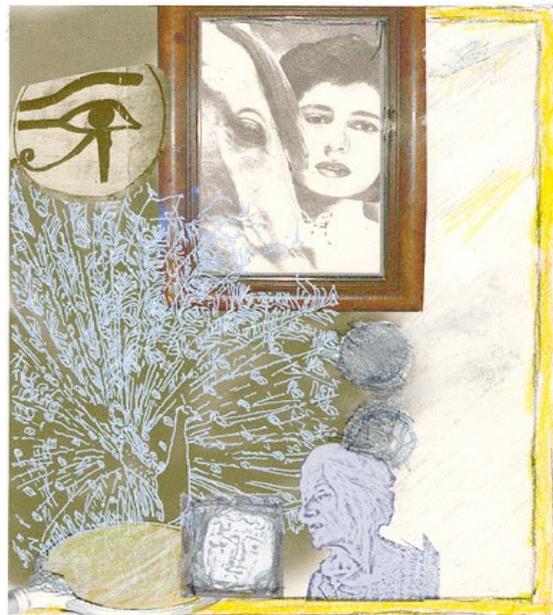


Interview with Jo Baer
By Brian Evans White

For almost thirty-five years, Jo Baer has been an expatriate of the American art world and the Minimalist art movement - leaving behind the irrefutable purist style she shared with art giants like Donald Judd, Robert Smithson, Richard Serra and Frank Stella. Declaring her departure from pure abstraction and the death of modern art in an '83 Art In America article, at 80 years old she lives and paints in Amsterdam. Her paintings explore the semiotic possibilities of symbols and images against the poetics of phenomenology.

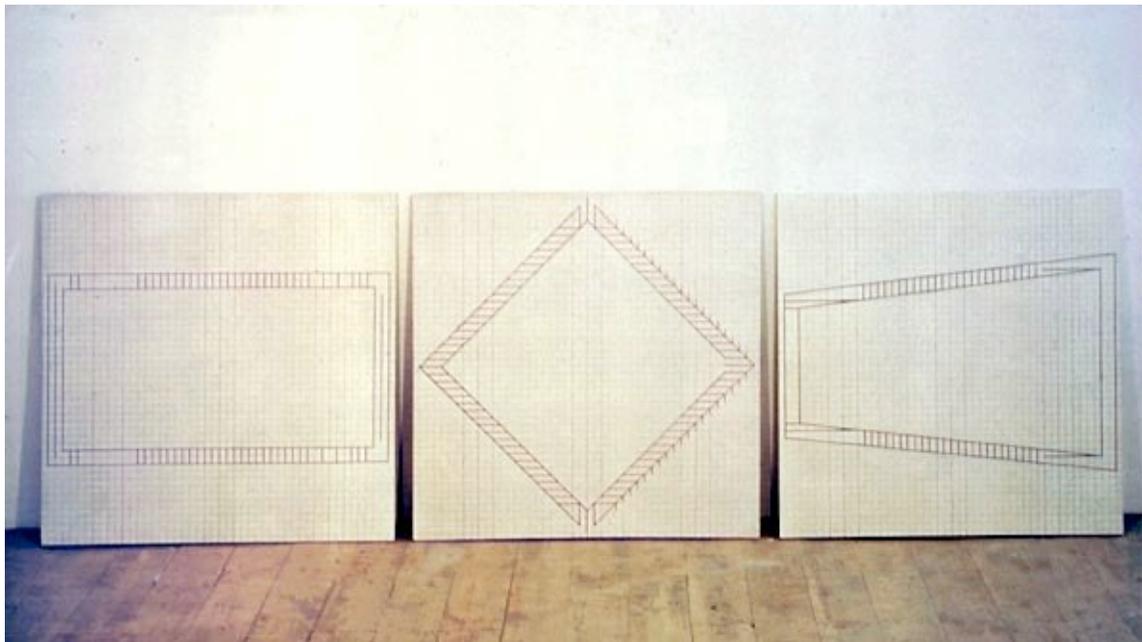


Brian White: Your paintings have gone through a great deal of evolution since your break from your minimalist roots. How have you come to arrive at these current paintings, which feel neither overtly figurative nor conceptual?

Jo Baer: I certainly didn't want to do narrative work. I certainly wanted to remain radical, in quotes. I didn't wish to illustrate. I wanted to work with meaning in a more forthright way than abstract art allows you to. The question becomes, how do you do it? It becomes a question of technicalities; you want to say something with an image, but you don't want the image to dominate the space. So you use part of an image, you make it transparent, you make it very small, you make it very large, so large you can hardly recognize it. You leave just enough so that it's recognizable, as you want it to convey meaning and speak with other images. An image without dialogue isn't useful these days. I find that's what's wrong with most of the young painters, they paint a single image that doesn't do anything. It just sits there and says, "Gee, I'm a great painter," or "Isn't this pretty," or "That's a real horse," or "That's not a real horse," or "It's an art horse." It's very important to have the images in dialogue.

