

**Joseph Bernard**  
**Interview by Jeanette Strezinski**  
**Director, Batista Gallery 4.17.04**

**Q. Were you interested in art as a child?**

**A. Yes. I made carvings, drawings, even toys for myself. One of my favorites was an emptied mayonnaise jar that I filled with water, grass and broken pieces of colored glass. I would hold it against my eyes up to the sun and turn it and it was this beautiful tumbling of color and light. I recommend making this for or with kids. Anyway, I see that as really having been a big influence on my films later on -- pure abstraction of light, color and movement.**

**Q. Similar to a kaleidoscope?**

**A. Yes, but handmade.**

**Q. Did you admire or were you influenced by anyone? Who inspired or supported your creativity as a child?**

**A. My father provided both visual and musical encouragement. My family, of seven, was working class, we lived in the projects. My father loaded trains for Railway Express and my mother waitressed. He died when I was 15 so I think the next level of art making was brought about more on my own. Earlier influences were musicians, writers, poets, and later, painters.**

**Q. You graduated with a BFA from the University of Hartford/Hartford Art School, in 1970 and then acquired an MFA in painting from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1972. Did the cultural revolution of the 60s and 70s, or any pop artists influence your work?**

**A. No, but as an undergrad I met Rauschenberg, Warhol, Indiana, and later did graduate studies with Brakhage. While the Vietnam War was going on I was trying to make some political art, but it was pointed out by a very wise man that I was just talking to myself. The big lesson was to dig deeper inside myself to find something that was not just topical, to get past the politics of the day because they continuously change. There's nothing as dated as a folk song about Johnson, Nixon or Reagan. The same can be said for most any issue in the political world today. And that would include sexual, governmental or religious politics. They wind up making me frustrated, so in my work now I attempt to go beyond the obvious and try to avoid preaching.**

**Q. Does this prompt you to work in an isolated environment or underground?**

**A. Yes. It actually helps being here in the Midwest as opposed to either coast where the art scene heavies may be more influential. It's actually very healthy here. The influences are minimal. An historic example would be Gene Davis doing striped paintings. His working and teaching in DC at a certain period in the past had everybody there doing striped paintings.**

That's not the case here. This is actually a very good place to be an artist because you have isolation working for you. To be a successful artist on the other hand, now that's a different story. This is not the art career place to be, but this is where I live, work and teach. So, for the time being anyway, I remain here.

**Q.** After you graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, there was a period where you worked on body prints before you shifted into filmmaking?

**A.** Actually I began the bodyprints in '71 while at the SAIC. I stayed with them a full 5 years.

**Q.** Why abandon painting for filmmaking?

**A.** The work I was doing then were paintings on 30" x 40" sheets of glass and they were basically reverse/collage paintings and on one of them I happened to lay my fingerprints in different colors across the bottom of the glass and I was intrigued with the amount of detail there was. The next step was to take it further and do larger portions of the body, shoulders and head, the whole three quarter body images were done on gessoed sheets of glass. They became white on white, very pure and eventually somewhat difficult to read, until the image literally disappeared. It felt like it was the right time to stop that body of work while at the same I was beginning to use a Super-8 movie camera and became very infatuated with it, thinking back to my studies with Brakhage.

**Q.** What do you think your role was as a filmmaker within the industry?

**A.** Zero, nothing. It was a private endeavor. It had nothing to do with the movie industry at all, it was a one-person operation. I bought the equipment, film and camera, gave it some thought, worked with it and once I had the films edited I would take them, my projector and screen to wherever the gig was. It was all quite solitary.

**Q.** Similar to your painting in isolation?

**A.** Yes. Very much like the act of painting. Different tools, but really the same collage sensibility.

**Q.** After viewing your film, "Night Mix," which was remarkable at many sensory levels for me personally, I wondered why silent films in a non-narrative style -- Why create collages of films of refracted light, fragmented movement, objects, color and people, which seem to be consistent with your body prints, filmmaking and painting. Why collages?

**A.** Well it's the idea of taking things that are there and making something other than what's there. I like the premise of finding rather than looking for -- and the idea of picking up something and combining it with something else and having it be something very unexpected. Not being able to anticipate what these two or three things might be when they're brought together and that's part of the chess game. That's part of the exploration, improvisation.

**Q.** A reflection of the experience of life itself?

**A.** Well, yes. It may very well be a metaphor for life. You are who you are because of when and where you were born and you try to make something of that. You chose a school, what you wear, how you eat, what you drive and it's that very same collage or assemblage that we're all part of as something called society. In my work I bring parts to a whole.

