

Artnet
May 17, 2011

An Interview with Ashley Bickerton
EDEN'S ANTI-HERO

By Emily Nathan

Back in 1993, Ashley Bickerton (b. 1959) abandoned his prominent position in the New York art scene, set up shop on the island of Bali, and never came back.

Surprising though the move might seem -- and Bickerton remains a player in contemporary art -- island living was a part of his history. The son of renowned linguist Derek Bickerton, who studied creoles and pidgins, the artist's childhood was spent in places where "they spoke English funny," from Barbados to Hawaii. Following his graduation from Cal Arts in 1982, he arrived in New York to attend the Whitney Independent Studies Program, and quickly rose to fame as one of the "Fantastic Four" -- along with fellow Neo-Geo artists [Jeff Koons](#), [Peter Halley](#) and [Meyer Vaisman](#) -- in the wake of a seminal exhibition at Sonnabend Gallery. It was simply a return to form, then, when the 1987 Black Monday market crash prompted his escape from East Village celebrity to a storied if remote Indonesian isle.

His early New York works were high-tech "commodity sculptures," integrating corporate logos and commercial hardware into strange, machine-like objects that were, at heart, expressions of his manic surfer passions. But once he hit Bali, the beachcomber in him took over, and the nuts and bolts and digital read-outs were replaced by chunks of coral, bottle tops, worn flip-flops and all manner of flotsam and jetsam.

Complementing this abundance of Edenic ephemera was the artist's taste for high-key hyperrealism -- a kind of painting esthetic familiar from any boardwalk airbrush booth, though often enough pushed to a wacky extreme -- and these days, he frequently depicts a cobalt-skinned character he calls the Blue Man. Clad in a striped boat-neck and linen pants, the handsome wayfarer indulges in all manner of excess, flanked by bare-breasted island nymphs with rainbow-colored flesh and sun-kissed, bare-footed children: coconut pomp.

Until now. An exhibition of his most recent works opened last weekend at Lehmann Maupin, and, though continuing an exploration of primal drives and desires, it demonstrates a dramatic turn towards the darkness. Aptly titled "Nocturnes," these are troubling canvases framed by the glowing neon signs of Indonesian debauchery, featuring delinquent youth, sex-trade tourists and a disturbingly deteriorated Blue Man.

Due out on May 31, 2011, is a pricey (\$375) monograph on the artist -- including an essay by his linguist father -- published by Other Criteria, the company founded by [Damien Hirst](#).

While briefly in town for his opening, the perma-tanned Bickerton met me at the gallery to discuss life a world apart and the onset of the night.

Emily Nathan: I want to begin with a subject that you have often described as “the elephant in the room” -- Paul Gauguin.

Ashley Bickerton: So many writers and critics have just regurgitated the same nonsense about that issue, but there is a piece written by Abigail Solomon-Godeau in the new book about my work -- and I literally read it with white knuckles and watering eyes. I just couldn't believe it. It was as if she had made me into an Alex Grey painting; she could see right through me. Critics usually vomit up the standard Neo-Geo rubbish, but that really isn't the point. She represented my relationship to Gauguin, needless to say, brilliantly.

EN: In postcolonial thinking, Gauguin's approach to the noble savage, and the way that kind of exoticism functioned in modernism, is considered exploitative.

AB: Demonstrating the “bad white man” -- that doesn't interest me at all. In my work, no one wins; I've lived abroad a long time now, and I see evil on all sides. I see hope and optimism and good intentions, and everything in between as well. The funny thing is that when I moved to Bali in around 1993, my first works were these very *weird* paintings, with freaky things going on. And people thought, “Oh! He moved to this far-off island, and now he's doing all this Dr. Moreau crap.” It made sense to them that way. But that couldn't be further from the truth. I was still just making my art; I actually had every painting planned out in my head before I even left New York.

EN: You have said that you designed your studio in Bali so that when you closed yourself inside, it could have been a studio anywhere in the world.

AB: I designed it like a white room. My initial impetus for moving was to escape certain things inherent to New York. New York can be a very nasty town, and it can also be a very loving town; it's heat-seeking. I always tell a dear friend of mine that his friendship is precisely commensurate with the graph of my career trajectory. In New York, that's what it's about -- the whole system of social dynamics is based upon a hierarchy, a weighing in to see who is going to kiss whose ass. On top of that, I was absolutely finished with working with fabricators, going to Brooklyn to deal with these angry men in these dirty, industrial places. We used to say, “You must move your art as close as possible to your lifestyle and your choices, not vice versa” -- and I didn't *want* this city lifestyle. It had nothing to do with me. I wanted to be running around the beach with a gunny sack collecting rubbish and sticking things on canvases here and there at my leisure.