BW: You use history and flat imagery like maps and constellations in your work, as well as cave imagery and artifacts. What is your goal in the arrangement of these ideas?

Jo Baer: I wish to use image language that is available. Going to other cultures - the caves, Egyptians, Greeks, Etruscans, whatever - they're interesting images, images that are not usual, not part of every magazine or billboard. If you can just ditch their historical context, halfway maybe, they're all recognizable as to where they come from. However, if you use several from other places you're saying these are human images. They're specific but they're speaking different languages, and why not? Our behaviors and interests go all the way back to the caves, many of them.



BW: There is a singularity in your early paintings and it was important for them to have no loose ends. Your paintings now feel like it's all about creating loose ends for the viewer.

Jo Baer: Yes, I'm leaving it for anyone to construct the painting. It's half-structured. Loose ends, I like that.

BW: Do you find it more or less difficult or satisfying than the minimalist works?

Jo Baer: Painting minimalist is horrible - you have a canvas on a pair of saw horses. It's idiot work. On the other hand, finding a color that works exactly is quite gratifying. Those are not simple paintings. It's very precise and if you get it wrong, it doesn't work and it's just like

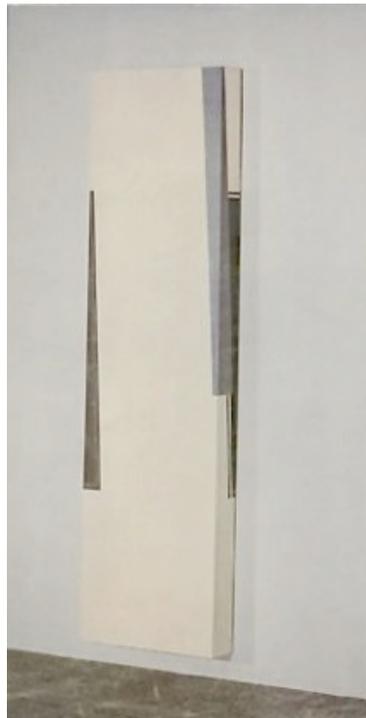
everybody else's blank canvas. I was working essentially with color. It was interesting how I could make colors do all kinds of things just in that format and I could induce moods even. It was a lot of trouble to make. It was dull but it had its interests. Precision was not exactly it, getting it right is. You get this finicky little white line on the edge coming around the top of the edge onto the black, but if that isn't there the whole painting is lost. It becomes a cut-out thing of black on the wall, a piece of stationary, a menu, whatever.

BW: All of your paintings have a strong sense of staring back.

Jo Baer: [laughs] Thank you.

BW: They are very multi-stable. It's interesting how recently they have a similar effect through the use of ideas rather than just a visual effect to take in.

Jo Baer: Well, yes, I've broadened and I'm using everything I discovered when I did the minimalist work; one doesn't throw away anything they've learned. I wanted to expand what I was doing, I wanted to expand my audience, I had a terrible feeling about the art elite. In the transitional works - the wrap-around paintings, the very low ones, the narrow ones that wrap around the sides - I decided to make the audience move around. This idea of sitting trance-like in front of a painting offended me [laughs]; I found it very bourgeois that people had the leisure to do that. There's definitely something wrong with that kind of thing. I wanted them off their asses and moving.



Mark Godfry was brought in to do a lecture when I had my show at Dia. The lecture was quite amusing - he talked about those paintings and how you can't see the whole thing at once. You have to remember one side and get to the other, you can't see the damn thing and you get pissed off. He was asking, "Why would she do that? Surely it can't be as simple as she wants people to move?" But of course it is. But he's British, they have another view on what is simple and what is proper. We Americans, and I'm still somewhat American, we are that simple. We take pleasure in it, because simple ain't simple, ever.

BW: When did you move from New York?

Jo Baer: I moved to Europe in 1975, negentienhonderdvijfenzeventig, in Dutch.

I lived for almost ten years in Ireland, and in London for three years (I hated it) and I've been in Amsterdam since. Its comfortable and I'm an old woman and I have a beautiful studio. I started running 25 years ago when I quit smoking. I run a couple times a week with my iPod and my Nike computer program, and podcast from DJ Steve-boy.com. I'm afraid if I stop I might rust.

BW: Do you keep in touch with your peers from New York like John Wesley, Richard Serra, Dan Graham, etc.?

Jo Baer: John Wesley is an ex-husband as you know. I was married to him for ten years. I have a painted lamp that I bought from him as we were separating. I was getting a grant from Washington DC and he didn't, so I bought it - it was my reading light. I've just recently put it in his Pravda show in Venice. My son tells me I could get \$150,000 for it so I'm sort of in touch with John Wesley in that sense.

Dan Graham visited me in Ireland, as well Walter DeMaria. Sol I was close to. Smithson I really liked, we were good friends but he died a long time ago. Judd and I became enemies of a sort and Bochner also. Andre, I see when I'm in NY, and we've become friends. He's very strange. So am I, I guess.

