

## Mirada Fuerte Bonnie Clearwater

*Mirada fuerte*, the “strong stare,” was one of Pablo Picasso’s defining traits. According to his biographer John Richardson, Picasso used his huge eyes to hypnotize, command, or seduce. His voracious stare, according to Richardson, never failed to work its magic. This reference to Picasso’s *mirada fuerte* ignited artist Hubert Bush in his quest to capture the defining characteristics of the subjects he portrays. After a successful career as a writer and experimental filmmaker, Bush turned to working exclusively as an artist in 2006. He was particularly consumed with defining what constitutes an individual’s identity and devising a means to portray it in art. This singular pursuit was at the core of an experimental film, in which each subject would repeat his or her name for two emotional minutes. In the process, the name and the individual became one.

During the period he was making the transition from filmmaker to artist, Bush took hundreds of photographs of artists who influenced him. Throughout this process, he focused his attention on how their identity as artists was evident in their faces, bodies, attire, and surroundings. He would shoot multiple rapid-fire exposures in an attempt to discern how each sees, dissects, and reacts to the world. The results were as varied as his subjects. Jasper Johns, age 76 at the time, rooted and at ease in his studio. As Bush noted, Johns “seems to be rapidly absorbing the world around him with a kind of detached intelligence.” In contrast, in his photographs of Rachel Feinstein, an artist and a frequent model for her husband, painter John Currin, Feinstein seems to shift her position as she adjusts to her dual role as artist’s muse and as an artist with her own vision and distinct visual language.

Bush’s photographs served as the starting point for a series of collages he created in 2001 as a response to 9/11. He was on the roof of his apartment on West 29th Street and took photographs all day of the collapsing World Trade Center buildings. He felt compelled to use these photographs so that they would have a life beyond documentation. The 9-11 photographs served as the basis for several collages and inspired Bush to continue the collage format using photo portraits he took throughout the rest of the decade. In *Mary Magdalene*, 2009, many photographs of nude women were cut into cubistic facets that Bush adhered to a painted ground. The spaces between the collaged elements form lines that give the composition the appearance of a stained glass window. The linear structure of this composition flattened the voluptuous nude, thereby fusing figure and ground. The viewer is drawn to the piercing blue eyes that stare toward the heavens with the intensity of an acolyte. The ferocity of her stare imbues this overall static composition with life.



*Jasper Johns*



*Rachel Feinstein*



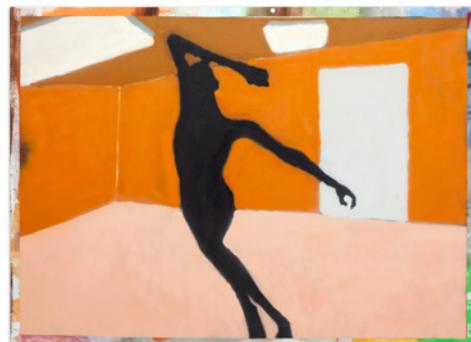
*Mary Magdalene*



grandpa

The relationship between figure and ground became a central concern for Bush as his work progressed. Rather than incorporate photographs of specific individuals into his work, he began imprinting the bodies of his models directly on the canvas. These imprint paintings marked a turning point for Bush. As his first full-blown foray into painting, he used traditional egg tempera, which he mixed and prepared himself. Although the medium is traditional, his application was unconventional, as he experimented by using the bodies of live models to imprint the painting on canvas. The process consisted of Bush preparing his ground with gesso and acrylic and next applying tempera paint directly to his models' bodies, faces, and hair. He would then position the models in specific poses and press them against the canvas. As the imprint was made only by the body parts that touched the canvas, the figure appears to dissolve into the infinite colorfield. These flat silhouettes defy gravity as they drift in a variety of directions. During the "printing" process of these paintings, Bush would take multiple photographs of the models, and then refer to the photos as he continued to work on the painting using brushes, sponges, and other tools to add facial details. The rich pigment of the tempera paint added gem-like hues to the composition and depth to the features. Once again, in this series the eyes play a pivotal role as a means to establish each subject's identity and character. In *grandpa*, for example, the fully realized and modeled face from which two spry eyes peer is in stark contrast to the nebulous body marks.

