

BONNARD'S OTHER AVANT GARDE

"The brain secretes thought like the liver secretes bile."
Pierre Cabanis, 18th century French physiologist.

BY JULIE HEFFERNAN



Angela Dufresne, *Strangers When We Met Gay Bar*, 2010, oil on canvas, 4.5' x 9.' Courtesy of the artist.

Press your forehead close to someone else's: a single eye will float forth and the nose will dislocate in a decidedly Cubist way. Press your eyelids while facing light and you will see geometric patterns of bright sparks like Op Art. We all know that we can manipulate what we see and that that ability forms a part of our visual knowledge of the world. Learning to notice more of the myriad peculiarities of perception and formalizing them with tools and concepts constitutes the methodology of art making. Those who can communicate something expressive of the unique particulars of their own visual experience and connect it to others—those people are artists. Certain great ones, Cézanne and Van Gogh among them, made work that forges a direct link with viewers in a very specific way, by re-creating how they themselves actively experienced the process of looking. The kinds of marks they made—their dots and dabs, precise erasures, the way they rubbed and overlaid their colors—all those things provide viewers a virtual transcription of the lived experience they had with their painted motifs—whether cypress trees or peaches in a bowl—as viewed in the moment, essentially allowing us to see through their eyes as though we are neurologically linked to them. Much has been written about Bonnard's exquisite mechanisms for notating his world stemming from his oft-quoted observation that painting was, for him, “the transcrip-

tion of the adventures of the optic nerve.”¹ John Elderfield enlarged on that idea by suggesting that Bonnard replaced “artificial perspective with the record of natural vision,”² essentially documenting the processes of seeing with his “stews of multitudinous colors scrubbed and burnished into low value contrast.”³ But Bonnard's vision was a lot more than just optical.

Picasso famously described Bonnard's unique way of breaking up form into many thousands of color marks as mere “daubing,” but that approach to synthesizing vision has been influential to a number of important contemporary artists like, for example, Keltie Ferris and Chris Ofili. Their work also evinces the experience of interior vision—flashes of color, light and hypnagogic abundance. But Bonnard's vision was different. It extended beyond the optical or perceptual into the very nature of thought itself, as the brain seeks meaning, finds patterns and creates associations out of random experience. Bonnard's psychological astuteness, aligned with formal inventiveness, played out in compositions that unfold layer upon layer of sensory knowledge. That's what made him a great painter.

Bonnard was a quiet artist who worked consistently in the fray while other modernists were running pitched battles, attacking the very core of how we conceive of form and style. Yet I would claim



Pierre Bonnard, *The Palm*, 1926, oil on canvas, 147 x 114.3 cm. Philips Collection, Washington DC, USA. Source: <http://www.wikiart.org>.

that Bonnard incited a revolution too, involving an elaboration of what permissible content can be. Bonnard's was a revolution in subject matter, turning a dining room table into a phantasmagoric carnival and a woman at her toilette into a primal spectacle, and that makes him as important to contemporary painters as Cubists were to previous generations. Bonnard rejected Cubism's stylistic imperatives partly because they did not serve his desire to insinuate content directly into the viewer's lived experience. He understood intuitively how to construct, say, a sensory double for our love of a warm bath. I've written about his use of a menstrual rag in *Large Yellow Nude*, and continue to admire the audacity of presenting to the public an item of such utter interiority that no other painter, to my knowledge, has ever depicted. That was a form of bravura too—albeit slyer than the swagger of Cubism's multiple perspectives or Expressionism's collisions of color. Those gestures, once so daring, are now as comfortable to look at as an armchair.

New eras bring the need for new forerunners, whose undervalued innovations and insights make greater sense in light of a new Zeitgeist. Contemporary artists often search out older artists who might provide them with alternative ways of conceiving pictorial worlds for the next wave of picture-making and conceptualizing. The Chicago Imagists, for example, while descended from Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism, rediscovered the sinuous eccentricities of the Sieneese School to better express the social changes of the 1960s. They were looking for fresh imagery and figurative styles that deviated from conventional Old Master painting while still engaging with abstraction and narrative, and found those qualities in the likes of Giovanni Di Paolo and Taddeo Gaddi.

