

BOMB

Julian Hoeber: "Interview"

Written by Jenn Joy

November 14, 2011

Following a phone conversation with LA-based artist Julian Hoeber, my almost illegible notes read: Luc Sante, obscure film that does cinema as sculpture, Kelly Nipper, *Stories in an Almost Classical Mode*, history of Shaker furniture, Mike Kelley, *The Tin Drum*, recipe for brandade, *What is Cinema?*, watch *Safe* again. These ciphers were evidence of a long friendship maintained across distance. In a way, they illuminated

Hoeber's sensibility as an artist—his intense self-reflexivity, his subversive take on art history, even his attention to the representation of violence.

In Hoeber's September exhibition at Harris Lieberman Gallery in New York, I encounter these concerns in a visceral way. Standing inside the vertiginous architecture of Demon Hill, his optical drawings have a dizzying velocity. Hoeber's work unsettles. He offers us clues without resolution. For his exhibition with Alix Lambert at Blum & Poe this past summer he borrowed the title *No Person May Carry a Fish into a Bar* from an archaic LA law. The exhibition asked: what is a crime? Offering up exquisite forgeries, contemporary relics, sculptures, traces from and documents of crime scenes as so many seductive objects requiring our forensic attention, Hoeber cast the viewer in the position of witness or detective.

Jenn Joy I have a flickering after-image from your artist's talk at RISD a few weeks ago that I want to return to. I love the way you spoke of the ambivalence of the photograph—the multiple histories present in the faces of the Boers staring at the camera—and how this document calls out our assumptions around the heroics of the rebel and the romanticism of the worker. I'm curious to hear more about how photography, specifically the fiction of the document, animates your practice. As an index, documentary photography seems to act as an unconscious side of, or subtext to, your work and your art-making process.

Julian Hoeber Photography is the art that I grew up with. My mother is a photographer and I was her subject for many years. I always have been friends with and surrounded by photographers, but I never have been any good at it myself. Like anyone else, I've made a few good photographs, but that's not being a photographer. It's been a source of frustration, in part because of having been photographed so often, that photographs are so untrustworthy. None of my mother's pictures ever gave me much information about who I was. The way photographs confront you with something that looks like a fact, but that turns out to be much sloppier, is central to how I think about my own work. The Boer picture you mention is filled with contradictions. It's a wonderful image for contemporary liberals. To our eyes, it looks like Tom Joad and his compatriots after the end of *The Grapes of Wrath*. The Boers were an army of farmers, but their historical significance is more complex than we can see in the picture. They were put in concentration camps by the British; they altered the course of British colonial rule throughout the world, but they were also a source of inspiration to the Nazis. The photograph can't reveal that. The conflicts of meaning inherent in photography fascinate me. However, I want the conflicts in my work to be less shrouded. I've been better at making videos and movies because they allow more room to open up the discussion of what's happening in a picture.

In a lot of my sculpture and painting there is a sense that what you know and what you perceive are in conflict. I suppose the odd, nauseating feeling that came with recognizing the conflict between what I knew of myself and what I saw in hundreds of pictures my mother shot of me, has been very productive.

JJ When you turn to film with *Killing Friends* (2001) and *Talkers are No Good Doers* (2005) this ambiguity becomes totally exploited in the work but then also in the exhibition I wasn't joking. you were joking. I was serious. (2005). The movement between the virtuosic trompe l'oeil drawings of photographs, to story boards, to collaged outtakes from the filming, to newspaper clippings renders an uncanny history of the moment. What connects these histories and events for you? How does your work negotiate the operations of mediation?

JH The works you mention involve representational images, which I've used less and less in recent years. In these works I gravitated to pictures of sex and violence—images of the body. They foreshadow my interest in experiential work. Titillating images of bodies encourage a feeling of identification, especially in cinema.

In movies I often show the mechanism by which a difficult or intense feeling—revulsion, fear, sexual arousal—is produced. It doesn't undo the revulsion, but it makes it comprehensible and it makes us discount some of our preconceptions. When all of these pretty kids get butchered in *Killing Friends* it's disturbing, but over and over you're reminded that it isn't even murder within the context of the narrative—the characters are only playing at acting out violence. The disjuncture pulls the rug out from under you and asks you to reassess how you react to something provocative. One of the best things a viewer ever said to me was that the film infuriated him because it snatched away his ability to react with the usual level of disgust at images of violence. I'm happy if I can bring a viewer to greater awareness of how his or her preconceptions impede understanding.

