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Dear Painter, cat. from exhibition at the Centre George Pompidou
Interview with Alison M. Gingeras

Brian Calvin

Alison M. Gingeras

To the uninitiated eye, Brian Calvin might seem like the painter of some lazy, smoke-laced Bohemia, tucked away in the anonymous landscape of a Southern California suburb. Androgynous figures with long dirty hair, elongated faces, and cartoon-ish features populate his canvases. They smoke. They walk. They point. They stare forward vacantly. They make ambiguous gestures. They wear plain, casual clothes that might identify them as "slackers". When pictured in an outdoor setting, the background topography is rendered with an extreme economy: distant hills and bodies of water are delineated using a simple line, filled in with matte fields of color. Occasionally, a set of stairs or a cropped section of a chain link fence suggests a sense of spatial hierarchy, without betraying an overarching flatness that dominates both figure and setting. Interior scenes are equally as sparse. With the exception of a few domestic accouterments—a burning candle, a drinking glass, a painting—just simple line and color define the otherwise neutral rooms where his figures lounge, sit, stand or congregate.

The most obvious art historical comparison has connected Calvin's idiosyncratic world of suspended figures to the detached "social" portraiture of Alex Katz. Each painter shares a sense of extreme pictorial economy; each has a bare-bones sense of narrative; each employs color in flattened planes, using a matte, highly personal palette. A sense cool of born in 1950s New York in Katz's work meets a culture of *ennui* in the vast sub-

urban sprawl of Brian Calvin's Los Angeles of the late 1990s.

Yet as Katz has proven over the past forty years, this seemingly overt simplicity is always deceptive. On the surface, Calvin's style and subject matter might seem easy or familiar—but underneath these cartoon-ish surfaces is a fundamental awkwardness. This pictorial and subjective unease comes not just from the non-narrative nature of the paintings but from the fact that each figure has subjected to an elaborate process of construction. Each one has been re-worked, flipped, "painted in or painted out"—an arduous process that is only apparent to a viewer who takes time to digest the visual complexity of each painting. The malaise present in each of Calvin's figures might be understood as a continual questioning of painting itself: its formal possibilities as well as its conceptual limits. This hypothesis seems to be echoed in Calvin's terse yet revealing titles. *Further On, Passing Through, Onwards* (2001)—these short words or phrases beg the viewer to move past the mere "illustrative" content to see the totality of the painting. A painting such as *Slow Burn* (2001) not only describes the mood of the painting (a figure passively watches a candle burning) but might also suggest the time necessary for the retinal "burning" of the image in the viewer's mind. Brian Calvin is a master of titling as well as a figurative painter who reasserts the primacy of visual thinking without returning to the cult of the formal in the Modernist tradition.

AG: Figurative painting is often read in a reductive manner, not extending beyond old debates pitting abstraction against figuration. Even today in the context of a much more heterogeneous field of art practices, figurative painting is often read as a mirror of its time: it reflects, records, and comments on the sociological, historical, or cultural context in which it is made. Are your human subjects actual people? Or are they typologies? Are they imaginary/fictive composites? Can your paintings of human subjects be considered within the traditional category of portraiture? Does your work embrace, resist, or is it in-different to such classical genres?

BC: It's important to me that the figures in my paintings seem believable, but I don't worry whether they seem realistic or not. I'm not particularly interested in realism. I just want the figures to have specificity to them. I don't think about portraiture or genre at all while I'm working. I simply try to be observant of what is working and what isn't. I paint things in or I paint things out. Try to make a good painting.

AG: There seems to be a refusal of allegory in your work; a sense of narrative is always pared down to an austere minimum. Indeterminate or ambiguous hand gestures dominate certain paintings (*Onwards*, 2001; *Passing Through*, 2001). Single, simple activities are caught in a state of suspension: a figure smoking and climbing stairs (*Further Still*, 2001).

BC: I certainly didn't start painting to tell stories. I'm rarely interested in either narrative or allegory in painting. The way narrative is constructed within certain paintings can be quite exciting, but the narrative itself is usually anything but. I'm interested in the thought process painting provides. I don't want my paintings to break down into words, or at least into sentences, very easily. I hope to make work that is stubbornly visual.

AG: Another series of works deal with the figure of the artist or the painting of a painting (*Don't Be Denied*, 2000). Even in these self-reflexive works, the temptation to extract some kind of allegorical commentary about painting itself seems to be even more violently denied.

BC: Painting mystifies me. It is a very strange practice, just this side of alchemy. To me, all of my work is a contemplation of painting and its possibilities, so it feels natural to sometimes make works involving the act of painting. I strive to think through painting, not to paint what I think. That would just be an illustration of the limits of my mind.

AG: Are you trying to strip figurative painting down to some kind of essential or rudimentary state? Figuration as an act of simple "showing" as opposed to "narrating", or "representing"?

