Realist Paintings by Bryan LeBoeuf

by Jay Williams

Informed by the techniques of European masters, the realist paintings of Bryan LeBoeuf incorporate beautifully painted surfaces and almost baroque lighting effects. His careful compositions have been inspired by his appreciation of the work of impressionist and modern artists, ranging from Degas to Barnett Newman. LeBoeuf's subject matter may be traditional in appearance, but it is quite contemporary in its psychological and social implications. Many of his paintings suggest open-ended relationships between the figures he depicts -- often parents, children, siblings, partners, and other family members -- and their interaction with moody environments.

His technique -- meticulous and traditional -- might lead some viewers to conclude that he is simply concerned with painterly illusion or superficially convincing subject matter. Not so. The craftsmanship so evident in his paintings is the means to an end, LeBoeuf asserts, not an end in itself. As he noted in a recent interview, "If all we had to do was manage craft! Look at the French Academy. My God! Every student in an atelier -- they're all extraordinary! But their technique is like a camera could do it . . . . Technique in picture making won't save the work; but without it, it will probably die."[1]

LeBoeuf's paintings may be classified as realist, but his artistic aspirations extend beyond observable reality. His canvases are conceptual, like those of the painters he most admires, artists for whom technique was not enough. They include Michelangelo and Titian, Velazquez, Delacroix, Manet, and Degas, all artists whose ideas about painting changed the way people saw its larger purpose. Those artists are emphatically not like the nineteenth-century academicians who did not question the function of art, but, rather, are like Manet and Duchamp who "challenge[d] the context of picture making."

For LeBoeuf, one essential stands out: "It's the ability to control the context." By manipulating the context surrounding his subject matter, LeBoeuf ensures that viewers attracted to his tightly controlled technique and representational subject matter cannot make facile interpretations of his figures and their actions.

His goal is to create a through-the-looking-glass illusion, "like the mouse hole in the cartoon that you feel you can walk into. There's no barrier between you and whatever this image is." To achieve this end, LeBoeuf subtly manipulates each composition, striving for the best combination of elements in the most effective arrangement. "The world is full of things, and the artist must be able to describe visually all of it," he explained recently. "even heaven, hell, and purgatory, and everything in between in terms of narrative that an artist might have to be able to imagine."

He incubates each idea through lengthy experimentation, often working out ideas in smaller scale before doing a larger version of a painting. He explained that "sometimes it takes a couple of years or more. An idea doesn't leave me. The ideas that stick around are the ones that continue to haunt me, continue to weigh on me until I get to them." During this process, he works out the all-important

context for his subject matter by carefully considering what Graham Collier calls "the trinity of space, light, and time."[2]

In LeBoeuf's work, issues of time are as central to his implied visual narrative as they are in literary narrative. Referring to a passage from *Death in Venice* in which Thomas Mann describes a sea voyage during which sky and sea seem to merge into one disorienting visual field, Collier describes how space and light are essential to our understanding of time:

> In a void of empty sea and sky the ship's passenger cannot relate himself to a place or position and, consequently, loses the ability to gauge the passing of the hours. The implication is that a sense of time depends upon being able to differentiate one position in space from another, and upon recognizing the time-distance that separates them.[3]

LeBoeuf's cropping, positioning, and modeling of figures, within the illusion of three- dimensional depth in his pictures, create a similar sense of ambiguity. In *Drawing is Love* (2008) and *On the Road* (2003), LeBoeuf creates the impression of unseen space in the environment of the figures, just beyond the limits of the composition. Both of these paintings are asymmetrically organized, with off-center vertical and horizontal axes. In each of them, the viewer is drawn into the composition and asked to imagine an explanation for the focus of the attention of a key figure who gazes into space, beyond the confines of the canvas. In *Hall Pass* (2003), he employs a mode closer to that of Dutch baroque painters, with moody lighting reminiscent of Rembrandt and grouped figures in interiors like those of Pieter de Hooch. In this painting, he models the central figures with raking light from an unseen source, allowing deep shadow to envelop other areas. He sees historical styles as "devices" that help him form a context for his figures and other subject matter "with the composition of the thing like a blueprint." Ideally, he would like every part of the composition to "reinforce ideas I have in the thing. . . . By the end, I try to have all the t's crossed and i's dotted. But not just to kill it or suffocate it, but to get to the place where I've evoked something else-where I've unlocked doors and probably gotten closer to a question than I have an answer."

He tends to have "an iron grip on the actual attributes," a term that he uses for the purely visual, abstract qualities of each painting that function as part of the content. Viewers who get too wrapped up in LeBoeuf's subject matter may miss his nonobjective use of color. To him, the play of color in the half-light is the "most chromatic and the truest."

He explains, "You could use that stuff to describe events pictorially," but his form of realism allows color and light to carry meaning independently. "It's absolutely doing it abstractly. Those things have meaning to me. I'm indirect in ways that are probably right-brained." In *Baptism* (2006), LeBoeuf works with a seemingly simple grouping of figures in the half-light, forming an abstract arrangement of organic forms on a richly colored ground. The value contrasts in this painting are analogous to those in an abstract painting that carries special meaning for LeBoeuf, Barnett Newman's *Twelfth Station* (1965), from the series entitled *Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani*.[4] Like the twelfth station, the crucifixion, the sacrament of baptism represents a climactic moment, but certainly not the end of a story.

