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# ARTFORUM

## Zach Bruder

MAGENTA PLAINS

Zach Bruder's thirteen acrylic-and-Flashe paintings formed a phantasmagoric time capsule of human endeavor, riddled with rupture. No matter how tidy or idealized, Bruder's places are more haunting than they are enlivened, as in the truncated colonial home of *Decorum* (all works cited, 2020), its dark innards at odds with the affable peachy hue of its exterior. In each of the canvas's four corners is a clock that features a well-heeled old-timey man captured midstride and looking purposeful. Not a leaf is amiss outdoors, and a brick wall behind the dwelling furthers a sense of stringency. *Coffer*, on the other hand, is a busy scene of a house being built. A golden ladder—perhaps Jacob's (a promise of heaven)—is propped against the wood frame of the unfinished home. The tableau has been painted as if viewed through the lens of a telescope, and it hovers above a partial rendering of Earth. In the work's lower-right-hand corner, two figures—pilgrims or wealthy merchants?—feast together at a table. Is this a parable of good fortune granted by God? Or a cautionary tale of gluttony?

The show's title, "Gone to Fair," resonates with an old Cornish festival song ringing in May Day, but when taken out of context it became a quaint flourish that complemented Bruder's agenda. Although the paintings cobbled together nostalgia, anachronism, and historical critique, they were not merely sentimental or sermonizing. Bruder's morphology of obsolescence takes on a Shaker sensibility in *Material Supply*, with tools such as a bellows, a scythe, a saw, a rake, and an ax arranged in a circle. A bucolic shepherding scene in *Valley* is reminiscent of American folk art. The scene is floaty and dreamy, and the stout farmhouses in the background are limned with warmth but seem desolate. The shepherd's face is masklike, the sheep look underfed, and a blackish cluster of distant trees is lithic. Two rows of decorative tulips at the top and bottom of the teal canvas—some of which are wilting—underscore a sense of vulnerability.

Particularly woebegone was the tortoise of *Make Haste Slowly*, an ancient entity on a field of regal purple; on its shell is a skeletal rendering of what appears to be the Colosseum. The toll of time could be read in the carapace. The work's title is from the Roman adage *Festina lente*, and the creature bears the weighty melancholy of ruins and old spooks. A prim little house outlined in one corner hovers while three beady-eyed human faces peer from violet depths. *Bounty* is a still life of fruit in twin arrangements: One is hyper-illuminated with glowing gold and yellow, the other a cool aggregation of stony blues. Cars are outlined in the background, barely visible.



Zach Bruder,  
*Bounty*, 2020, acrylic  
and Flashe paint on  
linen, 50 × 60".

The tension between past and present recurs throughout Bruder's paintings, as in a pair of works—*Made Ready* and *The Lesson*. These two canvases suggest the polarity of heaven and hell with figures in an underground bunker, framed by rows of identical houses and backgrounded by a grid. Each work depicts a sheaf of half-shredded documents which, according to the gallery's press release, represent the dissolution of knowledge and science. Instead of words on the cartoonish pages are horizontal lines that "read" as redacted text, deepening a sense of erasure. The artist's emphasis on this destruction raised the question of untold narratives, dubious origins, the buried trove. It imparted the sense of witnessing a book burning and called to mind a line from poet Susan Howe's 1993 book on early American literature, *The Birth-mark*: "... the word becomes an infinite chain leading us underground. Words are the only clues we have. What if they fail us?" Or what if we fail them? All those paper fragments are clueless wreckage, a deficit of culture. By reminding us of the checkered past, Bruder makes us aware of peril—as if our current political reality and precarious future weren't warning enough.

—Charity Coleman