

Interview with Thomas McEvilley at Moore College of Art and Design, Philadelphia, on the occasion of the exhibition “Jo Baer: Recent Works,” March 3–April 1, 1993.

Excerpted interview (pp. 140-142, “Broadsides and Belles Lettres,” Jo Baer. 2010).

In the late '60s and early '70s, the Minimalist, abstract paintings of Jo Baer were among the most hypnotic. They were one of the last convincing expressions of the abstract sublime and the Minimalist mode. The blank white triptychs with striping around the edges and on the support suggested the dissolution of all finite things into the infinite, the return of the multicolored light of earthly experience, as through a prism, into the white light of the beyond. The new paintings, like the metaphysical Minimalism of the earlier ones, still seem to posit the picture surface as a kind of cosmic, creative membrane, but now the direction is reversed: the figures that were once submerged into the blank white ground of the sublime are now tentatively re-emerging from it as if on the first morning of a new age dawning after the final dissolution of the last. Echoes of Abstract Expressionism are still present, but now they partake more of the birth-and-protoplasm imagery of Arshile Gorky than of Barnett Newman's palpable void.

Pale images of buttocks-displaying goddesses from paleolithic cave walls, vegetation motifs from Etruscan tombs, and horses bursting with life from classical Greek friezes slide into one another in close-hued embraces and knit together into a tightly strung surface. These paintings, with their spare and tentative color occasionally clarifying a part of an outline, are still primarily near-white. The figures seem to constitute themselves through condensations of the mist of the sublime. The theme remains that of the first moment, the metaphysical abyss that throws up forms and takes them down again, ad infinitum. The void into which forms dissolved a generation ago now yields them back into the light in a kind of figurative sublime, which seems a counterpart of the abstract sublime lurking on the other side of the prism.¹

That's what I came prepared to say. Now I'll put the screen up, and Jo and I will see what we have to say to each other.

TM: Jo, how are you today?

JB: Old, nervous.

TM: When did you move to Europe?

¹ Excerpted from *Artforum*, May 1987, p. 141.

JB: In 1975, directly after the Whitney show.

TM: The curator of that show, Barbara Haskell, used the term 'warm Minimalism' to describe your work. That could mean what I mean when I say that the work has perhaps more to do with Abstract Expressionism than with Minimalism in its feeling, tone and spirituality.

JB: I think it may mean that I was interested in color.

TM: If your early work *is* Minimalist, I think it could even be called hot Minimalism.

JB: Thank you.

TM: Minimalism made such an effort to be cold. Your work of that period seems to me to have participated very strongly in the tradition of the sublime. It has heat and intensity.

JB: I would agree. I never considered myself a purist. I used my hands, I didn't use tape. Brush strokes are there, although not intrusively. I was interested in materials. I used rulers and quite often a tiny brush, because the liveliness of the line comes from its being hand-drawn. I was interested in the exchange at the edges, at the boundaries. I'm interested in live art, I always was. I find purist art quite dead. Although it's a possible stance or position, it was never mine.

TM: In 1970 you wrote that you felt it was the moment for political activism in the arts.

JB: I said that one should always be politically active outside of the arts, but I felt that radical work was by its nature political, that actually all art is political. I don't believe in propaganda in art. I don't use the image to sell a point of view. Some artists do, but it's not my way.

TM: Your transition from abstraction to figuration is a political statement. Let's talk about that.

JB: I was interested in making work available to a larger audience. I didn't feel that you should have to have degrees in art history to be able to relate to the work. I was interested in imbuing it with a degree of meaning.

TM: It strikes me that your deliberate shift from highly reductionist abstraction to figuration is a gesture towards humanism, towards recognizing the embeddedness of the artist in society. The image of the prism that I used was based on a line from Shelley that goes something like, "Time like a dome of many colored glass, embrace the white radiance of infinity." Your work of the early period seems to have existed in that white radiance of infinity, and your European work

exists in the area beyond the prism, which has broken up the white light into the many real colors of the actual embodied light.

JB: Very nice metaphor, Tom. I also agree with what you said about the crisis of conscience.

TM: What you did before was so stunningly perfect. You must have had a strange feeling walking away from it as completely as you did.

