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Painting Technique & Pink Panthers: An Interview with Bjarne Melgaard

by [ALEXANDRE STIPANOVICH](#)

[BJARNE MELGAARD](#) is a Norwegian artist, curator, and writer based in New York. Having produced work extensively in all of these fields over the last few years, he has decided to slow down his production a little. Most recently, Bjarne has been preparing some drawings for various art magazines; [JEREMY](#) and I stopped by his place to ask him a few questions.



Photos by [JEREMY LIEBMAN](#)

Alexandre Stipanovich : When and why did you first come to New York ?

Bjarne Melgaard : I had been living in Brussels, Berlin, and Barcelona before and I was a bit tired of Europe. I had a show at New York's Greene Naftali that went pretty well, and I decided to try to stay because I liked it here.

You paint, you make sculptures, you write... Are these different energies or different way of expressing the same energy?

They are different energies. You need different energy to paint versus making a film, I think. Drawing feels more intimate than maybe painting does.

But you put a lot of energy in everything you do.

Yes. I think it just comes naturally. I paint when I want to paint, and that's maybe why there is an energy in it.

You don't follow a routine?

No. I don't paint every day and I'm not even in my studio every day.

So when you have a show you start painting just a week before the show ?

Yeah! [Laughs]

You also let other people into your studio to paint over your paintings.

That was a particular project with a group of non-professional artists—some homeless people, some people with psychological disorders. They called themselves the Bellevue Survivors and they worked in my studio for eight months. We did a show together at the ICA in London, the same show where I had a collaboration with architectural firm Snøhetta. These artists painted over some of my paintings for the ICA show, but that's not part of my usual practice.

And you painted over theirs.

Yes. So it was a mutual exchange.

So you like the idea of different mental spaces in the same creative place?

Yes, but also mental energies. For sure, I felt it was very interesting to relate to something unplanned, untrained, and non-professional as in the collaboration for the group in the ICA show. These people make art not as a career choice but because they need to do it for survival. Their way of relating to the images and the pictures was so different from my own. It was so direct and so private and so spontaneous, all at the same time.

Do you think it has impacted the way you paint now?

I have always been interested in outsider artists or people who are outside systems. The experience with the Bellevue Survivors influenced me a lot.

You also paint several canvases at the same time.

Yes, that I do.

But you have a very precise brushstroke.

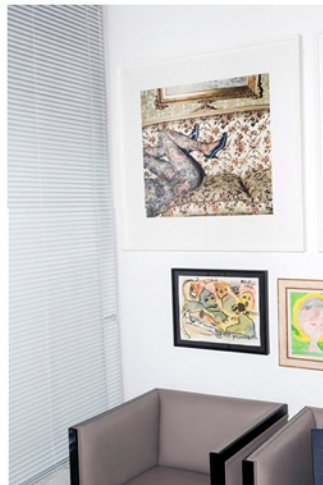
Yes.

How did you find this nervous, obsessive, intense stroke?

It's something that came after a while. You want to concentrate the line as much as possible, put as much energy into every little detail. There are periods when you want to paint really thick paintings with lots of paint and a lot of details, and other times when you want them really washed out, or tridimensional or whatever, or you want to have other people paint your paintings... It really depends what kind of mood I am in.

But this stroke is always there, and very characteristic of yours.

I think it has to do with the fact that when I paint, I am very absorbed in my own space.





Concerning your shows, you like to include your paintings in installations, and in installations within installations. How do you come with the idea? Is it a vision you have, or several layers of ideas? Or do you just invade the gallery space and make it happen?

I think it is a combination of things. You make a series of objects, a series of different structures you want to work with in the gallery or an exhibition space—it doesn't have to be a gallery—and you kind of improvise and make them work with each other while you're putting it up. I do a lot of improvisation. Obviously, somewhere it has to be planned, like if you have large-scale works.

There is definitely this feeling of profusion. Yes!

Maybe more so regarding your [CURRENT SHOW](#) at Gavin Brown's than for your [SHOW](#) at Venus Over Manhattan, but we always get a feeling of effortless abundance. How did you come up with the idea to reproduce William Copley's paintings?

It was something that I worked on for a show that I curated at Maccarone gallery. We invented a lot of artists and different art collectives. One of these art collectives was doing black "Copley" paintings. The same collective was in the show at Venus Over Manhattan.

You like to play with different aliases, like the Pink Panther, The Anabolic Warrior, BFBC... Are these fictional characters you want to inhabit or personify just for the period of the show?

Sometimes it's just once, sometimes they recur, like ghosts.

You're saying because they appear against your will or you choose to call them that?

I think it's because I'm interested in fictional stories; I'm interested in narratives. That's why I also write novels. Some of it has to do with the narrative structure. Also, it's something that combines and binds the show together in a way—like a narrative line in it. Some things like colors and forms, and also compositional things, also interest me a lot. It's not just this personality that is going wild.

In your shows, I'm always trying to figure out if you're turning a real character into a fictional one, or the opposite. You're blurring the lines between the fictional and the real world.

Because often that's how it is in life, too. Those lines are blurred.

Who would you say are your main inspirations?

I have several inspirations: Paul Gauguin, Watteau, Fragonard, Millet... Classical Rococo paintings—I'm very interested in that.

It's interesting that you mention Gauguin; He landed on the Marqueses Islands convinced he'd find people naked and drinking fruit on the beach, but when he arrived it was nothing like that. They were all dressed from head-to-toe, evangelized, alienated maybe? So he decided to paint them as he had imagined them—a fictional reality of what he wanted reality to be.

He painted what he had wished for would be there, his fantasies about these people, because it definitely wasn't a reality when he arrived there. But I have been to Hiva Oa and Nuka Hiva and those places. I went to visit his grave and everything... It was pretty deserted. There weren't many people living there. And it is quite rough there.

I don't think he was really appreciated there.

He was fighting with everybody. And then he became very ill. He is such an interesting character.

So how would you say that he has influenced you the most?

I like Gauguin because he represents something of a loser who went and made a conquest he never achieved. His lack of relating to a reality that isn't fixed is what I find most interesting when it comes to his art practice, not the different topics.

Bjarne Melgaard's Ignorant Transparencies at Gavin Brown's Enterprise is on view through October 26th, 2013.

