

Some Things Last Forever, 2008

PAUL BRAINARD

Q AND A WITH VIOLET SHURAKA

Year of birth?

1969

Astrological sign?

Cancer

Moon sign?

Scorpio

Portfolio website?

White Columns Curated Artist Registry:
www.registry.whitecolumns.org/view_artist.php?artist=107

Where did you grow up?

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Do you think this setting (Pittsburgh) influenced your work at all?

Pittsburgh's industrial history was in drastic decline in the 1970's. The steel mills were closing and all the people lost their jobs. Economically, it was a bleak time for the city. I can remember the heavy sense of history every time our family would drive by the old abandoned steel mills along the Monongahela River. The blast furnaces were very impressive and dominated the landscape for years after they were closed, rusting away. The weather is very still there; clouds hang around for a long time, very gray. I think that I had an emotional connection to that. It is very interesting to me that both Pittsburgh Pennsylvania and Manchester England have a similar industrial history. Perhaps that is why I connect so much to the music from there: Joy Division, Buzzcocks, The Smiths, New Order, The Fall, Wire.

Were you a creative youth?

Yes. I have always loved to draw and had an interest in history since I was young. My best friend and I became obsessed with a small country cemetery that was adjacent to an old church that had been closed for years. I was really into Stephen King novels at the time and to investigate the history behind the church and the cemetery seemed like the perfect summer project. We copied every tombstone down in a notebook and tried to find local residents in the area that we could interview about the local history and the church. I grew up in a suburban plan that quickly changed to country roads and the church and cemetery stood out in such a homogenous context. They provided a window to a very different time and I was fascinated with that.

Did you imagine that you would be an artist in adulthood?

In later high school and into college I became very influenced by punk rock and post punk music and the subculture that goes along with it, especially visual art. I made flyers for punk rock shows at dif-

ferent clubs in Pittsburgh. I think I had an epiphany in those years, I was introduced to so much exciting music and art, everything from David Lynch to Black Flag. I fell in love with a girl who was studying to be an Opera singer who was very headstrong and dynamic and a very inspiring person to be around. She loved everything from Nirvana to Thelonus Monk to Mozart.

Now you reside in NYC... How long have you been living here, in glamorous Brooklyn?

Since 1996.

What do you like most about living in NY?

I like the diversity of the different cultures and all that brings with it.

Least?

"Friends" and "Sex and the City."
 The caste system.

Would you ever move back to Pittsburgh, as it has a more vibrant art scene there now, more so than when you were growing up, at least...

I don't think that I could survive as an artist there. Unfortunately, most of the creative people leave to go to larger cities where

they can find work with a day job or show and sell their work as artists. There are smaller galleries that exist in Pittsburgh and I have shown in some of them since I left but I think that they have trouble getting a foothold and selling work.

Does NYC inspire you?

