

'Paintings' at The BOX

By Geoff Tuck

Published in Notes on Looking: Contemporary Art from Los Angeles

January 8, 2013

Dear painter friend,

Go and see *Painting* at The Box before it closes. The artworks – which include painting and not painting, video and sculpture, object and action – are personal and political and beautiful and objectionable and charming and difficult. Each is a lesson in how to make a thing that hovers between socially-acceptable-honesty and just-way-too-earns-for-comfort



Paul McCarthy Foam Pallet, 2012. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen. Courtesy The BOX Gallery, Los Angeles

Paul McCarthy, for whom this show represents a partial selection from as well as a kind of reprise of his CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art group exhibition *Paul McCarthy's Low Life Slow Life*¹, shows two pieces from 2012 taken from the set of his current project *Snow White*, these include a large piece of used carpet and a wooden pallet covered with brown foam (*Carpet*, 2012 and *Foam Pallet*, 2012). McCarthy's objects make me wonder about the whens and the whys of studio detritus's relationship to art, and about the exchange value of both. Presumably one's waste is the most personal thing one makes, and waste is conceptually rich too, as fact as well as metaphor; McCarthy's art seems to trouble the waters by being both remnant and work of art.



Al Payne, *Mine*, 1992. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen. Courtesy the artist and The BOX Gallery

A painting titled *Mine* (1992) by Al Payne hangs to the left as I enter, it has two scenes organized horizontally showing two children sitting on a floor and playing. At first glance, these scenes are repetitive, and as I read them left to right, subtle and important differences become clear. On the left side a small chubby child plays happily with a keyboard and a larger boy-child sits directly behind this happy player and looks on impassively, while on the right the boy has pulled his small mate away, the former keyboard player is crying, and the larger child smiles, triumphant and happy. Seeing the unabashed glee in the boy's face, I look back at the first scene to find traces of what I must have missed, but no, the artist has presented his subject in a way that resists such psychological percipience; Boy One remains impassive despite my efforts to find in him some indicator of evil intent.

Of course the impulse to say "mine" is primal, and parents begin the process of civilizing children when they teach them to share; but this teaching doesn't always work,

and the desire to *have* remains, as does the (possibly even stronger) desire to deny things to others.

The reddish-browns that Payne has used for the room speak of a family room or a den, the tousled hair and nice clothes of the children has the slightly smug universality that assumes whiteness and middle class status to all, and the ivory keyboard makes me think of the mysterious magic of objects that do things, of tools that make and that help us create. Nothing here speaks of evil, and for that matter I'm not even sure whether such selfishness *is* necessarily evil, but it is unsettling and creepy, it's like noticing the seedlings of abuse where I had previously found comforting normalcy. "Pay attention," I think, looking at *Mine*, "don't let your perception of five minutes ago color your understanding of what people are doing now."



Barbara T. Smith, *Pinch Me*. 1966. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen. Courtesy the artist and The BOX Gallery

