

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

BROOKLYN RAIL

What's more real, a dead tree or a drawing of a dead tree?

MICHAEL BERRYHILL with Nathlie Provosty

May 6, 2014

Michael Berryhill's paintings are brightly-colored, idiosyncratic, image-ambiguous oddities that have developed out of a consistent studio practice arching over two decades. On the occasion of his third solo show in New York, and second at Kansas Gallery on Franklin Street (May 2 – June 14, 2014), Berryhill sat down with Nathlie Provosty at the Rail's HQ to discuss his origins, obsessions with art history, attitude toward misunderstanding, and what's in back of the real.

Nathlie Provosty (Rail): You've mentioned that you are interested in misinterpretation and misreading. Could this have anything to do with growing up in El Paso, on the border of Mexico?

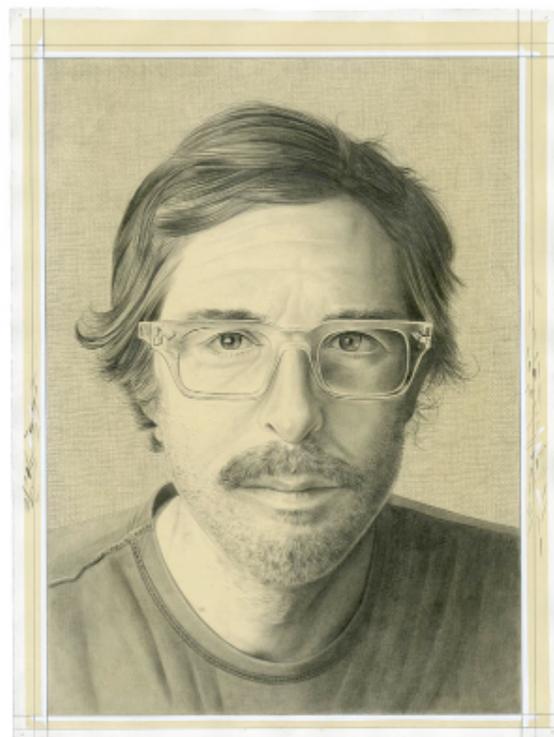
Michael Berryhill: Interesting. I never thought of misinterpreting as not understanding. I did have friends that went to American schools but their houses were across the border. It was that close, which is crazy. But my friends from Mexico wanted to perfect their English, so we didn't speak Spanish, and I never learned. What I'm interested in with misinterpretation is a way to meaning through the wrong understanding, which probably has much more to do with being raised Catholic. There are all these intense stories, and I took them seriously, which affected me. Some kids would be like, "Eh, it's no big deal," and they could watch *The Exorcist* and it rolls right off their back. Because they grew up with no religion, that movie is like a comedy. But you're really not supposed to take it seriously, I came to understand.

I remember songs that gave me goose bumps as a kid, and then 10 years later I realized, "That's not even the lyric. I completely got it wrong." And it doesn't matter. With religious paintings it's unnecessary to care about what they're supposed to narrate. Brueghel has all these fables and allegories, but to what? We have to make it up, interpret it, and I love that.

Rail: How were you first exposed to visual art?

Berryhill: My mother was a junior high school art teacher, so I grew up with a couple of Old Master books, but mainly Norman Rockwell and Frederic Remington. I would redraw bucking stallions and Native Americans over and over. And Star Wars. Almost every male artist of my generation I've talked to about it drew Star Wars immediately after seeing the movie. I was 5, and I think it was because it was the first depiction of space I saw with dirt on the ships, grit, dents, and scratches—a realism that was so beyond anything that I had seen in the fantasy genre. I realized things get old in the future too. As a feminist now, I find being artistically awakened by Star Wars to be utterly predictable. It's such a 5-year-old white male perspective. But we can't choose the fact of our origin stories, though we can get deeper and surpass them over time.

