

# BOMB



## INTERVIEWS

BETWEEN ARTISTS, WRITERS,  
MUSICIANS, DIRECTORS  
AND FILMMAKERS

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\$6.95 US / \$8.00 CANADA  
SPRING 2007, NUMBER 99  
FILE UNDER ART AND CULTURE  
DISPLAY UNTIL JUNE 15, 2007



# BILL JENSEN

by JOHN YAU

*I liked Bill Jensen's paintings the moment I saw them. They were mysterious and impolite, and had a sting to them. Over the years, he kept changing his work, and never settled into a style or signature image. He never seemed to quite fit in, and he didn't accommodate himself to the taste of the moment. These are just some of the things that he does and, just as importantly, doesn't do.*

*Jensen's paintings reinforced my feeling that, as a poet, I*

*didn't have to fit in or belong to any group. Being an artist or a poet didn't mean that you joined a club; the time for that had long passed. After we became friends, now nearly 20 years ago, I learned a lot about writing from talking to him about painting. Once, when my wife Eve Aschheim and I stayed with him and his wife Margrit Lewczuk in Italy, I lent him a book of Medardo Rosso's drawings while we drove off to see the paintings*

*of Piero della Francesca. When we returned a few days later, he showed us a group of drawings that had been inspired by the drawings in the book. They didn't look like anything that Rosso had done, nor were they like anything that Bill had done before. That openness is at the crux of what Bill does, and it is with that in mind that I began this interview.*

JOHN YAU

Let's talk about change. Your work is always undergoing change, and you have never had a signature look or style. Can you explain what is behind that?

BILL JENSEN

Change is good for art but hard on the artist. I feel that serious artists go into the studio day after day and let the art slowly take them, sometimes kicking and screaming, into new territories. They let the making of things have its own life, and this living force brings them into areas of creating they could never have imagined. Solutions come from this working process. Sometimes you have the feeling that you are being pulled by a team of wild dogs. Looking back over 20 or 30 years, I could never have dreamt where these images came from and where the art has taken me. To make some-



VOODOO, 1976  
OIL ON LINEN  
26 × 15 INCHES



THE MEADOW, 1980-81  
OIL ON LINEN  
22 × 22 INCHES

thing truly amazing is to make something you could never have dreamt of.

There is tremendous psychic terror when the brush meets the painting. As an artist you need to have a high tolerance for anxiety and a high tolerance for embarrassment. A high tolerance for anxiety because you feel pulled by forces greater than you. It is as if something is going through you, and it is not about you. A high tolerance for embarrassment because some of the stuff is going to look pretty bad. It has an identity outside of yourself and must be accepted. You have to take the good and the bad, the ugly as well as the beautiful, and the pain as well as the joy to get yourself someplace. Lots of artists let their work take them to a plateau, and then they stay on that plateau, maybe with a need to rest from the anxiety. I can't do that. For me, that would just be fear of my own anxiety. The work would seem too mechanical and without feeling. I work toward feeling, not away from it. Therefore my life is always filled with anxiety. Each work for me is not about one idea; it is about an emotional event that must be searched for and clarified.