JB: I didn't just turn my back on it. As simple as it looks, it involved a great deal of learning and skill and technique which I still use in the European paintings.

TM: You did bring those things along with you, but in an ethical or social sense, in the sense of the crisis of conscience involved, you left something behind. Your transition from abstraction to figuration seems to be a transition from formlessness to form. Form is the real stuff of actual, embodied, everyday life. After the period in which so much art was affirming formlessness and the void, affirmation of form is a political statement.

JB: I never thought of my subject as formlessness or the void. I was working with light, and I still work with light. I'm not interested in forms in the sense of a triangle or of a person or something like that. I'm interested in primary language. I'm interested in using images that are available without trying to convince people that I've represented them. They only need to be recognizable. So I use partial forms, fragments and transparency to keep those forms from being dominant. I'm still really interested in what we call space, which to me means how you get from one place to another. I call this transition. It's technical. It has nothing to do with what you're saying, although I don't disagree with you. I prefer speaking in painterly terms. I'm not at all at home with your words.

TM: 1975 was a year of tremendous political turbulence in this country. That ambiance must have contributed somewhat to the change of direction in your work.

JB: Yes, I watched our country re-elect Nixon in a landslide despite the fact that everyone knew how corrupt he was. So I said 'I'm getting out.' It took me a couple of years to do it.

TM: Seen against the background of the war in Vietnam, the American work, for all its beauty, was kind of death-affirming, like much 20th-century abstract painting has been. The European work is very life-affirming.

JB: I think of the early work as utopian. I think utopian work always happens when things are really awful. You jump away from reality and say, 'Here's how it could be.' It's a fantasy. Back in '83, somebody resurrected abstract paintings

from the '60s for a show at P.S.1 and interviewed the artists.² I read the interviews when they were published. Brice Marden was the only other artist besides myself who even mentioned Vietnam. I find that shocking.

TM: By the time the Whitney show opened, had you already made your decision to leave?

JB: Yes, I'd been looking to go for two or three years.

TM: So that show in itself must have been a strange experience.

JB: It was.

TM: To be showing this work, which you knew was great, but which you also knew was over for you. You were showing a part of your life that was signed, sealed and delivered, as it were.

JB: It wasn't quite that clear-cut. There are a few transitional paintings that show the work changing,

TM: The Whitney exhibition, with the incredible purism of the white paintings, was in '75. By '78 you had already found a new spiritual home in the paleolithic and Magdalenian periods.

JB: I'd been looking at them for several years. The transitional paintings from '75 use abstract signs from the cave paintings. I had started playing with them a year or two earlier. I destroyed a lot of that work. I messed around with it, made mistakes.

TM: Where did you move first when you left this country?

JB: I moved to Ireland, to the countryside. I lived there for seven years.

TM: Did you travel to any of the caves in France and Spain?

JB: Never. I have the books.

TM: It was enough to see the books?

JB: I didn't want the real experience. I just really wanted to use those images. No one knows what these things mean. There are various theories, of course, that

²"The '60s in Abstract: 13 statements and an essay," *Art in America*, October 1983, interviews by Maurice Poirier and Jane Neol, featured 14 of the 15 artists whose works were presented in the exhibition "Abstract Painting: 1960-69," P.S. 1, New York, January-March, 1983. See Baer's essay in this volume, pp. xx.

they're sex symbols or fertility symbols or calendar signs. I like that last reading in particular, but it's just a reading.

TM: So one of the things that attracted you to paleolithic imagery is that nobody knows what it means?

JB: Absolutely.

TM: There's a kind of a freedom there that is similar to the freedom of abstraction, which is also empty of content. Yet I'm a little skeptical. It seems to me that you use that imagery in a way that has content.

JB: I make content.

TM: You assign it.

JB: Of course, that's what I want to do. I like the fact that there's no certain meaning attached to those images. They're common to all of us humans. They aren't Greek, they aren't Roman. We have no idea where they come from, and yet they're very vital and obviously ours. I particularly like that.

TM: The work in this show contains Egyptian references also. I think I saw a snake from the tomb of Ramses the Sixth.

JB: That's not a snake, that's a cockatrice—or basilisk, Egyptian variety.

TM: Interesting. There's also the horse-falcon. When did that body of imagery start to come into the painting?

