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A conversation with Kristopher Benedict – April 2008.



Retreat refers to the title of your upcoming exhibit at the A.M. Richard gallery (May 16th-June 22nd). You are showing three rather large scale site-specific paintings in a gallery that is segmented into three rather small spaces-can you tell me about the underlying idea behind this choice? You could easily have dispersed smaller works.

KB: Your gallery has a really unique character. It used to be an apartment, so it has a kind of intimacy and a personality that comes from not being a white cube but not being domestic either. I felt right away that whatever I put in the show had to address the space.

There were a few reasons why I liked the idea of making large wall sized paintings for the show. I liked the idea that the paintings would act like a wall or a mural and mesh with the gallery in a way that a discreet object couldn't. I thought that the spaces depicted in the paintings would have a chance to affect the way you would experience the actual space of the gallery. At the same time, looking at it from the opposite side, I liked the possibility that they could be seen as these big public scaled intrusions into the domestic space.

As the paintings were being made, I was very conscious of both of these potential attitudes and let it inform a lot of the decision making – working between clutter and openness, illusionistic depth and flatness. I think some of the same ideas are at play in the subjects of the paintings. You find these intimate moments in some of the figures - the mothers and children, the yoga practitioners, or certain sweeter bits of the landscape, and that is countered by some of the municipal architecture and landscape and the cacophony created by passages of intense colors and colliding images.



Can you comment on the titles of your paintings, Retreat, Goodnight Stan and New Lights?

KB: All of these paintings were made by the superimposition of several images into the same composition. In the past, when there was a single subject, my paintings would have more straight forward titles like Night Park, or Musicians. There is nothing literal in the titles of the paintings in Retreat. Hopefully they give the work a sub-text or point you in a certain direction.

The painting Retreat was made by superimposing images of a yoga classroom, an arboretum from a senior community, and a Manhattan cityscape. The execution of the painting was all about achieving a certain type of ambiguity in the space. The word Retreat obviously has several meanings but for me, and in this context, it points to a melancholy feeling, the desire for removal - like there is something in everyday life that you want to step away from.

Goodnight Stan is the title of a **Bill Fay** song. The singer tells Stan "if you can, take a watering can, to protect yourself". He sings about them being taken away to Mars or Jupiter. The song is beautiful and has this great science fiction paranoia thing happening – an apocalypse seen from a tiny backyard garden. In the painting I'm after the same feeling. It's composed from a few images of mothers and children and one of a park path. The way it's painted and the way the images are put together, hopefully the watering cans and the baby's pacifier become strange unfamiliar things or else touchstones in an unfamiliar environment.

New Lights is the largest painting I've made and more than the others, I wanted it to have a really public dimension to it – a declaratory thing. I wanted it to feel ecstatic and have an optimism to it. The two figures in the foreground are doing a yoga pose where one woman is bending towards her feet with another woman facing upwards stretching out across the bending woman's back. I thought it was an amazing image. The landscape parts are from a corporate atrium. You can still make out some of the pterodactyls and other dinosaurs from the under-painting if you spend a few minutes or take drugs. The title New Lights refers to the optimism I want to see in the painting. When a faction divides, the New Lights are the ones who embrace change and go in a different direction.



Your choice of subject matter is both refreshing and embedded in a long tradition of [populist social realism]; police officers (Police on Horseback, 2006), the race track (Belmont Park, 2006), Macy's thanksgiving parade (Dora, 2007), individuals at play or rest in a park (Mother and Daughter, 2006, Musicians, 2007). You have depicted yoga classes as well as divers and swimmers in recreational pools. Your paintings seem concerned with daily group activities rather than the individual. Yet through all these busy people composition there is a deep sense of anonymity and isolation. Even as they embrace themselves, the individual don't seem connected. Faces if they appear are obscured by helmets, hair, movement or are depicted with generic and at times grotesque features. Can you comment?