I think part of what you're getting at in the question about negotiating the operations of mediation is my insistence on making the way images are manufactured part of the content of the work. In *Killing Friends* there are ruptures in the fiction that are me being honest about telling a convincing lie. In the trompe l'oeil pictures I make a point of representing photographs as things rather than presenting photographs as images. The edges of the paper, how it's taped to a surface—these elements make them paintings of things rather than just recreations of the magical thinness of images. It's a realist impulse to point out that decisions were made to bring a picture into the world.

JJ At times I have an intense sense of vertigo looking at your work. My disorientation is simultaneously perceptual and conceptual, a nausea evoked by the optical illusions but almost as potently by the overwhelming litany of references. I still remember the press release you wrote for *All That is Solid Melts into Air* (2008) that opens with an "old tattered body" and continues with "Bridget Riley, Camille Claudel, Judy Chicago, Valie Export, Barbara Kruger, Roy Lichtenstein, Thomas Eakins, Arthur Fellig, Christopher Wool, Sterling Ruby, DJ K-Swift, Santogold, Melanie Klein, Cy Twombly, Hermann Nitsche, Chris Vasell, Lucio Fontana, Paul Cezanne, Mark Quinn, Nate Lowman, Barnett Newman, Elaine and Saul Bass, Giulio Questi, Herschell Gordon-Lewis, Jean-Luc Godard, Paul McCarthy, Jim Shaw, Niki de Saint Phalle, Jesus Rafael Soto, Kori Newkirk, Jasper Johns, Kenneth Noland, Cady Noland, Tony Tasset, John Stagliano, Diplo, F. X. Messerschmidt, Tony Cragg, Alfred Hitchcock, David Simon and Ed Burns, Lucian Freud, Sigmund Freud, John Cassavetes, Robert Bresson, Vito Acconci, Harold Brodkey, Mike John, Sasha Grey, M.I.A, The Minutemen, Marina Abramovic and Bruce Naumann." It concludes with an insult to postmodernism and an homage to your mother.

Then the works in the show included optical illusion paintings and the series of bronze cast heads on mirrored pedestals. How do you deal with the anxiety of influence? Where do you place yourself in the work?

JH I'm going to paraphrase Jonathan Lethem on this. I recently saw him give a reading, and Lethem said that he grew up on Warner Bros. cartoons, and that he knew about Edward G. Robinson through Bugs Bunny's imitations of him before he'd ever seen one of his films. For many in our generation, intertextuality, layers of reference, sampling, etc. were internalized long before we had a name for them. I clearly remember doing impersonations of Peter Lorre based on the Merrie Melodies cartoons and having no idea he had been a real person. Years later I fell in love with Fritz Lang's *M* and *The Maltese Falcon*.

This constant absorption of meanings, images, and various disconnected histories, is part of who we are. Images and ideas just float around in our environment. I happen to have a fairly permeable membrane—stuff just leaks into me and then I feel like it's my own—though we're all pretty saturated. The anxiety of influence comes in the possibility that you're just trafficking in received ideas, and the problem is not confined to art. There's a difference between internalizing and understanding an experience, and spouting out what you heard someone else say. The fear is that you haven't fully processed what you've absorbed.

The particular show you're talking about came from a very lonely place, both in terms of ideas and process. Arguing with and reconciling myself to all of these other artists and histories was part of it; it was also the result of being surrounded by too many other voices in the real world. I needed to process what I had been taking in.

After making the film *Talkers*, I hated the idea of working with a crew again. I just wanted to work by myself I started making highly developed storyboards. These eventually led to drawings that were works in their own right. I started remembering old ideas that I had set aside years before. The busts riddled with bullet holes came from an old idea, initially meant to be absurd—a gesture of total bathos—but they ended up being quite elegant once I actually made them. The rough, uncontrolled surfaces we associate with expressionism, the results of destruction—these things look like art. I was interested in the back and forth between the gestural quality of the damage done by bullets and the indexical look of a life cast head.

There's this great history of "destroyed" art works: Yves Klein's fire paintings, Niki de St. Phalle's *Tir*, the works of the Gutai. However, in most of these works destruction is the primary medium. Making something that is a finished work on its own and then destroying it is another thing. I also was thinking about a history of grotesque portraiture—again, lots of references. On top of that, it was my own image that I shot, so it was hard to avoid the idea of where I'm located in the work. I had the impulse to destroy myself a bit, and art too.

JJ I keep returning to an essay Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev wrote as part of the 100 Notes series for dOCUMENTA (13) where she conjures a precarious relationship between art, conflict, and trauma through last writings of Walter Benjamin, Man Ray's reiterative *Indestructible Objects* and Gustav Metzger drawings, among many other things. I understand her proposal as an attempt to think of art not as cathartic, or illustrative, or aesthetically benign, but as an opaque and striated site where we must sit with ambiguity and conflict. Perhaps this is obvious when we are dealing with realms of representation, as your work so eloquently reminds us, yet she seems to shift the language and the politics of art-making in a way worth considering.

