

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Joe Bradley: Mr. Schmagoo

Joe Bradley has bobbed and weaved his way through varied styles—from scrawled primitive paintings to mod monochromes—but his rise to art world fame has been a straight shot.

Andrew Russeth



*Joe Bradley, in his studio in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, with *The Fiddler*, 2015.
Photograph by Stefan Ruiz*

On a muggy morning in early August, the artist Joe Bradley is driving his black Audi SUV along a road in the Long Island town of Amagansett, where he and his wife own a beach house, when he suddenly hits the brakes. “There you go, buddy,” Bradley says softly as he swerves around a tiny turtle in his path.

Bradley, it seems, feels an affinity with pokey, shell-bound creatures. Just a few days earlier, one of his dealers, Phil Grauer, a partner in Canada gallery in Manhattan, had told me that people often compare Bradley to a tortoise. “He moves really slowly to craft these ideas,” Grauer said. “Totally turtle,” concurs the artist Sarah Braman, another Canada partner. “Lots of looking.”

But if Bradley’s process is deliberate and methodical, his rise and output suggest another animal entirely—the hare. Bradley is just 40, but in the past decade or so he has shifted confidently, albeit mysteriously, through disparate scrappy styles: arranging monochrome paintings into goofy robot figures, scrawling primeval symbols on raw canvases, and painting rough, strange abstractions. Along the way, he has become one of the most closely watched—and hotly debated—painters of his generation. He was included in the 2008 Whitney Biennial and, more

recently, in the Museum of Modern Art's "The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World," its first major exhibition of contemporary painting in 30 years.

"I was always being challenged by what he did," says the artist Michael Williams, an old friend of Bradley's and also a painting star. "I would go to a show, and I would leave thinking, What the fuck is Joe doing now? And then, a week later, I'd realize maybe that was a great show."

At a seafood shack on Napeague Bay, a short drive from Bradley's house, we get to talking about his philosophy. "The idea is that you just do whatever you feel like doing," Bradley tells me, geese honking behind him. "I mean, what's the alternative, you know?"

Demand for his work is feverish. Last year a painting he made only three years earlier, a piquant jumble of blue, yellow, and green on a large, filthy drop cloth, sold for more than \$1.5 million at Christie's in London, nearly double the house's top estimate. New paintings can go for between \$150,000 and \$350,000. Ten years ago you could have picked one up for a few thousand.

For a guy who has rocketed to fame, Bradley is remarkably mellow. Today he wears a plaid shirt, jeans, and a black cap. His brown hair is longish, and his scruff looks a few days old. He speaks slowly but casually, often pausing before he answers a question. "Yeah, it's far-out," he says when I ask him about his market boom, as if he hasn't really thought about it. "It is a little unnerving, but then again, it's not like getting colon cancer or something. Who gives a shit, really?"

We've come here to pick up lobster rolls. Bradley says the place reminds him a bit of Kittery Point, Maine, the "pretty charming small town on the water" where he grew up. "Kind of like this without all of the glamour," he says. "Just lobster boats. No celebrities." Bradley's father was an emergency room doctor; his mother raised nine children—Bradley came along somewhere in the middle. As a kid, he was into comics and art and also considered pursuing environmental studies of some kind. For a time after high school he lived near home, and found work washing dishes and painting houses, but eventually he enrolled in Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), which in the '90s was a hotbed for experimental music. Bradley quickly fell into the scene, performing with Barkley's Barnyard Critters, whose members wore animal costumes onstage and, if vintage video clips are any guide, appeared to create mayhem. "Barkley" was Brian Gibson, one half of the storied noise band Lightning Bolt, who dressed as a dog. Bradley, on drums or guitar, was "Charlotte," a lamb. At one notorious Brooklyn show, Gibson—or maybe it was the backup dancer Rich Porter, no one can remember for sure—sprinted down the bar opening the taps. "Everybody got beat up and thrown out," says Keith McCulloch, who was in the band for a while, playing bass dressed as a fish named "Glub Glub," and was in the audience that night.

