



JOSHUA ABELOW

MAGENTA PLAINS

Joshua Abelow earned his MFA from the Cranbrook Academy of Art in 2008 and his BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1998. His recent solo shows include exhibitions at Sydney, Sydney, Australia, Apartment 13 Gallery, Providence, Rhode Island, Massif Central, Brussels, Belgium, L21 Gallery, Palma de Mallorca, Spain, Real Pain, Los Angeles, California and Et al. San Francisco, California. Abelow's work has been included in numerous group exhibitions worldwide. The artist has several published books including *Painter's Journal* (2011), *ART FICTION* (2013), *DRAWINGS DRAWINGS* (2018), and *Good Morning* (2018). From 2010 to 2015, Abelow ran ART BLOG ART BLOG, which functioned as art blog, temporary gallery, print publication, and sculpture. Additionally, the artist is known as the proprietor of Freddy, a curatorial project he founded in Baltimore (2016). Freddy is currently based in a church where the artist lives and works in Harris, New York.

Born in 1976, Frederick, MD

Lives and works in Harris, NY and New York, NY

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New York, NY 10002

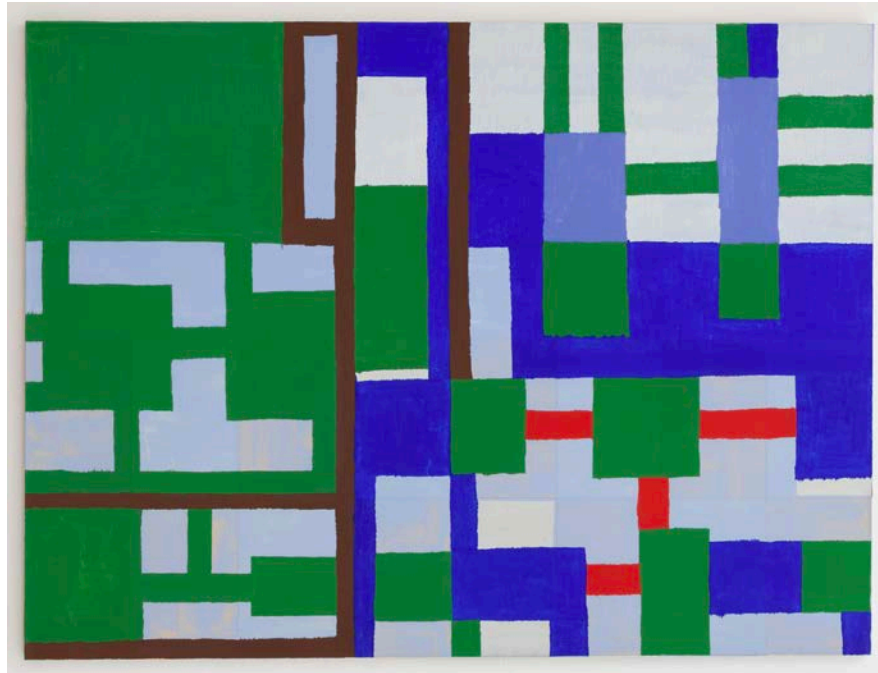
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The Guide

27 May 2021

THEGUIDE.ART



If not leaky, exactly, then the works in “Leaky Abstractions” are at least a little fuzzy around the edges, like a sharp stroke left out to dry, and begun to drip. In his new exhibition at Magenta Plains, Joshua Abelow riffs on the grid as both an archetypal structure in abstraction as well as a function of the digital world. Indeed, “leaky abstractions” is also a term in software engineering, popularized by Joel Spolsky in 2002 to refer to the way that sleek user interfaces occasionally give way to coding failures which disrupt or destroy—a website link which triggers a 404 error, for instance, or an app which freezes or glitches.

Across dozens of untitled earth-and-primary-toned oil-on-linen works from last year, Abelow’s medium to largescale works feature slightly wonky, furred blotches of color which frequently invert foreground and background. In one, dawn-colored sheaves of wan blues and drained oranges burst into a few rays of lemon yellow strokes. A few orderings hold across canvases—diagonal lines slice through orthogonal shapes in a handful of works, and diptychs appear in both landscape and portrait format—but none holds across all. Indeed, even the paintings’ commitment to abstraction itself wavers in a couple canvases, in which the letters of Abelow’s last name spill proudly across the bottom edge of the frame.

Joshua Abelow, *Untitled*, 2020. Oil on linen, 54 x 72 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Magenta Plains, New York.

Sight Unseen

11 May 2021

Sight Unseen

FAIR REPORT

Our 15 Favorite Artists From This Year's Hybrid Frieze Art Fair

by Jill Singer

The [Frieze Art Fair](#) returned to New York last week – both as the first art fair to launch an in-person component since everything shut down last spring and as a virtual viewing room. I took the time to browse both, and while I have many opinions about this year's hybrid model, let me start by stating the obvious: I am not the intended demographic for a luxury fair like this. I have neither the means nor the interest to purchase art at this scale, and, for better or worse, a fair like Frieze is all about buying – particularly in a year such as this one, when the option to mount a physical booth all but forces galleries to put their most saleable items on view (in most cases, this translates to paintings). In my ideal, art-through-a-design-lens, pandemic-less world, Frieze – and other fairs like it – would show a more [equitable mix](#) of two- and three-dimensional works, the artists themselves would be on-hand to educate visitors and press about their process, and we would all be taking a gloriously sunny ferry to Randall's Island instead of hanging out in the shadow of a failed mall in Hudson Yards.