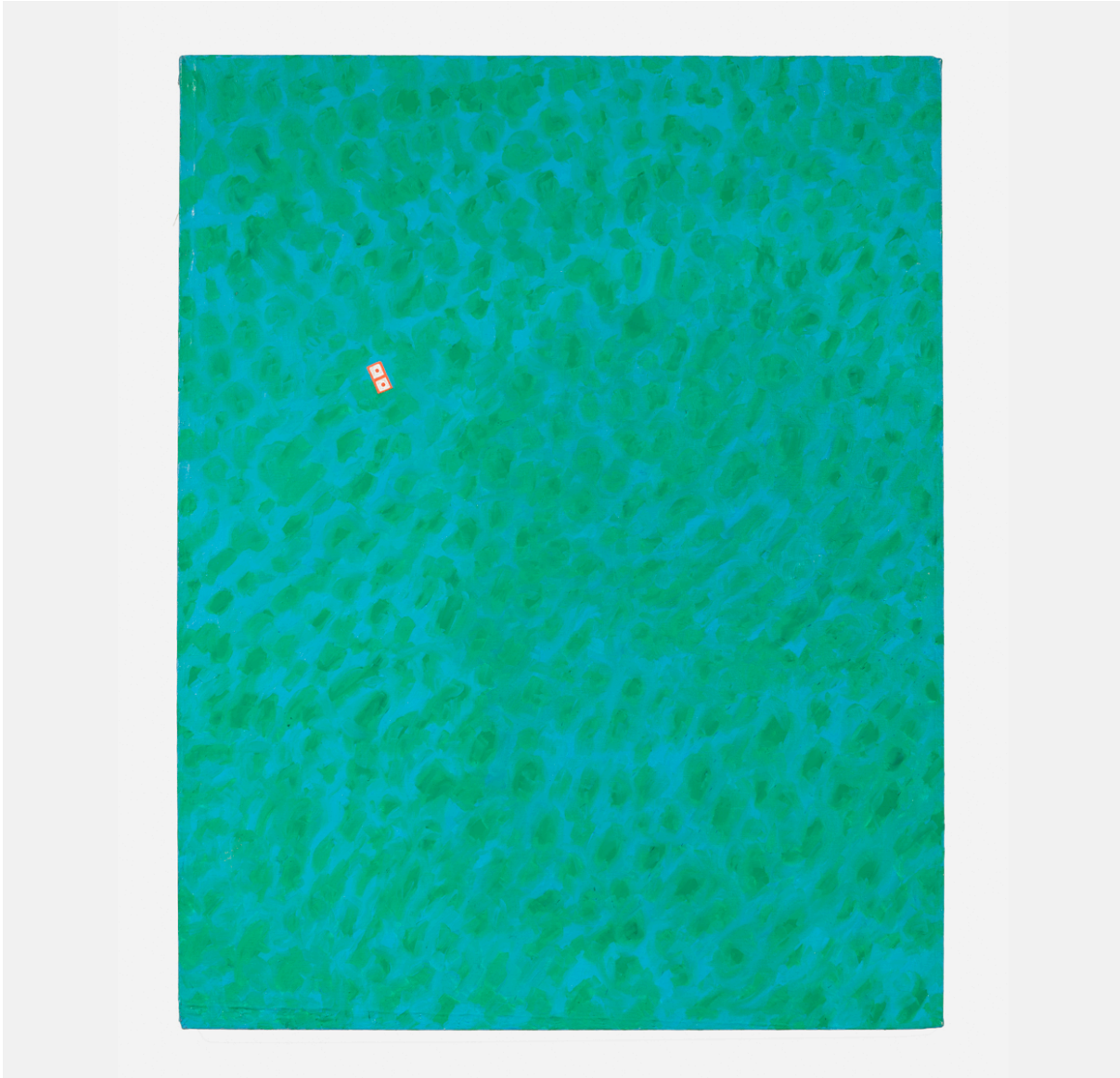
In 1979 (thirteen years after Barbara T. Smith painted *Pinch Me*) I listened to the radio station KJLH, which at the time was known as “The Land of Kindness, Joy, Love and Happiness.” The station was based in Compton and the music was suave and sexy, urban R&B. (Think of *Zapp & Roger More Bounce to the Ounce* and *Kool and the Gang Ladies Night*.) During this time – and associated in my mind with this music and my memories of the dj who began each morning announcing the day’s color, scent and flavor – I became aware of women who were making their own choices in life, women who were beautiful, well dressed and young, women who were sophisticated and who enjoyed parties and men. The actions of these women, these friends, showed them to be curious about their possibilities in this (still) relatively new sexually revolutionized world where they were agents rather than property, confident that their strength matched that of their men, and vulnerable as human beings. These were people who were finding themselves and were liking it.

Barbara T, Smith’s *Pinch Me* took me right back to that place. Smith must have been such a woman in her earlier generation, and she would have known women like this in 1966. The woman in this painting (is it Smith herself?) is outlined in joyous yellow, the background forms suggest a landscape and stars, and the figure is laying across a schematic of a chair. The whole resembles a hippy dippy 1960s sexy poster with a Minimalist Judy Chicago sensibility. It seems important to note that looking at *Pinch Me* made me happy and that writing now and remembering the painting I am suffused with well-being.

There is courage in the unalloyed sexuality of Barbara T. Smith’s *Pinch Me*. When it was painted, in 1966, the painting would have been surprising for an entirely different set of reasons than it is today. Today the joyous purity of its self regard and the openness and vulnerability it displays all seem wonderful, and its lack of dissembling is practically shocking.

Several other of Smith’s paintings in this show, portraits of family members, are equally personal and also feel charged. A painting of the artist’s daughter, possibly pregnant (*Katie*, 1963), suggests through a mix of representation with abstraction the complicated pleasure that is (or must be) pregnancy, a painting of her daughter as a child and one of the artist’s son also express the complicated nature of love relationships (*Julie*, 1960 and *Rick*, 1959).





