

ALEXANDRE GALLERY

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Triggering the Ingres Reflex: Brett Bigbee, His Powers and His Intentions by John Goodrich

Brett Bigbee: Recent Paintings at Alexandre Gallery | October 20 – December 17, 2011



Brett Bigbee, *Abby*, 2005 – 2010. Oil on linen, 70-1/32 x 53-7/8 inches. Courtesy of Alexandre Gallery

The discrepancy between technique and expression is one of the fascinating paradoxes of art. Who would think that Ingres' corseted technique could lead to such expansive descriptions? (Or, that Seurat's careful building of tones would culminate in such gutsy massings of form, or Soutine's thrashings—which stylistically seem to say, "Take me anywhere but here"—bring his subjects closer to the viewer?) Ingres' obsessive details and distortions are an entertaining symptom of his loving Raphael not wisely but too well, and we may find ourselves in the peculiar position of admiring him despite his intentions.

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Like Ingres, Brett Bigbee brings formidable rendering skills to idiosyncratic figure paintings. Nearly 20 drawings and paintings by the artist, who was born in 1954, recently graced the walls at Alexandre Gallery. Producing only one or two paintings a year, the artist has perfected a singular style that seems to combine the iconic reserve of American colonial portraiture and the descriptive effulgence of French academic painting. His precise modeling imparts to his figure and still life paintings both a glowing intricacy and a slightly surreal exactitude. Bigbee's attentions are actually quite selective: he invariably renders reflections on the irises of eyes, but no eyelashes to speak of; their whites always include that tiny fold of flesh at the inner corner, but nary a vein. One might expect to find a vulnerability in his portraits, given his painstaking method and the fact that all are members his family, but, if anything, they seem inoculated by their brilliant rendering. They have a porcelain opacity that triggers, for me, an "Ingres reflex": an admiration for the work at odds with its intentions.

The forms in the seven graphite drawings in the exhibition feel as much incised as drawn. In several portraits, the exquisite detail—the finely cracked lips, the darkly opalescent pools of eyes—impart an Ingres-like effect of self-generated organisms. *Study for James* (2000) is typical in that all forms become more diffuse as one proceeds away from the riveting eyes, until one arrives at a uniform tone at the sheet's perimeter, the hair melting into an enclosing vapor. In this respect, Bigbee's approach is distinctly unclassical; great traditional artists such as Ingres would locate a necessary role for each element, from encircling jawline to embellishments of hair, in characterizing the whole of a face.

Like George Tooker or William Bailey, Bigbee appears to approach drawing as an additive modeling process. Neighboring adjustments of tone actively create sensations of volumes, which accrue, in rather passive rhythms, to fill the surface. Opposite to this "from-the-inside-out" approach is the "outside-in" process of Matisse or Ingres, who, though fully capable of shading, start by locating and relating points across the paper, and building through the tensions of intervals. This is an approach based in composing, and it makes for different expression: the singularity of an arm extending through space as opposed to forms emerging evocatively from the depths. (In truth, great artists from Watteau to Degas had a foot in both camps, pacing their rich, modeled tones with vigorous intervals. But I'll admit I'm keener on outside-in composing. Modeling without composing takes you to light-weight seductions—to Greuze and Bougereau—while composing without any tonal modeling at all can take you to such extraordinary places as Picasso's line drawings or Rembrandt's pen-and-ink sketches.)

Consequently Bigbee's drawing is indeed muscular in its modeling, but not in the quantifying of human gesture. His infinitely patient approach to all parts of bodies produces some intriguing effects. For instance, the younger boy's head and left arm pop out disconcertingly in the five-foot-tall drawing *Joe and James* (2001-2003), while both bodies seem to drop from the heads, rather than grow from the support of earth, imparting to them something of the aspect of pinned specimens.

But might this be the result of a conscious decision? Consider the small, remarkable drawing titled *Abby* (2004). Here, the slight pursing of lips, the shading about the eye sockets, and shadows about the base of the nose, eloquently lead from one to the other as asymmetrical pressures, all within the tangible embrace of a head. Honoring the mobility of features, the artist turns the subject's eyes, wondrously, into the summation of a vulnerable entity.

In fact, lingering a while in the exhibition at Alexandre, one may sense in many of the works a particular kind of magic. Academic artists are frequently strong, if conventional, draftsmen and less than active colorists. Their hues tend to fill rather than direct, adding simply an evocative sheen to what's already there. Bigbee, however, appears to be the rare painter whose expression is more coherently expansive in color than in drawing. Indeed, his color sometimes weights elements left at loose ends by his iron-willed drawing.

In *James* (1999-2001), a portrait of a mother and her baby, the face of the baby is a marvel of modeling, and not just tonally, but with colors eliciting the movement between lit and softly shadowed areas. It represents what must be an extraordinary amount of work, yet it feels limber. Bigbee deftly catches even the curiosity in the baby's gaze. Colors lend tangible weight to certain other sequences, too: there's a luxurious depth in the movements between the baby's shadowed ear, the deep absorbent red of his mother's dress, and the pure blue of sky visible in the window—all coexisting within an inch of canvas space. But such are the peculiarities of Bigbee's attack that the entire remainders of the figures' bodies have less sculptural presence. One recognizes strategies in the drawing; the baby's curling fingers just broach the encompassing contour of his mother's shoulder, while his other hand, resting atop her wrist, launches the larger echo of her fingers. But the drawing fails to build to such affecting events, and in this case even Bigbee's empathetic color can't enliven them rhythmically.

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The exhibition includes five still life paintings, and here Bigbee's precise descriptions avoid of the surreal overtones of some of the figural work. He also brings to them the stronger aspects of the portrait paintings, with simpler compositions again showing more momentum of rhythm. The six fruit in *Quince* (2000-01) vividly capture the orbiting energy of orange spheres in a leafy world. *Dark Earth* (2010-11) catches the singularity of a bright clover blossom arcing from a darkened patch of soil; behind it, the division of a glowing rock, by two blades of grass, sounds a telling response.

Dominating the exhibition, however, is *Abby* (2005-10), a portrait of young girl standing alone in a field. One imagines that Bigbee summoned his full powers for this six-foot-tall canvas, and in technical terms it's a tour de force. Yet it impresses also as pictorial expression. Bigbee's colors impart to the figure a palpable presence, as if she had precipitated out the scene's thick, darkish air. Though the face and hands still flirt with that porcelain inertia, her vertical form holds powerfully in space against the taut horizontals of distant water and the rocks at her feet. Far-away treetops connect in an uneven wave that buoys the pale shoulders of the girl, who stands awkwardly, as if she wasn't quite sure how she got there. The artist clearly knows, though—at least on some intuitive level—having conjured it through some remarkable chemistry of color.



Brett Bigbee, *Abby*, 2004. Graphite on paper, 11-1/2 x 8 inches. Courtesy of Alexandre Gallery