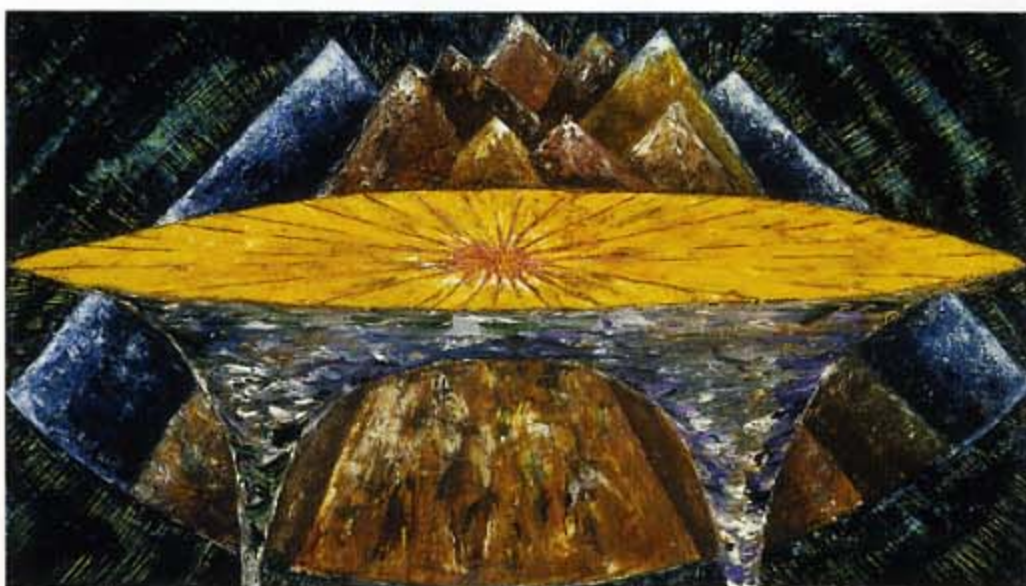
JY In the last 30 years, your work has undergone at least three substantial changes, though I realize that I am being far too simple and loose in my definitions. In the first period, your paintings had a central, often coiled shape. The surfaces were worked over, scraped down, and built up. I think the term *gnarly* would apply. In contrast to other abstract painters, your paintings were intimate in size—you could literally hold one on your lap. Then your work changed, and you began to have a landscape space in your drawings and paintings. The size became slightly bigger. The forms seemed to be derived from nature, there were mountain-like forms and leaf-like shapes, for example, though you transformed them into something more

mysterious and animistic. Now, in your current period, you are interested in the transitory and what you have called the *phenomena*; it's as if the landscape, which was already animated in your work, enters a state of flux. Forms seem to be about to appear and dissolve. And the color becomes much more rich and boldly chromatic, jewel-like. Would you care to discuss these changes?

BJ In looking back on my work over the past 30 years, one could, if one wanted to, group paintings from 1975–86, such as *The Black Madonna*, *Voodoo*, and *Crown of Thorns*. I grew up in rural Minnesota. I had a difficult childhood there, and the result is that the country is very frightening for me, but in New York with so few trees and the safety of my studio I felt protected from my childhood traumas. I didn't leave the city for more than 10 years. I think these paintings are more about what happens between people, glances, gestures, points of freedom, and points of conflict. These paintings are more urban in feeling.

In the summer of 1986, my wife, the painter Margrit Lewczuk, and I went to Maine to teach at Skowhegan, and I experienced the world differently. There I started to come in touch with the awesome presence of nature—how its realm of emotion and intelligence is much greater than ours. The woods in Maine around Skowhegan are very primordial. The landscape, the scape, began to enter my work in paintings like *Deadhead*, *Moat*, and *Sled*. The paintings I did in Maine were more about the way nature was when people were not around; we only mannerize nature to feel safe. We can't see nature as it actually is.

The next big change was in 1988, when I was asked to be a resident at the American Academy in Rome. Margrit, our infant son Russell, and I went. Margrit and I set up studios, worked, and began



THE FAMILY, 1980-81  
OIL ON LINEN  
20 × 36 INCHES



THE MARSH, 1981-82  
OIL ON LINEN  
21 × 16 INCHES

to experience Italy and Italian art. This is where I began to fuse the idea of human nature and nature. To be there and to work and to experience a place where people have tried to make things of beauty for thousands of years was very freeing. Art has a deep place in society there; it is a feeling in the ground that comes up through your feet. Everyone there knows the importance and necessity of art just like water and food and air, which I did not experience growing up in the Midwest. I think the great Italian painters of the past, say, the eighth century through the seventeenth century, used the biblical stories to grasp the very complicated emotional situations that were happening at that time. For me, abstract art is maybe the best way to grasp the very complicated emotional conditions that exist today.

