

Performance in Progress

A conversation with Hubert Bush and Jack Pierson

Jack Pierson: Where did you make most of the paintings?

Hubert Bush: There were two shows of the paintings that you looked at. One was at this artist-run space, called Central Fine in Miami...

JP: It's beautiful...

HB: Yeah, really cool - and Gavlak Gallery which is also a wonderful place to exhibit. I made most of the paintings in Miami, primarily using spray paint which was a bit of a reaction to... As you know I'd been making these egg tempera paintings. As a medium, egg tempera tends to lure you into detail. Multiple layers that create incredible depth and precision. But after a few years I found myself craving a bit of break from all that detail...

JP: Yes.

HB: And I decided to try spraying...

JP: That's a big, ...

HB: It's the antithesis.

JP: From Renaissance to the East Village.

HB: I moved to New York in the eighties...When did you?

JP: In the eighties, eighty-two.

HB: I can remember waiting on subway platforms and these trains would roll up in slow motion painted from front car all the way to the back, like a moving painting that would roll past. And it was so beautiful. I mean, I felt like my heart was gonna stop. The colors were so vibrant and powerful.

JP: Right.

HB: At the time Koch was talking about y'know the battle against graffiti and everything, but...I was thrilled by it. And when you went in some of the cars they were a mass of sprayed lines and scribbles. It felt like a jungle...So, I guess spray paint has a kind of nostalgia for me.

JP: Your sprayed figures, the silhouettes...look like a person on a stage, the backgrounds look like sets to me.

HB: I like theater, clearly.

JP: A Francis Bacon kind of theatrical space. And with the egg tempera paintings too.

HB: Yeah. It's like the figure is standing in a spot light.

JP: Plus the fact that for your tempera paintings you were casting and staging and using actual human bodies to make the paintings...

HB: That's true. Using body imprints of actual people. Then adding hyper-realized faces. Part of it too, aside from the theater was making a record of a human being at a particular moment.

JP: Do you feel like painting is more of an...execution or a meditation?

HB: I guess for me it's a kind of combination. There's a good bit of emphasis on the execution. I usually have something specific I think I'm after, but there are times when the process definitely becomes meditative. When I'm working on a series I develop a set of rules I try to follow...a sort of language or world I try to adhere to...

JP: These spray paintings look like there's maybe a drawing in mind. You are working towards an image that is, y'know, kind of clear from the outset, no?

HB: Yeah.

JP: I guess that's what I mean by execution.

HB: Yes. Yes. I do have a pretty clear idea of what I am going for, although in the process it often evolves...

JP: As an artist if I put a figure down I would find it hard not paint in response to that shape.

HB: Of course. With these spray-painted figures I'm constantly going back and forth between background and figure, adjusting and finessing. Both evolve together.

JP: Your interest is, has been, as long as I have known you, in some kind of figuration, even from the early photo collages...

HB: There's the inherent drama of the figure that I like.

JP: People always do the figure, but it's... It's not an immediate choice.

HB: Not now. Painting brings an incredible amount of baggage, as you know. And once you put canvas in a frame or stretch it on bars... you're looking at a painting and meshing it with all that history of art, all the other paintings you've seen.

JP: That's true.

HB: With figurative painting it goes back to the earliest markings on cave walls. So Figurative painting has the most baggage of all. But also it can be very powerful.

JP: The figure is usually for me a tool to get me going. A still life drawing class might open a door to something else...

HB: I understand that, my recent paintings - a continuation of the star map series - are based on the figure though I'm not sure it's obvious to anyone other than me...

JP: The large star map painting that was in the show at Gavlak...

HB: "*i promise*".

JP: Was that all spray paint?

HB: I started with gouache and chalk, and then sprayed paint on top of that.

JP: There's a trajectory in the work. Figure in defined space; then outer space; then the addition of text.

HB: The letters help straddle something that's abstract and figurative.

JP: Letters have meaning to us, but to some people language is abstract.

HB: I like the idea of using language in painting. Though it's tricky to pull off. I'll try text then usually I end up covering it over, thinking it's not necessary.

JP: You know, "*i promise*" it's a very satisfying painting to me.

HB: When you were at the show in the gallery, we didn't have much of a chance to talk about specifics.

JP: When work is up in a gallery show, I don't want to hear anything except how great it is.

HB: (laughs) Yeah, tell me what you think in my studio, but not in the gallery when it's already hanging and not going to change.

JP: In the Gavlak show there was a suite of figurative drawings...

HB: They started out as a blast of spray paint on paper, a kind of face. The paintings in the Miami show were of silhouetted figures, made up of blocks of color. I think they were strong and expressive but I struggled with the lack of detail. I appreciate minimalism on one level, but on another...

JP: It doesn't give you a lot to do. (laughs)

HB: Yeah...not exactly the kind of doctrine I'm prepared to embrace a hundred percent...so with the *f-train* drawings I started adding detail to the faces with oil pastel and pencil and ink.

JP: On a white background.

HB: Right, white paper out of a sketchbook with the perforations on the side.

JP: Did you do them prior to...as a ramping up...

HB: I did them in Long Island City as a kind of study for future paintings - preparation for paintings to be completed soon...

JP: Okay.

HB: I did them very quickly, they were sort of spontaneous. I started with one as an experiment and just kept on going, feeling completely absorbed and just kind of flowing. That's the best kind of working, you know, when things happen that way...

JP: You can just stay when you get there.

HB: That kind of place I realize is sort of rare.

JP: You need a map to get there.

HB: Yeah. A map is helpful. (laughs)

JP: And do you still write?

HB: I sometimes do and it's like stream of consciousness now. It's not narration. I was doing narrative, dramatic structure with screenwriting and plays which are highly formulaic. So it's nice to do something that doesn't conform to all those formulas.

JP: That kind of thing can provide a map. It doesn't have to be shown: it can just get you into a zone and can be a great way to get something onto the runway.

HB: For sure.

JP: You live with a lot of art. It must be very intimidating to try to (laughs) go to your studio and create. How do you deal with that?

HB: I usually don't find other artists' work intimidating. What's nice is sometimes there are specific pieces that I want to look at closely to say "Oh, how did this artist solve that problem?"

JP: I spent the first part of my art making process completely daunted by what's been done before – and that was just looking at it in magazines. (laughs)

HB: Its great to be able to see at something at home that might give some insight. I don't find that part so daunting...I have enough to be daunted by without that.

JP: I wanted to ask you about the sculptures. Are they paintings on wood or are they sculptures?

HB: That's a really interesting question. I guess it depends on who you're asking. (laughs)

JP: Is the wood from Florida?

HB: From Martha's Vineyard, washed up on different beaches there. Some of the pieces were quite large and water-logged. I needed help moving them. There was a lot of heaving and hoeing to get them into a truck. Then I sanded them a good bit and cut some of them down. They were beautiful but still they seemed to cry out for something more so I painted on them. I like working three dimensionally.

JP: That's great.

HB: I'm going to start working out of a garage that's in the Little Haiti section of Miami. It used to be an auto-body repair shop and has covered outdoor areas. In Florida it's great to work outside...

JP: Especially spray painting.

HB: Yeah. And it could inspire more sculpture.

JP: There must be a whole little community going on in Little Haiti now too, right? Are there other artists in the neighborhood?

HB: Yeah, a few pioneers. There's a painter a couple of doors down. He has a studio and shows other artists too.

JP: It must feel like New York in the eighties?

HB: A bit. Rough and gritty, but bursting with possibility.