

For an Anticipated New Show, a Shape-Shifting Artist Reinvents His Practice — Again

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Two weeks before his first Gagosian show, the artist Joe Bradley is still in the thick of things. On the walls of his Brooklyn Navy Yard studio, wet canvases face off amid the organized chaos of paint buckets, unstretched linen and a lonesome espresso machine. “These ones are mostly finished,” Bradley says, motioning to a triptych of large abstract compositions. “Others need radical surgery.” The eight or so works in progress that ring the room represent six months of development — an ongoing self-editing process that won’t stop until the paintings are on their way to the gallery. “Just knowing the deadline is looming, some kind of performative thing kicks in,” Bradley explains. “Otherwise you could play with something indefinitely.”

The option is tempting. Bradley's sun-soaked loft seems like an idyllic place to paint away the hours — an activity the artist prefers to do in private. With part-time assistants to take care of the more “blue-collar chores,” Bradley maximizes his time to indulge his medium. “Oil paint has so much life. It really behaves like it wants to behave,” the 40-year-old says. “You’ll go into a painting with an idea of what you want to do, and 40 seconds later your plan has been upended. You always have to deal with these little skirmishes on the canvases.”

Over the years, Bradley has repeatedly come out victorious — although it's hard to pinpoint exactly why. Picked up by Canada gallery in the early 2000s, the soft-spoken artist found a loyal audience despite the aesthetic leaps he chose to make. His “Schmagoo Paintings,” slapdash grease-pencil drawings, followed his fleeting success as a minimalist (which found him stacking monochromatic canvases into the shape of rudimentary robots), and his prices jumped from the thousands to the hundreds of thousands. While Bradley's critics suggest that his anti-style is more gimmick than substance, his fans laud him for his ability to continually find moments of sincerity and authenticity in art's most painful clichés.

For this show, Bradley meditated on painting in its most basic form — a stretched canvas hung on the wall, the technique defined by gravity, à la Cy Twombly's drips. “When it's on the wall, you can't help consider composition in a way that is sort of conventional, which is appealing to me,” he admits. The resulting images suggest energetic swipes piled up layer after layer. The out-of-the tube colors match the artist's primitive touch: red, blue, black, green. Nonfigurative and non-narrative, the paintings rely on being self-representative.

Almost complete, the works are currently called “to be titled,” and they will most likely remain that way. Bradley isn't big on titles: “I've shied away from naming bodies of work because on the one hand it kind of smacks of marketing to me, and on the other, I don't really think in terms of series like that,” he says. This exhibition is his first since leaving Gavin Brown's gallery in New York; and thus far, he's only shared the work's development with select close friends, so it will be new to everyone — the gallery included. In addition to the paintings and drawings he plans to show, Bradley will introduce sculptures: “That's a new dance move for me,” he says. The cumulative display will encompass two floors of Gagolian's Madison Avenue compound.

While Bradley is perhaps most prized for his ability to surprise, the artist sees his own work more cohesively than most do. “It may appear disjointed, the sort of bodies of work, but I think they can hang side by side comfortably,” he says, leaning back in his chair. “They feel like they all come from the same source.”