That said, there was plenty to like about this year's fair. At The Shed, my favorite booth was a sold-out solo effort by the Chicago-based artist Caroline Kent at Casey Kaplan. Kent, a multi-disciplinary artist and an identical twin, "revisits an ongoing motif of two fictitious twin sisters, Victoria and Veronica, who communicate through art objects. Kent considers the visual representation of non-verbal exchanges between the twins, a shared language predicated on kinship and intimacy in which one sister finishes the other's thoughts with a gesture of the hand." Another favorite was a sculptural work by Lydia Benglis at Mendes Wood DM, made from cast sparkles and chicken wire; it sold for \$125,000. Online, I particularly liked Joshua Abelow, whose geometric, oil-on-linen paintings are a precursor to a solo show at New York's [Magenta Plains](#) later this month. Take a tour through the rest of our picks below.



ARTnews

25 January 2019

Three Is a Magic Number: In Miami, a Trio of Abelow Artists Show Together

BY IRENA JUREK



Installation view of "A Very Happy New Year to You" at Nina Johnson in Miami. Left to right, the works are by Paula Brunner Abelow, Joshua Abelow, and Tisch Abelow.

COURTESY NINA JOHNSON

It is not every day that one sees an exhibition devoted to the work of three artists who are members of the same family, but **"A Very Happy New Year to You"** at Nina Johnson Gallery in Miami is precisely that: an illuminating show with infectiously ebullient paintings by three Abelows—brother and sister Joshua and Tisch and their grandmother Paula Brunner Abelow. On view through February 9, it is a touching affair, suggesting how their artistic growth and stylistic invention shaped one another over the years. Earlier this month, I spoke with Tisch, who is 33 years old and has recently been making psychologically charged portraits, and Joshua, who's 42 and leaning toward abstraction these days, about their first show with their late grandmother, who died last year at the age of 94.

ARTnews: There's something intriguing about having an exhibition that focuses on a family of artists. It creates such a close-knit and intimate dialogue between the works of art.

Tisch Abelow: It's amazing to see the ways in which our sensibilities overlap. I think our work complements each other. You can feel that the work and the artists are related.

Joshua Abelow: I agree. It feels so personal. And it's such a unique opportunity to show with my sister and my grandmother. It's too bad that Paula isn't around to see this show happen, but she knew it was in the works and she was enthusiastic about it. Art was a strong bond between the three of us and our cousin, Andy, who went to Maryland Institute College of Art for painting but pursued music. Tisch and I did a show together at an artist-run gallery in Philly nine years ago. That was our public debut as a family of artists.

How has your grandmother's approach to art making impacted the way you think about painting?

Joshua: I'm pretty sure it was Paula who introduced me to Matisse, and I think it was pretty early on when that happened, like when I was 12 or 13. She had a Matisse book that made a deep and lasting impression. Simple shapes, flat color, and fluid lines. That was it for me—I was sold! Like Matisse's, Paula's work is executed with an economy of means. There is intent behind every mark. And there is also a strong rhythmic quality to the work that I strive for in my own paintings and drawings.

Tisch: After Paula died, Josh and I went through her life's work—college assignments from Cooper Union, endless sketchbooks, abstractions, figurative work, sculpture, pastel and charcoal drawings, oil paintings. I felt in awe, and even a little jealous, of her willingness to try different styles, yet somehow she maintained a consistent touch. There was always something definitively "Paula" about the simplicity in her colors, lines, and compositions. I can get a bit stiff and controlling in my own practice, so seeing how she experimented was inspiring. Also, the fact that she made work with little reward or recognition is a helpful reminder that being a true artist is not about one's career, it's about making work and remaining humble.

Do you think that you've influenced one another as siblings?

Joshua: Yes, I think so. It's hard to define, but I think there is absolutely a shared sensibility, although there are certainly a lot of differences as well. I think one key difference is that I went to art school and Tisch went to liberal arts school. When Tisch was younger, her ambition, like our mother, was to write fiction. She went to Sarah Lawrence intending to focus on creative writing but ended up painting instead. I, too, have an interest in creative writing, which I think relates to a shared interest in psychology. I think we both see painting as an inclusive activity than can absorb other mediums and strategies.

Tisch: I was only 9 years old when Josh left for RISD. Growing up in suburban Maryland, it was pretty eye-opening to visit Josh in Providence, Rhode Island. Not to mention, how I learned about art history was fairly unique. Throughout high school and college Josh made work, even replicas, in the styles of famous painters, and those works hung all around our house. At the time, I thought those were Josh's styles and compositions. It wasn't until later, when I'd flip through art books, that I realized, "Oh, that's a Matisse!"

Tisch's recent work has become increasingly personal, after enrolling in the New York Graduate School of Psychoanalysis. The subjects come from old family photographs and images that evoke childhood memories, which seem to create an even deeper meta-dynamic between the works.

Tisch: Yes, since my enrollment at NYGSP, I've been painting portraits. These works explore my personal and family history as well as my dreams, to make work that shifts between comfort and discomfort. I think of the people in these paintings as a reflection of myself but also as their own characters, with their own traumas, as I might relate to a family member. For me, showing this work alongside Paula and Josh certainly enhances the uncanny effect tenfold. The history is right there! My work is not only reflecting my projected idea of my family, but it is literally in dialogue with my actual family's work and essence.

Josh's work has always had a psychological component as well. Although his recent paintings are becoming increasingly abstracted, they retain a level of intimacy and intensity.

Joshua: My work habits tend to be cyclical. Abstraction and figuration come and go, and from time to time they link up. In the many months leading up to the election of Donald Trump, my work became very agitated and somewhat aggressive. I made a series of large paintings loosely based on an image I took from a Francis Picabia painting titled *Masque*, dated 1949. I called these paintings (and drawings) the "ABELOW IN LUXURY" series. The luxury series was the first body of work I produced in the church where I live and work and run [the gallery] Freddy in the Catskills.

It was freeing for me to loosen up and make some "expressive" paintings, but once Trump was elected, it didn't feel right anymore. Trump was agitated and aggressive enough on his own and I no longer wanted to contribute to that vibe. I decided to lose the figure. I also changed the size of the large paintings from 80 by 60 inches to 80 by 48 inches. Over the years, I have gone back to this vertical type of painting again and again. I like the doorway/portal/window metaphor. The main idea is to make the paintings as plain as possible, to let the associations remain abstract and to let the political content remain somewhat implied rather than illustrative.