Barbara T. Smith, *Julie's Figinal Fitness*. 1964. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen. Courtesy the artist and The BOX Gallery

Smith's art becomes hermetic, but no less interesting, in *Julie's Figinal Fitness* (1964), a mottled teal colored canvas with a small red and white sticker applied to it. The sticker resembles a domino and, judging by the materials, it may be painted. I looked up 'figinal' and found nothing for it, the title suggests physical fitness but this takes me nowhere. Smith's idiomatic sound play in this title sounds made-up and Joycean and it keeps me repeating in my head "Julie's Figinal Fitness." The painting has a kind of resistance to understanding I can like in art, rather than be frustrated by. Smith doesn't handle her materials and her subject coyly, so I don't get the feeling that she is hiding meaning from me, or is venturing into coded irony; rather I get the sense that whatever this thing *is*, it is just that and exists precisely as Smith made it – representation or primary object. I get a similar feeling of reality and resistance to interpretation when looking at Joe Goode's *Milk*

Bottle paintings (MOCA has a nice one), which also seem about factual existence to me, although Goode's milk bottles are usually placed with Pop.



Boris Lurie, *Dismembered Stripper*. 1966. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen. Courtesy the artist and The BOX Gallery

Boris Lurie's 1955 painting *Dismembered Stripper* serves as an emotional counterpoint to Smith's *Pinch Me*, and it has a similarly heightened allure. The title is entirely descriptive, and if Lurie doesn't do as McCarthy does by presenting an actuality of his titles, his *Dismembered Stripper* is grotesque nonetheless. Beautifully so, like a Hans Bellmer drawing, and like a hoped-for but impossible scene from a production of Frank Wedekind's *Pandora's Box*:

“JACK. God damn! I never saw a prettier mouth! (Sweat drips from his hairy face. His hands are bloody. He pants, gasping violently, and stares at the floor with eyes popping out of his head. Lulu, trembling in every limb, looks wildly round. Suddenly she seizes the bottle, smashes it on the table, and with the broken neck in her hand rushes upon Jack. He swings up his right foot and throws her onto her back. Then he lifts her up.)



LULU. No, no!—Mercy!—Murder!—Police! Police!

JACK. Be still. You'll never get away from me again. (*Carries her in.*)

LULU. (*Within, right.*) No!—No!—No!— —Ah!—Ah!...
(*After a pause, Jack re-enters. He puts the bowl on the table.*)

JACK. That was a piece of work! (*Washing his hands.*) I am a damned lucky chap! (*Looks round for a towel.*) Not even a towel, these folks here! Hell of a wretched hole! (*He dries his hands on Geschwitz's petticoat.*) This invert is safe enough from me! (*To her.*) It'll soon be all up with you, too. (*Exit.*)

GESCHWITZ. (*Alone.*) Lulu!—My angel!—Let me see thee once more! I am near thee—stay near thee—forever! (*Her elbows give way.*) O cursed—!! (*Dies.*)”²



Boris Lurie, *Lumumba is Dead*. 1958 – 1961. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen. Courtesy the artist and The BOX Gallery

Lurie's political works in the show are also potent. *Lumumba is Dead* seems almost manic, it is collaged with hundreds of images – pin up girl pictures, an invitation to the fifteenth anniversary remembrance of the liberation of Latvian Jews and memorial to the Jews who

died in that country, held at a Westside synagogue, classified ads, and much else in the way of memorabilia.

I stood looking for a long time at *Lumumba is Dead* trying to remember who Patrice Lumumba might be. I remembered the Congo but not much more. I looked for clues in the piece, but was disappointed; I think what I found were clues to the artist rather than to the Pan-Africanist leader. Newspaper clippings, Betty Page pics, photos of a buxom blond doing things with her boobs, references to Hitler and to the Nazi's, a paper with WHY CUBA HATES US scrawled in gold on a black ground; it's a lot of stuff and it must have all been on Lurie's mind when Lumumba was assassinated by forces backed by the US and Belgium in January of 1961. Boris Lurie made *Lumumba is Dead* over the two years from 1959 to 1961, and I imagine him fascinated with the historic events in Congo, as the Belgian royal family was forced to give up its control of the country. The piece might have been like a scrapbook of the artist's thoughts during the victories and trials of a man, Lumumba, who must have been something of a hero to him; if this is the case, then it must have been wrenching for the artist to have to complete the piece as a memorial.