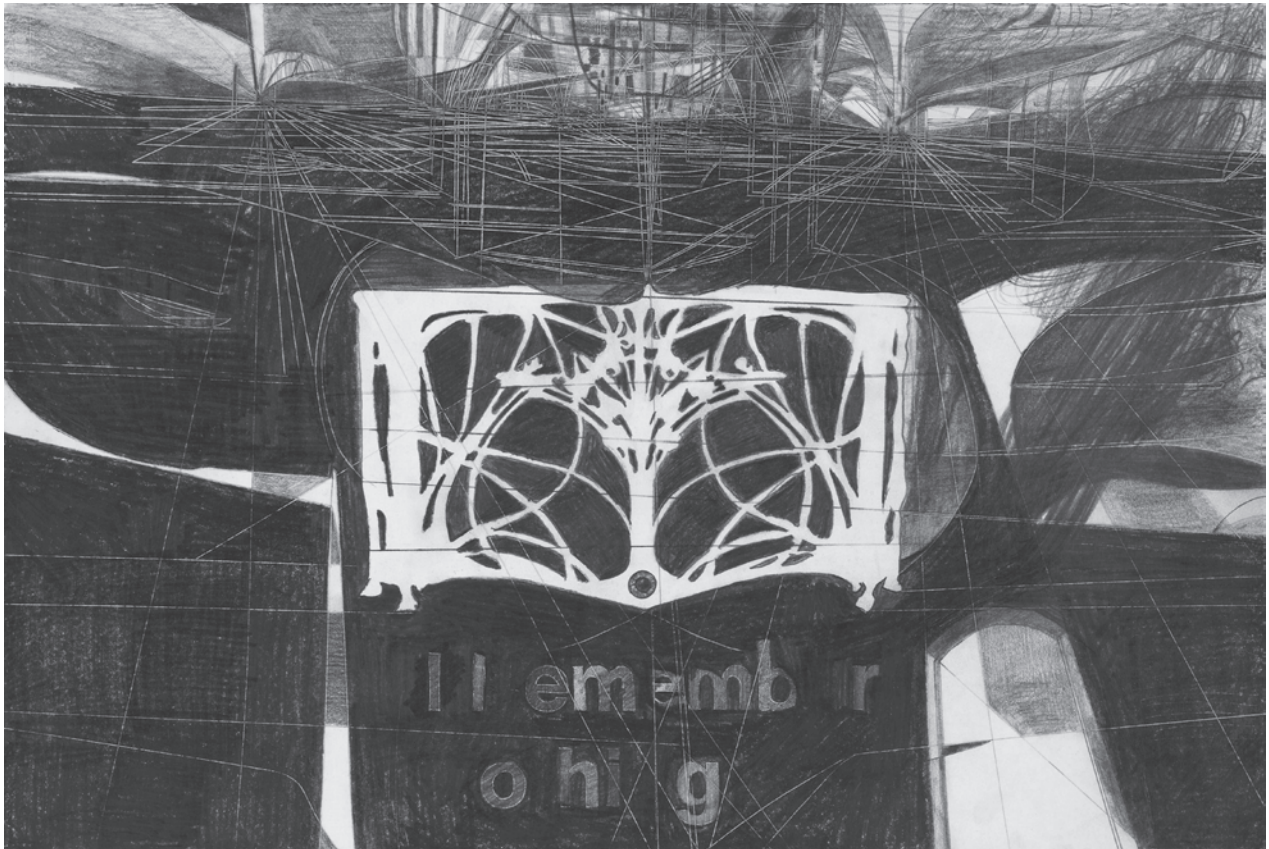
Yes. It is such a great place for art and music and culture in many forms from many different places and social strata. That is why it is so important that the cost of living not get too out of hand. It is important to the character of New York that it never lose touch with that and become too homogenous. The culture these many different groups bring gives the city its vitality and diversity.

Do you feel that there is a lot of interesting work being created in NYC right now?

Yes. I curated a group show last summer at the gallery where I work and it was full of current younger artists who live and work in New York. (www.gvdgallery.com) It was named True Faith in homage to New Order. The dominant aesthetic was an enigmatic openness, hybridist and a diverse sense of painting and drawing.



Our Lady of Joy, 2008



I Remember Nothing, 2008

To often visual art is looked at through a literary framework. Visual art exists on a visual plane, which isn't to say that it can't be analyzed but this literary analysis is secondary to the visual component. The manner in which I selected the artists was in accord with my studio practice, disparate, dynamic and psychological.

Here is a list of artists from that show. They all live and work in NYC.

1. Francesca Dimattio
2. Harry Druz
3. Franklin Evans
4. Jeff Grant
5. Andrew Guenther
6. Jeff Konigsberg
7. Wes Lang
8. Gina Magid
9. Yuri Masnyj
10. Ben Matthews
11. Tracy Miller
12. Kanishka Raja
13. Barry Ratoff

Which artists inspire you?