Joshua Abelow, *Untitled (Abstraction FNOO)*, 2015.

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND NINA JOHNSON

Cultured

16 January 2018

CULTURED

ARTIST JOSHUA ABELOW CARVES OUT AN
UPSTATE NICHE WITH FREDDY

RYAN STEADMAN

01.16.2018

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KYLE KNODELL



JOSHUA ABELOW CONVERTED A CHURCH
IN UPSTATE NEW YORK INTO HIS HOME,
STUDIO AND GALLERY.

If you're a contemporary art lover and haven't heard of the painter Joshua Abelow, that's okay: chances are, you've felt his influence.

Aside from exhibiting his own deceptively simple paintings at hot international galleries since graduating from the Cranbrook Academy of Art in 2008, Abelow has also managed to make a unique mark in the art world through less expected avenues.

In 2010, Abelow began ART BLOG ART BLOG, a celebrated online stream of art pics, links, quotes, music videos and other visual material. The blog was a source of informative entertainment for art insiders, one that Abelow feverishly updated while churning out his signature paintings and drawings. But in 2015, it was time for a new venture.

"I had Freddy in mind before ending the blog, and there was even some overlap," explains Abelow about his gallery, named after the gruesome star of the 1984 horror classic *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Freddy was first located in Baltimore, an unlikely choice of location for a contemporary art gallery, but Abelow had grown up nearby, and most importantly, the rent there was affordable. "The primary function of Freddy was, and still is, to present challenging exhibitions using an extremely low-overhead model," says the artist.

Since its inception, Freddy (which has since relocated to Harris, New York) has shown many young artists have gone on to bigger things, who have gone on to bigger things, including Nicholas Buffon, Amy Feldman and Puppies Puppies. The painter Ted Gahl, have gone on to bigger things, who did a two-person show at the gallery in the summer of 2016 with Bill Adams titled "Bill and Ted," found showing at Freddy to be unlike most other gallery experiences. "There is a core group that continually supports the program and, in turn, gets support from it," says Gahl. "A network of artists and friends, scattered throughout the tri-state area and New England, all pitch in... It's really effective at providing a counter to the sense of solitude that sometimes accompanies making and seeing art."



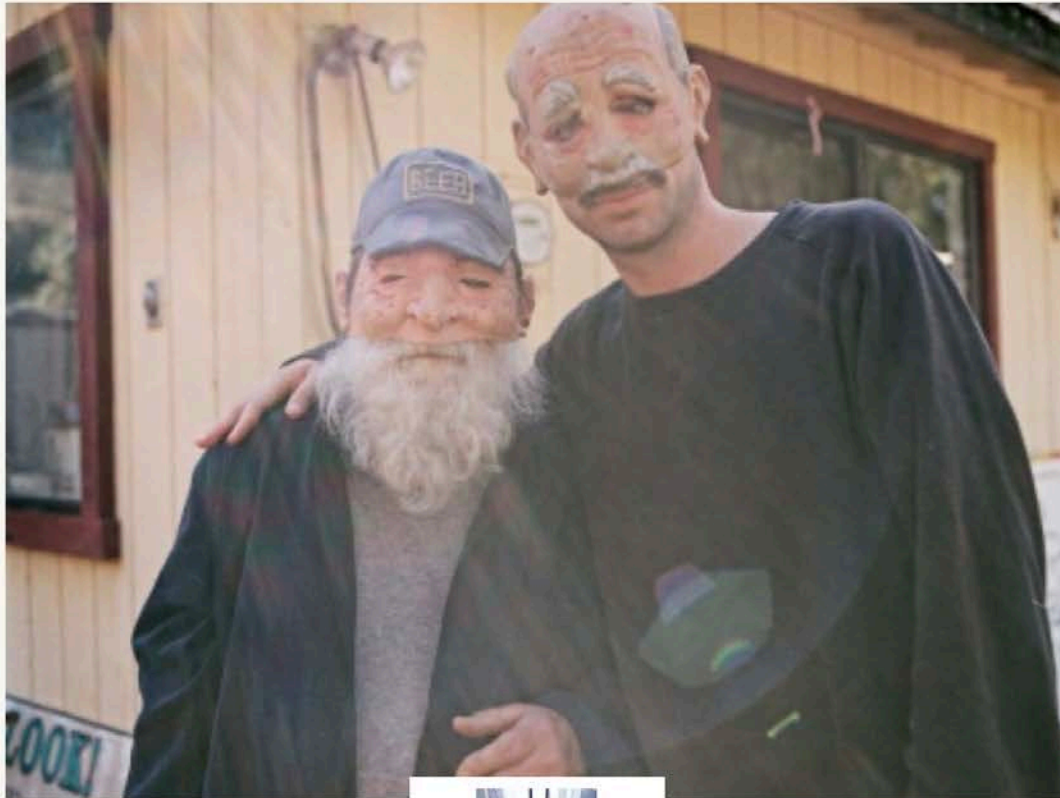
As it turned out, Abelow was leading a sea change for young gallerists, many of whom had begun relying more on the Internet and art fairs for sales and visibility rather than on their brick-and-mortar storefronts. "Because of the location, the primary audience for the gallery has been online," says Abelow, "and this, too, is an important concept for the gallery that I was keenly aware of from the beginning."

After his final 2017 show, which opened last month (Freddy is a seasonal space), Abelow will start putting ideas together for next summer's program. But in the meantime, he'll focus on his own work and an upcoming book of his drawings.

INVESTIGATIVE ACTIVITY: AN INTERVIEW WITH JOSHUA ABELOW

By Ross Simonini

November 14, 2016 5:18pm



VIEW GALLERY
3 Images

Before we met in person, I met [Joshua Abelow](#) by reading his online diary, Art Blog Art Blog. I learned about his art viewing habits through the daily, sometimes hourly posts, featuring canonical, obscure, and emerging artists (myself included). He posted music, literary quotes, videos, and his constant documentation of gallery exhibitions around New York.