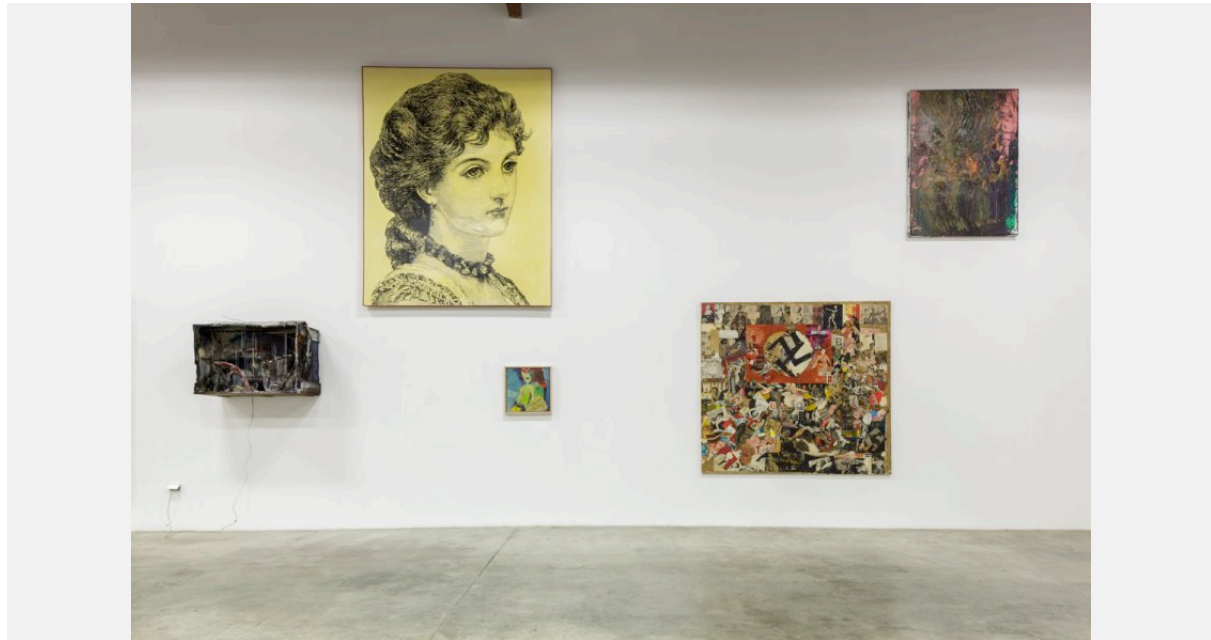
Alfons Schilling, *Cosmos Action Painting / Desperate Motion*. 1962. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen Courtesy The BOX Gallery, Los Angeles

In addition to Paul McCarthy's videos that document painting (v), the film *Cosmos Action Painting / Desperate Motion* (1962) by German artist Alfons Schiller plays in a room adjacent the reception desk. The film shows the artist at work with a sort of cyclotronic machine to which is attached a large, circular canvas. Schilling messes about, hurling and brushing paint while the canvas spins, faster and faster. At one point painter and painting become separated and rotate in wild dissonance; I am pleasurably struck by vertigo, in fact – returning to references from my own past – I am reminded of a Big Black show I saw

in 1981 in a basement in Long Beach, when like now, I was stimulated, overwhelmed, fascinated and thrilled.

I return to the desk to inquire about Schilling's second piece in the show, titled *Born Free* (2012). "We received from the artist instruction to go to a local 'Chinese store' and purchase two large magnifying glasses." By Chinese store Schilling meant any inexpensive local shop. Taking my hand-held magnifier *Born Free*, I returned to the film and played at making an impromptu camera obscura, reflecting the bright reception area onto the darkness of the film screen. I also wandered back into the main gallery and scoped out some paintings and areas of wall.

As a title, since I am a child of the 1960s, I have indelible memories of the animal movie of the same name, so Schilling's piece *Born Free* had me singing that mawkish title song to myself; as an art object which asks me to think, the action-sculpture inspired me to think freely, to wonder what it might be about and what action it might allow me to take. Schilling's magnifying glass reminds me that the experience of art is free, and that my response to art is also free, free from impositions on my own understanding by any outside world – unless I choose it.



Paintings. Installation view. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen. Courtesy The BOX Gallery, Los Angeles



Paintings. Installation view. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen. Courtesy The BOX Gallery, Los Angeles

