

brett baker

paintings

january 4 – february 2, 2013

essay by jennifer samet

elizabeth harris gallery

529 w20 st new york 10011

www.elizabethharrisgallery.com



scarbo, 2009 – 2011, oil on canvas, 5 x 4 inches

On Beauty: the Paintings of Brett Baker

Your will is practical, is truthful, is real – but it is not beautiful...If you apply yourself in any way whatsoever, your application is not beautiful...But there is something else you can do. You can suspend something in such a way that it doesn't have movement, motion, or time...It is just that one act, the act to save yourself from falling, that in some way can be beautiful.

–Milton Resnick

Brett Baker moved, in 2003, from a huge studio upstate to a tiny New York City apartment. He had made large-scale paintings and installations before beginning this body of work, which ranges from small to miniature in size. He still wanted to make large paintings, but couldn't, until it occurred to him to attempt making "big" small paintings. Duration replaced size – he resolved to work on them until they lived up to the larger works.

They are dense, thick with years of oil paint, abstract matrixes of interlocking marks, rows of vertical and diagonal dashes. The color chords are not traditionally lush or beautiful. They are olive greens, reddish-browns, dark blues and purple – but somehow never murky. We see beauty more than the weight of application. We do not sink into these paintings: the sensation comes off from the surface. It is this quality that is central to Baker's work: the suspension.

In general, Baker's work engages the issue of reversing our natural expectations. Baker looked for his mural size paintings to create intimate spaces and have the approachability of the work on an easel. Similarly, he plays with the boundaries and crossover between object (sculpture) and painting. The paintings that comprised his installations were approached from behind, so that you saw the supports before their monochromatic surfaces.



sisyphus (after camus), 2009 – 2011, oil on canvas, 6 x 6 inches

In these small paintings, Baker uses little to no medium, so that we are literally presented with full-bodied layers of oil color. They beg for touch -- open invitations to test whether the accumulations of paint could ever dry. Medium is the literal way to suspend paint, color, to let it float, but this would be too easy.

Baker's work calls to mind the late paintings of Milton Resnick: those dark, thick surfaces, monochromatic slabs. They reverberate as complete statements, rather than being about work or accumulation. In a 1970 talk, "On Beauty," Resnick posited that beauty only comes into play at that moment of suspension, the letting go of control, the point of knowing nothing. It is a moment that cannot be replicated in a rational way. It is the moment when the painting works on the artist more than the artist approaches the canvas. And yet, we are not exempt from doing something -- Resnick says that the whiteness of the canvas is the false support, the false light.

Baker talks about duration as a way to make the paintings big, but he also admits to me "the real reason I work so long is that it takes that long for me to let go." He references Camus's essay in the 6 x 6 inch painting Sisyphus -- one that is especially unrelenting in its mustard-browns, greens and grays, with just two dashes of violet. It is this absurdity (and the beauty) of being happy--suspended--in this endless pursuit of doing and not-doing that appeals to Baker, and where his paintings live -- resonance overtaking endurance.

Jennifer Samet, Ph.D.
is a New York-based art historian, curator, and writer



little novel, 2009 – 2011, oil on canvas, 5 x 4 inches



present brushing, 2009 – 2011, oil on canvas, 6 x 6 inches



hand (igitur), 2009 -2011, oil on canvas, 5 x 4 inches



night volume, 2009 – 2011, oil on canvas, 6 x 6 inches



igitur, 2010 – 2012, oil on canvas, 12 x 9 inches



painter's table III, 2009 - 2011, oil on canvas, 12 x 12 inches



axel's forest, 2007 – 2009, oil on canvas, 20 x 18 inches



painter's table, 2004 – 2007, oil on canvas, 14 x 16 inches



mask, 2004 – 2007, oil on canvas, 14 x 16 inches



visage (rublev), 2002 – 2003, oil on canvas, 22 x 24 inches

Brett Baker

born 1973

lives and works in Durham, North Carolina

Solo Exhibitions

- 2013 Elizabeth Harris Gallery, New York, NY
- 2008 "Brett Baker," Simon Gallery, NJ
- 2008 "Paintings by Brett Baker," SoconyMobil Building, New York, NY,
curated by Suzanne Randolph Fine Arts
- 2008 "Forms of Face: Recent Small Paintings," The Painting Center,
New York, NY
- 2007 "Facing Color: New Paintings," St. Mary's College of Maryland, MD
- 2007 "Time & Text," Zhou B Art Center, Chicago, IL
- 2007 "Time & Text," Ossia Fine Arts Space, Chicago, IL

