relying on technical skill to achieve a product (a box, for instance) gets my gears turning. Typically, I begin several projects at once. I
will build five boxes in varying dimensions, or I will turn several objects on the lathe; unaware of how they will be used. The process repeats itself daily until I have a shelf full of parts. Then I go about putting them together. It is strictly instinctive. This system is one of layers and levels of work. I begin the work in layers and I finish in layers. I might go two or three months without producing anything but parts. The next week I might finish eight or nine complicated pieces. It is the same with my painting. I could work on ten pieces at a time; slaving for months, even years on the same surfaces, thinking I’ll never complete them. One day I will go to clean my studio only to leave a couple hours later with seven finished, long-overdue pieces. It is a pattern that gave me fits until I recognized it. Now I am comfortable leaving pieces unfinished. If I am relying on process and material to begin works I am also dependent on a sculpture’s ability to hold my attention until completion, until it is finished with me. A start-to-finish piece happens on occasion, but it is not the norm.

Life is like this. My wife, Katy, and I have grand dreams. We write down our goals regularly. For the longest time I was afraid we would live a lifetime of frustration because I wasn’t seeing my goals met each day. It is an impossible way to live. Recently, around the time I recognized the previously stated pattern in my studio work, I realized that life is about process. We make plans and strive for our goals, but how often do we follow the regimen? How often does life cooperate? What would I have missed if everything went according to Brad Wreyford’s plans?! Sometimes all we can manage is a part, a percentage, or a step. My studio work, much like my life, is a chain of fundamental commitments: devotion to God, devotion to my materials; joy of family, joy of color; pursuit of the wilderness, pursuit of new visual experience. If all of these are met with regularity, I am unconcerned with the outcome. A close friend and successful businessman asked me one day how things were going. I replied, “I’m getting by, a little here a
“A little here and there will add up. Just wait and see.” It has. These are words to live by.

Painting is my first love. The speed of the paint and the instantaneous opportunity it provides was my first addiction. Life, unlike painting, dictates the how, the when and where. Painting provided an environment of power, one where each stroke and choice of medium gave me a voice, a response to my surroundings. The art of the first five years of my career was a release of twenty years of visual information. The paintings fell off the brush with an ease I fear I’ll never again experience. I started graduate school around the time I exhausted those reserves. My first year was a grind like I had never known: a gut check to see if I was a really an artist or just an art major. Then I became a father.

Long before I met my daughter, about nine months or so, I became a Dad. The anticipation of living with a child was enough to seriously change the direction of my work. The past two years have been an exploration for me both in my choices of color and process. Pastels and bright, artificial colors are now dominant elements in my work. In a subconscious effort to maintain the maturity in my work I complimented the heat and electricity of my new palette with the masculinity and practicality of construction-grade plywood. This was a step away from the immediacy of the brush and the tactile experience of painting to a process-based system producing industrial finishes in artificial colors. The move from one medium to another is one of a blessing and a curse. When I hit a wall in the shop, I’m usually up for a week of painting. When I can paint no more it is time to go build some more boxes or learn some other techniques with metal or wood. This flip-flop of modes has produced two independent bodies of work. When viewed collectively the two bodies compliment one another. The colors are the most recognizable cohesive quality. The shapes are consistent throughout. It’s as if I paint something
intuitively, remove the image from my consciousness, only to discover several months later that I built a wooden object that is a three dimensional representation of the flat image I chucked. This subconscious experience works both ways: 2-D to 3-D and back. With each of the two different processes I’m recording a visual library that is expressed on the other, but it is not an easy relationship. There is competition between the media. No one process defines me as an artist. I take great pride in this, but it also makes me want to pull my hair out. One of my chromatic heroes is Philip Guston. I love the softness and the gooiness of his paint. It is so thick and deliberate. I liken my own struggle between the second and third dimensions to his struggle with objectivity and the purpose of painting. I recall reading in YES, BUT… by Dore Ashton a passage describing the artist’s routine of painting objects in his studio all day, only to nightly cast them aside as a meaningless endeavor and proceed to draw non-objectively with ink until the morning. This continued for about three years. He was finding his way, as am I. Shortly after this period of struggle he produced the work that’s become synonymous with his name. I think he figured it out. Let’s hope I will. In the meantime I have to go where the mood strikes me. Some days I am obsessed with the hands-on manipulation of depth found in the exercise of painting. Other days I am more prone to flat, blocky, iconic uses of color, made possible by spray guns in the shop. In the future I would like to have a painting studio and shop that are in the same room. This might produce a more hybrid product of actual form, visual texture, and depth of field. This is what many people have pushed me to do, but I feel the work I’m producing now is successful, and I’m excited about it.
2. The Paintings