Bradley graduated in 1999 and found his way to New York, where he became the lead singer for a proto-punk band called Cheeseburger. "I remember him wearing only over-tight white jeans and rainbow-colored suspenders and writhing on the floor," says Kenny Schachter, a London dealer then based in New York, who, in 2002, snapped up a work by Bradley for \$200. "It was a fey landscape with pinkish colors and this atmospheric sky with little bows in it," says Schachter, recalling that moment (markedly different from today) when painting was more of a marginal practice and young artists weren't on every collector's radar. "The whole thing seemed to be the wrong thing at the wrong time." Which, of course, is what caught Schachter's eye. "There was something extraordinarily great in its badness." He gave Bradley a solo show the following year and kept much of the work for himself.

The day we meet, Bradley is just back from London, where he had seen Schachter and revisited those early pieces. “Looking at them again made me realize that show Kenny gave me was kind of my Rosetta Stone,” he says, referring to how the wildly diverse works hinted at future series. “There were these kind of fucked-up abstract paintings, and others would just be this piece of colored muslin or something, just stretched, and then one of them was just crayon.” But at the time no one wrote about the exhibition, and Bradley somewhat backed off from painting. Cheeseburger had some success: Its songs were used in commercials and video games, like *Grand Theft Auto IV*.

When Schachter moved to London in 2004, Bradley, along with some of the dealer’s other artists, joined Canada gallery, then a fledging space in the back of a nondescript office building in Manhattan’s Chinatown. One day Bradley showed up with a stack of drawings for paintings that looked like robotlike figures or 8-bit video-game characters assembled from monochrome canvases. “It was unlike any other work I had seen being made at that time,” Braman says. “It had this dry humor to it that was pretty beautiful and disarming and charming.” The gallery gave him a show in 2006. The work didn’t fly off the walls, but eventually all of it sold. Soon other dealers came knocking, like Javier Peres, who says he was intrigued by Bradley’s “contemporary take on ‘primitivism,’ particularly classic Dogon art, from Mali, combined with the visuals of art brut.” He bought a few pieces, sold some to the tastemaking collector Charles Saatchi, and represented Bradley at his galleries in Los Angeles and Berlin. Not long after, Bradley earned that spot in the Whitney Biennial. “I think of him as a very old-school painter,” says Shamim Momin, who co-curated the show. “He works for a long time with particular ideas.”

But just as those arch paintings were catching on, Bradley began to have second thoughts. “I was projecting into the future and imagining another five years of making those things,” he says. People were already coming by telling him to do “a dog or a table or a horse” using the monochromes, he says, chuckling. He remembers thinking: I don’t know if I want to spend my days doing this.

A few months after the biennial closed and just weeks before the 2008 presidential election, Bradley spent three nights at Canada drawing with grease pencil on raw canvas, creating his follow-up show. The works are shockingly simple—a Superman sign, a crucifix, a stick figure, a curved line. Grauer recalls joking, “Jesus, Joe. Way to destroy what little career you had.” But the gallery rolled with Bradley’s “Schmagoo Paintings,” borrowing a beatnik term for heroin.

“When I made the show and hung it, I was in a very toxic mood,” Bradley says. “I thought to myself, Oh, fuck it, I’m just going to do this and then maybe I’ll just drop out. I thought everyone would hate it, you know?” He was coming out of a relationship and, he says, “I was just stoned all the time and in this generally paranoid mood.”

Some people did hate it. In *Frieze* magazine, the curator Chris Sharp noted a vogue for “retarded” art in New York, declaring that “Joe Bradley has thrown down the ‘durr’ gauntlet...it doesn’t get much more retarded than this.” But everyone was talking about those paintings—and they were even selling. Dan Colen, another fast-rising star who knew Bradley from RISD, filed an impassioned rebuttal on the *Frieze* website, noting that he “was missing last call on the night that America had elected its first black president” to defend the artist’s honor.

Bradley soon found a new girlfriend, Valentina Akerman, a book designer. “I remember taking

her to see the ‘Schmagoo’ show—and then we were married six months later,” he says. “It was kind of a nice turning point.” They are now raising three kids.

