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JOSEPH BERNARD *BASEDONATRUESTORY!*, *Parts 1 & 2*

by Vince Carducci

THE ART GALLERY, MACOMB CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS, CLINTON TOWNSHIP,
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Whenever I hear Jean-Luc Godard's famous dictum, "Cinema is truth 24 times a second," I always ask myself, "So what is it the rest of the time?" This conundrum is what Mary Ann Doane, in her book *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, terms "Zeno's Paradox"—that no matter how infinitesimal the gap between images captured on a strip of film there is always something of the real that has gone missing. These fugitive spaces are the terrain that filmmaker-turned-painter Joseph Bernard has explored over the last 20-plus years in mixed-media works that combine paint, photomechanical elements, and found objects into compositions that meld text and image. This recent two-part exhibition of work done over the past two years, presented at the Art Gallery and the Center Galleries, both in metropolitan Detroit, marks a high point in that investigation.



"Signifier of Light" (2010). Acrylic, ink, and objects on wood panel, 22.5" x 24". Courtesy of the artist.

A student of Stan Brakhage at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the 1970s, Bernard found early success in the non-narrative film genre as part of the second generation of what Jonas Mekas once dubbed the New American Cinema. Shot in the Super 8 format, Bernard's abstract silent films of color, light, and movement were shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Funnel Experimental Film Theatre in Toronto, among other North American venues. He completed more

than 100 films before abandoning the medium in 1986 in favor of collage painting, a decision made as much for practical reasons as aesthetic ones—quite simply, his production materials were becoming increasingly scarce with the rising prevalence of videotape in the consumer marketplace.

Film maintained a physical presence in Bernard's artistic production as he often collaged actual pieces of processed stock onto his paintings, hermetically sealing the strips of footage under layers of polyurethane. It also maintained a spiritual presence in the specter of the cinematic sensibility that informs (or to continue the metaphor, haunts) Bernard's work.

Doane, among others, has noted the procrustean relationship of cinematic time to industrial production in the regulation of the image as it progresses frame by frame across the screen. Among the truths revealed in that 24 times a second is the rationalization of the commodity system, whose output relentlessly marches in lockstep to the punch clock of capitalist rule. In the same way that avant-garde cinema sought to deconstruct the constraints of the Hollywood dream factory's narrative form, along with the ideological apparatuses embodied therein, Bernard has wrestled with the representational dialectic he initially encountered as an independent cinematographer: On the one hand, the impulse to arrest the random, the contingent, the unpredictable—preserving the ephemeral, by turns, on film emulsion and on wood panel substrates—and on the other, to open up the possibility for aesthetic situations where signifier (the image in its many guises) and signified (whatever it might mean) are continually at play.

In the new paintings the dialectic is painstakingly worked and reworked into a synthesis of form and content. Virtually all of the pieces are of the same or very similar aspect ratios (21 inches or 22 inches high by 24 inches or 25 inches wide), mimicking the continuity of the cinematic frame as a rendering device. The thin OSB wood panels are mounted floating just off the wall, highlighting their materiality and yet bracketing off the virtual space contained within each composition from the surrounding environment. A thick coat of gloss varnish gives all of the work a uniform reflective sheen, partially negating the particularity of the heavily worked surfaces.

Using a digital inkjet process originally developed for creating decals, Bernard fuses photographic images onto the picture plane, adding bits of text that may or may not read coherently, along with detritus such as flattened aluminum cans, fiber thread, and dried flowers. Sometimes he takes lettering stencils but only uses parts of the templates to create sign-gestures that evoke languages either lost or alien.

Bernard titled his companion exhibitions *BASEDONATRUESTORY!, Parts 1 and 2*, with the letters set in all caps and run together as if to close the gap between thought and expression, the source and its representation; in other words, the truth beyond even Godard's formula. It's a ruse, of course, because Bernard knows as well as anyone that the presence of the sign presupposes the absence of its

referent. It's also a bit of commentary on media simulacra, the "truthiness" of spin, docudrama, and reality TV. But each of Bernard's paintings is its own piece of reality, the photographic samples contained on their surfaces surrounded by environments that do not so much explain or amplify their meaning as suggest the more ineffable something that exists outside the frame.

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