The next change occurred in connection with a conversation you and I had in my studio in the mid-'90s. Before this, when one painting took over and demanded to be finished, that one work needed to be everything—the whole world in one painting. You reminded me of William Blake and the possibility that everything—a tree or a rock—could be something seen in another way, and that the reverse might also be true; a rock or a tree could be everything, that seeing didn't have to be either literal or metaphorical, that it could occur on a more heightened level. I thought about that and wrote a little piece about it and that changed the work. That a little bit of something could be everything, and that everything could be something just looked at in a different way, and yet there might be a heightened sensitivity in working so just a little bit of something is enough, and could be everything.... Maybe a little bit of something helps start a work about flux: flux being part of everything and

everything being part of something, no end and no beginning.

I have also been deeply moved by Chinese painting and Chinese poetry for a long time, but it wasn't until the summer of 2003 that you gave me a book, *Chinese Poetry: An Anthology of Major Modes and Genres*. In the foreword, the editor, Wai-Lim Yip, talks about the idea that in the third or fourth century, the Daoists believed that human beings could not see the phenomena—nature—as it really exists, that we only mannerize it, and from that century on the Chinese tried to make art about how the phenomena sees *itself* without the influence of human beings. They also said that while looking at the Milky Way if you can feel a distant star as part of your body just like your elbow, and your elbow as part of the distant stars, you have begun to be enlightened. I have had those moments.

JY Those moments that you are talking about remind me of a passage in Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay *Nature*: "Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me." Near the end of this passage, Emerson states, "I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty."

BJ I have never read Emerson, but I probably should. That quote is very Chinese. It is very similar to the elbow and the Milky Way concept. To try to be an empty vessel that the phenomena—all the forces around us—can go into and through. We are all part of the same matter, and the matter in the Milky Way is the same as the matter in my elbow. Jackson Pollock's statement "I am Nature" for me has been very misunderstood. Pollock tried to paint the cosmos, deep infinite space. To me, he



MOAT, 1986  
OIL ON LINEN  
34 3/4 x 29 1/4 INCHES



SLED, 1986  
OIL ON LINEN  
39 1/4 x 28 1/2 INCHES



DEADHEAD, 1986  
OIL ON LINEN  
36 1/2 x 33 1/4 INCHES

was saying he was part of nature, one with nature, and it was misunderstood as human ego separated from nature—a typical Western idea of human energy above nature, controlling nature. The American tradition started with Albert Pinkham Ryder, a phenomena-based artist, and that tradition has continued with artists like Marsden Hartley, Arthur Dove, Mark Rothko, Clifford Still, Pollock, Myron Stout, Alfred Jensen, Forrest Bess, Agnes Martin, David Smith, and Ronnie Bladen.

JY One thing I think should be said here is that, despite all the many changes that your painting has undergone, drawing has been a constant activity throughout; you are always drawing, from the first spirals that you did while you were still in Minnesota to the recent dissolving forms done in a variety of mediums including ink, egg, and oil tempera.

BJ I think works on paper are very important. It used to be one to one, drawings, etchings, and paintings—all working toward that one emotional content. When Margrit, Russell, and I went back to Italy, after being at the Academy, we rented a house of our own. My stable studio was a *tabula rasa*, a clean slate. It had none of my history around, unlike my studio in New York. I would let the drawings go in any direction that they wanted