In the summer of 2009 I began my thesis work. After a two year sabbatical, I decided that I wanted to return to painting. I had no idea what would happen. I began working simultaneously on several very small panels. The attention given to the surface of my painting proved to be as obsessive as the attention given to smoothness and squareness of my sculptures. More than ever I gravitated to a reduction of visual information and a promotion of more atmospheric qualities. The current need to reduce and simplify in my work is an expression of the necessity of consolidation in my personal life. Learning to manage a home, a family, an income, and an education has cultivated a streamlined perspective on life. I don’t have the luxury of the superfluous.

One recurring element of most of these paintings is the presence of a cloud-like apparition. The interpretation of their presence varies. I worked my way through middle school, high school, undergraduate, and graduate school as a landscaper and construction worker. The clouds are very important to anyone who works outside. They bring shade and relief. They can also bring destructive winds and rain. They also have a spiritual connotation. I am reminded of the Lord’s presence with the Israelites in the wilderness: “The LORD was going before them in a pillar of cloud by day to lead them on the way, and a pillar of fire by night to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people” Exodus 13:21-22. The cloud is symbolic of God’s omnipresence and omniscience. These paintings serve as reminders that He is in control. He will provide all my needs. All of my abstract paintings end with one or both of these elements: a cloud (symbol of relief and judgment; the presence of God) or a horizon (elimination of the presumptuous and superfluous; clarity).
Bobby’s Boat

This is one of the earlier paintings I did in my thesis work. It is relatively small, 24”x16”. The density, flatness, and shadowy quality of the background set it apart from the other paintings. As I paint, I typically work the surface from each of all four rotated positions, sometimes even making rotations upon completion of the surface. The vertical relationship between the architectonic silvery mass and the beaming focal image was established very early in the piece and remained throughout. This stability of orientation is unusual for any of my paintings. This piece was a subconscious retreat away from the other paintings I was doing at the time (*Cotton Candy* and *Jellyship Encounter*) and from the work I was yet to do in the remainder of my thesis. This, more than any other painting in the show, is a throwback to the work I did when I first taught myself to paint several years ago. It has all the necessary ingredients: primary triad, hovering cloudlike image, and a gloomy, night ground punctured by a bold, cheery, colorful shape.

I finished *Bobby’s Boat* in the Fall of 2009. In its inception the boat shape was upside down resembling more of a head or a balloon, something rising on the plane. I felt the application of the paint was complete, but I was uncomfortable with the juxtaposition of the bold figure hovering over the bluer end of the painting. There was an uncomfortable clash of flat imagery against a more spatial environment. While viewing it from both positions I asked my
friend Professor Bob Hausey what he thought about the dilemma. I don’t recall his opinion of the positioning of the painting. I do remember him looking at it the way it is now saying “that’s a nice yellow boat”.

Inadvertently, I had painted a mysterious log canoe sailing off into the night. This different perspective resolved my dilemma of formal imagery vs. visual depth. Shortly after that meeting Bob passed away. The notion of a boat sailing into the unknown seemed eerily appropriate.

**Cotton Candy**

*Cotton Candy* was finished in the fall semester. It was one of my first confident uses of purple, albeit more of a plum. I began this piece oriented 90 degrees to the right in an attempt at a Morandi-like still life of neglected vessels. I’ve always had a tender spot for still life paintings. Ideally I would paint abstractly in tandem with still life, one on each end of the studio. The way still life appropriates importance on the mundane, so abstract painting does with shapes.

