



BASEDONATRUESTORY! PT1&PT2



JOSEPHBERNARD

That Joseph Bernard is concerned with resolution is evinced by his statement, “In my work, I bring parts to a whole.” In diverse media—painting, film, collage—and over several decades, he has consistently dealt in opposites and their synthesis—the organic and the geometric, urban signage and dried flowers, text and image, or, to borrow the paradoxical conceit by which he has described his films: “...metrical deliberation and freefall abandon.” Bernard’s choice of title for this exhibition, **BASEDONATRUESTORY!**, in itself suggests a reconciliation of sorts, facetiously alluding to Hollywood jargon and issues of autobiography as well as playfully parodying the equivocal nature—fact or fabrication—of the photographs which constitute a significant component of the work. In these collage paintings, most of which span only a two-year period, Bernard has come full circle, merging filmmaking with painting.

Any artist’s stylistic evolution is, of course, determined by the various decisions which affect changes in the work. In the early 1970s, Bernard crafted acrylic, collage paintings on diverse and occasionally anomalous supports, sometimes choosing window shades or storm windows as well as the more conventional masonite panels or glass. From 1971 to 1976, he produced body prints on gessoed sheets of glass. By the late 1970s, the artist temporarily eschewed painting and, using the Super-8 movie camera, began to make abstract collage films in the tradition of his former instructor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, renowned filmmaker Stan Brakhage. Then, after a decade of success

in filmmaking, Bernard abruptly returned to collage painting, a decision conditioned perhaps as much by changes in the film industry as by his conscious aesthetic choice.

But the evolution of his work has been a reasoned one. His collage paintings, from their inception in the late 1980s until the present, reference his previous work in film. In the early pieces, collaged film fragments are often paired with objects such as feathers, filaments, dried moonflowers, fragments of magazine photographs. In all the work, the scintillating lights typical of film are translated into the painting medium through the layers of high gloss acrylic varnish which seal the collage elements and result in a jewel-like luminosity.

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Photographic images, now digitally conceived and processed through new technologies, figure prominently in the most recent images. And characteristically, Bernard handles them in a manner which evokes an ambiguous combination of synthesis and dislocation incorporating, as he does, overlapping images and multiple exposures often resulting in paradoxical juxtapositions of non-objective and figurative elements.

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Bernard's mentor, Josef Albers, as the artist recently reminded me, contended that, while in mathematics, the sum of one plus one is two, in art, one plus one can equal two, three or more. Indeed, Bernard rewards the viewer willing to take the requisite time to observe his complex and subtle work with myriad and contradictory levels of meaning.

Bernard has remarked that, "One of the most crucial issues of this latest work is pairing images, then giving them surroundings." In *Portuguese Shadows*, for example, he joins image and text, abstract and figurative components to offer the viewer a poignant glimpse of past lives. A photograph of a weathered, shake-shingled fishing shed on whose façade four photographic portraits of Portuguese widows of Provincetown fishermen have been attached — perhaps an elegiac gesture — is collaged at the top left of the painting. That two of the women are smiling, two of them grimacing, may allude to the Janus masks of ancient Greek drama which remind us that comedy is the other face of tragedy. Bernard couples this representational image with obscured references to fishing gear — a boat, masts, rigging — the type of equipment that likely conveyed the husbands of these women to their deaths at sea. The artist, however, has observed that he devises paintings which often invert original intentions. Just so, the text included suggests a Jungian subversion of linear time itself, as the shadows of these women's experiences echo across decades and distance to evoke comparable sensations in our own lives.

Time is, in fact, an overarching theme in the paintings of this artist for whom filmmaking, in essence a time-based medium, has been a significant part of his oeuvre. Often, as in *Portuguese Shadows*, Bernard offers the viewer a kind of Joycean polyphony of remembered images, a visual reinterpretation of that writer's stream of consciousness. Then again, he translates the abstract elements of his films into those of his collage paintings which, he suggests, are every bit as "time-based" as film, given that "...the maker begins and ends a process; the viewer steps before, then passes the piece."

Joseph Bernard's new work has expanded that which came before. As he has said, "If art has a purpose, it may simply be to provide new possibilities." Invoking again a thespian allusion, the "new possibilities" manifest in the paintings exhibited in ***BASEDONATRUESTORY!*** reveal another face of a familiar muse.

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