Rail: There was a long stretch between your B.F.A. at the University of Texas, Austin and your M.F.A. at Columbia. What were you doing?



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

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Berryhill: I worked in the production side of advertising; layout, Photoshop, InDesign. In the '90s it was a crazy boom, and you could get a job if you had any computer skills at all. Also, I was painting in my apartment the whole time, which was longer than 10 years. And after I moved to New York in '99, I was going to shows relentlessly. I still have giant boxes of every card to every show I ever went to. There are fewer cards these days, but I'll still take a press release.

Rail: You were in a band too, and played the guitar.

Berryhill: I was in my first band at age 34, which was one of the greatest things ever. This one friend of mine from Austin, Steve Garcia, just said, "I'm starting a band, and you're in it." [Laughter.] Most of my friends were real musicians, but it was my one band moment—I haven't been in another since. I feel like it really affected me as a person; practicing was so much fun.

Rail: We met five years ago while in the Marie Walsh Sharpe Space Program together. How did that year affect you?

Berryhill: Well, it's still affecting me in that I realize that you make such different work when you have room to make it. But it was hard because I had that studio and was working 50 hours a week that whole year. Yet, I was with an amazing group; that is still true.

Rail: William Carlos Williams wrote in *Kora in Hell* (1920), which really reminds me of your paintings, "There is neither a beginning nor an end to the imagination, but it delights in its own seasons reversing the usual order at will." Your paintings have a surrealist quality about them, but you have specifically said that you're not as interested in automatism or psychoanalysis as you are in invention.

Berryhill: Yeah. I'm not interested in aligning myself with an ideology. What's exciting to me is being a little bit lost and then finding meaning; finding my way out of being lost is so palpable. And it's fleeting, but when you feel that moment of getting an answer—where there are no answers forthcoming in our lives or elsewhere—when you get a real clarity in not-knowingness it's a pretty inexplicable sensation experience. And I think that drawing does that, and a lot of different art forms; I'm a huge movie fan. But painting is the most vivid version.

Rail: On Saturday in your studio you brought up Katy Siegel's interview with Richard Shiff in the Rail from 2009, where Shiff said that touch is an extension of vision.
Berryhill: Right, and the visual as a two-way street in that when you touch something, the thing is touching you back. And, he says, if you think of vision in that way, then anything you look at is looking back at you. I really love that understanding because then he goes on to describe that if a dumb object can give you a subjective experience, then imagine how a really smart object, a painting that has been manipulated, changed, touched, and thought about can give you a super-subjective experience. I think he's right. And I do think that many different reads on my paintings are possible, more probable than maybe a lot of other painters or object-makers that I like.

Rail: If the painting touches back, does the person feel this touch, or discover his subjectivity anew?

Berryhill: That would be really nice, but I don't spend any time trying to make a particular viewing experience be the case.



Michael Berryhill, *Tabernacle Trapple*, 2014. Oil on linen, 58 × 50 . Courtesy of artist and Kansas Gallerv.

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Rail: Do you have a specific idea in mind when starting the painting?

Berryhill: Yeah, but it could change on me. And often it takes unexpected turns where it only becomes really obvious what it is about in the end—that I had no idea about 90 percent of the way.

Rail: The evolution of imagery. You have an incredible inventory, breadth of drawings that are largely monochrome, a lot of line drawings, but do you use dream imagery or memory?

Berryhill: No, I couldn't tell you last night's dream.

Rail: You've used this repeated craggy object-shape, figuratively abstract, which reminds me of the rocks in da Vinci's "Madonna of the Rocks." Where did that come from?

Berryhill: It's something like a rock. Someone described them as scholar rocks, and I'm sympathetic. I used to think that scholar rocks were molded by scholars over years of contemplation and living with them, where they would change and change. Now I know that they are chosen for their multiple contemplative possibilities, where they resemble mountains or caves or animals.

Rail: Do the drawings build off each other?