Painting objects is a hair’s width removed from painting non-objectively. The strength of both genres is dependent on the artist’s ability to create a composition of elements engaged in some form of dialogue. The decision to turn this piece midstream strayed from the original compositional objective, but maintained that sense of engagement. The impotence of the lower shape suggests neither a lack of importance or activity in the painting. It acts as a halo or shadow of sorts for the more imposing, cramped cloud hovering above. The vertical horizon acts like timeline; advancing as the cloud rises.
My goal was to create a painting that made the viewer salivate. Morandi’s work always had that effect on me. His cottony whites and bread yellows, coupled with his jumbled compositions remind me of cake on a plate or my thanksgiving dinner with servings so big and piled they all run together. There are barely any remnants of the initial layers of soft blues and creams, but it does give me the sweet tooth.

**Disciples of Destruction**

These two panels were painted separately. They along with *Heathen Huffer*, and *Helium* are all the same scale. I used a process I developed earlier in the year to enhance my addiction to painting in pairs. I built two jigs on either side of my studio. Each jig could hold two panels at a time. This allowed me to mix and match with many possible relationships and combinations. While providing ample interaction and response between the surfaces, my impatience made this a long and frustrating endeavor. This process was an exhausting effort that provided only this one joined painting out of 8 panels. These particular panels were never studio mates. Never did the formal information of one directly influence the other. The decision to put them together was made after I packed all the panels away for a period of one month. This is the first of my paired paintings to evolve as such. This method of exhausting my materials and myself to find a simple solution has been one I have perfected this year.
Dry Rot

The employment of orange has been cautious throughout my career. Only in the past 18 months or so have I ventured to even use the secondaries in my process. Even more rare than their use is their endurance through to the finished product. *Dry Rot* bucked the trend throughout with layers of orange, green, and yellow. While working on this piece I was reading *Over the Edge of the World* by Laurence Bergreen. The book chronicles the journey of Magellan and his ships from the conception of the voyage through to the last survivors. The testicular fortitude required to set out on such a venture is lacking in our present day. It seems the only frontiers left are accessed via lab coat or keyboard.

Much like *Bobby’s Boat*, *Dry Rot* was painted as a flat image, and can be viewed as such. However, the segmentation of the surface acts as a horizon line, confirming the painting as a landscape with the vessel-like object nestled in the foreground. The vessel was inspired by ships of Magellan’s era. I wanted the sails to appear menacing, foretelling the dangers that awaited the ambitious voyagers and warning those they would encounter. *Dry Rot* is a ship lodged on an island sandbar, baking in the intense equatorial sun.

Heathen Huffer

It’s the surface of the sun, or mars. Wherever it is, it’s hot and uninhabitable. It’s an apocryphal piece.
For by fire and by his sword will the LORD 
plead with all flesh: and the slain of the 
LORD shall be many.

Isaiah 66:16

And the LORD will cause His voice of 
authority to be heard, And the descending 
of His arm to be seen in fierce anger, And 
in the flame of a consuming fire in 
cloudburst, downpour and hailstones.

Isaiah 30:30

This cloud is definitely menacing and capable of producing hailstones. The layers and texture of the paint add a quality of confusion and terror, the kind experienced when people are conquered, judged, and taken captive. Many of Isaiah’s prophecies were fulfilled over a hundred years after his death, mainly the captivity of Israel to Babylon. Some, however, are revelations of things to come: the Second Coming of Christ, the restoration of Israel and her prominence, and the destruction of this present earth by fire. The tenderness and brokenness of Isaiah and the expression of God’s love and provision for all humanity make the reading of this book an unequaled, visual experience.

Helium

There are few things that please me more than completing a successful work on the square format. Squares have always been difficult for me. They are so complete, perfect in a way that taunts me with each stroke and step back. For me a square is easier used as a shape on a rectangle surface. Depth seems to be more difficult to achieve on a square; I’m so drawn to the
frame, the edge. *Helium* was painted on a remnant of an older painting on a hollow core door. I cannibalized several of these for the 3’ square surfaces. This provided a nice under layer of texture. You might say I’ve been working on these paintings for several years. The texture of an under painting can help or haunt me. I always begin pieces like this by whiting out the surface with oil-based primer in an attempt to start completely from scratch. With *Helium* this proved to be a vain attempt. As seen here in *Pink and Red*, the upper right of the painting was the section used for *Helium*. For several layers I fought the ghost of *Pink and Red*. The image hung in my psyche such that I was unable to press on without it. I scraped out the rough outline and salvaged a few remnants of the forgotten red. If any painting sits around my studio long enough I may paint over it. This is one of the many changes afforded by digital technology. I can cannibalize a painting and salvage its image. This would be an interesting endeavor: to see how many images or finished products one panel could produce. I never respected *Pink and Red*. It was too clean cut, lacking exhaustion and mystery. I feel with Helium the image has permanently earned its surface.
Ink Dream