I would describe Bonnard as a bridge artist—one who connects to the past and anticipates the future. His work can be seen in the lineage of Piero della Francesca, who shares his appreciation for geometry and taut compositional matrices, and of Diego Velázquez, whose self-conscious subjects and impressions of pulsing

air anticipate Bonnard's flickering marks. Masaccio gave us human sorrow, but Velázquez was one of the first artists to paint so convincingly the vulnerability inherent in social position: his *Infantas*—with their natty wigs, mirroring in shape their royal gowns, that function as psychological tropes for the burdens of wealth, power and position—look more like fashion victims today than royalty. Bonnard's *The Boxer* (1931) expresses a similar pathos. Differences in technique aside, the squall of paint is similar in both artists, overwhelming any sense of authority in Bonnard's supposedly strong male figure, as he succumbs to the storm of mark-making. This too is an image of feckless posturing: "I got carried away with color and I sacrificed form to it," Bonnard admitted. The pose trumps the man and undoes him.

Bonnard's dissolution of form foreshadows American visionary artists like Charles Birchfield, and later *Informel* movements in abstract art. And I see distinct nods to Bonnard in some of the most interesting figurative artists today, whether they know or acknowledge it. I'm thinking for instance of Peter Doig, Angela Dufresne, Nicole Eisenman, Lisa Sanditz and Hernan Bas. Bonnard's tangled gardens and thick air are evident in the eccentricities of Sanditz's and Doig's phantasmagoric landscapes; his disappearing figures rematerialize similarly in Dufresne's and Doron Langberg's paintings. His color palette and contrasting light have clearly influenced Dana Schutz and Kyle Coniglio. And echoes of the awkward revelations and sudden apparitions in his group portraits resound in the bathetic dinner parties of Nicole Eisenman.

Bonnard anticipates the narrative urgency of such contemporary painters, all of whom have distinct stories to tell about gender fluidity, repression, suburban anomie, the stultification of the individual and depredation of the landscape by mainstream consumer culture. His empathy for women stuck in stifling domesticity, the way he understood the repressive nature of bourgeois life, is evident in the way he composed *The White Interior* (1932) with its awkwardly



Kyle Coniglio, *Self Portrait with Bears, Otters and Wolves*, 2009, oil on canvas, 20" x 24." Courtesy of the artist.



Lisa Sanditz, *Underwear City*, 2008, oil on canvas, 68" x 87." Courtesy of the artist.

bent-over woman, hemmed in by background walls, radiator and door. That woman is further cornered, almost pierced, by a foreground table that virtually juts into her stomach.

Bonnard had an approach to the figure that mirrored his and wife Marthe's reclusive natures: he famously shaved his moustache when he went on a cruise, "to look like other passengers"²⁴. His figures disappear into their worlds, as though their relative importance to any situation were up for grabs. Vuillard's bourgeois figures blend into their domestic realms; they're part of the furniture like Betty Draper in *Mad Men*. But Bonnard's are caught up in a game of hide-and-seek; they literally sneak up on you, from behind a tree or bush. Similarly many of Dufresne's figures belong more to the atmosphere that permeates her worlds than they do to themselves: they emerge from tiny glowing TV sets, as in *Me in TV and on the Couch* (2007), or fade into a fog of air, as in *Strangers When We Met Gay Bar* (2010), fully aware that they are bit players in coruscating worlds, where light, the energy of metal music and quicksilver flashes of paint constitute the main event.

Nature looms large in a world where the human is diminished. The town of Le Cannet, Bonnard's refuge from the suffocation of the city, became his muse as much as Marthe. In a painting like *The Palm*, he suffuses the central figure with the same color of blue as the air above the red roofs, literally turning her into the stuff of atmosphere, allowing the large palm frond above her and the rectangles of reddish-orange behind her to come forward and clash and clang like cymbals. She is in effect a hole in the painting, similar to the fetid lake in Sanditz's *Underwear City* (2008), which bod-ies forth through mountains and the ooze of contaminated land, forming a toxic maw that both sucks us in and advances towards us menacingly. Sanditz's muse, if she has one, would have to be the dying landscape itself, a place where human beings have disappeared and the detritus of hyper-consumerism is all that's left.