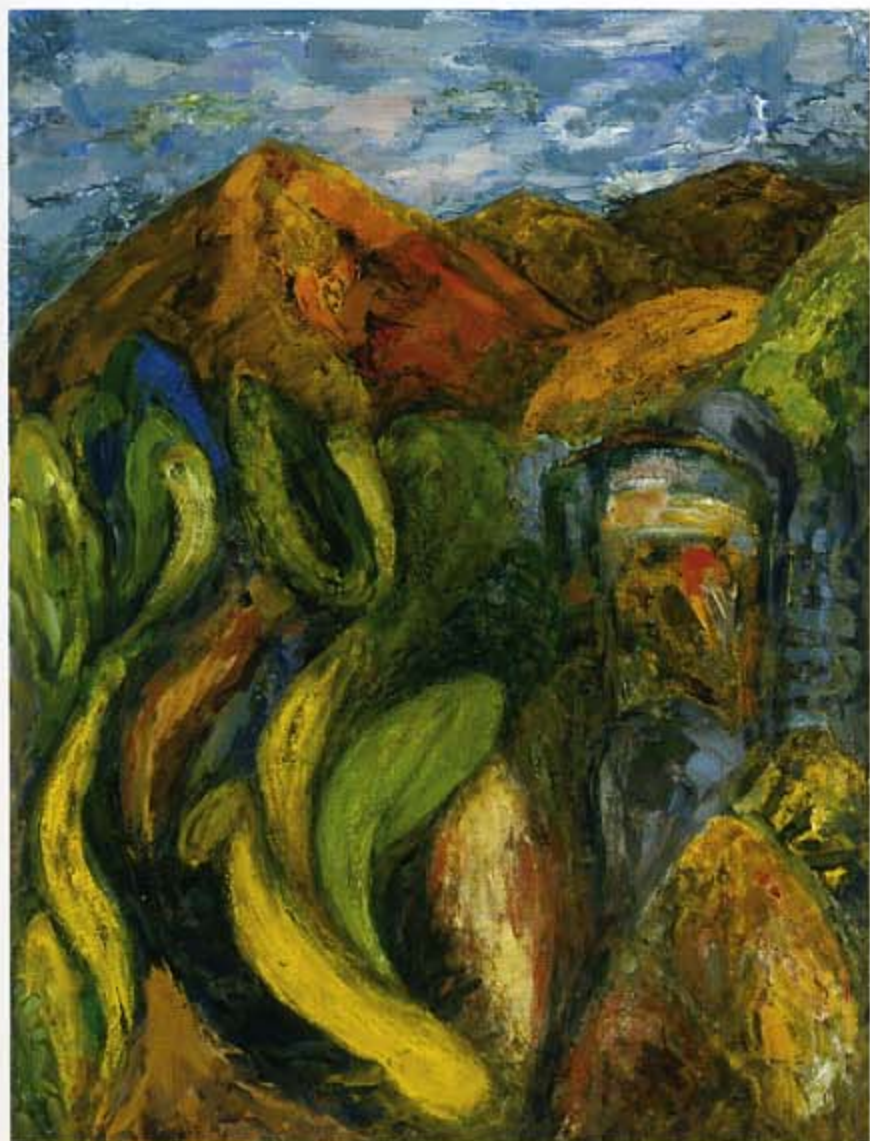
to go in. This was about 1993, and years later, looking back, it seems to me that the sources for my recent paintings came out of that activity of working in a room with no personal history. This working without an altar is very healthy for my work.

JY It seems to me that you keep finding ways to step aside, to let the painting pull you forward, tell you what to do. I mean if the phenomena sees itself, how do you become the agent that allows that to happen?

BJ If you let art be a living force, it will tell you what to do; that is inspiration on the deepest level. The trick is to be a very sensitive listener: once something is born into paint, the artist needs to have the ability to listen to it without judgment, and to accept its reality outside of oneself. The painting exists in its own state, and it is for me to accept its vision and not judge it according to ethics or beauty. In its awkwardness or ugliness, sometimes vulgarness, it has reached a state of truthfulness. This truthfulness is an awareness of its reality outside of myself. I will always believe more in its truthfulness, its emotional clarity, than in its beauty or rightness.

JY At the same time, in our conversations in your studio, you have mentioned specific visual perceptions. In your earliest period of paintings, there is a painting that you said was inspired by the memory of a table in the house that you grew up in; it was higher than you were, so the memory must have come from when you were very young.

BJ The first memory you mention was reignited while I was working on a painting—it was one of me as an infant crawling on the floor, looking up at a dining room table full of grown-ups. The grown-ups were very cold, very frightening, and very powerful. Aunts, uncles, and grandparents became mountains in the painting. When I finished it, I called



PARADISE LOST, 1987-88  
OIL ON LINEN  
42 1/4 x 32 1/2 INCHES



FOR GEORGE (GEORGE TRAKL), 1993  
OIL ON LINEN  
30 x 40 INCHES

it *The Family*. It had reignited areas of my psyche experienced in childhood. I did not understand my personal reference until well after the painting told me it was done. It had a sense of something being there, that the content was there to its fullest. But later on I had a feeling of déjà vu. I like the thing you wrote about Weldon Kees, about some of his poems. "The poem isn't so much remembering the past as being invaded by it. It registers a present tense of memory. The poem collapses the past and present, knowledge and innocence." Beautiful words, John, very well described. Could you comment more on this?

