

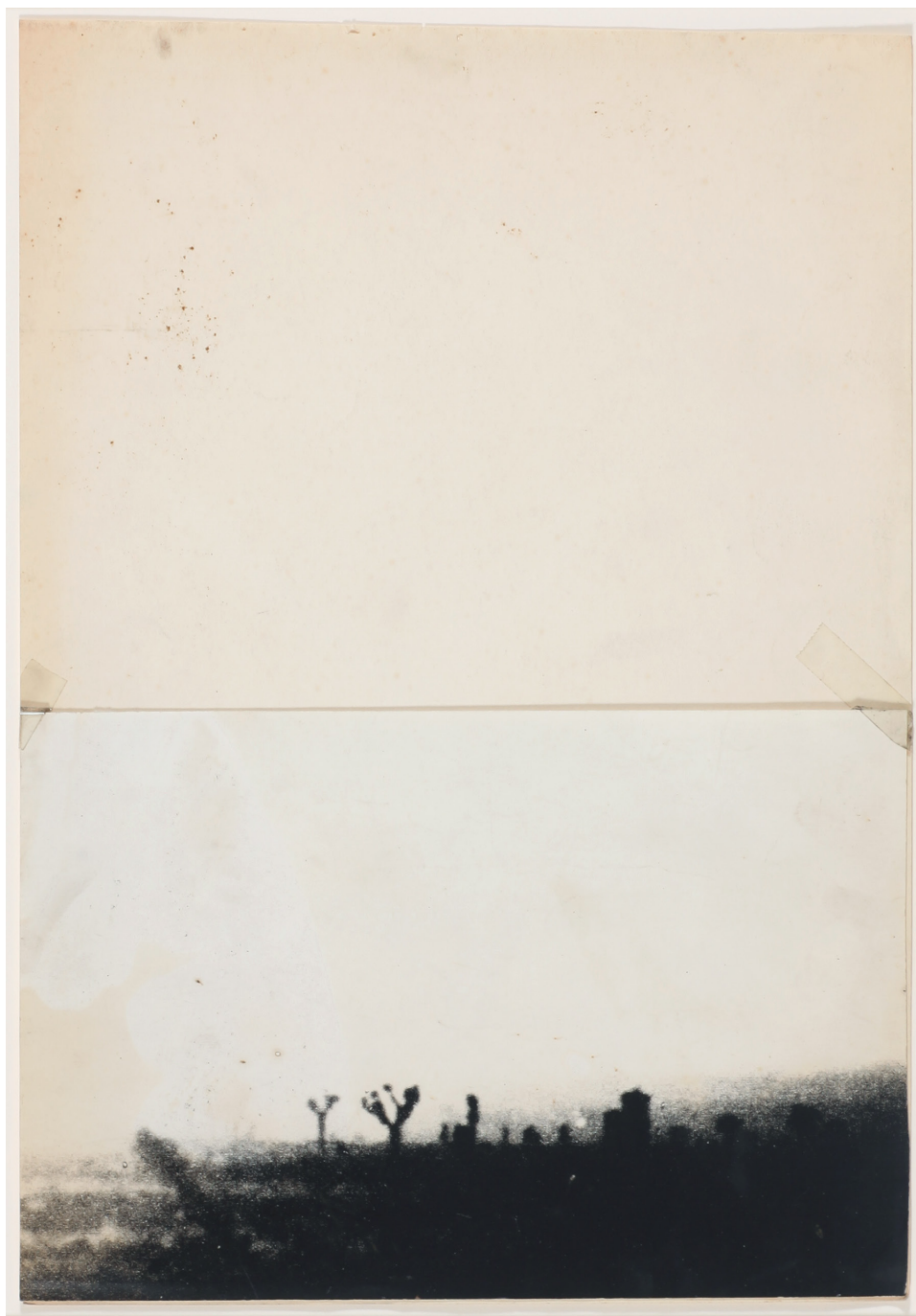
Petzel

Allie Biswas, "In Conversation: Troy Brauntuch with Allie Biswas," *The Brooklyn Rail*,
November-December 2016, pp. 67-69.

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE DEC2016/JAN2017

FEATURED INTERVIEWS Troy Brauntuch / Russell Connor / Prabhavathi Meppayil / Sarah Schulman / Ai Weiwei
GUEST CRITIC David Levi Strauss: *What is Criticism, Now?* FIELD NOTES An Interview with Noam Chomsky



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Troy Brauntuch, *Bag with Garbage*, 2009. Triptych: Conté crayon on cotton. 40 × 150 inches. Courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York.