I see shades of the same suffocation in the garden party of Bonnard's *The Terrace at Vernonnet* (1939) and in Dufresne's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Delusional Dinner Party for Big Daddy* (2007). Bonnard's painting divides the space into a weirdly shaped grid to emphasize the stifling nature of that social situation. The grid subsumes the scene into a tight little cluster of wonky shapes, like a bunch of deflating party balloons squashed and stacked on top of each other. Such sick geometry effectively annuls any flow of vital energy among the sectors of that little bourgeois backyard. Everything is neatly compartmentalized, like partitions in a picnic basket whose food is rotting. In her garden party painting, Dufresne presents us with what might superficially seem like a perfectly charming outdoor gathering, like Bonnard's, here accompanied by Chinese lanterns and a yellow glow suffusing the air with warm light. She then subverts that mood with excessive glazing and transparent veils of paint splashed about that break up any internal coherence and suggest something sinister at play. She describes particulars of the narrative and its composition not through rendering but through bold strokes of paint that are applied and then partially wiped away. The image is attacked as an integral way of telling the story.

Dufresne creates an ethereal light that she then undoes with those glazes and erasures, framing certain areas for focus, such as Big Daddy in the middle of the table. This grid of negative space and positive shapes clarifies some figures and obscures others: a phantasmagoria of perpetrators and victims. Some figures stand out and others are subsumed into the veils of dripping, frantic

paint, but all look to be drowning in the penetrating goo of toxic color, as though the very poison in the pigments that painters use is contributing to the character's suffocation. Only the paper lanterns are left behind as witnesses.

Kyle Coniglio is a young artist very much influenced by Bonnard and Dufresne, and his work evinces a similar interest in illicit characters that dematerialize in climates of thick air. In *Me and the Beasts* (2010) Coniglio paints himself surrounded by a variety of beasts—bears, wolves, otters—all permeated by a melancholic turquoise glow that suggests subterranean malaise, both heartbreaking and comic. This is a demi-monde for *les enfants sauvages*, to prance and cavort in their bestial play.

Bonnard insinuates his fascination with the bathetic and illicit in subtle, sometimes barely perceptible ways—he was too well-mannered to do otherwise. Yet manners don't concern contemporary painters, who often lay bare sexuality of the kind seen in *Large Yellow Nude* without hesitation. What is harder to find in our times are sincere expressions of that experience. Doron Langberg and Nicole Eisenman risk it in ways that manage to be both daring and subtle, as their revelation of secrets is slow and often accompanied by a frisson of discovery.

Hiding the figure in the stuff of negative space—transposing figure/ground relationships—occurs in Doron Langberg's *On All Fours* (2012) and Nicole Eisenman's *Study for Winter Solstice Dinner Party* (2009), to reveal something unexpected and stirring. Like the disappearing figures in *The Boxer* and *The Palm*, we see Langberg's bestial figure first as only a red veil of atmospheric space. Then we notice the clotted clumps of thick paint doing something very specific: they are surrounding a shape. All of a sudden those clumps become the space while the red glaze becomes a positive shape: a figure crawling towards us. That transparent red glaze will forever oscillate now between space and shape, now positive, now negative, as the figure dematerializes into a red glowing light, and rematerializes into the raw, sensual zone of illicit sex. A similar oscillation occurs in Eisenman's *Study for Winter Solstice Dinner Party*. Around a white dinner table, dark and abject figures lounge or sleep. But as the eye moves back in space, ground gives way to figure and the negative space of the white table suddenly becomes positive, as with Langberg's figure, revealing it now as a female torso, splayed out, corpse-like. Its head aligns vertically with two candles (one functioning as the woman's solar plexus and one as the crotch). Eisenman offers us here a vision of a sacrificial body, with the poor and miserable dining on her, like a veritable Mater Amata Intemerata, but spotless no longer.

It's worth recalling that one reason a certain kind of avant-garde art, predicated on shock, worked so effectively on unwitting viewers in the early 20th century and made headway in the culture was because of the unique way that its novel stylistic forms and unconventional ideas complicated the act of viewing. A viewer weaned on expectations of pleasure and realism in her art consumption was suddenly thrown into a state of uncertainty—what Breton described as "convulsive"—when faced with her first upside-down urinal or fur-lined teacup. With the accompanying adrenaline rush from that supercharged surprise, she experienced a kind of euphoria as her mind worked hard to make sense of those new experiences, unmoored from the determining nature of bourgeois certitudes. Such movement, from certainty to doubt and then acceptance, created a unique kind of excitement. As Jed Perl says in his review of Jeff



Angela Dufresne, *Me in the TV (from Antonioni's 'The Passenger')*, 2006, oil on panel, 24" x 30." Courtesy of the artist.