Berryhill: Oh, yeah. And I can also put 10 things in a row, thinking "these are all the same," even though I didn't initially know they were, because they're all different colors and they're all different orientations. My mom had a little Michelangelo *Pietà* sculpture—she probably ordered it from the Vatican—and the backside was an uninterpretable shape of fabric folds. Seeing it from reverse was when it made sense to me, and if you looked at it long enough, you could pick up on the sorrowful thing that it was. I saw Leo Steinberg in the early '90s give a lecture on the *Pietà* that influenced me significantly. He described what we all know, that it's Mary holding Jesus blah, blah, blah, a Christian thing. Then he broke it down into the radical, figurative object it was. Michelangelo's genius was that he took a normal-size woman and had her hold a full-size adult male: it's really impossible to have it be casual. [*Laughter.*] So if you look again, you see she has linebacker shoulders. And her thighbone is cracked in half to accommodate the lowness of his body. Steinberg made a drawing to show how low the body was through the leg. And yet when you look at the thing, it's total realism, it's totally natural, amazing. That's why there's no difference to me, realism, abstraction.

Rail: Is believability important?

Berryhill: Believability is important only to seduce. A little bit of something you know and a little bit of something you don't know.

Rail: But you need both?

Berryhill: I respond to both. I could honestly respond to something that's completely foreign, but if you ask me, "What's the last thing that was completely out of nowhere?" I would have a hard time telling you what that was. The first time I saw a Ryan Trecartin video where they are speaking super fast, I thought, "This is youth culture. I understand this is like gay, speed-talk from the South. I get it, but I get that I'm not supposed to get it." But it felt totally new.

Rail: I think his work is really incredible, and it takes a long time to get into the pace of it. How do you deal with subject matter?

Berryhill: I don't frontload my work with subject, and I don't think about trying to get something to translate from a subject. I think the subject comes out of the translation of confusion. At some point it could be more figurative than object or more heavy than light, but I recognize the subject when it's almost done. And that's when I finish.

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Rail: Is that related to the name of the painting?

Berryhill: Usually. Sometimes the name is goofy to lighten up this autonomous art object. I've thought about making funnier paintings, but then I can't decide if they're funny or sad. [*Laughter.*] And I can't premeditate art.

Rail: Comedy and tragedy are bedfellows. They have a tumultuous relationship. And deviant. In your studio on Saturday nearly every painting had a table or surface upon which the usually main, centralized shape sits.

Berryhill: Yes, I'm asking you to look at this thing and I'm going to offer it up to you on a surface we can both agree on—gravity, a plane, table, or tray.

Rail: Like the head of John the Baptist.

Berryhill: Or Saint Agatha whose breasts were cut off and she has them sitting on a platter. That's crazy. It's the handshake of the image.

Rail: You embrace art history and use many image references. What's your feeling about André Masson or late de Chirico for example?

Berryhill: Love them. I get the sense that de Chirico was really interested in narratives but was super adept at composition, so it's a real fight with him to either tell you a story or wow you with his power, which is really funny. I love "Dying Centaur," with one centaur just murdered while the other flees the scene. It's goofy, tragic, whimsical, and simultaneously murderous.

Rail: Like early Cézanne.

Berryhill: Yeah, it's great. But Cézanne also has been a tough one for me because I saw the color as so dingy. I used to hate on him mostly because I was trying to avoid being a muddy colorist in my own work. For him it's all about touch and the way the thing is constructed. I know that's why Cézanne's a genius. He was so obsessed with getting across how the thing is made. He'll be someone who will grow and grow for me, partly from discussions with my peers. My good friend John McAllister is a big Cézanne fan. And Richard Shiff is a Cézanne maniac. But my art history fixation is like a constant confession that I want to be in this camp. I'm standing on the shoulders of shoulders of shoulders, and it's a pleasure to be alive after all of that. Plus, there's a lot of information that gets me out of trouble spots. I went to a great state school, the University of Texas, Austin, and there were amazing people to witness from afar. Erik Parker, who was a student with me, talked Peter Saul into collaborating with him. That was amazing, so smart. But as for art history, stealing, borrowing, and using it embarrassingly is for clawing your way to originality.