IN CONVERSATION

Troy Brauntuch WITH ALLIE BISWAS

The photographic image has played a central role in the work of Troy Brauntuch since the beginning of his career. When he first started exhibiting in the late 1970s, the manipulation of an existing image formed the basis of his practice, and his inclusion in the now historic *Pictures* show at Artist's Space, New York, in 1977, cemented his connection to the medium. Later on, moving away from the appropriation of images, he began to take his own photographs, which focused on scenes from his personal life. On display in Brauntuch's current exhibition at Petzel Gallery (*Troy Brauntuch*, through December 23) is a small group of majestic paintings, a medium he first started to explore in the early 1980s. In these pigment on cotton works, the artist relies upon three references: the German propaganda artist Josef Thorax, dresses by the fashion designer Charles James, and a pair of gloves related to the O.J. Simpson murder trial. He spoke with Allie Biswas about his transition from New York to Texas, and how working by hand remains a pivotal part of his practice.

ALLIE BISWAS (RAIL): What was it like growing up in New Jersey?

TROY BRAUNTUCH: I should have never mentioned New Jersey in my bio. I should have said "born in New York City." New Jersey always seems weird. I was born in Jersey City and then I lived there until preschool. Grammar school was in Connecticut.

RAIL: So your ties aren't really to New York, then?

BRAUNTUCH: That's right. I really grew up in Old Greenwich, Connecticut. My father worked in New York City, so he commuted. He put a suit on and got on the train in the morning. I was born in 1954, so if I was six or seven when we were in Old Greenwich, then he would have still been a pretty young guy. My parents were born in New Jersey and they grew up in New Jersey, so that was what they knew. Initially my dad traveled a lot, but in the end... I remember that it was kind of cool to get on the train and visit him in his office when I was older.

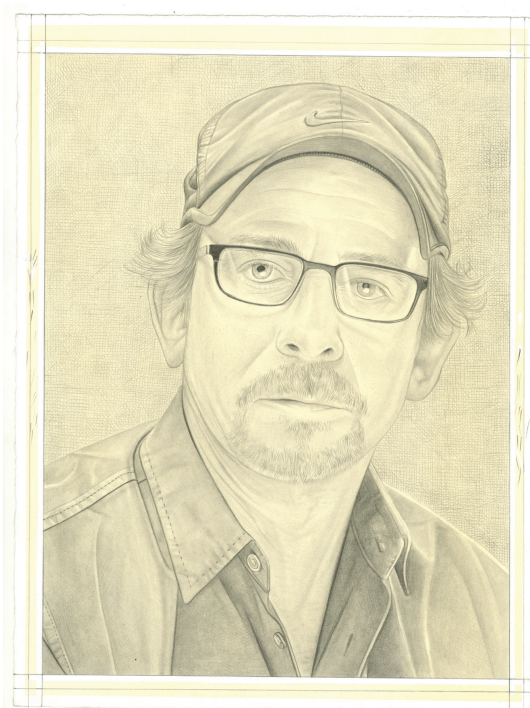
RAIL: Were you interested in art when you were at school?

BRAUNTUCH: As a kid I did a lot of drawing. Many artists that I know would, as children, sit around drawing.

RAIL: What sorts of things did you like to draw?

BRAUNTUCH: You know, stupid cartoony things, figurative things. Whatever it was that children do—narrative stories, ghosts.

RAIL: Do you remember your art teachers?



Portrait of Troy Brauntuch. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui. From a photo by Bryan Schutmaat.

BRAUNTUCH: They really didn't teach art. They just sat in the room! I would visit New York now and then, so I kind of had a taste of galleries and shows. But I really got educated in college.

RAIL: So prior to going to CalArts, you hadn't built up your art historical knowledge?

BRAUNTUCH: No, I was quite ignorant of art, really. I became aware of that rather quickly in college. I mean, a portfolio review back then, even by CalArts, was mostly based on your skill set. For undergraduate, it was about if you could really draw, or make an object or sculpture, or take some good photos.

RAIL: Why did you want to go to California?

