



Mystery Captured
Hamtramck art/film savant Bernard makes magical collage
 by [Vince Carducci](#)
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Hamtramck's own Joseph Bernard would appear to be the classic enigmatic artist. As a painting major at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the early 1970s, Bernard began his career making works that used physical traces of the human body imprinted onto gesso (the traditional artist's medium for priming canvas) spread over sheets of glass.

By the late 1970s, influenced by one of his SAIC instructors — the legendary experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage — Bernard abandoned painting for the Super-8 movie camera. His abstract silent films were beginning to garner serious art world attention, having been screened at the Funnel Film Theatre in Toronto and the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, when in 1986 he stopped making them and began painting again, which he has continued to do since.

On the face of it, his current show at Batista Gallery in Ferndale seems to reinforce the enigmatic conceit. First is the idea of an 18-year retrospective. Why not 20? And, the show is installed so as to mix old and new, juxtaposing the most recent paintings with those done 10 or 15 years ago, blurring the ability to discern a linear progression from earlier works to later ones.

	
<p>Fool's Rules 2003 20"x25"</p>	<p>Gunboat 2002 11.5" X 16"</p>

Then there's the work itself: Built up in layers of collage and pigment on wood panels, the paintings contain cut-up pieces of film, thread filaments, feathers, dried flowers and such hermetically sealed under thick layers of shiny polyurethane. Moving in from the edges of each

work are concentric rings of painted frames inside of frames, providing a visual-centering focus akin to Hindu yantras.

While the compositions seem staid from a distance (in fact, many are perfectly symmetrical), getting up close reveals a superabundance of details for sustaining moments of surprise from prolonged and repeated viewing.

The notion of the artist as enigmatic is itself a convention (one of the oldest in the book), and it's artistic conventions that Bernard confronts from the start. The paintings on glass use actual impressions of body parts, questioning aesthetic representation as perceived by the human eye. From there, it's not a big leap to filmmaking, also an imprint off the real in that it captures the light reflected from objects and etches it onto film emulsion. Bernard's films subvert cinematic conventions by refusing to tell stories, i.e. presenting fictional representations of time. Instead, they are montages of color, pattern and movement held together in real time simply by their physical connection as sequential frames of film.

Cutting up and reassembling cinematic fragments is essentially collage, and what Bernard accomplishes in his films in terms of time he does in his paintings in terms of space. In each case, pieces of the fragile world are preserved in their singularity and at the same time they become part of something bigger by their incorporation into the organic unity of the work of art.

In the 1999 work in the Batista show titled "Blood Moon," ecru-colored dried moonflowers are set in two rows on a field of red surrounded by painted frames of olive, black and gold, red and blue, etc. There is no representation at all. ("What you see is what you see," the modernist art adage goes.) However with another look, the pattern of moonflowers on red evokes the design of an Oriental rug; the painting doesn't offer the viewer a world inside the frame but a surface upon which the eye may ride.

One of the great things about the Batista show is that the space is big enough to give individual paintings (even the biggest ones) plenty of breathing room while also providing opportunities for seeing relationships between various groupings. What's more, the main gallery is flooded with ambient natural light, which permits the jewel-like quality of the pigments and collaged elements underneath the polyurethane to radiate intensely. This latter effect is yet another of the seeming enigmas of Bernard's aesthetic.

Collage, of course, is the quintessential modernist technique. (Its invention is generally attributed to Pablo Picasso with his painting "Still Life with Chair Caning," 1912.) It subverts illusion by bringing pieces of the real world into the ideal world of art. But the inner glow emanating from Bernard's paintings is reminiscent of nothing if not the religious artworks of Renaissance masters like Raphael and Titian, who used the refracted light from layers upon layers of translucent glazing to symbolize the Holy Spirit permeating the world with God's grace. A similar reading of Bernard's work is affirmed by titles such as "Ritual," "Presence," "Force Field," "Vestment," "Conjurer's Waltz," etc. In Bernard's case, though, it's the artist's intuition that's being captured and displayed.

Enigma is just another word for mystery. Ultimately, creativity isn't rationally explainable. It's as close to magic as it gets in this postmodern world. And Joseph Bernard is one of Detroit's grand wizards.

Joseph Bernard: The Boxed Set 86-04 runs until July 31, at Batista Gallery, 756 Livernois, Ferndale. Call 248-544-4627. Gallery hours are Tuesday-Friday, 11 a.m. -5 p.m.; Saturday, noon-4 p.m.