He also posted his own work—drawings, paintings, poems—much of which expressed the same kind of compulsive chronicling found in his blogging. He often works in series, repeating simple abstract forms or crude, cartoonish figuration with subtle variations, as if capturing the slow development of his most basal desires. In this way, Abelow revealed himself as a documentarian artist interested in any form that suited his impulse to record. The publication of his book, *Painter's Journal* (Peradam Press, 2012), which followed the trials of love and life of his early years as an artist in New York, provided yet another medium and another entry point into his larger project. Like all of us young artists, he was trying to understand how his work fit into the history of art and the current climate of art, but he was doing it publicly, vulnerably, in real time

For his many readers, the blog was as an intimate, idiosyncratic window into an industry that usually prefers white-walled neutrality. For me, Art Blog Art Blog, which ceased publication in 2015, served as one of the great art publications of the 2000s and a masterpiece of the blog form.

Abelow now lives far from the urban art world in upstate New York, where he paints and runs his gallery, Freddy. We conducted this interview over many emails.

ROSS SIMONINI Why blog?

JOSHUA ABELOW I was interested in the cataloguing capabilities the medium provided. I was also interested in reaching a potentially large audience with unprecedented speed.

SIMONINI The last post was published five years to the day after the first, right?

ABELOW Yeah, in fact, it was five years to the minute.

SIMONINI What were you cataloguing?

ABELOW Every post on the blog (there are more than thirteen thousand) is catalogued by the date and exact time of entry. The content of the blog is primarily the work of other artists, both living and dead. But now the blog exists only as a sculpture, *ART BLOG ART BLOG, March 30th, 2010, 2:51 PM – March 30th, 2015, 2:51 PM*. I had it transferred to a solid-state storage device that uses integrated circuit assemblies as memory to store data. Then I worked with a graphic design team in Brooklyn called Other Means to create a housing for the device that could be presented as a sculptural object which I presented at galleries in New York and Los Angeles. So, the sculpture is both an object in a room and a five-year memory bank or time capsule. I destroyed all the visual content on the blog (as it exists online) by replacing every image with my painting of a running witch.

SIMONINI Why destroy it?

ABELOW Destroy isn't exactly the right word. I wanted to *infect* it. I wanted to infect the blog with a virus of running witches. I got perverse pleasure in taking apart this thing that millions of viewers had seen. I think there's poetic content in this destructive act. I wanted to override the primary content on the blog with a digital reproduction of a painting I made so that my painting could literally run through time and space indefinitely. But I hope an institution will acquire the work and present it to the public again via a new URL. That way the blog can exist in both forms online: the infected alongside the original.

SIMONINI Why is the witch running?

ABELOW The witch is running to keep up with the information overload that defines our culture in the twenty-first century.

SIMONINI How did you think about the act of posting your own work? Were you creating a context for it?

ABELOW When I started the blog I had little presence in the art world. I was living in Maryland and the blog was an easy way for me to get my work seen by a New York audience. Yes, I was absolutely creating a context for it. As time went on and the blog became popular I shifted the focus away from my own work and onto other artists' work. I particularly loved sharing work by under-recognized and undiscovered artists. I moved back to New York about seven months after starting the blog and made it a goal to visit as many studios as possible.

SIMONINI How did the blog affect the reception of your work? For me, it connected the dots between your painting, writing, curating, and your personality. I could see the larger Abelow project.

ABELOW Back in 2010 when I started the blog I was thinking about a Bruce Nauman quote from a 1978 interview: “Art is a means to acquiring an investigative activity.” The blog was a way for me to explore this idea and, like you said, it allowed me to connect the dots between my studio work and my work as a writer. However, I’m not sure the audience for my work (in the broader sense) connected all the dots. Countless times I was referred to as “artist and blogger,” rather than just “artist” and, over time, this began to irritate me. In 2012 or 2013, I started to make paintings and drawings that referred directly to the blog, and then I showed the sculptural version of the blog in 2016. To me, this felt like a victory for the blog as Art.

SIMONINI How did you see the blog affecting the reception of other artists’ work? Like, say, [Gene Beery](#).

ABELOW Many, many times I posted the work of a more or less unknown artist, and later on said artist would have a solo show somewhere. It’s almost uncanny the way this happened repeatedly and, in some cases, with very short intervals. For the most part, I was happy to play a role in a number of careers. Gene and I had a wonderful working relationship instigated by the blog, which has led to a good friendship. Gene liked sending me lots and lots of images, primarily photographs of himself and his family. I think Gene is on the blog more than anybody. He became a sort of collaborator on the blog, especially toward the end. It’s shocking he doesn’t have more recognition because it’s clear he is an important artist. He’s an American treasure. I’ve introduced his work to as many people as I can and I’m proud of that. His painting, *ART GAME*, hangs above my bed.

SIMONINI Is Freddy the new Art Blog?

ABELOW Freddy is the evolution of the blog. Some of the objectives are the same: to show work I think is vital to a larger audience primarily through the internet. But, one significant difference is that Freddy does have a physical address. Originally it was in Baltimore. Now it’s in a church where I live and work in upstate New York.

SIMONINI You seem to have a conflicted relationship with the art world—sometimes obsessively documenting it, sometimes living in remote areas and demanding it come to you.

ABELOW My relationship to the art world has been conflicted since I first learned about contemporary art as a student in the ‘90s. The art that was the most interesting to me was the older stuff. I wasn’t able to connect to most contemporary work and it left me with a certain feeling of disdain for contemporary art and artists because I didn’t think they were as good as the dead. Doing the blog was fun because I could easily put the dead alongside the living. It was like time traveling, and it helped me to have a better understanding of and appreciation for contemporary art. I also have admiration for artists who go their own way—Donald Judd, Agnes Martin, Clyfford Still, Lee Lozano, Robert Smithson, and Georgia O’Keeffe, to name a few. Living in a remote area can give an artist a bird’s eye view of the scene and not get caught up in trends or petty social nonsense. I think Gene’s work embodies this position.