BRAUNTUCH: Sun and surf. California! I was accepted at Cooper Union and other places. I was so honored to be accepted at Cooper Union. And I'm from the East Coast so it was free! Not only did I get accepted, but it's free! And I bailed on it. Instead, I went to a private school, which, for that time, was pretty expensive only because I wanted to get away from the East Coast and go to the beach and hang out in the sun. How romantic is that? California! I only knew about CalArts by way of a magazine—it might have been *Time*—that had a big article on a new amazing program and school. This new Disney wonderland that was going to fuse all the arts and make a new art work. So even though I wanted sun and surf, this really

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Troy Brauntuch, *White Light Study (Part 2)*, 1979. Paper, newsprint, photostats, cardboard, tape. 16 3/4 x 19 3/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York.

amazing profile that I read made a big impact on my decision to apply.

RAIL: During your time there were some pretty reputable teachers at the college.

BRAUNTUCH: Yeah. John Baldessari was the conceptual art person. John would have loomed as the big name. This was basically the second year the school existed. I went there in '72. John was really great because he was just a Mecca of information. He brought every artist on the planet through to give talks. Whether it was Chris Burden, or Bruce Nauman, or Robert Morris, or Richard Serra. Every week there was somebody coming through. And as an undergraduate, his door was open. The painting teachers were also really good, but you were on your own. There weren't classes. You were thrown into the studio, and you really had to do your own research and ask your own questions and find information. You had to be pretty aggressive. I negotiated it well. If you couldn't, well, then it was a terrible program. You know—if you were going there to get schooling.

RAIL: What kind of work were you making at college? I read somewhere that the admissions panel selected you on the basis that you had a "touch." Was your drawing a way for you to show off that quality, do you think?

BRAUNTUCH: I had a bit of crossover. The program that was with John, the conceptual art program, was a pretty tight group. I hung out more with the painters, but in actuality my work lent itself much more to the conceptual artists. And although I may have had the "touch," I sort of obliterated that during my time there.

RAIL: Was that deliberate?

BRAUNTUCH: The work got less touched, for a start. I think I always got that respect for having that skill, but I think it's the last thing I really care about, often. I think things that are beautiful—the look of something, the beauty of something, the effect of something—those things are great. But the actual manipulation of something, or my touch, or my ability or skill sets, I wouldn't even consider. It just gets me there. I abandoned touch when my work shifted to the photographic. I had gone through a whole

stage of spending years doing photographic work or litho work or untouched work.

RAIL: But then your drawing turned the focus back to this way of working. Why did you drop photography and return to working with conté crayon and pigment on cotton, for example?

BRAUNTUCH: I got back into drawing, and back into wanting to think about touch, because I felt the photographic object was too obvious and too recognizable and too common. I thought Pop Art did it really well! Remember that most of that early technology, back in the early '70s, was still pretty primitive compared to now. That's why I got back to my hand, and my drawing, and making stuff, because I felt the photographic option was dated. It's funny in relation to appropriation art, because I moved away from the photograph thinking that what I made was more original and more interesting.

RAIL: You mention appropriation: When your work first became well known, it was for lifting images and incorporating them within your own photographs. When did you first start thinking about using existing images in this way?

BRAUNTUCH: I guess '75.

RAIL: So a couple of years before the *Pictures* show at Artists Space. What was your incentive?

BRAUNTUCH: I certainly thought people like Warhol and that whole generation were geniuses. The work was sort of becoming minimal in the sense that when I left school I was doing things that had no beginning and end. One image and one object turned into another. It became very theatrical. Conversations with Matt Mullican were very important.

RAIL: How did you know him?

BRAUNTUCH: We both did an exchange at Cooper Union during my second year at CalArts. He studied there too. We spent a semester in New York and we went everywhere. I do think that conversations with Matt had a lot to do with how my work developed. Matt was really important, although his work was much more conceptual. It was nice because we were very supportive

of each other. Back to my touch, to me making things—it never got in the way, which is sort of nice. Even though our works are so different, we always had a real respect for each other. Anyway, the work around that time was much cruder. I might have just taken the word "voice" out of the *Voice* newspaper and put it in the corner of a sheet of paper and that was it: "voice."

RAIL: I would never describe your work as being stark, though. It has always maintained a softness. It doesn't have that conceptual look about it.