Rail: What's the difference between doing that and appropriation?

Berryhill: In appropriation you want credit for what you take and when you're smuggling it or mugging it, the real game is to lift it and leave no fingerprints, though you would fess up



Michael Berryhill, "Deztop," 2014. Oil on linen, 58 × 50 . Courtesy of artist and Kansas Gallery.

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immediately and honor the thing. But, it's a secret weapon rather than a quote.

Rail: Where does your unique color come from?

Berryhill: From being partially hue blind. [Laughs.] No, I learned from printed-page color, book-page paintings rather than seeing them in life, which wasn't representative or as helpful. But I'm interested in a strange luminosity. And I always want variation. I can figure out a color in one piece, and I work really hard not to repeat it. To be interested I have to get lost and double back, and that's harder if you know what you're doing. And so I think the plan is a little bit of chaos, and the colors and shapes come up together.

Rail: Do you set parameters or limitations for your process?

Berryhill: No, none, though I have my limited technical routines.

Rail: Between your last show at Kansas in 2012 to now, were there specific changes you wanted to make?

Berryhill: Yes. I was not conscious of how to make them, but I wanted for the next show to have the feeling of one thing with little flickers of things around it—less of a shotgun approach. So I'd make a drawing, and then another drawing, and then another; I think Dana [Schutz] does this too, to get the image “yes” or “no” moment before starting to paint, all the information I need, a road map. And I trust myself faster now. That show felt right then, but I already felt like it was not close enough to what I was thinking about. And maybe that's a fun kind of torture one does to keep going, thinking that's not quite it, and then you just want to do it again, and again, and again. I hope that's true too. Also, I realized then that the subject meant something (for a long time I believed it didn't, and so didn't care). But having the platform of a show and the privilege brought the issue forward. Still, clarity may be odd when you know that you're interested in misinterpretation. [Laughs.]

Rail: Maybe they are not mutually exclusive. In the past you've had some critical response to your work about the different degrees of the so-called finish. What unifies paintings that have varying time spans, or more open versus dense brushstrokes?

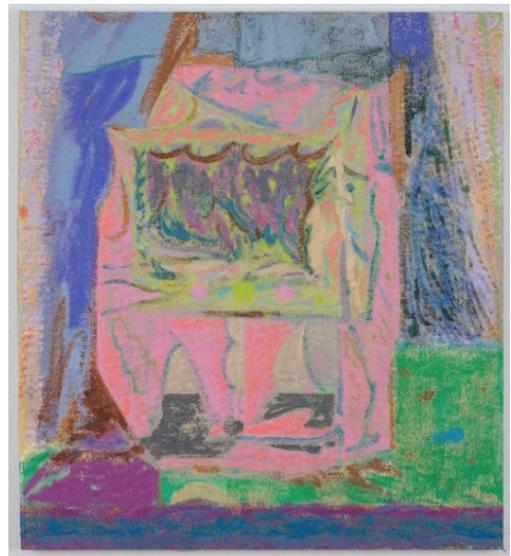
Berryhill: The sensation moment. When the subject or experience crystallizes I have to accept it. It's doing that thing, the thing, a thing. Undeniability can be fast or it can be labored, and I'm attracted to both. I'm not dogmatic about touch. It took me a long time to like Matisse. Always I was Picasso “yes,” but Matisse “no.” At MoMA in the 2003 Matisse/Picasso show, where they were side by side with the exact same image, I thought Picasso just destroyed Matisse. Now I really wish I could go back because I feel so differently. They're both unbelievable. And Matisse is in the air.

Rail: Did you see the recent Matisse show at the Met?