See above list. (from True Faith show)
I also was recently in a group show curated by Wes Lang "The Boys are Back in Town" in Atlanta at the now defunct

Romo Gallery. I think that he put together a group of very talented younger artists who worked well together. Elizabeth Huey, Kerry James Marshall, Guillermo Kuitca, Dr Larka.

Where did you go to school for art?

University of Pittsburgh BA in Studio Art
Carnegie Museum School of Studio Art
Pratt Institute MFA Painting

Has anyone that you have studied (or worked) with influenced you?

I like a lot of the artists I have worked with over the years, but I always try and maintain a respectful distance and go out on my own. Much of the time I am conscious of other artists influences but I am very interested in using these influences to create a new hybrid form. New breakthroughs in art movements always come by a blending of somewhat disparate styles of art and culture to create something new. I love that idea.

Are there contemporary artists that you tend to show with?

"The Boys are Back in Town." This show was in Atlanta in the spring and is going to go to V1 Gallery in Copenhagen this

fall. The artists in this show I have shown with before, other than that I have been in a lot of different group shows at 31 Grand Gallery, John Connelly Presents, group shows associated with Scott Hug and his magazine *K-48* and more recently with Pia Dehne and Sissel Kardel.

Do you have a philosophy pertaining to art?

I like to make art that is emotionally and visually engaging, and dramatic.

Can you describe it in one sentence?

"Do not go gentle into that good night."

I really hope that when someone sees one of my paintings or drawings that they feel something vibrant and something alive as well as something very emotional. The idea that art is something that will last and speak for you when you are gone has always been a large part of the attraction for me. I suppose that is why I focus on more philosophical issues in my work.

Your work has a pop sensibility, mixing elements from popular culture, the vernacular, and the everyday. Like with Pop Art the subjects in your work are often



Coney Island Whitefish, 2008

fashion models copied from magazines, images lifted from tabloids and porn, American icons, product logos, and signage. However the pop art of the 60's was less of a scathing critique and more of a glamorized depiction of consumer society (to some extent, depending on which pop artist) & your work implies a culture that is doomed and sick. Do you believe that America will have another golden age or do you believe that the direction we are heading in is just going to get progressively worse? Is it all doom and gloom from here on out?

I think an important part of understanding the work is understanding that it represents the moment an individual sees an advertisement and in a split second projects their life onto the environment of the advertisement, fusing the two. I am really not trying to be overly moralistic about it, I just feel as though it is my job to use my sensitivity to the world around me to show what I feel when I interact with life. I think that the Blade Runner scenario is probably truer to life and closer than you think. Science fiction literature has been another huge influence on me ever since I was young. When I was younger I was very much influenced by movies that my

parents took me too. I went to see Alien in 1979 with my parents and I still remember how much it scared me and I loved it! George Romero is from Pittsburgh and he pretty much invented the Zombie film with Night of the Living Dead and Dawn of the Dead. The social critique of these movies as well as the bleak future existence resounded with me.

Do you find that your work has dealt with darker themes over time?

I think that some of the drawings I was doing in 2005 were really very sad and somber, as it reflected things going on in my life at the time. From time to time I have worked back and forth between being more blunt and subtler. I would like to make more work that is more subtle and mysterious because I feel as though there is a lot of strength there. I enjoy making work that is beautiful and pretty but I also want to have the viewer experience the movement of the hand in the drawing, the sense of time compressed in the creation of a drawing, the devotion in making it.

Part of the critic's initial problem with Pop art was its depiction of "low" subject

matter. However, emphasizing the banal and the kitschy (rather than elitist, high culture) has become somewhat of the norm in contemporary art. Do you feel that it is unnecessary to talk about conflicting themes such as high versus low, fine versus commercial, abstract versus figurative in the year 2008? Has the divide between these categories been erased?

