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“Pay Attention Motherfuckers — Artist Billy Al Bengston in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist and Alex Israel”

Numéro HOMME

Because California painter Billy Al Bengston has a passion for motorbikes, he uses spray paint instead of oil for his paintings. The pithy painter, who has also worked as a stuntman, has become one of the most important West Coast artists of the last decades with his colorful floral paintings. In an interview with Hans-Ulrich Obrist and artist Alex Israel, he explains why he considers Marcel Duchamp a deceiver and how he got Barnett Newman to never talk to him again.

A home visit at Bengston's house in Venice, California. It is lunchtime. Several people are visiting and lunch is about to be served.

Hans-Ulrich Obrist: Billy, you were friends with the great American curator Walter Hopps (1932 - 2005).

Billy Al Bengston: Yes, of course. He was brilliant, so smart.

HUO: Hopps was super important for me as a young curator; he gave me courage, energy. We spent a day [together] in Houston, I felt transformed.

BAB: When Walter Hopps opened the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles in 1957, it was really fun because it was an artist's gallery. It was definitely not for money.

Bengston's wife enters the room and serves home cooked pasta made by Billy.

Alex Israel: Billy, this is delicious I had a really long no carbs period. Then I went to Rome in June, and I couldn't resist the pasta.

BAB: Why wouldn't you eat carbs? I never understood this.



AI: It makes you thinner. I stopped eating carbs and sweets. In May, I had to cast my body for a sculpture that I'm making and I wanted to look fit.

HUO: Alex, where is this sculpture now?

AI: In Walla Walla, Washington. I'm still working on it. I'm not done.

HUO: Billy, do you do all of your work here in your studio?

BAB: Yes, I do it here and everything with watercolors in Hawaii. I have nothing but a good life.

HUO: How did it all start? Was there an epiphany with your art?

BAB: I just realized that I am better than everybody else. No, it really happened with Greek American sculptor Peter Vouklos (1924 - 2002), who was my teacher in ceramics at the Los Angeles Art Institute, (now OTIS). I did one year with him and then I was confident enough to realize I would never be as good as him at ceramics. But I knew I could be a better painter, so I said, I'm

out of this fucking game. Everybody at that time came out of Peter.

HUO: Peter Vouklos is almost like the prehistory to what happened afterwards in L.A. Is he famous here?

BAB: Not really. Ceramics was a laughing sport. It was ruled by a group of morons. Pete came in and he was so intimidating that he had to leave because the only people who could talk to him were his students.

HUO: Who else were his students besides you?

BAB: Ken Price and John Mason. Pete didn't teach. He just came in and worked everyday and we watched him and we stole everything we could from him artistically by copying him. He picked a group of students who would be in the inner circle, Ken and

I happened to be in that circle. He was totally nocturnal. Pete phoned at 11pm and said, come on over, we'll make some clay. He had a huge bread mixer and we started to make a ton of clay around midnight and finished at 4am. Then we took massive loads of clay out to his studio and used about 100 pounds a day to make balls and cups. At 7am we all went to have breakfast across the street and Peter paid. Then school would start and we all went to bed.

HUO: What would you consider to be your first mature works?

BAB: I don't judge myself. I think I am still very immature. I don't have any favorites. If I don't like it, I throw that shit away. My ego is stupid, sometimes I look around and say, oh shit, I have to throw all this stuff away.

HUO: How much has the motorcycling subculture been influential to you?

BAB: I made my living racing motorcycles. I went to work one day a week in summer from 7:30 -9:30pm and I made enough money to live from it for three weeks. I broke my back just before my 30th birthday and I race quite a bit afterwards, but I wasn't as good, my ego wouldn't take it. There is a big difference between being first and fourth. Ed Ruscha used to ride down Baja, California, all the time. We did books and bikes together. We were asshole buddies form way back.

HUO: How did you meet each other?

BAB: We met in Los Angeles after he got out of Choinard.

HUO: So you had these activities like motorcycle racing and at the same time you did your art, for example your flower paintings.

BAB: I started painting the *Draculas*, the paintings with the centrally placed flower. They are called Draculas because Ken Price walked into my studio and said, hmmm, looks like 'The Count' is flying through the window. Ken and I were fans of Bela Lugosi, who played Count Dracula in the early Dracula movies. He said that because I had boxes around the images, they looked like windows. The main reason for this is a

terrible mistake—according to my thinking, the box replaced the signature. It's a serious mistake to put signatures on things, unless your name is Salvador Dali or Picasso. They designed their signatures and they look beautiful.

HUO: You never sign you work?

BAB: I do it on a drawing. On paintings it looks like graffiti. I always figure that the easiest thing to do is copy a signature.

HUO: Alex, do you sign your works?

AI: On the back. We stamp them too.

HUO: Billy, you never signed your works in the past?