Berryhill: Yeah. Even something that's an efficient-looking painting is saving you the trouble of seeing the labor. But, I do like the idea of the infidelity of my visual tendencies, so I want a little difference even within a group of my things.

Rail: Did you consciously open up your brushstroke between 2012 and this show?

Berryhill: Yes. There's a lot of attraction to friends of mine. Like my own crew, Jackie Gendel,



Michael Berryhill, “Coven Oven,” 2014. Oil on linen, 37 1/4 × 33 1/4 . Courtesy of artist and Kansas Gallerv.

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E J Hauser, John McAllister, even Josephine Halvorson's conceptual thing, how she can have a metaphysical experience with an inanimate object. That Tal R show a year or two ago at Cheim & Read blew me away; it was so wrong and antique. But it also reminds me that I want to be different.

Rail: Okay. What's more alive, a dead tree or a drawing of a dead tree?

Berryhill: Oh boy. That's exciting. [Laughs.] Clearly the drawing.

Rail: Alright. What's more real, a dead tree or a drawing of a dead tree?

Berryhill: Wow, what does that word mean? Well, if you want a botanical history of the world, the tree is more real. But for me, a drawing, an object depicting anything, is reflective of human endeavor, and that's very real. But a painting is more real than a drawing. Drawings are the brain on paper. The doodle is like the brain on paper. Visual thinking. And some people paint like doodles, which I love. But I don't paint like doodles.

Rail: How about—as with the Piéta—is fiction more real than so-called reality?

Berryhill: It can be more meaningful. What's real is not that interesting sometimes, and it doesn't have to be. It's real. There's no pressure on real to be interesting. There's a lot of pressure on drawings to be interesting. Real is merely real.

Rail: [Laughs.] It's a relaxed real.

Berryhill: It's real relaxed.

Rail: Speaking of, you've had many pun titles, such as "Mife on Lars." What attracts you to the pun?

Berryhill: It's utilitarian. It does the work of humor and musicality of the painting, and I think it's pure, playful pleasure, while adding another layer.

Rail: In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche wrote: "Whoever fights with monsters should see to it that he does not become one himself. And when you stare for a long time into an abyss, the abyss stares back into you."

Berryhill: You've got that right. I think the fact that I'm equally excited about artists from the past and present helps me resist style—even if I have one; I'm fairly promiscuous stylistically speaking. The part that I enjoy about image making is knowing that it can go any which way but happens to go this way. The paintings could be embarrassing, but the sort of embarrassment that stands for total surprise. I look for that. I account for each decision, I can't account for why it occurred to me. You can't get back to the first cause. The mystery is always there.

Rail: Is there a most pleasurable part of painting?



Michael Berryhill "Saturn n Son," 2014. Oil on linen, 30 × 24 . Courtesy of artist and Kansas Gallery.

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

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Berryhill: Yeah. The beginning, and also what Charline von Heyl calls the “what the fuck moment”: How the fuck did I do this?

Rail: Astonishment. Artists are asked to talk about what their work means a lot, much more than in other cultural mediums. Do you think this is necessary?

Berryhill: The reason I spend so much time making this stuff and because this is my interest, is because I’m not a verbal person. I am verbal personally, but I dislike the pressure to do it on demand and I can’t defend that which is mysterious to me. I think art is pretty useless in that it doesn’t do something that you planned for it to do. There’s a reason I’m obsessed with listening to politics, but I’m not an activist. I’m definitely a crazy liberal in my mind and in my heart, but I don’t think art can do that kind of lifting. It does a different kind of lifting. It does the thing that we all are hoping that humans are smart for: having interesting mind experiences, and emotional experiences so we can expand and flourish. Verbal can do that too, but that is a separate thing, that is the written word, that is not what I spend my time doing.

Rail: Do you think then art has a role in communication?

Berryhill: Yeah, but such a strange one. Being willing to—that’s that attraction to possible embarrassment—willing to be wrong. Willing to be strange.