I recently went to the Prado in Madrid and was very struck by philosophical and emotional concerns that were represented in the work of Goya, Velazquez, Bosch, Peter Bruegal the elder, Jose Ribera and so many others. The realism and fantastical imagination in these works combines "reality" and the "supernatural" in one painting. I think that art history will show that the separation of high and low is something that is rather irrelevant; it has been around for a very long time in Western art. I do think that the elitists do love "lowbrow" themes as well.

I enjoy making work that is done by hand. I like the look of a drawing or painting that has been arrived at through work rather than traced from a projector. I don't work in a way a commercial artist would, even if the subject matter is contemporary.



Mercury Retrograde, 2008

Skulls, nude and lingerie clad women, the Doritos logo (speaking of “low” subject matter), & jack-o-lanterns recur frequently, almost obsessively, in your work, could you describe the meaning that each of these elements holds for you? Do they represent anything in particular?

My father sent me a picture of my brother and me when I was only about 6 years old with a plastic skull with orange hair. I am so excited about the skull and I really love it. I think that it is funny because it shows that I was obviously fascinated by Halloween and skulls ever since I was young. It was by far my favorite holiday growing up. I think that I use these images in my paintings and drawings to remind me of my past and also as a vantage image of mortality. I studied quite a bit in both undergrad and graduate school with human cadavers and I found it fascinating. The beauty of the structure of the human body is astounding. I work with the images from pornography in the same way I use other images from advertising. Pornography is advertising and vice versa. I like to combine images from commercial advertising with images from my own life to illustrate the gulf that exists in the yearning for a “better life.” Combining images of mortality with the void of substance in advertising is one way I feel as though I can make a picture that represents a more accurate contemporary existence. The presence of Early American puritan gravestone art mixed with contemporary advertising and pornography represents a picture of

reality of American History, where we have come from as a culture, how that informs current directions in culture today.

In addition to utilizing imagery from various media sources you also weave your personal history and memories into your compositions. How do you decide what real life, diaristic events to mix with the pop culture images chosen for a particular piece? Do they usually have something to do with each other or is it completely random-- some thoughts floating around in your head at the moment you choose to put something down on canvas? Do you feel that once a painting/drawing is complete it may have the power to twist and distort your own memories?

I do not like to plan what I am going to make or do within a drawing. It makes the process much more exciting when you are not sure where it is going to go. Many times I destroy images as I am going the same way that subway posters are defaced with graffiti. Additionally I work from many different perspectives at one time, jumping from one area of a drawing to another, one subject to another. The finished work looks something like a cross section of my brain, how things interlock and relate, how some of it is important and some of it is not, much like life itself.

Why do self-portraits so often make their way into your paintings and drawings? Does your presence in the work represent the

individual in a media saturated, consumer society?

I am trying to present the image of myself as an entry point or doorway into the image. Edvard Munch self portraits have been influential in that he shows himself in distress and emotional upheaval. Compositionally the self-portraits act as a conduit between the viewer and the environment of the painting.

Your work, to me, is a hybrid that combines aspects of geometric abstraction, figuration, and pop art... You create energetic, chaotic compositions via a system of drawn lines, intersecting and superimposed over colored planes, diagonals, & organic forms, interweaving these architectural elements with sultry females, self-portraits, people from your past, etc... Sometimes your compositions resemble an exploded city where things have spun out of control. People are obliterated whilst trying to connect with their environment; instead they are destroyed by it. Could you explain a bit about the process of adding and subtracting elements in your work? Is there any meaning in the forms overlapping and eradicating each other?

It is fairly random, I do not know what direction the drawing is going to take at first and it is usually somewhere towards the end that I have some idea of how it will eventually look. I do look at the composition abstractly at a later stage of the drawing to make it work formally. I am trying to show multiple perspectives at one time. I wish to show one viewpoint in contrast/conjunction with other viewpoints and hopefully have this illustrate empathy for others. I see the drawings as an open dialogue, one in which perspectives can change and how others perspectives can change the way that one understands themselves. In this manner I wish to communicate an underlying humanity through the work.

