

Brett Bigbee

Tibor de Nagy Gallery through June 4
BY MAUREEN MULLARKEY

THIS IS A DELICIOUS exhibition, more complex and original than acolytes of "the right now" could ever grasp. Brett Bigbee achieves, with grace and commendable understatement, a refutation of prevailing notions of what constitutes contemporary art. His contemporaneity does not reside in style, the easily grasped "look" of the work. He exhibits no solidarity whatever with "the art of the nineties," or any other such concession to the specious present.

His painting testifies to the soundness of T. S. Eliot's comment, stated more than sixty years ago, that tradition is not something blindly handed down but rather searched out and embraced. "Tradition . . . cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which . . . involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence." Bigbee is too serious and knowledgeable a painter to seek his creative identity in facile modes wrapped in a time package. Instead, he does justice to the present by giving life to what truly concerns him: his wife, his infant son and his own progress toward maturity.

His means are drawn from those traditional formats and devices that suit a sensibility which is deliberate, refined and emblematic. It is a temperament ordained to gravitate toward the hieratic, linear clarity of the Florentine *primitifs*, particularly and inevitably Piero della Francesca. The inclination is reinforced by Bigbee's unabashed interest in American folk painting which reflects back, at the remove of several

centuries, the power of frontality and stylization, the directness and iconographic devices of its Renaissance precedents. From a wealth of examples, what comes straight to mind is Ammi Philips, 1788-1865, with his impulse toward softly rounded volumes and dream-like moods. Out of this disarming blend of Quattrocento genius and American *naifs*, Bigbee creates an art of great charm and quite modern sophistication. His studio procedure admits no spontaneity, yet the overall effect is fresh and innovative.

The strength of this exhibition lies in the vitality of Bigbee's intuition of the bond between past and present, between the timeless and the temporal, combined with the gossamer delicacy of his touch. Built up slowly from a golden imprimatura, his paintings have the glow of newly prepared fresco. Add the tempered surface luster of watercolor on silk, a favored ground of American folk artists. His figures are lit as if from within more than from any exterior light source. An unfinished canvas, *MORNING STREET, 1997/99*, provides a window into the working method that yields the characteristic radiance of Bigbee's oils.

The exhibition's anchor is the stunning *JOE (SELF-PORTRAIT), 1994/99*. The composition soars above the mere mechanics of picture making. It is the very means by which the painting achieves its psychological veracity and depth. What Leonardo described in his notes on portraiture as "the motions of the mind" finds both their impulse and parallel in the subtle asymmetries marking the figure as well as the confining verticals and horizontals of the shallow space behind it. Bigbee's bias toward decoration is

totally submerged here in architectural detail and coloration — a radiant azurite blue that bows to Holbein — in order to summon recognition of the constricting pressures of young fatherhood.

A closed door to the right of the figure is countered by an open window on the left. Through it we glimpse, as in Renaissance panel portraits, a hint of the outdoors and the horizon beyond the confines of the interior. The view is unlyrical, the geometry of street and sidewalk doing duty as middle-distance landscape before it abuts one of Maine's coastal bays. Instead of the obligatory tree, Bigbee provides a spare utility pole, its crisscrossed cables substituting for branches.

Bigbee sits squarely on a stool, level with the picture plane and aslant of dead center. He wears only white boxer shorts, their folds painted as gracefully as a turban on the heads of youths by Uccello or Veneziano. One arm grasps, barely, the infant Joe, squirming to evade embrace. The other is extended in a distinctive gesture, palm forward, that occurs seldom in life but everywhere in the Western tradition's variants on the *non me tangere* theme. Bigbee presents himself in the mirror image of Bramantino's *ECCE HOMO*, the child's presence altering the suggestiveness of the pose to one of protection and supplication not unmixed with apprehension.

The baby is observed with a cool, Netherlandish eye for the peculiarities of infancy: out-sized head flattened at the sides, haunches narrower than the belly. The depiction carries with it respect for nature's accommodation of the birth canal, an image all the more affecting for being clinical. Modeled with a miniaturist's care, its movement suspended in time, the infant is realized with a tenderness held in

check by an uncommon reserve.