Most of the work in *Paintings* is historical, made between 1953 and 1992, with two works by Paul McCarthy and one by Alfons Schilling from 2012. The feeling in the room, the sensibility that prevails is not, however, dated; the paintings, videos and sculptures at The Box seem absolutely pertinent to the world outside the gallery, to the world in which we live. I think work that is expressively political and personal has been made in the Occupy movement, by the many artists who are part of it and many artists who are in sympathy but independent of the action; I see this mixture of personal, enigmatic and also activist work being made by such artists as John Burtles, Rona Yefman, Olga Koumoundouros and Adam Overton, to name few (and not all Angelenos/as) who have been on my mind recently. In part, the press release states, "Most of these artists work outside of the art world and use paintings to explore their social, personal and artistic dilemmas. These pieces are deeply personal to highly controversial. Ignoring the accepted avenues of what is considered "hip" and "trendy," and I recognize the tone, it is one of lament for the shallow taste of the marketplace. I will not argue with the characterization of the artists, whose work is as described, and I also won't quibble with the history the press release tells, I am certain of its accuracy. Instead I will observe of the art world today that if in large part it supports easy and beautiful art over challenging art, still there are many specific cases of difficult work (perhaps better termed *excellent* work) being shown all over the city of Los Angeles: in artist-run spaces, and local art venues, on city streets, and in established alternative spaces, as well as in commercial galleries and museums. It may partly be that we are not giving proper attention to this success. If we who tell the stories in this art world choose to tell of the trendified commercial market and of poor funding for alternatives to that commercial scene, I think we're setting the stage for a party that nobody new wants to join, even while we might be congratulating ourselves on our rigor.

One of the results of the above is that as cultural producers and observers we are advised by experts in popularity (which is too often misunderstood to be populism) that to appeal to



'the audience' art must pander, it must be easy and pretty. I would propose the opposite: I would propose that since difficult art *is already* successful, since it is viewed in many venues and in many ways, we ought to tell *that* story and demand *more* 'difficult' art and so invite even *more* people into our already thriving party.

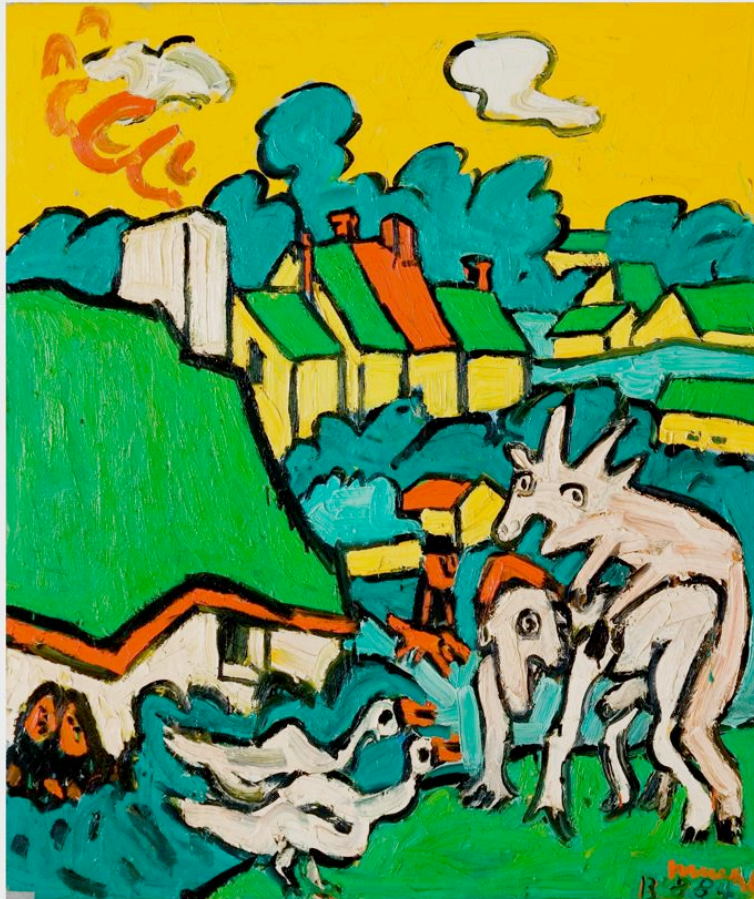


Lee Lozano, *No Title (Hygiene #3)*. 1961-63. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen. Courtesy The BOX Gallery, Los Angeles

I wish to congratulate the good people at The Box for producing this excellent exhibition, and I appreciate their presentation of the show as a bit of an antidote – for it is true that the received wisdom would have us believe that excellence is disappearing around every corner, while the evidence shows that excellence like this *does* happen, *is made* to happen all the time in studios and in art spaces and in neighborhoods all over the city.

Again, go and see *Painting* before it closes on January 26.

The BOX Gallery website: <http://www.theboxla.com/>



Otto Muehl, *Stunk in Auers (Van Gogh Series)*.1984. Courtesy The BOX Gallery, Los Angeles

¹ Erik Bakke in *Aftershock Magazine* on Paul McCarthy's *Low Life Slow Life*:<http://aftershockmagazine.com/paulmccarthy.html>

² Quoted from Project Gutenberg edition, translation by Samuel A. Eliot:<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/33415/33415-h/33415-h.htm>