*Ink Dream* holds the record in my career for longest running painting. I started on this surface about three years ago. Whenever I change studios I generally go through a substantial purging of materials and unfinished pieces. This cleanses me of that which I was unable to resolve. This case proved to be different. I think the scale was the decisive, subconscious factor that determined my keeping the painting through two studio moves. It’s 24”x22”, almost a square. This is a comfortable dimension enabling plenty of room for horizon while maintaining a sense of gravity. *Ink Dream* stands out among this body in its denial of a hovering focal point. The bisection of the balloon image emphasizes the foreground, a gathering of suspended amoeba-like forms in a field of organic purple. This painting reminds me of garments, once vibrant, now washed out and faded, the ink having bled.

For three days a few years ago I worked with a friend on a sport fishing boat off the southern California Coast. I had never been on the ocean, and rarely in my life had I been required to rise at 4:30 am for work. I’ll never forget the experience of a Wednesday morning on a three-quarter day trip riding an hour to the fishing grounds. The day was cloudy and the sea rolled heavily, additively heavily. This would make most people sick, but I loved every second of it. The horizon here undulates drunkenly with the density of the early morning sea. As stated
in my introduction I believe the best art to come from physical experience rather than mental or emotional intents. This experience on the black, rolling sea registered in my psyche and produced *Ink Dream*.

**Jellyship Encounter**

Again, Guston looms. He freed me from the sophisticated. He made the clunky sophisticated. This is a clunky painting, awkward and uncomfortable. The unearthly atmosphere that generates the artificial heat on the left is complemented by the easily digestible and inviting landscape of the right panel. The jellyship is one of the many versions of UFO’s that recur regularly in my doodles. They are amalgams of aeronautical shells or bodies propelled along by cloudlike feet or chubby tentacles. This is a relatively new object that spawned from my looming clouds. Beyond that recognition, I can offer no explanation of origin. I’ve made several pieces in my short career using the two-panel format. Most of these multi-surface paintings are done in equal-sized double squares or rectangles. Here the panels share only one dimension. Of all the paintings of the year this was personally the most engaging. The small scale of *Jellyship Encounter* (24”x 40”) allowed for a swifter application and drying of paint. This provided more control and experimentation of the very important placement of the elements. This method of painting two separate surfaces simultaneously in the ultimate goal of union developed about six years ago. I don’t know where or how it arrived in my studio, only that, under normal circumstances, it
makes me want to jump off a bridge. But, when it works, it works well. Does this work? I think so. Regardless, the panels have such a history together I can’t think of them as separates. It works, certainly, on that level. These objects neither imitate nor conjugate with one another. They provoke one another, yet they are in covenant.
3. The Sculptures

As my paintings emphasize my affection for the properties of the material, so my present body of sculpture is as much an exercise in my love of wood, particularly salvaged wood. Ninety percent of the materials for my 3-D projects are taken from the scrap bin and the trash pile, or they are re-appropriated parts of some machine. The attentive artist can find almost anything he needs if he’ll just be patient. This patience has produced an ability to see potential in any scrap materials and cultivated a mode of operation that is in constant flux. For instance, I might need an exotic hardwood or a block of aluminum to finish a piece. Finding none, I would be forced to either change my plans or shelve the project until the desired material surfaced. I’ve learned to make art without any budget. I don’t know how I would react if I could purchase any material at any time. For me this is the most addictive form of creation. It’s faith-based art, an act that is very much dependent on the tide of life, the benevolence of others, and an observant eye.

