

# ALEXANDRE

## Brett Bigbee: Small Realities

by Suzette McAvoy

In a recent essay, Carter Ratcliffe writes about “duende,” the elusive, animating quality that Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca describes in *Theory and Play of the Duende* as “a force, not a labor, a struggle not a thought. . . . Meaning, it’s not a question of skill, but of a style that’s truly alive: meaning, it’s in the veins: meaning, it’s of the most ancient culture of immediate creation.”

Artist Brett Bigbee has been making paintings for nearly four decades and has duende in spades. His work first came to my attention in an open juried exhibition at the Farnsworth Art Museum in 1988. I had recently arrived as curator at the museum, which was celebrating its 40th anniversary, the occasion heralding the exhibition. Bigbee’s contributions to the show were a forthright self-portrait, seated in his studio at night, wearing denim overalls and a red cap, a la Piero della Francesca, and *Spring*, a radiant full-length portrait of his wife Ann standing outside on a wooden balcony in a red dress and a white apron, in which she cradles a bouquet of flowers. Bigbee was thirty-four at the time and three years out of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, where he studied with Elizabeth Osborne, Sidney Goodman, Henry Pearson, and, importantly, Will Barnet, who convinced Bigbee, who was reluctant to let it go, to sell *Self-Portrait* to the museum, where it resides today. The older artist’s elegantly composed portraits of his wife and family had a lasting impact on Bigbee, whose principal subjects have been Ann and their sons, Joe and James.

While best known for his domestic portraits, Barnet switched courses several times throughout his long career, and in 2018, Bigbee embarked on a new path of his own. “What I was looking for in my work was maturity,” he told me on a recent visit to his studio. “There’s the Picasso quote, ‘It takes a long time to

become young.'" After thirty years of producing breathtaking, exquisitely rendered figurative works that garnered him unstinting critical praise—"There's never been a painting quite like it," wrote Mario Naves of *Abby* (2005-2010), Bigbee's "heart-stopping" painting of a young pre-pubescent girl in a flowered bathing suit on a deserted beach—it was time to turn his considerable skills in other directions. His labor-intensive technique of slowly building up the image through successive layers of unmixed color, a Renaissance painting method he adopted at the Academy and has maintained—although it set him apart from his fellow students and earned him derision from some of his instructors, "Why are you fussing around with painting it five times?"—resulted in luminous, velvety surfaces of distilled clarity. Still, it often took him years to complete a canvas.

A postgraduate Fulbright enabled him and Ann to spend a year in Italy, living in a 13th-century villa in the hills above Florence. "It was idyllic," he says, "an Eden." There, he met Carter Zervas (1951-2004), another American artist with ties to Philadelphia, who became a lifelong friend. During our visit, Bigbee references Zervas, an artist I wasn't familiar with, telling me he admires the "animation" in his paintings, which are "full of content." A posthumous catalog of Zervas's work assembled by his wife Rachel reveals an artist of poetic eccentricity, energy, and wit, whose subjects often portray his dog Lucky as the everyman, in mid-air in pursuit, in confrontation with the serpent of a garden hose, or asleep dreaming of the squirrel that got away. "The saint (or the devil) resides in each of us and can reveal itself not just at the fulcrum of victory or sacrifice but at any step along the way," writes Douglass Paschal in the catalog's foreword. It is this quality, above others, that Bigbee's work shares with Zervas. The embrace of the devil and the saint, the openness to the whole of life.

"This work had to be experimental, pushing me to do things that I knew I could do, but hadn't done," Bigbee shares. *Heritage* (2018), depicting the temptation of Eve, is one of the first of the artist's allegorical paintings. Like the other recent works, it is a small canvas, approximately 11 x 8 inches. Within the tight constraints

of the rectangle, Eve's naked figure crouches, her gaze turned to the dragon-headed serpent whispering in her ear. The flat delineation of space and form and the profusion of patterning are drawn from 16th-century Moghul miniatures. When compared to the earlier *Standing Nude* (1991-1999), a tonally modeled, full-scale portrait of Ann bathed in lavender light, her eyes fixed on the viewer, the artist's intention of "leaving illusionism to explore a path of freedom as a visual storyteller" is made clear. Look closely in *Standing Nude*; you'll see a golden apple on the mantel behind Ann's shoulder. In *Heritage*, she holds the forbidden fruit.

*Inner Conflict* (2018) and *Vixen with Bird* (2018), paintings depicting a male wolf attacking a snake and a female wolf with her caught prey, continue the allegorical theme of temptation and loss of innocence. This time, the primitive rendering and lush, green foliage recall the art of Henri Rousseau and his statement, "It is often said that my heart is too open for my own good." A sentiment evoked in Bigbee's trio of pink rose paintings, *Desire for Grace* (2019-2020), *Orbit of Intimacy* (2021), and *Shadow of Turning* (2023); each is a distinct rendition of the emblematic flower. Bigbee's long-held fondness for Early American folk painting, particularly the work of the itinerant John Brewster Jr. of Buxton, Maine, is present in the gossamer, stylized blooms pictured before the sea in *Desire for Grace*. The voluptuous damask roses that circle one another in *Orbit of Intimacy* bring to mind the extraordinary botanical collages of the 19th-century English artist Mary Delany. In *Shadow of Turning*, a solitary rose grows amid a field of Queen Anne's lace, a tiny bud of blood red above, a small blossom of blue in the center, and the white wings of a butterfly below—an allegory for conflicted times. "Soft voices had they, that with tender plea / Whispered of peace, and truth, and friendliness unquelled," writes Keats in his poem, *To a Friend That Sent Me Some Roses*.

On February 9, 2021, shortly after the worldwide death toll from COVID-19 topped two million, a lawyer in Texas inadvertently presented his case in court on Zoom as a cat. The video of the proceeding as he struggles to remove the

kitten mask filter, declaring, "I'm here live. I'm not a cat," went viral. Bigbee's slyly humorous painting of a grey tabby cat with a lipstick-red Cheshire grin commemorates the meme. It is followed by *In the Land of Prizm* (2023), a picture of a rakish cerulean blue cat who looks like he swallowed the proverbial canary as he heads out for a nighttime prowling, oblivious to the red bird above. In both cat paintings, the solid cadmium yellow ground carries the light. The artist continues his exploration of intense hues in *Man, No Man* (2023), a tightly cropped version of St. George and the Dragon. The violet beast lies prone under the hooves of the white horse, its fanged mouth pierced by the lance of the unseen rider. A narrow border of vermilion frames the scene, another nod to Moghul paintings. Bigbee initially titled this work *Klesha*, a Sanskrit word that translates to "poison" or "affliction." In Buddhist philosophy, ignorance is the first of the five Kleshas, the root cause of all other problems.

With *Sanctuary* (2023), the artist offers a respite from conflict and crisis. A "safe place" within a patch of dark earth populated with weeds "that follow human life." The sweet spot, a juicy cherry at the bottom left. Nature—real and imagined, inner and outer—is the through line in *Small Realities*. Testing himself, "I don't hold back, I give it my all," Bigbee sets a high bar, addressing the scope of human frailty and resilience. "The artist's role in society is to try to make signposts in this world of magic," he adds. His art is a gift to those who stop and see.