BAB: I did but it is a mistake. I realized it one day when I was talking to Barnett Newman. He was talking about his monochrome paintings that are painted completely in one color. I asked, what about that squashed lizard in the corner. He said, what do you mean? I replied, well that black thing on the corner, which was his signature. This was the only thing I could see, because it was the only thing that was a different color.

HUO: What did Newman say?

BAB: He didn't speak to me after that. But he stopped signing them. I think the New Yorkers were so far behind us compared to California. We didn't have to worry about selling things. We couldn't sell anything so it didn't make any

difference.

HUO: You were free?

BAB: The difference is, in New York people would talk to you in the older days and say, what gallery are you with? To me, if you are with a gallery that means that you are a hired hand, just an employee.

HUO: You think that was the advantage of California?

BAB: Yes, the advantage was, at that time it was a close circle of artists, very competitive and very supportive. Then it became a commercial situation like in New York.

HUO: Did that happen when Walter Hopps went out?

BAB: Irving Blum changed the game. He was always looking to New York. He didn't know any other system as he was from New York, born in Arizona, with a full



Cary Grant accent.

HUO: Frank Gehry said for years I should meet you.

AI: Frank Gehry designed an installation for your exhibition at the Lost Angeles County Museum of Art in 1968, right?

BAB: He designed the architecture and I modified it, then he redesigned it and I modified it again. I put a couch, chairs, tables and floor lamps in and dismantled the overhead lights. He made everything crooked by “deconstructing” it. When I told Frank I wanted furniture he went out to one of these places that rent out terrible furniture you can’t stand to look at. I had a hissy fit and Frank took it out. I got my truck and went around and borrowed everyone’s furniture. I had Ed Ruscha’s casting couch and I put another couch in one room that I knew the guards would be in so they could sit on their asses. I put a TV stand in there too. Before black people were being hired by the city, I made friends with the Black Panthers so I put a room full of Black Panthers posters in the show. I even stayed in the museum during the night and slept on the couch. I had access to the museum.

AI: Who invited you to do the exhibition?

BAB: I curated it, but Maurice Tuchman instigated it. The best thing that came out of the museum was a sideshow from Horace Clifford Westermann from Chicago. Maurice came over and asked me, do you want to meet H.C. Westermann? I ran over to the other room and Westermann looked at me. He had this way of greeting everyone. He stuck his hand straight out and he had this big meet hook. He was just rippling muscles everywhere. I got very close to his hand and then I did a stunt in front of him and fell flat on the floor. He was laughing. At the opening we entered the museum together on our hands. Both of us went up the stairs on our hands. We became good friends.

AI: Billy, you designed H.C. Westermann’s exhibition at MOCA in 2000, right?

BAB: Yes, and I did a damn good job.

HUO: Westermann wasn’t alive anymore at that time. What did you do for the show?

BAB: I did it right—that’s all. I painted the floor all yellow and blurred the edges so it looked like a shag rug and changed the lights to pink and yellow. That was the only exhibition I designed in its entirety. Most people are afraid of what I do.

HUO: Is it true that you met Marcel Duchamp?

BAB: Yes. Walter Hopps introduced him to me. I think Duchamp is a total fraud. I liked him as a person. I just think he is a fraud. He did more damage than god damn any other person did to the art world. His work allowed art teachers to be stupid and even stupider people to be stupid. Everybody accepted ready-mades as art, which I don’t believe they are. I think he was a pretty good chess player.

HUO: How did you then bring all of these new materials into your work, e.g. in the 60s you worked with Polyurethane. How did that happen?

BAB: It happened because I’m practical. Oil paint is real shit. It is pigment mixed up in salad dressing. It dries out, cracks and it falls off. The pigments are good but the binder is terrible. At the time I was working at the motorcycle shop [using] spray lacquer and thought — this is a much better material I tested it myself, so I painted the tank of my motorcycle one with oil paint, the other one with lacquer. The lacquer painting lasted

two seasons; the oil painting lasted for only one race.

HUO: In the 80s you made these paintings called “Clowns and Mummies”. How did that serious come about?

BAB: I have always been a stargazer. I looked up to the moon and I thought, what is the corniest thing you could do? So I painted clowns. I was just tired of doing the same old shit, so I changed. I don’t have any reason for doing anything. I just do it.

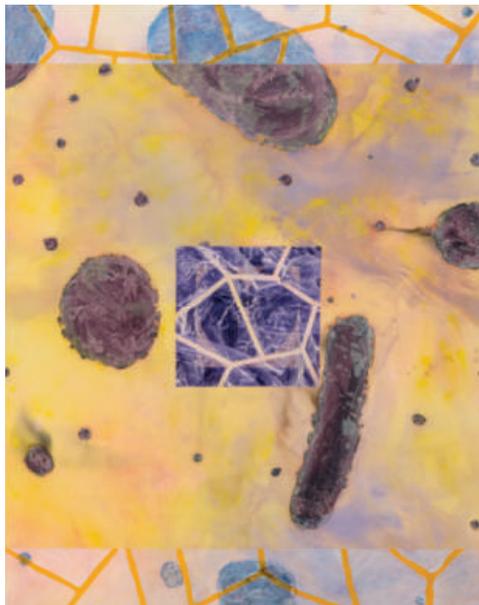
HUO: Art happens— as the American painter James Whistler said.