BRAUNTUCH: Even though I kept on reducing and reducing the image into something more singular, it never got cool. It never got to the world of Sherrie [Levine] and Richard [Prince]. My work was a little more conscious of being poetic. A lot of things that led up to my work in the *Pictures* show are no longer, like the *Voice* piece, or a work I made called *Separate Tables*, which was made out of balsam and stacked tables. When I met Jack Goldstein, we had a real conversation about these objects that I was making. We had a strong affinity and dialogue about the spectacle of things and the image as object.

RAIL: Was the *Pictures* exhibition as important as we are made to believe?

BRAUNTUCH: [Laughter.] Well, the *Pictures* show was a real stepping-stone for me personally. I was still quite young. Jack was eleven years older, Matt was older. I was sort of the kid. Two years later I had my first solo show at The Kitchen, in '79. The people I appreciated at that moment—Bruce Nauman and Chris Burden—those conceptual artists were ultimately what I went to school on.

RAIL: How did leaving New York in the late 1990s change your life?

BRAUNTUCH: When I moved to Austin, I thought it was really an adventure. I was pretty destitute in New York for a time. Things were not great. For a period I was selling coffee, and I had left my gallery. I had been showing with Kent Fine Art, but they closed, though they have since reopened. I backed away from many things and I started teaching at Columbia. I thought teaching was nice, and applied to various places. Austin accepted me, so I just left, and it was great.

RAIL: Having spent so many years being integrated in one city—particularly somewhere like New York—it can be easy to feel as though there couldn't possibly be life elsewhere.

BRAUNTUCH: You can't think beyond the walls of New York City, but there really is a whole other world out there. When I moved to Austin, I was actually enjoying my life for the first time in a long time. I was playing golf a lot. I stopped making work for almost a year. I wasn't running away from New York, it was just time to get out of here.

RAIL: Did your studio practice stop because you were simply adjusting to a new way of living? Does it take time for you to create the right environment in which to work?

BRAUNTUCH: I really can't make my work just anywhere, in terms of studio practice. I could never do the things that young people do nowadays, where they are bouncing around doing residencies and living somewhere for just a month. Can you really go somewhere for six weeks and make a body of work? If so, that is amazing. I think that residencies are perhaps their new way of attaching themselves to a community and meeting people.

RAIL: Let's talk about the images that you have been drawn to throughout your career. A lot of them could perhaps be described as historical documents. Your current show makes reference to Josef Thorak, who was Hitler's favorite sculptor, and one of your earliest works evolved from a set of drawings made by Hitler.

BRAUNTUCH: I think it's this strange fiction/nonfiction poetic fascination with the image that I have. I'm curious about how we look at the world and at the things that are put in front of us. Initially I used a lot of war imagery.

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I ravaged old bookstores and collected various images of men out in the field. I looked at helmets. It wasn't so much the horror of a wound, but more about the strange otherworldliness of something real. I just think I always need that thing to hold onto: that which is real. I used the drawings by Hitler based on a kind of repulsion/attraction. I found them to be beautiful and interesting objects. The three images that I used were a Wagner opera set, a World War I tank and a classical historical archway. I wasn't interested in Hitler in any way, nor did I even consider him as an artist. I wasn't using these drawings because he has gifts or talents whatsoever. They were no different than an image or an object or a photograph of something. In general, I would say that there is a certain deadness to this kind of imagery. You wouldn't look at them and know that they were by Hitler unless you'd been told. I wouldn't use Monet on his ladder or Brancusi in his studio, because those things have histories to them.

RAIL: What about your own photographs, which have often focused on domestic scenes? Those feel as though they are in-between a moment, or are showing the aftermath of an event. Would you say that they also occupy this type of "dead" space?

BRAUNTUCH: I think so. A very important show for me was around '96 that I did in Switzerland with Mai 36. I had been through a terrible divorce, so it was a tough show. I'd used personal things before, but it was the first time I did an exhibition with my own photographs. And the work sort of weaved into what really was the tragedy that was my life. The show was this strange combination of the Pan Am plane crash from 1990 and this simple, more poetic imagery, like the back of my wife's head on the pillow. The show took in this private narrative with this much more tragic external event, which I thought was really interesting for my work. That show got me back to things like my cat, and my chair. Things like that. I don't like the word "mundane"; those things that we think are not so powerful are actually going to be quite beautifully powerful to most of us in life. Exhibitions I did after that show pulled more into that sort of private realm, as supposed to the public appropriated space.