JH The ability to sit with ambivalence and conflict is what my shrink used to call "adulthood" or

“mental health.” If art is simply one more site of conflict where we must sit and allow ourselves to be ok with that, how does it differ from the other miserable shit we live with on a day to day basis? Should art be a problem that we are happy to leave unsolved? That seems to rely on the viewer being mentally healthy, which I believe is asking too much. Or is Christov-Bakargiev saying art is a place where we can develop some equanimity in the face of conflict? I’d like this, if art was able to make people comfortable with moral ambiguity, but I also would want to leave room for things like aesthetic pleasure, which, while not malignant, isn’t quite benign. Images of war and disaster are serious, and seriousness is a place of unambiguous comfort for most intellectuals. I wonder if a more difficult conflict for some of the art world to navigate would be the places where things are unserious, and driven by a goofy, happy, irrational version of the id. The idea of art as merely a place to sit with ambivalence and conflict sounds joyless. There’s something equally valuable in being comfortable with a lack of control of your intellect and your senses.

JJ I imagine she and I certainly would create room for pleasure in the art experience—space for less than sensible ecstasies. Yet, these days I find myself returning to questions of violence and its pressure on representation and language. Looking back to the first exhibition we worked on together—a wall of repeated fragments, noses, ears, antique medical equipment, drawings, photographs—the body appeared cut up, splayed, then bleeding endlessly across a black and white tile floor. The work felt like a dark interrogation of anatomy by way of pulp culture, medical discourse, and even classical portrait painting.

JH In my earliest works I was trying to find a way into the figure in art. I’d had an old-fashioned kind of training that revolved around life drawing and anatomy study, and I was into some pretty salacious figurative painting. When I discovered people like Bruce Nauman and Vito Acconci, I realized there were more nuanced ways to approach the subject. The first shift for me was to move from representational painting to making movies, which still was a way of making pictures of people. What quickly became obvious was the different way that viewers identify with people on screen as opposed to on the canvas. This was an epiphany for me. I realize I wanted to deal with people’s absorption and experience within films rather than make flat pictures that existed as patently fictitious and experientially distant.

JJ Did you read Michael Fried’s writings on absorption in relation to figurative painting and photography? He identifies absorption as a motif within which the depicted figure is focused completely on her task thus producing a kind of ontological fiction that the spectator is not there. He sees this as an important lens for thinking about art more generally now. Thinking of this early installation in light of your recent sculpture and installation, I sense that you are playing both sides of this—distilling something more metonymic perhaps. How to say this . . . the figure ignores the beholder, of course, but then there is an assaultive cue, a detonator, that breaks this frame and asks for a more complicit read. Does this idea have any bearing on the politics of disorientation animating the physical or perceptual trajectories in your current work?

JH What you’re describing in the piece of mine is akin to breaking the fourth wall—letting people in after they’ve been absorbed in a fiction that excludes them. The idea is to cause a Brechtian distanciation, but it’s become such a convention that it barely works anymore. Experiential work has been more productive for me. If disorientation does what it is meant to do, it puts people in a position to reassess the world around them. Simple disorientation isn’t enough in itself—but in the context of the kind of focused attention that happens when viewing art it can be valuable. In *Demon Hill* I tried to make a powerfully disorienting situation, while leaving the mechanism that creates that effect completely obvious. That way the effect isn’t reduced to a trick. Rather, it’s a different position from which to see the world, hopefully one which allows a person to question the validity of his normal position.

A lot of not knowing also is required to make work that produces a surprise for people—and surprise is really what we're talking about in a way—with things they already should understand. If you go along with all of these theoretical propositions, you can't really get to the surprise part. A certain amount of work has to be done intuitively and while letting yourself be confused by what you're making. When I started doing the backs of the paintings, for example, I thought it was a bad idea; I didn't know why I wanted to do it, but for me that's usually a good sign.

JJ These unconscious images on the back of the paintings—are they ever meant to be flipped? What of the relationship between artist and installer, or artist as installer? These secret images seem to nod to your past labor.

JH After making a lot of dark and violent work, I started making very attractive paintings. Part of me felt I couldn't leave the darkness behind. I had done double-sided drawings that were aggressive looking on the front with decorative abstractions on the back. I made the joke that the work looked dark, but there was another side to it—that the drawings had an unconscious mind. When I started to do the backs of the paintings, I wanted to give them another quality that was hidden and in opposition to the obvious qualities. It was a way to push back against myself and against what had started to feel too easy. The back of the painting became a kind of shadow self. I make the fronts fairly systematically and the backs fairly impulsively. But on the front I allow myself to be intuitive and impulsive within a structure, on the backs I impose a little structure (I always include a photo, usually violent) on a loose and quick way of working.