BC: I want my paintings to feel self-contained when they are finished. I believe that each painting has its own inner-logic, it's own thought process. Sometimes it seems interesting to include a lot of information, and sometimes I prefer to include very little. Recently my paintings look very simple, but I think that they are deceptively simple. It's quite complex to make a "simple" painting that doesn't just shut down or become overly iconic.

AG: Despite the sense of stillness and suspension, *ennui*, or "coolness" of your figures and their environment, it is striking to what degree they are evocative of the "cinematic." Living and working in Los Angeles, it seems evident that your daily experience must be completely saturated with images.

BC: I live and work at home. I find it surprisingly easy to ignore the outside world when it's necessary. As for the cinematic element, I don't really see it. It might be there, but I primarily think about other painters and their paintings.

AG: In speaking with someone like Alex Katz, I ventured to ask him about his connection to cinema—especially the French films of the 1970s that attempted an insider examination of the bourgeoisie, like in the films of Eric Rohmer or Claude Chabrol. I was convinced that many of Katz's beach scenes recalled films such as *Le Genou de Claire* ("Claire's Knee", Eric Rohmer, 1970), in the way it was a very intimate portrait of a given class while guarding a calculated sense of distance or emotional detachment. Are you consciously drawing from cinema or other forms of photo-based image making?

BC: I tend to keep it all pretty separate in my mind. In general, I think about television more than cinema. I enjoy television's repetitive nature; it's strange anonymity and the flood of images. There's a lot to think about it. However, I'm a huge fan of Chris Marker's films and videos. You can feel the film thinking about itself ... very dense and yet open and playful at the same time. Absolutely inspirational and all very illuminating. I think William Eggleston does the same for color photography.

AG: As you know the exhibition is attempting to speculate about a certain strain of painting's ability to "digest" or engage with the "image" and its saturation of our everyday lives. Has this predominance of "image" (in the sense of its contemporary definition as being free-floating, disposable, detached, instantaneous, fleeting) dislodged more "traditional" concerns ascribed to figurative painting, such as representation and realism?

BC: I think figure painting's "traditional concerns" were dislodged well over 100 years ago, if not by Manet or Cézanne then certainly by all those that followed on their heels. It's been over 50 years since Pollock's heyday. I think a lot of people honestly believe that the drip paintings were the period at the end of a sentence. It certainly was an incredible breakthrough for

Pollock and for non-objective painting. Ironically though, it so quickly became the new image of modern art. I'm much more interested in artists who aren't looking for breakthroughs, but are simply trying to forge their own mode of communication.

AG: For many people who see your work for the first time, they immediately make a genealogical connection between you and Alex Katz. While certainly this connection is visible, I have been thinking about the deceptive austerity of your work in relationship to a certain European tradition that has fallen out of fashion, especially in France. Perhaps Katz is too obvious, too American, too rooted in a certain social class. In particular, I was thinking about the early paintings by Bernard Buffet that depict his ascetic existence in the immediate post war period, his isolation as an artist, his refusal of narrative/allegory, his early interest in bohemian and "outsiders". Are you familiar with Buffet's working, especially his early self-portraits? Another possible French antecedent could be Balthus, especially

in regards to the interest you both seem to share for Italian quattrocento fresco painters (Piero della Francesca, Giotto).

BC: I don't know Buffet's work. It sounds interesting and I'd love to see some. I admire the eccentricity of Balthus and the frozen quality of his paintings, but never really felt a personal affinity between his work and my own. There are several painters whose work I spend a lot of time pondering and Katz is definitely one of them. Rarely will you find image and process so symbiotically linked. His work has a beautiful inner logic. As for French painting, my favorites aren't all that obscure. I constantly return to Manet, Bonnard and Matisse. I also love aspects of David, Géricault, Courbet, Cézanne and Vuillard.

AG: Are there other less obvious historical figures that are important to your work? Are these "genealogical" musings relevant, useful, or valid to your work?

BC: Piero della Francesca and Giotto are like planets to me. It was their work as well as that of Philip

Guston and Andy Warhol that made painting really open up for me. Fra Angelico's frescoes in the Convent of San Marco in Florence completely blew my mind. Who else? Massacio, John Wesley, David Hockney, Sigmar Polke, Gerhard Richter ... These are the people who make me want to paint. They are all such deeply intelligent visual thinkers.

AG: Despite of the extreme two-dimensionality of your work, intensified by the matte use of color fields, there is a whiff of the sculptural embedded in the poses, gestures, and posturing of your figures.

BC: My technique is far from streamlined. I don't start with an image. I find my figures through a process that includes a lot of addition, subtraction and amending. Figures move around a lot, lose their arms or their heads, spin 90 degrees, are painted out, etc. I suppose that is where the "sculptural whiff" comes from. My work looks much more fast and graphic in reproduction. It's a problem for me.