SIMONINI The blog and your books, such as *Art Fiction* [Karma, 2013], make the relationship between your writing and art appear very fluid. Is that how it feels to you? Do the two processes intersect?

ABELOW Yeah, I think part of what I’ve tried to do as a painter is to suggest that painting isn’t just painting but a world view. Anybody can pick up a brush and literally paint something, but this isn’t inherently interesting. What’s interesting is an artist’s relationship to the world and, perhaps, the world’s relationship to said artist.

SIMONINI Are you done with blogging?

ABELOW Yes.

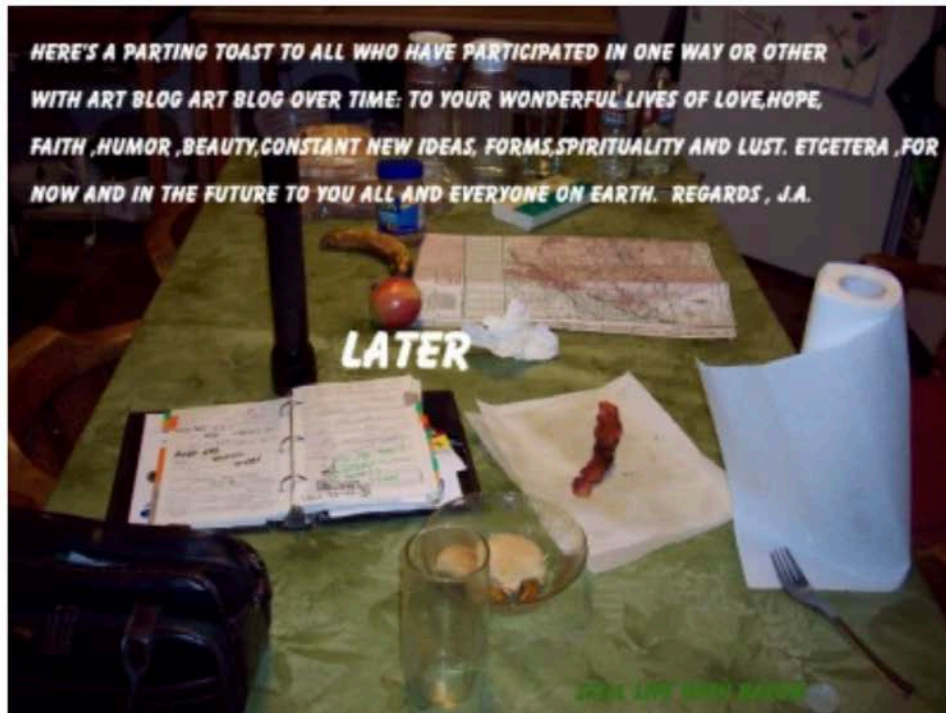
15 March 2015

ARTnews

After More Than 13,000 Posts, Joshua Abelow Will End Art Blog Art Blog

BY **ANDREW RUSSETH**

March 3, 2015 3:40pm



COURTESY GENE BEERY

Art Blog Art Blog, the art blog prolifically updated by artist **Joshua Abelow** with exhibition announcements, installation shots, Bukowski poems, and sundry other items, and which also took the form of a temporary gallery and a print publication, will cease its run on March 30 at 2:51 p.m., exactly five years after he started it.

For the past few days Abelow **has been running photo collages** by the artist Gene Beery announcing the impending closure, and he confirmed the news to me in an email. “In the end there will probably around 13,500 posts or so,” he said. “We’ll see.” As of press time, there were 13,390 posts on the blog, though that has probably climbed by the time you’re reading this.

ABAB was, for years, an almost preternaturally dependable source of news about shows in New York and further afield, particularly in artist-run and fly-by-night spaces. There was a thrill in visiting, knowing that you would, without a doubt, come across a new show, a new artist, something you hadn’t heard of.

“I’ve always considered the blog an art project (like Andy Warhol’s time capsules),” Abelow said. He plans to leave the blog online as an archive.

Contemporary Art Writing Daily

2 September 2015

● Contemporary Art Writing Daily

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Wednesday, September 2, 2015

Joshua Abelow at Freddy

[\(link\)](#)

The wider artworld came to know Abelow through his Art Blog which - coming to prominence against the sterile facade of CAD's hegemony - felt human, resistant, and no-qualms subjective key to a very specific NY scene, felt warm in reestablishing the local against the global, like grocery co-op charm to Walmart's efficiency. It felt NY again. And as interest increased for those looking for the freshest produce Abelow became, if a not a ringleader, then a purveyor of visibility, a figure of some small access in a scene, that everyone knew, all the while and for like ten years before making scruffy hamhanded paintings that purviewed the doubt of the painter, the doubt morphing over many years, the paintings changing over the course of Abelow's character development from unknown, from entendres of suicide ("HANG ME") to flat laughter ("HARHAR") and as the painter character grew to show himself, to paintings of a man running full speed with his erection before him, to today that same man cloaked in the facade of a powerful witch, and all lovely abstractions along the way, still running.

November 2013

ARTFORUM

View of "Abelow on Delancey," 2013.