Bush's subsequent painting series, titled *the right to be forgotten*, addresses the individual's right to control his or her on-line identity. Bush culled the images from on-line sources and traced them onto his canvas. He then added layers of spray paint and mixed media over the images, thereby masking their identity. The resulting figures appear as dark, shadowy silhouettes without any articulated facial features. Despite their anonymity, the body gestures suggest each individual's personality. In one painting *009*, a black figure arches its spine and



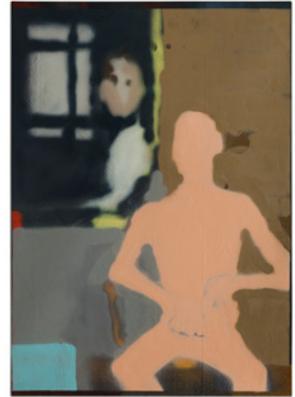
009

contorts its elongated arms backward, expressing either jubilation or aggression. In another painting *005*, a shadowy contemplative figure lurks at a window behind a seated peachy figure. In this work, one of two in the series to include two figures, the gap between the bodies isolates them from one another. In all the paintings in this series, the figure is the center of attention. Unlike the infinite space that characterized the body-imprint paintings, the space in this series is constantly shifting. In *008*, for example, the orange figure and its outstretched arms form a flat cross against a blue background that suddenly recedes at the bottom left of the composition, where it meets the angled corner of the floor and the trapezoidal white light at the top right. The thin multicolored borders surrounding these paintings additionally contribute to the illusion of depth by framing the scene as a window into space.

One of the last canvases Bush painted in this series, *007*, is especially intriguing, as a mysterious green phantom in three-quarter pose seems to be emerging from the shadows of a dark blue and magenta abyss. Only the subtlest details—the hollowed orbs that suggest eyes and the shading that models the arms, torso, and legs—keep this painting from dissolving into pure abstraction. The figure seems to have been caught off guard and shrinks from the viewer’s intrusive gaze.

Bush set this series aside to pursue a different direction in his *star maps* series. These paintings express universality, as the night sky is ever-present and remains an infinite mystery. As Bush notes, it is comforting to assemble recognizable images from the random points of starlight, for it makes the unknowable less daunting. The stick figures satisfied Bush’s urge to bestow identity on his subjects. Like the silhouettes in the previous series, here the playful body gestures, rather than facial features, express an array of personalities. And again, most of these works represent a single personage, with the exception of *friends forever*, with its two stick figures dancing a jaunty jig.

To a certain extent, the stick figures are a return to the linear scaffolding of the early collages. The chaos of the night sky, however, provides an escape from the balanced compositions of the collages. This is especially evident in *i promise*, in which Bush bestows his own names to constellations, such as *gimme shelter*, *bright side*, *the price is right*, and *4-ever* (reprising the pose of the dancing stars). The resulting painting is an all-over composition of white lines and infinite space, akin to a Jackson Pollock drip painting. Bush further thwarted his instinct to make things perfect by using spray paint, a medium that is difficult to contain and consequently fraught with “mistakes” and surprises. Most of the canvases started with a gouache underpainting over which he sketched outlines of the figures or star maps with pastel or oil stick; in these, the buildup of mixed media produces a dense opacity. For



005



008



007



*friends forever*



*i promise*



*ftrain 10*

others he headed straight in with the spray paint. Ultimately, the unruly spray paint gave Bush the confidence to abdicate control in his next series, the *f-train* paintings on paper. The series title is derived from the name of the train line he rides as he journeys from his residence in Manhattan to his Long Island City Studio, observing the distinctive traits of his fellow passengers.

Each of the *f-train* works sprouts from a single burst of spray paint, to which Bush quickly adds oil stick marks to suggest the quirks of his unsuspecting and anonymous models. In these paintings, Bush concentrates only on the faces of his subjects rather than representing them as full figures. Although their crooked smiles, upheld hands, and flattened heads give these beings character, it is their *mirada fuerte*, their strong stare, that gives them a soul. These vibrant paintings on paper fulfill the promise of the *007* painting and they are astonishing in their originality and compelling as autonomous personages. With their drips of paint and scattered haze of pigment, these unique creatures are in a perpetual state of becoming, as they emerge from the ether and unite with the cosmos.