You have to nudge a bit to get Bradley talking about his personal life, and so, one evening later in August, as we sit in his sprawling studio in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, I ask again about that heady period when he began dating Akerman. “It was a total new chapter, for sure,” he says. “She’s just an extraordinary woman, and I think it coincided with my buckling down and”—he shifts into a faintly ironic, or maybe embarrassed, tone—“trying to, um, commit myself a little more to life and work.” (He also concedes they probably didn’t get married after just six months. “I might have been exaggerating a bit.”)

After stripping his art down to almost nothing in those brutally spare “Schmagoos,” Bradley began adding color back in, transforming the primal forms into unruly, not-quite-figurative masses on raw canvases that he would later sew together into larger compositions. Bradley’s reputation was growing, and the unconventional blue-chip dealer Gavin Brown came knocking. “I couldn’t place what he was doing,” Brown says. “All of his strategies seemed to be contradictory.” Which is the crux of Bradley’s achievement. While so many artists struggle to conceive a single trademark style, he toys with a handful of them. The resulting paintings can be beautiful, but they are always tinged with a wry irreverence or a distance. “I felt annoyed by the fact that his deliberate incoherence was something that I was not able to find a key to,” Brown says, noting an “American audacity” in the work and mentioning “R. Crumb, graffiti, agitprop, bathroom scrawl.”

He decided he had to work with him, and in 2011, Bradley was showing with both Brown and Canada. Collectors fought for the work, and museums got on board. Laura Hoptman, a curator at the Museum of Modern Art, in New York, which has acquired 10 Bradley works since 2011, says that she sees him as “someone shaving Expressionist painting to its essence.” For MoMA’s painting survey last year, she placed the entire “Schmagoo” show on the opening wall. “They *seem* stupid, but they’re very profound,” she says of the paintings, arguing that they harken back to cave pictographs. They definitely make more sense now that you can see where Bradley was headed. Even Sharp has recanted, in part: “Looking back, it is kind of wonderful work,” he says, pointing to the “my-3-year-old-could-do-that humor,” but adding, “I still can’t fully embrace the dude-ness of it—the sense that it was painted by a dude for a coterie of dudes who totally dude-ed out over it.”

Another sign of Bradley’s ascendance is that imitators have appeared, like the 29-year-old London-based Colombian artist Oscar Murillo. That his grimy, drop cloth paintings bear a suspicious resemblance to Bradley’s has become a running joke among some in Bradley’s circle. As we wrap up lunch—Bradley has to head off to take care of “kid stuff”—I broach the issue of Murillo. “It’s strange,” he says carefully. “I think he’s maybe borrowed a thing or two, but what can you do? It’s the nature of things. He seems like a smart kid. He’ll probably figure it out.”

A raucous jazz record by the saxophonist Marion Brown is playing in the studio that evening, and there is a lithograph by Philip Guston perched on a table. Books by the German painter Georg Baselitz and underground comics are piled on another. About 40 roughed-up canvases in various states of completion are scattered across the floor. Bradley trudges across them in dirty white sneakers as he shows me around. “They’re taking such a long time to finish,” he says, surveying the canvases a little warily. One is covered in large earthy brown dots, another seems to resemble

a tree and a stick figure, but just barely. Most are tangles of two or three colors.

Bradley's shape-shifting has slowed recently. He has been making sculpture and silk screens, but mainly he's been toying with this type of messy abstraction, honing his beguiling language, a peculiar mixture of the rudimentary and the sophisticated. "I'm kind of becoming a conventional painter," he says, only half-joking. "I don't like repeating myself, so something will become a trope in the studio and it just starts to bug you." Should that happen, he'll likely put some of those pieces away for a while. "Sometimes when you're working on a painting, it's nice to let it cool off a bit," he says. I mention something that Brown told me: how having children has in some way influenced Bradley's work. He thinks about this for a moment and perks up. "Watching a child draw is really remarkable," he says. "The confidence and how they approach it." When one of his children makes a drawing that catches his eye, he admits, "I'll just kind of tuck it into my pocket. I bring it over here and put it up on the wall."