

Overview



Moonshine, 2008. Color spit bite and sugar lift aquatints with aquatint. Paper size: 22 × 21½"; image size: 14 × 14½", edition 25. Printed by Ianne Kjørle.

Edgar Bryan by Kathan Brown

At Crown Point staff meetings, each of us reports what we are working on, and today I said I was writing about Edgar Bryan's prints. "In the middle of the night I had a brilliant idea about Edgar's work," I said. "On my way here this morning, I remembered writing something down. So I called home on my cell phone and Tom found the scrap of paper by the bed. It says: Does not vaporize." Everybody laughed.

"I am going to use it," I protested. "There's something to it. You'll see." The printers have been printing Bryan's three new etchings for a month or so, and everyone here has developed a real fondness for them. I asked in the meeting what our staff people see in the prints, why they like them.

"We are in uncertain times," someone began.

"Looking forward, looking back."

"An allegory of the history of painting."

"Maybe more than painting, maybe of life."

"The characters are vulnerable. But figuring it out."

"Wide-eyed, resigned, funny, hopeful. Those big feet. That toy easel. Those pots."

"What about those pots? There's a big Morandi show in New York at the Met right now."

"It's the opposite of Morandi. It's not about the pots, it's about what's in them. *Moonshine*, that's the title."

Uncertain Times

As I write this, we are in the midst of a worldwide financial



Model Defending Jugs, 2008. Color spit bite and sugar lift aquatints with aquatint. Paper size: 31½ × 27"; image size: 22½ × 18¾", edition 25. Printed by Ianne Kjørlie.

crisis and on the cusp of an historic election, so uncertainty is dramatically in the air. Edgar Bryan's "sweet, sharp meditations," as New York Times critic Roberta Smith described them, somehow hit a soft spot. But, these images were not developed yesterday. How did Bryan, who lives in Los Angeles, know that uncertainty would become so quickly rooted in our culture? Eight or nine years ago, when he began to develop his mature painting style, and six or seven years after that when he painted the images on which he based these prints—even seven months ago when he created the prints—we were in a cycle of excess and grandeur, both in art and in life.

The best artists predict the future, and it is only after the future happens that a consensus develops about who the best artists are. At any given time, there are a lot of artists working outside the cycle of the moment. Some of them are mining mature ideas already legitimately theirs, some are prettifying

ideas legitimately someone else's, a few are oddballs, and even fewer are visionaries. When we recognize a visionary's work, it's a surprise: "This is exactly how I feel; how come I haven't noticed this feeling before?"

The History of Painting

Here's Roberta Smith again, describing the source-painting for one of Bryan's new prints: "[The model] shoulders a large water jug (as in Corot) and holds a sword (as in Poussin). But the jug's narrow neck, black-to-red glaze and teal highlight is more 1950s Los Angeles than French Academy in Rome." Edgar Bryan was born in 1970. By the time he got from his hometown of Birmingham, Alabama to the Art Institute of Chicago (BFA 1998) and the University of California Los Angeles (MFA 2001) it seems safe to say none of his classes featured models posing with jugs. I imagine the art students



The Surrealist, 2008. Color spit bite aquatint with aquatint and soft ground etching. Paper size: 23 × 22½"; image size: 15 × 15½", edition 25. Printed by Ianne Kjørli.

were doing elaborate performances, attempting ambitious installation works, and interning in factory-like studios of successful artists.

So, what's the point of this picture with its slapstick Freudian overtones and its red-nosed, bruised-knee model, firmly balanced but obviously uncomfortable? Maybe it's about life, when you're stuck in the past. But what about the artist, Edgar Bryan himself, working at his toy easel? He doesn't seem to be stuck anywhere, except inside the picture-plane. He's happy. He's working, keeping busy. Is this about life, too? And what about the pots?

Moonshine, That's the Title

Moonshine is down-home, homemade. You don't need a factory to make it, and it has a beautiful name. Have you ever tasted it? In Bryan's picture, there are two moonshine jugs along with three incongruous 1950s vases of the type Roberta Smith mentioned. Writing in the *New Yorker* about Giorgio Morandi (who died in 1964), Peter Schjeldahl said, "It's as if he had set out, time and again, to nail down the whatness of his objects but couldn't get beyond the preliminary matter of their whereness." Looking at Bryan's vases, I couldn't see either whatness or whereness, so I turned back to Schjeldahl, who went on to say that Morandi did not deal with "synthesized illusion." Then I got it. Synthesized illusion is exactly what

Edgar Bryan is dealing with—handmade but synthesized, invented from parts already existing, not just in art but in our culture overall.

Why vases and jugs? Neither the art history reference nor the title accounts for the way this picture creates fond feelings for itself, different from the fond feeling of escaping into a Morandi work. Bryan's title, however, gives a clue. The jugs are awkwardly arranged. The colors are odd. The work provokes a smile. It's (symbolically) Moonshine. Edgar Bryan's images (at least currently) purport to be about art, but at their core they are about life. They don't allow us to escape the world, but they give us a rueful, innocent, equanimity toward it.

The *Surrealist*, Bryan's self-portrait, confers uncanny, almost ridiculous, serenity on the artist as he paints a world out-of-control. Model *Defending Jugs* shows a vulnerable—and humorous—defense of the past. By the way, the title of the painted version of that image is *The Sword*. Sometimes Bryan reverts to bland titles, as if not wanting to give clues to the devotees of whatness and whereness. But, mostly, his titles are generous. Here's a short list culled from the catalog for his 2006 painting show at Regan Projects in Los Angeles (the show that first acquainted me with his work):

The World Won't Listen (a bicyclist)

The Unknown Country (the artist in a swirl of autumn leaves, his tiny easel in the distance)



Edgar Bryan in the Crown Point studio, 2008.

The Last of the Famous International Playboys (the artist asleep on the floor among papers, vinyl records, and cassette tapes)

We Live as We Dream, Alone (a beautiful globe on a green surface with a blue background).

Does Not Vaporize

Roberta Smith, in the last line of her review, talks about Bryan's "central oxymoron: sincere irony." I checked the dictionary: irony, it says, means insincerity. Also, incongruity, and humor based on opposites. Irony expresses the opposite of the literal meaning of a situation. It's dangerously close to vaporizing whatever it touches, I think, when used in making art, because it is generally rooted in insider information. I haven't talked with Edgar Bryan about this, and maybe I'm wrong, but

I don't think sincere insincerity is what he's about. Incongruity, yes, and maybe humor based on opposites—though I believe his humor is not as simple as that. But I think, overall, Smith's characterization of Bryan's work as "sweet, sharp meditations" is closer to the mark than the oxymoron. Again, his titles give me the clue: they are nothing if not sincere.

"Does not vaporize," my midnight revelation about Bryan's work, is unlikely to have come from a consideration of irony, however. It's about the way the objects and people in the pictures feel: grounded and present, if slightly akimbo; not misty, wispy, or super-styled. There are other artists out there right now making reputations by not being grandiose. But many of their pictures vaporize in the mind after a short time. Edgar Bryan's work, in my mind at least, is here to stay.

INVENTION TRADITION

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