Most people, when they see a show, never know about the backs; this is certainly the first time it's ever been written about. Once people know there's something nasty lurking behind the paintings, I think they start to look at them differently. They know the paintings contain something else they can't get to. The paintings become associated with this other idea and you can feel it seeping through the front.

Anytime you see an artwork, there's always a tremendous amount you'll never have access to, no matter how transparent the work may seem. I became attuned to that when working as an artist assistant; I saw things go into the works that would never be part of the subsequent discussions. When I started doing the backs, I loved that there'd be a secret between me and the people who make the show happen. It's preparators and installers who keep you from looking like a fool most of the time when you do a show, but there's little glory for them. Most of them are artists and they tend to be the most interesting people to hang out with when you're putting up an exhibition. I had heard Bruce Connor used to put cheesecake shots on the back of his pictures for the preparators and I thought that was a good idea. I wasn't going to do cheesecake because it seems irrelevant to what I'm trying to do; I wanted to give those guys some extra meaning rather than some extra thrill. People who own the work also get access to this "secret." I've had a few people ask if it was alright if they showed the paintings backwards so people could see the reverse. I've never said no, but I suspect it won't happen because it likely means having the "main" painting against the wall. That seems like a fairly aggressive and self-defeating act, which actually, on reflection, is an idea I kind of like.

JJ The curation of the objects in your current exhibition—the paintings, the furniture, the tilting architecture—creates so many the illusive trajectories. What happens when that gorgeous modern chair becomes the setting of those behind the painting photographs? Can you talk about the installation choices? I sense an explicit choreography in this exhibition that is as much the work as the objects within it.

JH To give a little back story, the paintings are part of a series that began a few years ago. I use a

rigorous conceptual system to create compositions that I execute more loosely and intuitively. The virtue of this structure is that there are limits to push against. Eventually I was pushing farther than I'd expected to. I had envisioned something as flat-footed as coloring outside the lines dictated by the system, but I got to a place where the system itself was beginning to fall apart. As I approached working on this show the paintings started to look more and more representational to me—an unexpected development in what was meant to be complete abstraction.

The more I worked, the more I moved toward architectural forms. Knowing they'd be installed with the newest iteration of *Demon Hill*, I tried to make them depict a disruptive and vertiginous architecture. A lot of the paintings look like doors or hallways and there's a lot of decay. I wanted to make it clear that the repetitions in the pieces are not about a style, but a motif. Compound angles and receding, crooked spaces and architectural obstructions manifesting in a few different kinds of paintings as well as in the furniture and constructions was a way to bring a sense of disorientation into the whole space, not just inside of *Demon Hill*.

Some things were placed really carefully. There is a diamond shaped painting that strongly echoes the architecture of *Demon Hill* and was placed beside the structure. I hung the active optical drawings so they'd confront you as you exited the *Demon Hill*. These drawings are tough to look at and are dizzying. It was a bit of cruelty to put them near the exit, just when you might want some relief.

The chair you mention was originally included as a resting place behind the structure. It's hard to explain to people who haven't been inside how upsetting *Demon Hill* can be. I wanted to create a calmer space between the building and the majority of the paintings, as well as a vantage point from which to view *Demon Hill* as a sculptural object. I wanted to script a person's movement through the space, with heavy drama and intensity at the beginning, followed by a moment of rest. In that moment of rest, I included the most representational works in the show. The Small Door painting and the piece I keep calling the head in the box are in this in-between space with the chair. I wanted to them to haunt the space a little bit. I think those pieces, which look very similar to the other works in the show but carry a more obvious connection to architecture and the viewer's body, are key to making the forms in the painting function as motif. They force the read of the abstract paintings in the next room, which, as I said, verge on the representational.

Your suggestion that the chair can be connected to the pictures on the back of the paintings is interesting to me because I'd never thought of it myself. I suppose the door and the head in the box just beside the chair also hint at what's inside or behind the paintings. I think about the paintings, with shadow selves and secrets, as a bit like heads themselves. In a way a show becomes that too, and when you're in that chair, penned in slightly by the building, you're a bit like the head in the box. I don't want to draw the analogy too precisely, for fear of taking what's compelling out of it, but it may be a good way to go look at the show again.

Jenn Joy teaches in Graduate Studies and Sculpture at Rhode Island School of Design. She is scholar-in-residence at Danspace Project at St. Mark's Church in NYC where she curates Conversations without Walls with Judy Hussie-Taylor. In her past life, she directed jennjoygallery in San Francisco.