Boxes

This series was unintentionally spread over the course of the past two years with surprising regularity. Each piece is a result of some mistake or series of mistakes. Usually the work would start with me building much larger forms. Again, each of these is result of an artistic unwillingness to follow a plan. These were usually backburner pieces that seemed to build themselves over time. The action of making boxes was one of therapy for me. If I had no ideas and no materials of interest I would scrounge for scrap
plywood: often some very large sheets (thank you architecture department). Building a box that is truly square is one of the most difficult things to do in woodworking. I saw the activity as a practice and development of a technique involving no fasteners, only wood-glue. I knew that one day each form would serve a purpose. Each is so satisfying in its lack of pretension. They are afterthoughts; quickly and instinctively altered, then cast aside, only to be changed the next week. Most of them took months to complete. These exemplify the importance of process and patience as tools; as means of tapping into the subconscious. Each appears so deliberate they seem to defy the previous statement, but they’re very responsive works.

**Clouds**

In December I was putting the finishing touches on my paintings for the show. Wanting a change of pace I began *Cloud 1*. This form and its display were conceived while I was processing and writing about paintings such as *Helium* and *Heathen Huffer*. Deeply ingrained in my creative process was the notion of a cloud, a cloud that is the bearer of blessings and curses, a bringer of gifts and destruction. I began to model the appendages loosely after toys that my daughter has. The concept of teaching a child to grasp different kinds of handles was particularly fascinating.

The appendages of the Clouds are a concept born from the lightning bolt. The lightning bolt serves as an arm for the cloud delivering providential fire. When I hear the word “lightning” I am as quick to think of images of Zeus holding a lightning bolt as I am of the natural climatic occurrence. In my mind lightning has become a cartoon element of mythology or humor. These abstract clouds were a result of the
merger of the concepts of lightning as a tool of Zeus and the appendages of educational, toddler toys.

**Father and Daughter**

*Daughter* was built first. Originally she was to stand on the ground in the middle of the gallery floor. The bulldog stance is that of my baby girl just before she learned how to walk. She was strong and fearless. I feel I’ve captured this in this portrait. The week I was making this piece she busted her teeth on the edge of the tub. She left teeth marks in the ceramic tub. The poor baby hit it so hard she chipped the ceramic! I was two seconds behind her. I had just taken a shower and accidentally left the door open. Teeth were sideways and blood was everywhere. I am sure this has happened to a lot of parents. When it is the first time to happen to one of your children it is the first time it has ever happened in the history of the world! I decided to include her crooked teeth in the portrait. My wife and I learned some very valuable parenting lessons from this experience.

The crooked teeth inspired the making of *Father*. Indie’s front, left tooth was the one we were concerned about. It had been pretty much severed. This happened to me when I was twelve, a much older and much more traumatic experience. My front left tooth was knocked clean from my skull, root and all. Ask me which hurt worse.
4. Conclusion

The content of my work is normally indiscernible. The analysis of this thesis body is purely speculative. I move from one medium to another, one palette to another, as one being driven by instinct. What results is a log of physical and emotional life experience in coded layers. The work is automatic and instinctive. The decisions I make are subconscious in their origin, but, formally, are very deliberate. I feel my greatest strength as an artist in any and every circumstance is my ability to achieve balance. There is visual balance of each piece, consisting of choices of the formal elements. There is a balance of talents between the craftsman quality of sculpture and the effective manipulation of the surface in painting. Most importantly, there is life balance. Balancing my professional pursuits with the personal priorities of loving and providing for a family has been the greatest lesson and achievement of my tenure here.

The daily impressions of living with my daughter, Indie, have been my visual sustenance throughout my thesis work. I am certain this is a subtlety to the casual viewer of this thesis. I am fine with that. Every piece is not about her, but her colorful presence has been an influential constant during this endeavor.
Vita

Brad Wreyford currently lives and works in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. His work is sourced directly from his relationships with his beautiful wife, Katy, and his mischievous daughter. He is an enigma of hidden talents. With the ferocity of a mother crab he can pinch with his toes while pouring the perfect cup of tea. He is a paradox of creative expression and conservative values. He is as comfortable with a shotgun as he is with a paintbrush.