RAIL: So, in other words, you started to use your own personal history as your subject?

BRAUNTUCH: Right. Down the road, I looked at things that were part of my life, that I had never viewed as a still life or as part of the history of art, you know? I hadn't considered them in that way. I viewed it so much more as my own history and my own relationship to public imagery and private imagery. As an artist, I guess I have permission in a strange sort of way to put these things out there. We can do anything, and pull from anything. It was almost as if as I was working on this big public image of my cat sleeping over there on this table. I was thinking, "This is what I should be doing."

RAIL: Do you think that you had become bored of the media, or, more largely, the external world? Had the imagery from these places become meaningless?

BRAUNTUCH: At some point in the '90s I became very tired with this public reality. And even though in this show, I have gone back into this domain, there's something that's very intimate about it for me, in terms of the history for my work.

RAIL: Would you say that you are trying to negate associations? Are you asking the viewer to try to *not* place what they are looking at?

BRAUNTUCH: I think it's somewhere in between. I think the history is very important, and I think that it always becomes found and located, as much as someone would want it to be found and located. Is there some higher meaning? Like, why those dresses by Charles James are with that sculpture by Josef Thorax? No. [Laughter] There is some intuition of one's own history and what I'm attracted to and live with and think through, but there's not a real connecting thread. I'm not that interested



Troy Brauntuch, *Untitled (Gloves I)*, 2016. Pigment on cotton. 108 x 99 inches. Courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York.

in going into the dates of the dresses and dates of the sculptures. At some point it falls away. I'm certainly respecting history but I'm also accepting it as my found object—my way of looking at something. I think I am reusing something that operates in the world, and I am finding this strange beautiful setting that allows it to be re-presented and that allows it to be beautiful.

RAIL: How long do you keep a source around, and how easy is it for you to find things that interest you?

BRAUNTUCH: The photographs that I used of the gloves, which feature in this current show, were shots that I took myself when I was watching coverage of the trial on TV. So that would have been in the mid-'90s. And I have only just referred to them now. Those shots don't exist elsewhere—you can't find one magazine in the world that has that specific picture. I always say that there's a right time for something. There's a time when something should be seen, or talked about, and sometimes it's about intuitively knowing when that moment in time is.

RAIL: Can we talk about the experience of looking at your work? I find that your paintings in particular, like the ones you have made for this new show, are incredible to look at because you feel as though the actual image is coming into view over several seconds. Your eyes have to adjust in the way that they do when you're in a dark room, for instance. It is never immediate, and even when you think you've found the image, it often disappears. Do you deliberately make it difficult for people?

BRAUNTUCH: A lot of the earlier works were even more fragile than these works, and they were under glass. People would say, "He's putting them under glass to make them even more difficult to see, so that the reflected world becomes part of the work," and I said, "No, the glass is there to protect the work, they're really fucking

fragile." [Laughter.] When something is entombed it has a fragility and beauty just by its protection, by this layer above. Anyway, if the hand I am depicting in my drawing was more prominently a hand—if it had a color or contrast, say—I think it would be one of the ugliest things I had ever seen. I think the depth that the hand has—the slowness of the recognition that it asks for, and the physicality that it adds to the space—is not about hide and seek. It is about how the image resonates once one has recognized it. It really is not a Reinhardt; it's not a slow recognition of something that is abstract or turning abstract. It is not about standing in front of the image and considering the beauty of the deep mauve purple color turning to a rich black. I think there is a weight to an image, just like an object, and I'm really trying to hit the note of when it's recognized. And I am certainly trying to hold it there.

RAIL: The works depicting the dresses, I think, particularly relish finding that balance. Maybe that's because fabric is more variable than, say, marble. And it's also more obviously related to the physical.

BRAUNTUCH: The dresses could go further in one direction. You know, "these are too ghostly and they should be more sculptural," or "they should be more sculptural based on the flatness of the hand." I'm really conscious of the physicality, the sculpted element, of the show. I think this show is the most physical and brutish and kind of over-the-top in a way. I am aware that there is an absurdity to some degree in how the beauty in these three rooms is coexisting. But, anyway, it would bother me if someone really thought that it's about finding the image. For me, the image is always there. But I do appreciate that the work has always had a slowness, and that for some people the experience of looking at it is a little like watching water boil. ☹