JY Well, William Wordsworth wrote about memory as something "recollected in tranquility." But Kees registers memory as an impingement, as something that comes unbidden, and that it can make you aware of what has passed since that earlier moment in your life when you didn't know as much as you do know, about your neighbors, and how badly their lives turned out. In Kees' poem, the past and present have equal power, and time isn't linear, at least not in any simple way.

In paintings like *Winter, Givers & Takers*, and *Paradise Lost*, that you did before you and Margrit went to the Academy in Rome, you said that a leaf-like shape was inspired by Ronnie Bladen, who waved good-bye to you while he was in the hospital, dying. Can you talk about this?

BJ **Winter was the time of year when Ronnie, our closest friend, died. In his last weeks he could not speak, so when we left him every day he could just barely raise his hand up, palm out. He had very large, powerful hands, even at that time. That hand, palm out, surfaced in paintings, and became a leaf, an image of fertility and growth. That content, the psychic area, did not have to be reignited; it was**

something I had just recently experienced. It is about when life gives you what you can just barely handle, a powerful emotional experience that you do survive. Content is the only thing I ever worry about in my work, and after his death, for about two years, I did not have to worry about it at all.

JY The reason I mention these two specific things is that in your paintings you find a way to deal with a specific perception in a specific way, and yet they are abstract, not representational; and they are neither anecdotal nor autobiographical, at least not in any narrative way.

BJ **Well, the kind of painting I do is very complicated. I work in a very immediate way, which seems to be the best way for me to work. The work can ignite areas of our psyche, of memory, where we can link up with a specific emotional connection, or cause us to sense areas of our psyche that we would not otherwise have been aware of. So the way I work makes me sort of a psychic traveler. And if the work can touch or ignite areas of my psyche that I am not normally aware of, then someone looking at it might come in contact with areas of *their* psyche that they are not normally aware of. It doesn't have to be the same areas as mine. The great Italian painters of the past had to illustrate biblical stories**



KUROSCURO II, 2000-2001  
OIL ON LINEN  
44 x 32 INCHES



BROTHER AND SISTER, 2000-2001  
OIL ON LINEN  
44 x 32 INCHES

to an audience that couldn't read. Maybe today we need artists to keep us in touch with our visual, non-literal consciousness. In these areas of our consciousness, wars do not start and prejudices do not exist. They are areas of our psyche before the *I, me, you, and it*.

JY Your paintings arise out of process, out of working back into the painting. This suggests that when the process changes, it will change the painting. Is that what happens in your work?

BJ I have found that the more ways I can start a painting, the better. I seem to use the idea of seepage, where I will dredge something up physically in the painting, look at it, and then let it seep down again and then dredge it up again. Through this process, a hallucination of something might be in the painting. And if I can listen and stay close to that hallucination and clarify it, content will exist in the painting. The hallucination is a flash, a flicker of content, and my job is to make the flicker constant, to clarify the emotional charge of the painting. Myron Stout called this "Atomic Painting." You have to paint every atom.

JY One of the changes that have occurred in your work relates to color. Your work has become more and more audaciously chromatic over the years. In your recent paintings, the color is more boldly chromatic than anything you have done before.

BJ Color is really too sensitive for me to talk about, but there are a couple of things I can say about it physically. I believe that one of my jobs as an artist is to release the energy that exists in materials. In the late '90s I found pigment ground so fine that I can make paint without grinding. I put the pigment in the medium and just stir. The Italians have this great turpentine, *Essenza de Trementino*; it thins