So that was part of it. I didn't want to be beholden to fabricators any longer. I wanted to make my own work, to paint, and I knew I could live cheaply in Bali. On top of that, my career had sort of been driven to that point; I didn't have much choice. So I left, and I didn't give up. There was no teaching job, no fallback position. My sister once told me, “Well, I'll study photography just in case” -- I said, “In case of what?” There is no “just in case.” There is this, and that's it.

When I got to Bali, I wanted nothing to do with any of the artists there. They were all a bunch of posers, indulging in that ridiculous Gauguin trope -- wispy artist-types painting rustic old ladies and coconuts and doing offerings and local folkloric

nonsense, using these hideous neo-expressionistic colors. That's why the Gauguin thing was so revolting to me at first, I think.

EN: Still -- at the end of the day, you were a white, male artist, living in the South Seas.

AB: But I couldn't bear to deal with that for quite some time. I think it was 2004, when I was working on show of landscapes with the old bric-a-brac stuff -- coconut, driftwood, et cetera, attached to the canvas. And one day I stopped and looked around the studio, and I realized that while I had tried to avoid *at all costs* everything about where I was, everything about Indonesia, it had nonetheless seeped in through the cracks -- like smoke -- and it had completely taken over my work. The palette was now blue-greens and grey-blues, and even the composition had transformed into something akin to traditional Balinese Batuan school compositions.

I had been there almost 10 years at that point, and I suddenly realized that within that time, my work had changed completely. Then I hit the moment when I had lived in Bali longer than I had lived in New York -- and little by little it became clear that it was time for me to confront the elephant that had been lurking, always.

So there he was, Gauguin: expiring, syphilitic, his sarong falling off, surrounded by those young island girls. I decided to face him.

EN: After that realization, you began to make things that embraced -- or parodied -- the notion of a 21st-century Gauguin?

AB: I think it started when Lehmann Maupin offered me its booth at the 2006 Armory Show. *Art fair -- isn't that like prostitution?* I thought. So I decided I was going to make artworks that were like billboards that would advertise *me*. I had done a photograph for the Greek collector Dakis Joannou's book *Monument to Now* in which I had created this elaborate set-up -- staging the paintings next to surfboards, posing my son and a dog and a couch and my girlfriend at the time, and in the photo a Balinese man comes along, blessing the paintings. It was completely outrageous; totally camp. And people loved it; they *believed* it. Suddenly, they felt that they *got* it -- and I was thinking, "But it's a boldfaced lie!"

Then I realized that you should never let the truth get in the way of a good story. So I began to draw on the collective fantasy of this life I was supposed to be leading. I gathered children, and pregnant women, and pig heads, and coconuts, and I fabricated this incredible, colorful island world. Really, it started as a series of accidents.

EN: So, you finally acknowledged that people wanted to envision your life as this exotic escape, and that engendered the Blue Man, a version of yourself -- colored blue -- who swam in idyllic scenes of excess and indulgence, balmy, naked island women and sun-kissed children.

AB: The works were something of a joke at first, these big, kitschy advertisements meant to say, "OK, if you believe *that*, let's see how far we can push it before we

strain your credulity." It was only when I had finished them that I realized they might actually be saleable.

I haven't seen any of them yet, by the way -- those women. In real life.

EN: You have described your works as something like the *inverse* to [Allan McCollum's "Surrogates"](#) -- where his works blank out human desire, your works are saturated with it; they smack us over the head with it.

AB: Yes, desire is everywhere present in my paintings. I'm interested in the liberating aspect of being totally untethered, let loose in the worst possible environments. My favorite artists are always women that do things that are so wrong: [Kara Walker](#), [Laurel Nakadate](#). I like things to be seven kinds of wrong. If they are seven kinds of wrong, sometimes the wrongs neutralize themselves, and the whole thing becomes --

EN: Familiar?

AB: Honestly, I don't want to know what my paintings mean. I don't know if the kids in them are street kids, if they are middle class -- one of them has the "Nude Girls" sign smacking him in the head, the other one is basically gripping the "Massage" sign. Nothing is ever an accident in my pieces; I spend too much time on them for that. But while I don't know what the kids are up to, I know it ain't good.

EN: The Blue Man -- he looks like you, but might I say that he represents the human condition, in all its hypocrisy and contradiction?

AB: Actually, the Blue Man was never really me. There are bits and pieces of me in him, but I take things from everywhere to construct these characters; my interest is in constructing.

I have described him as a refugee from the 20th century, the degenerate, existential, ex-patriot. The anti-hero. He is lost, and now he is drifting afloat in the 21st century, which is completely different from all the history that preceded it.