NEW YORK

Joshua Abelow

JAVIER FUENTES

55 Delancey Street

October 10–November 10, 2013

Repetition is integral to the practice of Joshua Abelow, an artist who has succeeded in parlaying a individual iconography and persona into an emergent artistic presence in

New York. The work in "Abelow on Delancey"—graphics drawings, small, medium, and large oils; and even a printed publication—conglomerate into a meraimage reflecting Abelow himself and a topography of the conditions subtending his practice. His stick figure man, often drawn donning a crude top hat and sometimes sporting an erection, appears over and over in the paintings on view. Never quite upright, the stick man is usually shown with slanted shoulders and a cocked elbow, and is occasionally accompanied by a solar disk, establishing a visual resonance with Matisse's *Figure*, 1947, a simplified figure that is itself the product of a few iterations issued from the artist's late-career whims. With each appearance of Abelow's stick man, we see the artist adding and refining a handful of self-coordinating gestures, including the direct use of his surname and references to his Web presence in six versions of the painting *Blog Blog*, 2013, and in two paintings titled *Blog Me*, 2013, which also include the directive in their composition.

Abelow is adept at driving home a point, or is at least keen to use all the artistic means at his disposal to broadcast a carefully composed image of himself. Consider the more familiar aspects of Abelow's painting. Hard geometries disintegrate at their edges, raw bulap supports undercut the radiant colors on their surfaces, and a deft visual echo becomes just another dirty joke. These are accomplished, calculated transgressions, the workings of a talent acutely aware of his circumstances.

Nathaniel Jay

Observer

5 November 2013

OBSERVER

ON VIEW

'Joshua Abelow: Abelow on Delancey' at James Fuentes

By Andrew Russeth · 11/05/13 4:17pm



Installation view. (Courtesy James Fuentes)

After a string of solo shows abroad over the past two years, Brooklyn-based poet, painter and blogger Joshua Abelow is back for his second stand at Fuentes. As its title makes plain, it's an off-Broadway show—a proudly scrappy, ambitious one. His work has gotten larger. Stick figures, many sporting gargantuan erections, fill his paintings and drawings. They run and dance about in wee top hats or brandish painting palettes in front of his trademark, precisely sloppy (and thus perverse) riffs on classical abstraction: slightly misaligned chevrons in many cases. Text dances alongside the men: "BLOG BLOG," "MR. INTERNET," "BLOG ME," referring to his blog, Art Blog Art Blog, which he updates relentlessly (but not impartially) with photos of art by a vast array of artists.

That nude stickman—perhaps a stand-in for the artist's (or any artist's) most craven desire for attention—seems harmless enough at first, as he begs for your eyes and the chance to be put into digital circulation, but his sheer omnipresence unsettles. Ditto for Mr. Abelow's tight, sophisticated drawings. There's not an erasure in sight among their long lines, which conjure up all sorts of beastly collage-style scenes (the stickman's inner turmoil, I like to imagine) that are populated by devils and various sexual imbroglios, with hints of art-historical sources.

Taking ideas for paintings that he has admitted in interviews are questionable and executing them with absolute, puckish confidence, Mr. Abelow cuts the figure, or at least the sly caricature, of that rare, ennobled brand of artist: breezily cool on the surface, hell-bent underneath, like Andy Kaufman or Chris Farley. You may wish he would loosen up a bit, and get even weirder, but uptight repetition is the fuel for his discomfiting, faintly evil magic. He's playing the Lower East Side right now, honing his material. The Great White Way should come soon enough, and then a plush, well-deserved residency in Vegas.

(Through Nov. 10)

October 2012



JOSHUA ABELOW with Jason Stopa

Joshua Abelow is an artist living and working in New York. He runs ART BLOG ART BLOG, which functions as a blog, a website, and a newspaper. Abelow uses absurd humor, geometric abstraction, expressive figuration, repetition, and text to create works with layered meaning. Abelow recently sat down with painter and writer Jason Stopa to discuss his work and upcoming exhibit at James Fuentes. His show is entitled, *Abelow on Delancey*, and runs from October 10 through November 10, 2013.

Jason Stopa (Rail): Looking at the paintings you have on the walls here in your house, I feel they carry an explicit joke that one just *gets*, followed by an inside joke. Maybe you could talk about that a little bit?

Joshua Abelow: For a while I guess I felt like the joke was on me [*Laughs.*] You know, trying to be a painter—it's difficult and, well, the joke is still on me—but now I'm sharing the joke with other people. When you say an "inside joke" I think you may mean that people who know a lot about painting or went to art school and are steeped in that art-historical stuff would be more cued into certain jokey elements in the work.

Rail: Particularly in this painting [referring to a work in Abelow's house] with the words "HAR HAR HAR HAR," it's the sound of the laugh and then it's repeated and descending vertically on the painting. I begin thinking about what the joke means in terms of what the painting is. So there's a double joke, a knowing wink and a nod, like a "you get it?" kind of thing.

Abelow: There's definitely the quick read, and then there's a more maniacal side to it because of the obsessiveness and the repetition. I think that the more maniacal side of it is what interests me personally.

Rail: Are you a maniacal guy? [*Laughs.*]

Abelow: I don't know.

Rail: On one level the joke is humorous, but because it's repetitive it stops being funny and it gets a little scary or sad, depending on the joke.

Abelow: Well, I also wanted—and this is just one example—but I think in general with pretty much all of my paintings I try to, through the use of fairly traditional painterly concerns—color, surface, composition—just, you know, like seductive oil paint, I try to draw somebody in but then I like to slap them in the face with something that's butting up against the very thing that maybe made somebody want to look at the painting in the first place. This painting—there's some drips and stains—it could even be in conversation with a Rothko.

Rail: There is a color field quality to it.

Abelow: With “HAR HAR HAR HAR” it begs the question: who is the painting laughing at? Is the artist laughing at himself or is the painting laughing at the viewer who is trying to think about what the painting means? I think it's funny that the painting would not only mock the maker but also the viewer.

Rail: As if the painting has an agenda itself, it's autonomous, and has its own attitude about it?

Abelow: Yes. The meaning of the painting is determined, to a large extent, by what it is next to or near it, like in this room for example, the painting is next to Brian Belott's Cat. [*Laughs.*]

Rail: Something that's interesting about the way that you work is that the context upon which things are placed changes the meaning of the object. Meaning is not fixed—everything has fluidity in that everything relates to something else. Some artists may start off saying that they're a certain kind of painter, or they only work in sculpture, etc.—a much more linear way of working. How did you start working in this way?