Serra I saw in a restaurant a few years ago when I was doing a show at Dia. I was with the curator. I went over and said, "Hello Richard" and he said, "Who are you?" [laughs] He knew very well. I liked his earliest work much more than his monumental works. He did some great flowing work. He poured a plastic to look like pig skin with hair sticking out of it, I'll never forget that. He was actually a very a good sort of surrealist until he decided to get on the high art Judd bandwagon. He was all right, Judd was better I suspect. Well, Smithson was better than either of them.

BW: How do you feel about their choices to remain with a single artistic voice throughout their whole careers?

Jo Baer: They were men earning a good living. They were having a pissing contest over who earned the most money and that sort of thing.

I had a different need- I was a woman successful in a man's world. The feminists called me a "female man" because I was successful. They wouldn't even have anything to do with me, until the past five years. Now I'm a role model, which is much better.

I felt I had a responsibility to be more ambitious than the men. The men were comparing Cadillacs in the parking lot.

I have a very special position as somebody equal to the others of my time while still carrying a very great load for the women and showing that it's possible to do all this. You have to do the right thing and to do the right thing you have to change. Otherwise it's just dishonest.



BW: I wanted to be sure to ask about the title for the painting, Shrine of the Piggies (The Pigs Hog it All and Defacate and Piss on Where From They Get It and With Whom They Will not Share. That s It)

Jo Baer: [laughs] Titling is fun, it's the only part of making these paintings that's any fun. Isn't that a good one? The quote in parentheses is a friend of mine, a New York artist, a fourth husband type, who I'm still close to. I sent him an image on the web when it was finished and at first he didn't get it and then he wrote back 'Oh! "The Pigs Hog it All and Defacate and Piss on Where From They Get It and With Whom They Will not Share. That s It."' and it was so good, even misspelling defecate.

I was doing these great big paintings and I hadn't been selling very much of this work. Any work

that had sold was by myself or for museums. I suddenly decided that I really needed money and I would make smaller paintings in a series that would be more available, I thought. I halfway went back to minimalist routes as I decided to take images that mirrored the stretcher bars, and a urinal is a good rectangle. I also think toilets are interesting. I do believe in being rude at some point in a painting, it's necessary to ground it.

BW: The paintings have a way of being in several places at once. Often between vulgarity, intellectualism and elegance. You'll see one side immediately and soon after the others reveal themselves and interact with one another.

Jo Baer: I am elegant by nature, but I pride myself on being vulgar and I don't mind showing that. In terms of painting I think it's necessary, you don't want to get co-opted.

Someone came in here once, a friend of Robert Miller Gallery, he knew me and wanted me to show with Robert Miller Gallery. He came by for a studio visit and I had one of the big paintings from the VanAbbe show, with a black man hanging on one side and some dancers on the other. He looked at that and said, "You can't put something like that in an Exxon board room." He was just so offended I was using a subject matter that no one could sell to Chase Manhattan. I was very pleased.

Toilets are just not nice. I don't mean to be pornographic, I just mean to speak about what's there, and say 'Listen, we don't do Kitsch.' Milan Kundera, the Czech author had a great definition for Kitsch, "Kitsch is the absolute denial of shit," and I could use that as a motto. [laughs]



BW: With the piece Memorial For an Art World Body (Nevermore) which stands out and beautifully captures all the concepts, rhythms and ideas of the fifteen years of paintings prior. Did you feel that you had found something you were searching for?

Jo Baer: I am wondering what to do now. It ended that body of work. I had planned to do seven paintings in a series, memorial, altar, shrine, etc. But since I painted my own death in a beautiful way I don't know what to do next [laughs]. I'm just beginning to wrestle with subject matter. I think I'm going to make a very big change again. I can't do another one of those paintings, so I'm off on a new adventure soon. I found a great deal of difficulty in that painting.

Yes, I made a beautiful death for myself. I was very touched by that painting. To look at death as beautiful - not scary - I thought was pretty good. So what do you do after you die, rather, painted your own death? You have to do something totally different.

I think I will go back to a semi-abstraction ...I think. Or to a lesser use of imagery.

BW: What social context do you imagine the next phase of your career in?

Jo Baer: I've had a thought in the last week or two - from 1969 when Paris, Kent State, the Vietnam War and Corporation Globalization happened, we all knew that everything was finished. Gone. Nobody understood anything anymore. Where there was no intellectual

agreement, art had to change. No one could speak an abstract language that could be understood amongst the people who cared. There was a social fabric that art lived in that had suddenly disappeared. Nobody knew what to think any more. Recently though (in the last year or two) it has finally reassembled itself.

This need to paint explicit meaning is no longer there. There are no more subjects that are relevant or necessary to work from. They're all clichés, everyone knows it. Why do I have to say it? I think its time to head back into something else, although I still don't think non-objective is correct any more. I think we can be abstract again because there is enough social cohesion to sustain it.