

Albright-Knox show explores Joe Bradley's diverse career

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"East Coker," a 2013 oil painting by Joe Bradley, will be on view in a solo exhibition opening June 24 in the Albright-Knox Art Gallery.

Considered individually, Joe Bradley's various bodies of work seem to have emerged from entirely different brains.

There are his robot paintings of the mid-aughts – vaguely digital, 21st-century takes on color field painting. There are his childlike grease-pencil drawings on enormous canvases that evoke cave paintings. And then there are his gritty, multilayered de Kooning-esque abstractions, which contain the footprints of people who have walked over the canvases in his studio.

These distinct bodies of work and others, including the 42-year-old artist's figurative sculptures, will go on view June 24 in the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, in what the museum is calling the first large-scale museum exhibition of the artist's work in North America.

"It became a challenge to figure out how this work comes from the same person: What's the brain that's producing these divergent bodies of work?" said Albright-Knox Senior Curator Cathleen Chaffee, who organized the exhibition. "I'm hoping this exhibition will allow people to see this eclectic, innovative mind at work."

Chaffee, who first encountered Bradley's updated takes on color field painting in the 2008 Whitney Biennial, said that there are two important pieces of connective tissue that link these seemingly disparate approaches to painting and sculpture: humor and the human figure.

This goes for the robot paintings, many of which seem to vaguely mimic human forms, as well as for the obvious references to human anatomy in many of the pencil drawings and some harder-to-detect echoes of human forms in his more recent abstractions.

"I hold onto the body because I just can't make an abstract painting," Bradley told Art in America in 2011. "There's just always a story that I have to make happen."

For viewers struggling to get over the common gut-reaction to abstraction – let's call it the "my kid could paint that" reflex – it helps to try to suss out where the human figure exists in Bradley's work.

It's an exercise that works equally well with the heavy-hitters of abstract expressionism, whose famous works anchor the gallery's collection. These include anatomical references hidden in de Kooning's "Gotham News," the psychedelic swirl of biomorphic body parts in Gorky's "The Liver is the Cock's Comb" and the vertical forms in Clyfford Still's paintings, which can be traced back to his interest in the human figure.

"Good World," a 2017 painting by Joe Bradley, is in the collection of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, where the artist is having his first major exhibition in North America.

What often distinguishes Bradley's work from the machismo and self-seriousness of the famous abex painters, Chaffee suggested, is a lighter touch.

"For this artist, not everything has the same heft or weight to it. It's important to laugh," she said.

It doesn't hurt that the Albright-Knox contains a world-renowned trove of the best of 20th century American abstraction, which many museumgoers may use as a grounding to explore Bradley's work.

"I think people in the community who are familiar with our abex collection will see a painter who in contemporary life is struggling with a lot of the same formal questions that those artists were struggling with," Chaffee said. "How do you make a good abstract picture, a picture that can hold its own in a field that since the '50s has become so saturated?"

Buffalonians will soon have a chance to judge for themselves.