Abelow: A huge shift happened for me when I stopped trying to make big paintings, and by that I mean paintings that contain *all* the information. When I was younger I wanted to put the whole world into the painting. Later, my thinking evolved and I decided to start making smaller work. Placing things next to one another to create meaning became really natural. I especially noticed that when I started putting text into some of the paintings. When I was in grad school at Cranbrook, I noticed that the way the work was placed in the room completely altered the conversation during the crit and that became really, really fascinating.

Rail: Tell me about the work that you're making for this show that you've got at James Fuentes?

Abelow: I had this great studio in Chelsea all summer where I had the opportunity to make some bigger work—nothing huge, but bigger than usual. The last show I had there was over two years ago and the bulk of the works were 12 by 9 inch paintings and then some 24 by 18 inch paintings. This time there's going to be a good number of paintings which are 40 by 30 inches—paintings with text that directly refer to my blog, ART BLOG ART BLOG. In conjunction with this show, I'm doing a book called *Art Time*—the background of the pages in the book are composed of screenshots from my blog during a four year period. I took these screenshots and then I jumbled them up so time is not linear. A lot of the paintings and drawings in this show are going to be put on top of these ART BLOG ART BLOG backgrounds. I also have 17 new pencil drawings at the framers right now for the show.

Rail: Do you think about surrealism, or that time period a lot?

Abelow: Yeah I do. I think about Picabia and the “Vache” period of Magritte in particular. I've appropriated their work from various time periods and put it directly into my drawings. Of course, when I say “appropriate” I mean I open up a book and I use it as reference material to make a drawing—my drawing isn't going to be an exact replica—I'm not pulling out the projector, that's not my objective. I'm just looking at their work to get the wheels going upstairs. It's a way of inserting myself into an art-historical moment and then pulling out. I've seen a lot of rare Magritte's—there's the Magritte that everybody knows and then there's this Magritte that is incredibly weird and kind of like a secret. I think some of the stuff that's less recognizable is pretty great.

Rail: There are other things that creep into the work that are pretty funny. When I was in your studio I saw a few paintings of a stick figure with a giant boner...

Abelow: [*Laughs.*] Yeah, he's going to show up a lot in the show!

Rail: [*Laughter.*] Do you want to talk about that a little? The stick man? And there was another series of phone numbers?

Abelow: A lot of the text-based work started at Cranbook. The first text-based piece I did was 72 oil paintings on linen hanging in a grid. The text alternated, "HANG ME HANG ME HANG ME HANG ME" and "HARDER FASTER HARDER FASTER." And I liked that there were all these different ways you could read it. Like there were implications of suicide and I was also thinking about the painting's desire: what do the paintings want to do? The paintings want to hang. And then I like that the word "HARDER" was broken up so that it also said "HAR" over and over again, which acted as a cue to the fact that there was some humor going on. Another text-based idea that I started developing was the "Call Me" paintings. I would write "Call Me" on the painting and then I thought, well instead of just writing "Call Me," I'm going to literally paint my cell phone number. I liked how that could be performative in the sense that it sort of dared somebody to call or text me—a stranger. And I thought that was kind of interesting. They started out on monochrome backgrounds. I put the idea away for about a year and then I came back to it when I started making these little geometric paintings in 2010. I tried to set up visual rhythms with the arrangements of the work. I'd have a few paintings on the wall—geometric, geometric, geometric, and then a self-portrait. Or, geometric, geometric, geometric, and then something with text on it. The oddball painting was there to undermine the system. I started painting the phone number directly on top of the geometric abstractions, which I saw as a way of defacing or vandalizing the painting and also disrupting the logic of this pure abstraction that people seem to put on a pedestal. So, that's where that idea came from. At the same time that I was developing these little geometric paintings, I was starting to push these absurd, satirical self-portrait drawings of the Artist with a capital A. Over time, the character with the beanie and the cigarette, "the painter," evolved into this idea of "the performer" which is where this stick figure man with the big hands, the funny shoes, the top hat, and the giant dick is coming from. It's the idea of art making as a kind of perverse performance.

Rail: There's this idea of the artist that's been around for a long time that you were just describing: living in bohemia on the margins of society. It's something that's been around since the late 19th century, coming out of romanticism. And now we live in a world that's really different. In some ways it's still the same, but the artist struggles to have that bubble around them, that mystery...

Abelow: The bubble of solitude?

Rail: Yeah, I mean especially in New York. I think in other places it's different, but in New York you wind up having this very visible life. You're going to openings, you're engaging with other artists, writers, curators. Sometimes you just want some space and quiet. But, if you become a full recluse, you'd kind of cut yourself off from—

Abelow: Opportunities.

Rail: Opportunities, yeah. With our generation, there's thousands of people coming out of art programs, versus maybe 20 or 30 years ago where it was a much smaller number. In a sense, you almost kind of have to get on stage and perform a little bit.

Abelow: Absolutely. That's exactly where I'm coming from with that idea. I also think that there's—I don't know—I mean everybody's thinking about it, so I hate to talk about it because it's such a “hot buzz topic” or whatever, but, you know the Internet is really changing everything. If you make a painting, or a drawing, or a sculpture, or whatever you make, and either you have a gallery or you want a gallery, and you want to participate in the contemporary art conversation, of course the first thing that's going to happen is that the work is going to be photographed and turned into a JPEG and/or a TIF file. It's also going to be blogged, or e-mailed, or put on a website. And then these things, these images of images are then traveling around, because of course, as soon as you put something on the Internet, it's kind of like this weird, open free-for-all. So, talking about text in my work again, I made a painting about a year ago that said, “BLOG ME.” A lot of the things I end up pushing forward in my work make me kind of cringe. Like inside I'm thinking, “Oh my God, this is the worst possible thing to do.” And then of course I think, “Oh I have to do it and I have to do a lot of it.” So when I did that “BLOG ME” painting it was really interesting because as soon as I put it on the Internet, it got re-blogged 250 times or something like that. It's kind of like that Baldessari thing, those paintings that list instructions or descriptions—of course, mine's not a list, it's just two words—but then all these strangers are doing it, doing it, doing it. It's just very strange, you know?