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2013 "Independents" Green Hill Art Center, Greensboro, NC
- 2012 "Heroes" Small Black Door, Queens, NY
- 2011 "Printed, Painted, Pressed" C2 Fine Art, St. Petersburg, FL
- 2010 "Artists Invite Artists: Small Works" The Painting Center, NY
- 2010 "New Walls/Fresh Paint" The Painting Center, NY
- 2009 "Intimate Frontiers" Richard Stockton College Art Gallery, NJ
- 2008-9 "Placing Color: Paintings by Brett Baker, Kayla Mohammadi,
and Carrie Patterson" Winona State University, MN
(September 2009)
Boston University, MA (April 2009)
The Painting Center, NY (May 2009)
St. Mary's College, MD (January-February 2009)
Bristol Community College, MA (September 2008)
- 2008 "Peace" Sideshow Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
- 2007 "War is Over," Sideshow Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
- 2006 "13th Anniversary Show," The Painting Center, New York, NY
- 2004 "Nature Abstracted," The Painting Center, New York, NY
- 2002 "Award Winning Alumni 1995-2002: Guggenheim, Dedalus, Starr,"
Sherman Gallery, Boston University, Boston, MA
- 2000 "Fine Arts Downtown 2000," New Bedford Art Museum,
New Bedford, MA
- 1999 "Contemporary Painting '99," Juror: Andrew Forge,
Erector Square Gallery, New Haven, CT
"Young Masters: Recent Graduates from Boston University
and Yale" Glass Mountain Gallery, Bantam, CT
"New Models," 808 Gallery, Boston University, Boston, MA,
- 1998 "National Competition," Juror: John Walker, Bowery Gallery,
New York, NY
"Emerging Boston Artists," Juror: Carl Belz, Dante Alighieri
Society, Cambridge, MA
"New Romantics," Gallery 855, Boston University, Boston, MA

Awards

- 2002 John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship
- 1999 Juror's Prize, Contemporary Painting '99, Juror: Andrew Forge
- '97-9 Constantin Alajalov Scholarship, Boston University
- 1995 Purchase Award, President's Collection, College of William and Mary

Bibliography/Video

- Joy, Christopher and Keeting, Zachary, "Video Interview with Brett Baker," Gorky's Granddaughter, 2012
- Brennan, Valerie, Interview with Brett Baker, Studio Critical, 2011
- McCann, Margaret, "Intimate Frontiers," Richard Stockton College, NJ, 2009
- Goodrich, John, "Placing Color", New York Press, May 15, 2009
- Colaizzi, Vittorio, "Placing Color", catalogue essay, 2008
- "Four Drawings by Brett Baker", LIT, The Creative Writing Journal of The New School, 2007
- "Art, music, and language mingle at the Ossia Fine Arts Space", Lisbeth Redfield, Chicago Maroon, The University of Chicago, October 26, 2007

Academic Experience/Residencies/Panels

- 2012 Visiting Artist, SUNY Oswego, NY
- 2009 Visiting Artist, Winona State University, MN
- 2008 Panelist, "Communicate Better through the Web: A Guide for Visual Artists", NYFA/Cue Art Foundation, NY
- 2007 Artist House Residency, St. Mary's College of Maryland
- 2007 Visiting Artist, St. Mary's College of Maryland, MD
- '99-01 Visiting Lecturer of Drawing, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth

Professional Experience

- 2010-12 Writer and Editor, Painters' Table, painterstable.com
- 2011-12 Contributing Writer, Aeqai, aeqai.com

Education

- 1999 M.F.A., Painting, Boston University, Boston, MA
- 1997 Post Baccalaureate Certificate, Painting, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA
- 1995 B.A., Fine Arts, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA



hand, 2002 – 2006, oil on canvas, 16 x 12 inches

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