Koons' show at the Whitney Museum, "From the first supporters of the Cubists to the critics and collectors who embraced Abstract Expressionism early on, the bewilderment one sometimes experienced on encountering new art was embraced as a complicated intellectual challenge, demanding new alignments of sense and sensibility."⁵ But decades of challenging art predicated on shock (amply described by Robert Hughes in *The Shock of the New*) with Freudian undertones (analyzed by Hal Foster in *Compulsive Beauty*) may have limited our understanding of what constitutes greatness in art. What shocks us today becomes habitual—even disparaged—tomorrow. Revelatory experience is qualitatively different in its effect on us from shock, and isn't undone by habituation. The slow revelation of a Bonnard painting is similar to the sharing of secrets; it increases awareness, and forges intimacy and connectedness.

In the lineage of Courbet, Bonnard reclaimed realism for a 20th century avant-garde public. The 19th century's breakdown of faith in form, most noticeably its faith in academic Realism to conjure truth and verisimilitude, was for Bonnard an opportunity to move beyond the representation of surfaces and the aesthetics of design evident in his early work, to delve into more truthful depictions of lived human experience: its clandestine underside. Bonnard's *Large*

Yellow Nude gave me my first mature experience of avant-garde shock as a pathway to truth because of its revelatory suggestiveness and timing—how long it takes the viewer to fully comprehend its secrets. Bonnard traffics in slow takes, psychological nuance and subtle hints of illicit subject matter that reveal themselves gradually. The main event of a Bonnard painting is almost always barely visible, involving a figure or everyday object that has been deformed in such a way that you cease to recognize it as itself. While that elicited for me the revelatory thrill I equate with avant-garde art, it is not deployed merely to shock, but to reveal something deeper, maybe even shameful at times, about our humanity. What begins in *Large Yellow Nude* as an apparently simple scene of a woman at her toilette ends with a distinct revelatory thrill—a barely identifiable object, on closer scrutiny, becomes a menstrual rag. Where Cubism or Expressionism bludgeon with harsh striations and wild color, Bonnard whispers. And I am floored.

Many contemporary painters describe Bonnard as important to their development as artists. But Bonnard is no easy reach. The challenge he sets for all narrative painters is formidable: how to use both understatement and wild speculation to tell a bold story well; how to say something about our humanity that is both piercing and



Nicole Eisenman, *Study for Winter Solstice 2012 Dinner Party, 2009*, oil on canvas, 20" x 16." Courtesy of the artist.

poignant, without mockery; how to play out the slow revelation with perfect timing, implicating the viewer in the ramifications of each and every mark made. These are not small tasks.

Many artists I know are looking for imagery that engages more with the local than ever before, with the flawed nature of human kind and a clear critique of human exceptionalism. They seek imagery that depicts formally and conceptually how and why we humans are losing the big game. As Bonnard's world shrank when he left Paris and moved to Le Cannet in 1910 during the height of Cubism and its many stylistic offshoots; as Marthe crawled into her bathtub and gave herself over to the spangle of light reflecting off tiles, becoming all at once a vision of intrauterine plenitude and a speck of flesh within a kaleidoscope of light and color, many of us are oscillating between the hugeness of our growing global awareness of environmental destruction and, at the same time, keeping bees on our roofs and planting milkweed to attract the disappearing butterfly. As the promises of Modernism fade more and more—all

its grand visions and myths of progress essentially trumped by the environmental devastation left in its wake, signaling the failure of the Anthropocene—we need to find imagery to describe that growing self-consciousness, and humility, in the face of our failures. We are witnessing movements all around us, in philosophy, in quantum physics and critical theory that decenter the human from the main field of action. No tragedy is implied here, only a recognition that there is so much more to see, so much else to notice if we humans, like Bonnard, just move a bit out of the way. ■

NOTES:

1. Pierre Bonnard, 'La Peinture ou la transcription des aventures du nerf optique'. Diary note for Feb. 1, 1934 in *Bonnard*, exh. Cat., Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1984, p. 69.
2. John Elderfield, *Bonnard*, exh. Cat., Tate Gallery, London; Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1998, p.33.
3. Stephen Knudsen, email conversation with Julie Heffernan, August 28, 2015.
4. Thadee Natanson, *Le Bonnard que je propose*, Geneva, 1951, p.88.
5. Jed Perl, "The Cult of Jeff Koons," *The New York Review of Books*, Sept. 25, 2014.