I first came up with the blue man character in 1979, I think -- though he was originally conceived as set in Mexico -- and he was very loosely based on Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*. But the interesting thing is that when I perform him now, it feels like a terribly gauche sort of adaptation. The clothes I have to put on are totally painted and stiff and I can barely move. I feel like Gene Simmons must feel: here is this persona that I invented in the eagerness, flexibility and suppleness of youth, and I have to carry it into the aching, dragging of middle age. I have to put on this costume and re-enact this existence, and ironically, while I'm lumbering along under its weight, I have to embody this beatific creature who moves gracefully, easily -- a paragon of indulgence and ease.

I wouldn't *actually* want to do everything that I depict in my paintings, but I can relate to the desires they express.

EN: You mentioned "performing" the Blue Man -- it's a fairly complex process. You pose models within elaborate, theatrical scenes, then color the entire set-up -- people, clothing, props -- with paint. You photograph the whole scene and put it into

Photoshop, where you work it over again and print it out. Finally, you add paint onto the printed image to make the finished work.

AB: It is a very uncomfortable process. You get everyone in there, painted, and every single element gets painted, too; books, bottles, chairs -- every last pillow. And then we have to get into these positions and hold them, our feet playing footsie while we smile in ecstasy. We have to look beatific, but the paint is hot and heavy and the clothing is stiff. The photographer has to take shots of every single section: close-ups, pan shots, all of it. Then Photoshop itself is a bloody long process.

Previously, when I was painting in the ordinary way, I could never include more than three people in a given painting because each person took me a month; it was unsustainable. This process is much quicker. I could spend three days painting a hand that I had photographed and copied perfectly -- but it ends up looking just like the photograph I took of the hand.

Painting well means nothing. People who paint well get hired by other people to paint well for ideas that are more important than the stupid idea of painting well. That's what pushed me away from painting.

EN: Are you saying that your process is practical, then? It's a question of efficiency?

AB: Yes, and as I've said many times, I like the documentary aspect of a photograph -- but I don't want total documentation. I want a catalogue of essences. I never photograph people together, by the way. Only those that are touching are photographed together; the result truly is a construction, a pastiche.

EN: I like the integration of fantasy, desire and reality -- but the use of hyperrealism to express an exaggerated fantasy seems perverse.

AB: Well, when I wasn't working in photography, I was doing Photorealist painting. For one thing, I can't bear to have a bare spot, a dead spot. I suffer from this all-consuming guilt about taking the easy way out -- I've somehow got to hurt myself when I'm making art. I've got to somehow destroy time, life; something's gotta give for the piece to live.

But yes, that tension between fantasy and reality is present in my work. And in fact, the holes that you see in the canvases of my current show came about because I wanted to destroy the illusion of the painting.

EN: I want to return to Gauguin. Maybe there is a similarity between you that you have not recognized: Gauguin's exaltations of the world around him, and your grotesque exaggerations in which the sublime and the profane are merged, are both designed to lead us towards the universal truth of what lies beneath them.

AB: At the end of the day, I just want to speak. Yes, there are themes I might come back to, and perhaps I'll engage with certain, more readily consumed tropes as vehicles to say what I have to say. But the common ground in the end is that we all want to make something beautiful; the most important thing is to have the kind of relevance that makes people *feel* it. I want to touch people, somehow.

Even those colorful blobs of paint that I began adding to the frames -- I realized immediately that they really *activated* the picture plane, and that is what fascinated me; it gets back to that idea of "visual fatigue." Credulity, incredulity, points of reference -- the blobs lead the eye about. And that is what I am always trying to do with my art: find new ways of making the eye dance, make the responsive organs dance differently. It's as simple as that.

EN: Your father is a linguist whose specialty is pidgins and creoles, those simple, makeshift languages created to facilitate communication between two different peoples. I feel that your work reflects this: it communicates with us because it reaches us at our most reflexive, human response, be it repulsion, or attraction -- or both -- at what is vulgar, or lofty -- or both.

AB: In my work, I keep going back to the most basic, but grandest themes -- family, for example. And I try to access and re-invent those themes in some new way, perhaps even by packaging them in something that doesn't look anything like what you'd expect it to look like.

Morality -- right and wrong, good and bad -- is only something that we have invented in order to orchestrate our society. It's not that the world is this or that; it's not that I want to define what is dark and what isn't. I simply think we must acknowledge that it all exists and get off it.

"Ashley Bickerton: Nocturnes," May 6-June 25, 2011, Lehmann Maupin, 540 West 26th Street, New York, N.Y., 10001.

EMILY NATHAN is assistant editor at *Artnet Magazine*. *Contact*