KB: I'm more concerned with creating iconic imagery than depicting the personalities of these subjects. Ninety percent of the time I have no idea who the people that I'm painting are outside of their image. I'm working with metaphors - these figures are all stand ins for different ideas I want to address in each painting. I'm referencing these older artworks in an attempt to comment on our present tense formulation of concepts like leisure, lifestyle, and public space.

If you see a tension between the collective and the individual in these paintings, that is great. It is something that I've gone about addressing from a lot of different angles. In the end, the subjects I choose for these paintings are there to begin a conversation, to ask some questions.

I think, in a really broad sense, what interests me now about the presentation of this contemporary iconography is how it resonates and creates dissonances with that past trajectory of painting you are talking about.



You mentioned in an earlier conversation the idea of spontaneity and openness- tentatively called it controlled improvisation-I used the term "controlled" because improvisation implies a moment or action that is not rectifiable-I know you work over and over your paintings. I'm not sure they are ever finished in your head. Are they?

KB: Yes, thankfully. I always begin a piece with a strong idea of what it should look like when it's finished. I think the openness we are talking about is a willingness I have to go off the map a bit - to change the plan - when I see something unexpected but exciting happening. This sort of thing works best when the viewer is able to follow along. It's like "The Joy of Painting".



*I would like to address the **abstract expressionist** and underlying **Neue Sachlichkeit** aspect to your paintings. I find that these two manifestations are the most relevant to your work. While your subject matter is culled from American daily life it has continuity with both European old master (**Ribera, Goya, Velazquez**) and the moderns (**Beckmann, Ensor, Manet, Caillebotte**). It is an interesting link. Can you elaborate? What are you looking at?*

KB: I feel like I've kind of come at many of these artists backwards - a little ironically at first. Using some of their language to talk about other things. I spent a some time riffing on **Vuillard**, painting "interiors" of radio broadcast booths. But figures like **Goya, Velazquez, Ensor, and Manet**, I'm really awed by. The more I work with subjects that share commonalities with these artists, the more I see the influence of learning to draw from comic books, getting my color sense from **Hanna Barbara**, and having a television based attention span. But these are all positive attributes, I really don't want to be a master or a modern and I don't think I want to be European.

In terms of what I'm looking at, when I was working on Retreat, I started looking at all these illustrations of architectural redevelopment proposals for the **Gowanus** area of **Brooklyn**. They are all made with a kind goofy but slick Photoshop aesthetic with children flying kites, people boating and beautiful skies. I've lived in the area for a few years and these proposals are honestly such a pipe dream that you have to admire them. I was also looking at Maurice **Prendergast** and Sigmar **Polke**. I was in Berlin recently and saw some great paintings by the **Brucke** group and the Dana **Schutz** and Raymond **Pettibon** show at CFA gallery.



You have mentioned the bridge to belief i.e. the communal search for spirituality- a need to signify urban living. Do you feel disconnected?

KB: No, I don't think of myself that way. I don't think of things in absolutes where you are either disconnected or you're not. I've made paintings where there appears to be an ecstatic communal awakening, paintings from the perspective of the misanthropic loner on the outskirts, and lots of things in between. I guess there is a common thread of this searching for meaning and each painting is another opportunity to reformulate the whole thing. But as I was saying before, it's enough for me to present some questions. Is this spiritual self-exploration, or is it an exercise class? Yoga like painting has a lot to do with looking for a hypothetical unity of mind and material. It's a discipline.



How has photography and access to the internet impacted on your painting?

KB: Before I had easy access to the Internet I collected lots of gardening magazines. I also was unaware of just how many nudist colonies existed. It really has been an invaluable tool.

I'll often work with images that I've found on Google image searches, but I also work from photos that I take, illustrations, sketches from the imagination or memory. Before I begin a painting I make a few preparatory drawings and work more or less exclusively from them.



What are you working on now?

KB: I think I'll begin to focus again on smaller paintings. Maybe some still lifes. I want a little quiet time.



Thank you Mr. Benedict.