**Q.** Why the shift from filmmaking back to painting, especially during a time in your filmmaking career when you were becoming well received and well known in the video-art industry? You received several Michigan awards and honors and your films were shown at The Museum of Modern Art in New York, Funnel Film Theatre in Toronto, Chicago Filmmakers and Detroit Institute of the Arts?

**A.** I wouldn't rule out the consideration that I'm a complete idiot. But I was also at odds with the Kodak Corporation. There were technical problems; labs were closing, it was becoming more and more difficult to process film. Things were turning to video and I was very much a filmmaker as opposed to a video maker. My appreciation was for the resolution, high quality, the manual aspect. Again, a collage kind of thing. Cutting little pieces of plastic and then rejoining them in a different way -- that had enormous appeal but at the same time next to nothing was being written or said about the work -- the money was going in one direction -- the films weren't for sale -- none of that bothered me -- I did this very seriously for ten years, made over 100 films. And some of them are still very valid -- they maintain their intentions today, twenty-five years later. But it was something else that had run its course and I went back to the handling of collage materials that had been used for the films. I then made large sheets of them and eventually those plastic tapestries became attached to wooden panels and then the addition of acrylic paint and all these translucent materials that I was using like onion skins, seaweed, pieces of movie film, feathers and the rest became paintings. You sort of slide in and out of these things and I tend to be doing them on ten year cycles. I'm just fortunate to have lived this long and gotten in and out of some these activities but, it should be said, each of them were done in depth and each of them were done obsessively.

**Q.** Your work portrays an artist of compelling characteristics. Why do you select dried flowers, dead organic materials, cut-up discarded films from other artists, broken alphabet images? Do the selection of objects have some sort of connected relationship between each painting conceptually?

**A.** I honestly had never consciously put a list like that together. It sounds like I'm attracted to cast-offs or the broken down and very possibly, I am. I do think there is as much beauty in a dried dead flower as there is in a living one. I'm not bothered by the worn qualities or fractures of these materials and film as long as its other people's film that have been damaged or beaten up. I am attracted to them. They have a beauty and they have a credibility that I'm drawn to.

**Q.** The multilayering, organic against geometric objects. Are you attempting to create tension?

**A.** No, I actually hope something's going to feel resolved. I am very aware that I'm mixing these opposites -- the organic and the geometric and there's always been a division -- these are two separate categories according to most art historians and I'm attracted to the mix of the two. They are opposite schools -- the expressionist versus the minimalist -- one has

romantic gutsiness, the other a clean hard-edge classicism, and both are filled with spirit. A wonderful blur to one and a structured clarity to the other. Both appeal to me so I'm straddling the two and trying to make a kind of sense, a kind of beauty out of these opposites. I think that's a challenge I respond to. Complexity and simplicity are two things that exist in all of us.

**Q.** Your film viewed opposite from your paintings -- structure versus abstraction or chaos -- do you agree?

**A.** If you had an opportunity to see my film two or three more times you would then see a structure just as you would hear a structure in a symphony -- you would more easily sense a beginning, a middle, an end. A sense of repetition -- rhythms would be noticed -- a lot of that is difficult the first time around. It's almost like you have your eyes too close to one portion of a painting and then another portion of it -- rather than seeing it as a whole. With a painting it's a bit easier -- you walk towards it and take it in. Film is a time art -- you cannot see the whole at any given moment. It's only in your mind a totality can be sensed. Watching that film again you'd find it less "chaotic" and as for the paintings, I might be tempted to describe them as having the same organic turmoil going on but within a formal format. All complex art works the same way, you come back to it again -- with repeated viewings the experience is enriched.

**Q.** I see that repetitiveness in your paintings. I feel I can revisit your work over and over again and find new intricate details unnoticed the first time.

**A.** That's important to me as I shift and change over time. In this show we are looking at 18 years of someone's work. I'm as curious to see the show as I am in making work because a new mix is going to be there. I'm intentionally taking work out of chronological order in the installation. I would like something done 10 or 15 years ago bumped next to one done a few weeks ago and I think these combinations will offer me a fresher view.

**Q.** How focused is your vision of painting? Do you foresee yourself shifting back to filmmaking? What are you working on next?

**A.** I'd love to have at least two parallel lives -- to be able to do both -- the day isn't long enough. I'm now able to combine some aspects of filmmaking into the paintings. I can manipulate these decal magazine photos making them no longer what they were. That interests me. So I'll probably continue working as a collage painter for a while. At least that's what I'm saying today.

**Q.** We look forward to seeing your future work.

**A.** Thank you Jeanette, I'm looking forward to seeing it myself.