BAB: I just do it.

HUO: Hedi Slimane chose works by you for his 2015 Men’s Spring/Summer collection.

BAB: They made a publication too.

HUO: When you do your paintings do you sketch or



draw?

BAB: No, never. I know what I am doing.

HUO: What are you working on now?

BAB: I am not doing a damn thing. I haven't done anything since I came back from Hawaii two weeks ago. I don't know what I am going to do next. I am afraid to start because I get involved and I just can't get out.

HUO: Did you work there?

BAB: Yes, I was there for two months. I don't have reproductions of the watercolors. I did there. In fact, I don't like reproductions. It is not the real thing. It is like talking about fucking. It's fun but it doesn't work.

HUO: Do you have an unrealized project? Dreams, utopias, lost competitions?

BAB: No. I am not interested. If somebody volunteers with a great idea, sure, I will play. I don't know what I would like to do. If I knew I would do it. For a while I wanted to build a studio, but now I never want to do that. It has to do with age. If I do it myself, I will fall of the perch before I finish.

AI: At least you know how to stunt-fall, safely.

BAB: I will fall quietly and permanently.

HUO: Have you done public art projects?

BAB: Yes and they are all terrible.

HUO: How can we see them?

BAB: Drive by. I don't know what they look like. They are probably faded and fucked up. No, the only person who made it halfway successful was Alexander Calder. That was it. The rest was just commercial art.

HUO: It is fascinating how you clearly distinguish commercial art and non.

BAB: It didn't used to be like that. 30 years ago it used to be very clear. Today I don't think that it is blurred at all. Now everything is commercial. The things Alex is doing are very successful. It is a different age. It is a different thing. The value today is financial.

HUO: The art world has become an industry. The music world too, the literary world is an industry. The only world, which is still unchanged and which reminds me of the art world is the world of poetry. I think the

world of poetry never changes. There is no market: it is exactly how it always used to be.

BAB: I always dreaded the fact that my daughter might become a poet, it is the only real fucked profession.

HUO: Did she become one?

BAB: Not [even] close. Fortunately, I have never figured out what she became. Close second was dancing. I think she is going to work with horses.

Hans-Ulrich Obrist and a few others leave the table, to see some of Bengston's work that is spread throughout the house. Billy and Alex continue chatting about dogs.

BAB: I don't like many dogs, only ones with a white face.

AI: You are a dog racist.

BAB: Yes, I like to be able to see the eyes and the mouth. I can live with it, if the face is white with a bit of brown. I used to get my dogs from Perfect Pet Finders. I told them I want a dog that fits in a shoebox, it can't have a sloppy face and preferably does not shit (laughing).

AI: I just need a dog that won't give me an allergic reaction.

BAB: So you got a poodle type?

AI: Yes, he's half poodle and

half cocker spaniel. I call him Mr. Brown.

BAB: That's an unfortunate combination. I bred cocker spaniels for a while. When I was in junior high school I bred them for money.

AI: In your hometown in Kansas?

BAB: No, when I moved to California with my parents in 1949, where I went to Manual Arts Senior High School.

AI: Jackson Pollock and Philip Guston went to Manual Arts.

BAB: I know. Everyone wanted to go there because it was the only high school in the US that had nude models at that time. I was so excited when I walked into the classroom that was run by the art teach, Mr. Swankowski. Nude models in those days were landslides. They wanted to chat with you all the time and I said, take your fucking clothes off.

AI: Was it the same art teacher who taught Pollock and



Guston?

BAB: Yes. He looked real artistic. He had a grey goatee, he was old school.

Hans-Ulrich Obrist returns from the tour through the house and is excited about a series of paintings called "Dentos".

HUO: How did you invent those images?

BAB: It comes out of Abstract Expressionism where they talk about things coming and going, when they discuss that the painting is moving beyond the frame. I painted them in the late 60s.

HUO: They look so fresh. They could have been done yesterday.

BAB: That is the advantage of being in a situation that's not commercial. Every time somebody buys something I usually double the price on the net one. What is the rush? Does it look like I am having a bad

life?

HUO: Besides your most recent works, the watercolors, there are also two larger paintings, where there is this line. You mentioned it somehow connected to Ken Price. Can you tell me about that?

BAB: Ken was not reductive. I have always said, the thing that separates a great work of art from another work of art is a stroke of genius "and you only need one". You can do a thousand of them but it won't be better than just one. I'm just an old fashioned painter who is very contemporary. I am really a non-objective painter. I just paint paintings. I don't do deceptions.

HUO: What would be your advice to a young artist in 2015?

BAB: Same thing the Bruce Nauman print from 1973 said: *Pay attention motherfuckers!*