JB: I'm very interested in very disparate things sitting next to each other. In Europe, so many different people live right next to each other. How do they do it? They're so different. I was browsing through books and noticed something very strange about the Egyptians and their neighbors, the Cretans. Their religious symbolism is totally visually contradictory. Egyptian gods are big at the top and tiny at the bottom, while their architecture is big at the bottom and tapers upward. In Crete, things are the other way around. The divinities are wide at the bottom and narrow at the top--those beautiful women with their little boleros, big tits and great big full skirts--and their pillars and columns branch out on top. I suddenly had that clear insight, and then, of course, I began playing with that imagery because I think it says a great deal about people. These are visual signs of culture. I began thinking about modern equivalents, like the colors of national flags. Why is it that all democracies have red, white and blue flags? Why is the German flag so sinister? I started playing with these things because I think they represent something deeper. I'm not a scientist or a historian, and I'm allowed. If it works on canvas, there's probably an element of truth in it.

TM: Going back to that mid-'70s moment again, it sounds to me as if you underwent a general loss of faith in Modernism. When that occurs, there are essentially two options available. One is a pre-Modern revival stemming from a belief that people in pre-Modern societies had figured things out better. They didn't destroy their environment and eliminate their bio-mass and commit suicide on a mass scale as Modernist society has so conspicuously tended to do. The hippy movement and then the ecology movement in this country followed that line of thinking. I see this pre-Modernist revival as one of the Post-Modernist options. It appears to me to play a big role in your brand of Post-Modernism, which seems to want to re-establish connections with pre-Modern types of societies, with the feelings and spiritual dimensions associated with them.

JB: I really only wanted to look at them, I don't want to relive them. They smelled awful, and the infant mortality rate was incredible. At the start of Cubism, there was a point where artists chose to go in the direction of Modernism. I have gone back to share that moment and to explore a different path. I wouldn't know how to describe it properly, but I'm certainly not into arts and crafts.

TM: Let me approach again this idea of the membrane that has always seemed to me to be so conspicuous in both phases of your work. The European work, which mixes images and motifs from the Paleolithic, the Egyptian, the Minoan, the Etruscan, reminds me of the so-called Akashic record, the idea that there's an intangible and non-physically visible space in the universe where all events of all moments are registered as on a receptive membrane, like a photographic film on which everything mingles and flows. Your European work, with its veil-like, semi-transparent references to different eras, strikes me that way.

JB: What you're saying is very nice, but I don't work that way. I am inclined to locate things laterally on the flat surface, and not behind or in front of it. I'm interested in structuring a metaphoric world, and I don't want any escape hatches in it. Nor do I want things falling out onto the floor. That's my prejudice, and that's how I work

TM: Have you always written?

JB: Yes. I don't write well, but I've done it.

TM: You've written rather a lot, I think.

JB: Yes. It's surprising, because it's very hard work for me, and I have no talent for it.

TM: I'm thinking especially of the book which you gave me the other day³ which contains a lot of your own research and interpretation of that research. You develop an idea about the classical confrontation between lion and horse cultures. Could you go into that a little?

JB: I was noticing that artifacts of Mediterranean and Near Eastern peoples, who worshiped mother goddesses, tended to carry lion images, whereas the Indo-European people came in with the horse. Wherever these people were, you find the lion and the horse. It used to puzzle me, and I got more and more interested in it. When I was making the drawings that are reproduced in that book, I began to develop an idea of why those cultures adopted those animals, and I assembled the drawings with this new subject in mind. I had so much interesting material and so many places that I wanted to take it that I decided to write about it.

TM: The writing came after the work?

JB: Yes.

TM: Since you associated the image of the horse with the invading Indo-European cultures, can one extrapolate from this to the work? Can one approach the image of the horse in your paintings with that in mind?

JB: Probably not. I wasn't thinking about that until later, after I began to assemble all the tracings I used as materials for the earlier image paintings. These particular ideas about horse and lion cultures developed in tandem only as they were being built into the drawing series, and thence to the writing. But it's still the same horse. After all, a horse is a horse is a horse....or is it?

³ *Jo Baer: Four Drawings, with a commentary by Jo Baer and Bruce Robbins*, see this volume pp. **xx**.