Do you like the work of Julie Mehretu? The architectural details in your paintings make me think of her work...

Yes, I do like her work quite a bit. The larger works are so impressive in person. The scale of her work and the combination of elements, historical, architectural and random imagery is something that I feel captures a state of contemporary existence. Other artists that I respond to that work in this manner are Benjamin Edwards, Mark Bradford and Terry Winters.

Pop art was most often created by the same means as the mass produced products and images that it was depicting, with techniques such as silkscreen

and projection, do you ever utilize any of these techniques of mechanical production or do you always draw/paint by hand?

I always make the work by hand.

Do you ever use the computer as a tool when creating your paintings and drawings?

I sometimes use older drawings to work out ideas with newer compositions much the same way that one would cut images from magazines to work through collage ideas.

Describe your process of creating a new piece. Do you have a library of images that you refer to when starting a new work?

I do have a library of images that I start with initially. I usually start with a central portrait head and work my way out from there.

How do you know when a new work is finally complete? Or do you?

It is sometimes very difficult and there are many occasions that I have overworked a painting or drawing and subsequently lost it. The work of Willem De Kooning is so impressive to me in that it is possible to see that finished works of art went through many stages and were possibly finished many times before he let them out of his studio. This idea is so fascinating to me, as it shows that there are many examples of a finished work and it shows the multitudes of possibilities in painting and drawing. I love that idea.

Why do you paint with oil rather than acrylic or another paint medium? Does oil paint affect your process/help to shape the progression of your composition?

I like the idea of the atmospheric glow one can achieve in oil. The slower drying time also allows for more manipulation over a longer period of time. I have always been attracted to the qualities of oil that are very traditional painting qualities, I don't feel that acrylic offers as beautiful as surface.

Describe that moment when you knew for sure that art was something you wanted to pursue seriously.

My first girlfriend was a very passionate opera singer and her dedication to Opera was very inspiring to be around. I met her when she was 18, at a punk rock show. She quit the French horn and decided she was going to be an opera singer. I watched as she went through Hart School of Music, Manhattan School of Music, got a scholarship to Julliard School of Music, sang at the Salzburg Opera Festival and I

saw her perform at Lincoln Center as the mezzo soprano lead in Hansel and Gretel. She went from a very small town to the Metropolitan Opera in a very short time. Her drive and influence is something I will never forget, especially since she is no longer with us.

Was art encouraged or practiced by your family?

I am very fortunate that my family has always been supportive of my choice to be an artist, and for this I am very grateful.

What was the first piece of art that really mattered to you? Yours?

I made a really strange large portrait of a woman in 1995 -96. It was based on a composite of heroin chic and Dorian Gray. I used my own features for some of the facial features and my hands and Sandra Bernhard's mouth. It is pretty scary looking.

Others?

The De Kooning *Woman IV* painting at the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh.

What images keep you company in the space where you work?

Prints of photographs I have taken, old drawings, old paintings, images from advertising, random junk, anatomy illustrations, art catalog, text/signage from the subway. If I see an image I will very often use it in a painting or drawing if it intrigues me.

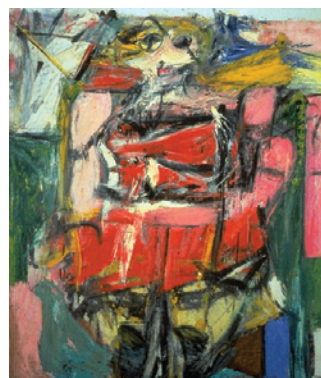
What do you have coming down the line in terms of shows and/ or projects?

The Boys are Back in Town at V1 Gallery in Copenhagen.

What are you really excited about right now? M.I.A and Santogold.

What could you imagine doing, if you didn't create art?

Something that would help other people understand and appreciate the power of human expression.



Willem De Kooning, *Woman VI*, 1953, oil on canvas, 68 1/2" X 58 1/2"