The sacramental imagery of *Baptism* is one of the few direct references to religion in the exhibition. Raised in the Catholic faith in Houma, Louisiana, LeBoeuf credits his upbringing with opening his mind to be psychologically receptive to Renaissance painting and other historical European religious imagery. His childhood in the South -- he is one of three sons of a salesman and a nurse -- sensitized LeBoeuf to the primacy of family and community relationships and gave him a set of strong role models for his figurative imagery.

Boy (2008) and *The Pearl* (2008) are compositions dominated by single, monumental figures. He prevents them from being too sweet or sentimental by placing them in an ambiguous space on a ground that is essentially abstract. The relative scale of these figures to the modest actual sizes of the canvases has nothing to do with the feeling that these figures, and the space they command, are in scale with the viewer. "I always think of a Degas painting in the Met, when it comes to this [issues of scale]. I think it was one of the first ballet paintings. There are perhaps twelve figures, a bunch of figures in this tiny little painting, and the illusion of space and air in the space of this small painting is more immense than most any artist can create."

As powerful as these single-figure canvases may be, LeBoeuf seems most at home when he presents figures in tension, as in *Trois Bateaux* (2004) and *Cancellation of the Flight into Egypt* (2008). As natural as it may be to assume that he is narrating factual events, he is quick to point out that the content of these paintings is based on intuitive suggestion:

> *Cancellation of the Flight into Egypt* aims at doing what a lot of other work of mine does, gets to this place which is begging a lot of questions, questions that are presupposed before I start out and finally get to the actual painting. That was one of those ideas, one of those visual images that popped in my head and wouldn't go away . . . This is another picture where family is suggested. . . . Again, it's what I know. If we removed most things in this picture, we're left with this landscape that's the place where I come from. Visually, I know these trees. I know that ditch. I know this fence that's down. I know that field; it's in my head. And it's like all of my pictures; none of these things actually exist, but they absolutely exist in terms of "I made this up." [The elements] were part of . . . occurrences and events in my life -- I've remembered things and put them back together in an artificial way to create this story.
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> My favorite place would be right in the middle [of a story]. I didn't make it to the end of this "journey." I want to leave it right where we come to the most visceral part of the sentence, in the middle. Where you're . . . in the "fattest part" of what's really real about it.

LeBoeuf's composition owes its verisimilitude to his mastery of space and light. The high horizon line and foreground space are inviting. The space and time seem strangely familiar. The psychological environment of the painting is open, a place to be possessed and understood by anyone. Again, he

invites viewers into the middle of a constructed reality, where they may participate in creating the narrative or, at least, completing it in their minds.

Viewing his other paintings requires equal intuition and creativity. In *Trois Bateaux*, LeBoeuf again presents a mysterious and unresolved relationship between figures and their environment. The teenaged girl and boy, the enclosing mangrove bay of greenish-brown water, and old and new boats evoke a rich variety of associations: growth and decay, restriction and freedom, action and inaction. Appreciating LeBoeuf's paintings is as easy as feeling the motion of the sailboat in *Trois Bateaux*, or the magnetic pull into the space of the foreground figures in *Daedalus and Icarus* (2003). In each instance, LeBoeuf invites viewers to resolve the psychological tension, perhaps imagining that they could help the father tie the shoe of his distracted little boy. (Surely there's some urgent reason for them to be leaving or arriving.) He opens the visual space of *Daedalus and Icarus* and *Hall Pass* to viewers as an almost cinematic experience, asking that they allow each composition to impose its own rhythm on the experience. "The overall feeling, your overall sense of the entire picture, the speed at which you travel through the picture will be sped up or slowed by what's in it. That's another relationship," LeBoeuf said. "It's part of the forever chess match." The success of the game depends on participation by all viewers. If it is a chess match, it has multiple endings by necessity, each as open-ended as a novel by John Fowles.

One of LeBoeuf's favorite stories concerns his recollection of a Kurt Vonnegut interview with Charlie Rose. He remembers Vonnegut commenting that "there are three things that mean anything to us: food, sex, and becoming." Becoming is central to the appreciation of Bryan LeBoeuf's work, because his work focuses on the creative potential of relationships. His paintings don't communicate in the third person, but, rather, in terms of "we." His paintings excite and entice, offering the delights of a creative conversation. He notes that "I consider them part of some dialogue as much as anything." It is a dialogue in which viewers can take part across time and space, as if they were friends and family.

Notes

1 Bryan LeBoeuf, unpublished interview by Jay Williams, April 2, 2008. All subsequent direct quotations have been taken from this interview.

2 Graham Collier, *Art and the Creative Consciousness* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 120.

On the same page, Collier quotes Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* as follows:

The horizon was visible right round; beneath the sombre dome of the sky stretched the vast plain of empty sea. But immeasurable, unarticulated space weakens our power to measure time as well:
the time sense falters and grows dim.
3. Collier, 121.

4. See Barnett Newman, *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1966), 29.

About the author

Jay Williams is Curator at the Morris Museum of Art.

About the exhibition

Realist Paintings by Bryan LeBoeuf opens to the public on Saturday, July 26, and remains on view through Sunday, September 28, 2008 at the Morris Museum of Art in Augusta, Georgia. Organized by Morris Museum of Art curator Jay Williams, the exhibition includes ten large-scale realist paintings by Louisiana native Bryan LeBoeuf.