Rail: Your paintings have this aspect, either something's being asked of the viewer or the painting is telling somebody to do something. There's an activity-based thing involved.

Abelow: Sure, I like that.

Rail: It's an interesting way for painting to operate, not only to talk about itself, but to try to talk to other people, literally. Especially in a time where people are giving very, very limited attention to things. Your work is hooking them with humor, before they have to digest the painting. It's kind of a way of loudly calling somebody's attention. Speaking of how the Internet's changed how we view the world—I've noticed how when I first got the Internet and I would only check my e-mail maybe once or twice a day.

Abelow: That was early 2000s?

Rail: Yeah, maybe early 2000s. I was still in undergrad. And now I find myself checking email all the time. And I usually have multiple windows open. I might even be looking at the same image on different websites. It's altered our subjectivity so much that it has fractured our sense of undivided attention. Like if something is not immediately grabbing your attention, it's all good, 'cause you've got other things you're doing at the same time. Your work tackles this. You're doing serial paintings that also have a call-and-response dimension.

Abelow: Yeah. The other thing that's going to be part of this show is that I'm doing another paper—you saw the first ART BLOG newspaper that I put out, right?

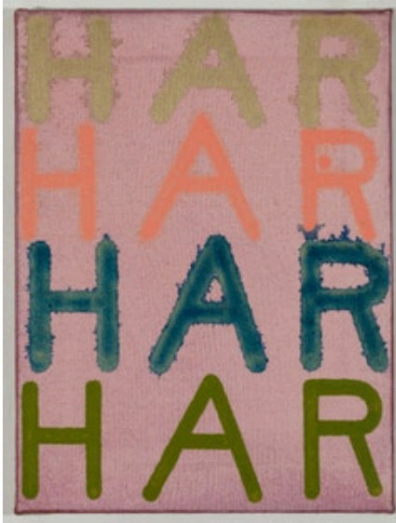
Rail: Yeah.

Abelow: Yeah, so now I'm doing round two. I put the first one out in Spring 2013, as part of the Petrella's Imports project. Petrella's Imports was this project that happened over the summer in a newsstand at Bowery and Canal, where this group of artists had the newsstand and basically made it—rather than a traditional newsstand—a newsstand for artists' printed matter and I think maybe they sold bottled water. I forget exactly. Like artists' bottled water. Anyway, they asked me if I wanted to be a part of the project because they wanted to have some artists who had Internet material that they could then turn back into printed material, which I loved because I love having this ART BLOG ART BLOG moniker, and then, messing around with what it is. Like, oh it's a newspaper, it's a gallery, it's a what-the-fuck-is-it, you know what I mean?

Abelow: And so to be able to turn my blog into a newspaper was really exciting. One of the things that was also really great about this was I got to interview Gene Beery who I've gotten to know via the Internet over the past year and a half or so. And he sends me—anybody who looks at my blog regularly knows that he's on it like every couple days, because he's always sending me these bizarre photographs, often they have text. I just—I really like the work. Anyway, so this new publication I'm going to do is going to be the same format as the old one: all black and white, trying to have the same mixture of text and image, well-known artists alongside lesser known or emerging, dead, alive, whatever. Peter Halley is contributing this great essay titled, "The Frozen Land," which was first published in 1984. I don't know what people have read or haven't read—but I think a lot of younger artists maybe haven't seen this essay, and the ideas in the essay are great. Ideas that are super relevant to what people are thinking about right now, so I'm excited to put that in this kind of blog/newspaper/exhibition context. In the essay, he's talking about how new technologies are basically freezing time. And I also got a friend of mine to interview a painter named Richard Bosman, I don't know if you know him?

Rail: I know the name, but not the work.

Abelow: Yeah, he's a little bit older. He has these paintings from the '80s, which are really weird. There are two paintings that are going to be in the newspaper; one's called, "Arrow in the Eye," and it's literally a man with an arrow in his eye and he's bleeding and his face is all mangled up, and then another painting is called "Drowning Man," and it's this great woodcut from 1981 or '82, of a man drowning, and it's just amazing. His work is really kind of dark and comical—of course I relate to that. In the first issue I interviewed Gene, and then moving forward I want to keep this thing like a game of telephone. So in the second issue, Gene is interviewing Jamian Juliano-Villani, and I just got the transcript from that and it's hilarious.



Joshua Abelow, "HAR HAR HAR HAR," 2007. Oil on linen, 16 x 12".

Rail: [*Laughs.*] I bet it is.

Abelow: And then, down the road, when I can get the funds to do another one, Jamian will interview somebody. I like the connectivity of that, and that I can sort of put these connections in play, but then they go off and have a life of their own, and it's completely out of my control. When Gene and Jamian did the interview they did it via a phone call. Gene taped it with an old-fashioned cassette tape recorder. And then Gene mailed the cassette from Sutter Creek, California, where he lives, to Brooklyn. Next, Jamian transcribed it and came over here, and then I edited it. So there are all these level of removal. It was just really exciting for me to have this older artist, Gene, who's kind of an obscure figure, you know? A lot of people don't know about his work. He's a great artist. And then Jamian, who just came to New York about a year ago or so and she's really hitting the ground running. There's a lot of excitement building around her work right now. And both their work deals with the absurd, and a brute kind of honesty. I thought they would have a very interesting conversation. [*Laughs.*]

Rail: I like those two combined—he's kind of got this out-there, Beat Generation thing going on, and she's got this like really wild personality, you know?

Abelow: Yeah, exactly, exactly.