the paint, and yet it holds color. This medium enabled them to paint ornamental plaster molding for hundreds of years without obscuring the detail of the molding. The combination of an Italian-style turpentine that I make and finely ground pigment allowed me to make paint again, for the first time since the mid-'70s. Making the paint is a very simple process that involves allowing the pigment to soak in the oil thoroughly before mixing it. Each color is a different material and needs a different soaking time. Similar to the way I paint, there is a period of seepage. I can adjust the exact amount of pigment with each color and increase the intensity above that of even the best paints manufactured. Right now I have the ability to make the color as bright or as dark as I want—I can control the saturation to the fullest spectrum that the painting asks for. I don't start out to make a dark painting, but at some point during the painting, it closes in on itself and the spectrum becomes very dark. All the dark purple Spanish earth paintings comprise a series titled *Ape Herd*. The title comes from a contemporary Chinese poem, written by Mang Ke, that resembles Goya's *Disasters of War* series if it were read as poetry. The series is about how the more sophisticated and civilized we become, the more we kill for greed. It is a perfect commentary on what the people have allowed this country to become and what we as people are doing to other people all around the world and to ourselves.

JY I would like to go back to the beginning. Starting around the mid-'70s, at a point when many critics pronounced painting dead, you shifted the size of your work. Before the mid-'70s, you worked on fairly large paintings. You might say they were large in a conventional way. And then you shifted to working on a much



FEI FEI #37, 2001  
EGG AND OIL TEMPERA ON PAPER  
17 1/4 x 15 1/4 INCHES



IMAGES OF A FLOATING WORLD #23, 2001-2003  
OIL ON LINEN  
26 x 22 INCHES



DUO DUO #47, 2003  
EGG AND OIL TEMPERA ON PAPER  
17 1/2 x 14 3/8 INCHES

more intimate size. What did that mean to you? Why did you change?

**BJ** For me, the mid-'70s was a time of complete physical and mental collapse. I was never hospitalized, but I probably should have been. Due to its toxicity, I was told to stay away from oil paint for about a half a year. During that time I drew a lot. What seemed to happen in the shift from the larger paintings to a more intimate size was a stripping away of that which was extraneous in the larger paintings. What I was left with, I felt, was more to the essence. Also, in the early '70s I discovered Albert Pinkham Ryder at the Brooklyn Museum. I also saw paintings by Marsden Hartley, Arthur Dove, Forrest Bess, and Myron Stout in small out-of-the-way galleries. Seeing the presence of this work that didn't rely on large physical scale reinforced the belief in what I was doing, that in our mind's eye, when something is deeply felt, it takes up the whole world, and that is scale.

**JY** I would also add that your paintings are anti-thematic, that, as we talked about before, they arise out of working back into a painting, and that this has both been constant in your work and helped it change. You seem to be strongly against mannerizing your work, settling into and refining a style.

**BJ** The anthology you gave me on the Fei Fei contemporary poets in China was very interesting. They are the poets who reacted to the massacre at Tiananmen Square, but were writing in China and didn't leave like many of the Misty poets did. They were younger and just emerging. These poets are very much like the Beat poets in America. *Fei Fei* means No No, and the manifesto of these poets is to be against everything. One of the things they

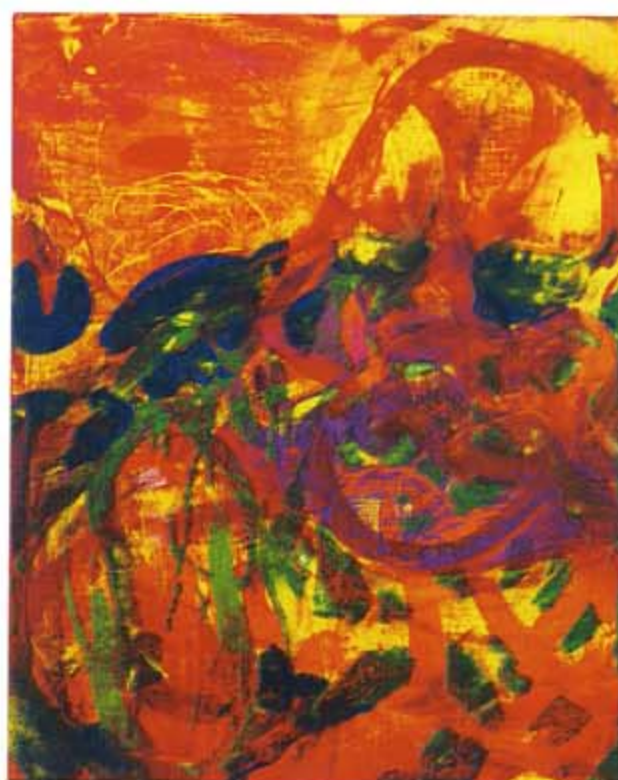
are completely against is style in art. For them style in art is the encroachment of capitalism on their society and their art. There is no generalized style to their work, and yet you still feel a deep Chinese tradition of four thousand years of writing. It seems almost genetic. For me, style is death to an artist. I also read Renzo Piano's writings on architecture. He is a great architect. He also believes that style is death to an artist. Each one of his buildings arises out of the site, the environment, the light, the atmosphere, the purpose of the building. Giacometti once pointed to Egyptian art and said that we can see now that there was a style there, but that was not what the Egyptians were working toward. The style emerged out of their need to grasp the world around them. In a lot of contemporary Western art it seems that the artists are trying to develop a style first, a logo. But style has nothing to do with art. Style is fashion, and hems go up and hems go down.