The growth of Joe is mapped in three other paintings, two of them accompanied by preparatory drawings that are as finished and satisfying as the final painting. As in all Bigbee's works on paper, graphite caresses the page with consummate gentleness, making drawing as much an instrument of love as of depiction.

Bigbee's paintings of his son make no concessions to familial nostalgia and repel sentimental association with centuries of putti and plump bambini. *BIRD I* and *BIRD II*, each 1998/99, are exceptionally fine. Each presents the viewer with a nude male-child, solemn, unselfconscious, guarded by his own innocence. One figure varies from the other by only the slightest directional shift in head and foot and by the position of its arms in relation to a captive bird.

The modernity of the child is unmistakable. Again, it is the composition that reverberates with memories of a living past. The bird-in-hand recalls fifteenth century fondness for images of the Lady's young Son playing on the ground with birds. It carries us through the Renaissance in scores of Holy Family scenes, to Brönzino's delightful portrait of Giovanni de' Medici at 18 months. It crosses paths with countless folk portraits of children with their pets and toys.

BIRD I sets the child on a mound of embroidered nature, a hint of tapestry tradition and of the paradise garden that serves us still as an emblem of childhood. *BIRD II* sets him at the edge of wide water, a luminous white cloth discarded on the sand. In reality, this is probably Bigbee's nappy, but, iconographically, it is cousin to those bits of white drapery intended to

presage the shroud in Renaissance Nativity scenes. And why not? Outside the garden, nature is vast; the world as a whole dangerous and disturbing.

Precise as their contours are, Bigbee's figures avoid the sharp cutting edge of primitive paintings. Contours recede from the eye, the forms enveloped by atmosphere. Subtle blending of pigments — pulling background color forward into flesh — creates shade as well as depth. In *JOE (SELF-PORTRAIT)*, there is greater circulation of air, more definitive shadowing and closer observance yielding more anatomical rendering than in any other work on exhibit. The figure has a chiseled, sculpted quality, with a greater tonal contrast that functions inadvertently as a chastisement to his female nudes. However lovely, these seem weaker, more schematic, by comparison.

Bigbee's females, modeled on his wife Ann Binder, have a radiant sweetness purged of seductiveness. Beautiful in an undemanding way, they present themselves less as women than as embodiments of something unspecified. Of good breeding, perhaps, or good manners. *ANN WITH PLANT* 1990/91 finds her in an awkward, rather meditative pose, nude but with her socks still on. If only we had knocked before entering. *STANDING NUDE*, 1991/99 exhibits her, front view, with the formality and leafy ornaments of a Crivelli *MADONNA*. Instead of lush fruits, Bigbee flanks his modest nude with exquisite plant cuttings in glasses of water. The ensemble suggests the triumph of cultivation, delicacy, over the unruly impulses of nature. *Comme il faut* and ethereal, her nudity is as chaste as her son's. Mother, like child, does not welcome our approach.

The catalogue essay by Sylvia Yount compares Bigbee to Balthus: "While disquieting moods and a cool eroticism are shared features of both artists' work, one senses a greater depth of feeling in Bigbee's art." This is catalogue-speak in an otherwise fine commentary. Much as Bigbee may have been struck, as all serious figure painters have been, by the power of Balthus' 1984 exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bigbee's work bears small similarity to Balthus' beyond a mutual attraction to Piero. Balthus' passion for Piero was married to an equal appetite for Courbet, the fusion resulting in such robust glories as Balthus' *THE ROOM*, 1947/48, where, a magnificent young female nude stands, arm extended, in the same gesture that lends historical weight to *JOE (SELF-PORTRAIT)*. The origin of the gesture is the single point of contact. It's purpose, mood and promise are poles apart, with eroticism residing exclusively in the Balthus.

Automatic equations of nudity with eroticism rob Bigbee of his distinguishing characteristic: namely, a counter-cultural reserve that, paradoxically, expresses feeling through the strength of the effort made to mute it.

Bigbee is not served by minimizing the emotive depth and sweep of Balthus' oeuvre. It is not necessary to manufacture claims for Bigbee. His art sustains itself on its own intelligent and gracious terms. See it and you'll understand.

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