**JY** The roots of your continual transformation strike me as philosophical; it seems that it has to do with your understanding of reality.

**BJ** As I said before, I related very deeply to the Daoist philosophy that human beings mannerize what they experience in this world. Thoreau said the original person is one who sees the world as it is, not the way they were told it was. The Buddhists believe that there are three levels to the way we experience reality. On the first or lowest level are the people who think that what they see really exists. On the second level are the people who have doubts that what they see is real. On the third level are the people who know that the world of appearances is a complete illusion.



PURPLE STEP, 2003-2006  
OIL ON LINEN  
26 x 20 INCHES



SMELT, 2004-06  
OIL ON LINEN  
40 x 32 INCHES

You and I are somewhere around the second; if we were to reach the third level we might have no need to write poetry or paint. A lot of great artists get stuck between the second and third level.

The concepts and illusions people set up to believe in are developed for psychological and physical reasons to let us function within a society. As soon as we are born, these illusions are being programmed within us. In Asian philosophy they would call the self *before* these illusions have been programmed “the original face.” In Chinese philosophy these illusions are called the “world of the red dust.” In Western societies you could use the myth of Adam and Eve as an example. In the garden before the expulsion “innocence,” and after expulsion, “contamination.” I believe that artists throughout time can see this, the other world beyond the red dust, beyond the contamination. They are able to make objects that are about that world so that we can experience it. I didn’t become an artist because I saw a beautiful landscape that made me want to paint it. I believe that I saw something that someone made that put me in touch with that other world through the making of objects. It used to be that through ritual, the shamans could put us in touch with that other

world. For the tribe to have a psychic balance, it was necessary for everyone in the tribe to experience that contact. I think contemporary artists do the same thing without ritual and without myths. They are able to make the invisible visible.

I share affinities with Arshile Gorky. He said that he just kept staring, trying to see below the surface. In World War II, he proposed an idea to the Army, that there should be a unit devoted to camouflage, and it should be made up of contemporary artists because their job was to make the invisible visible, so they would naturally be the ones who could make the visible invisible.

JY Earlier, you said that the mind’s eye was where experience got clarified and dense emotional events would happen. Could you talk about that more?

BJ I feel that when events are felt strongly, all the senses are brought into focus: sound, sight, feeling, taste. When strong emotional events happen, they register acutely in our mind’s eye. At that moment the present time is felt acutely—the awesome present. These events take over all our senses and compress time. In the early ’70s I helped Ronnie Bladen install some of his sculptures; that’s when we became friends. I have always had this sense that Ronnie’s sculptures were coming from deep within the center of the earth and are passing through our time for just a moment, on their way to a distant star or destination. His work was at one moment filled with density, and at the next was light as a feather. At an opening on Long Island, where I helped him install two of his sculptures, I told him that I coined a new movement: “compressionism.” He loved that and said, “It’s so dense that it could never become fashionable.” ☉



ASHES, 2004-2006  
OIL ON LINEN  
49 × 38 INCHES



THE FIVE, THE SEVEN (THE SCREAM), 2005-06  
OIL ON LINEN  
32 × 48 INCHES