

Ashley Bickerton

September 25- November 6, 2021

Various Small Fires is pleased to present an exhibition of new works by Ashley Bickerton (b. Barbados, 1959, lives in Bali, Indonesia) and the artist's first solo show with the gallery.

Bickerton, while known as an American artist, has lived and worked on the south coast of the island of Bali for the past 27 years. He grew up moving between a series of islands in several oceans, and across four continents. Deeply influenced by the legacy of his father's nomadic career as an internationally acclaimed scholar in anthropological linguistics, Bickerton's peripatetic childhood was critical in shaping the conceptually based and autobiographical practice that he has become known for today. After graduating CalArts in 1982, Bickerton wasted little time moving to New York City and establishing himself as one of the seminal figures in a group of artists coming out of the then explosive East Village scene, a group variously referred to as Neo-Geo or Commodity Art, and that included the likes of Peter Halley, Haim Steinback, Allan McCollum, and Jeff Koons. The works that ensued from this hotbed, while borrowing liberally from the language of earlier modernist developments in 20th century art, including minimalism, conceptualism, and pop art, shifted those dialogues dramatically to create a critical practice that raised questions about the commercialization of contemporary cultural consumption and the commodification of the art object itself.

An avid lifelong surfer and fervent anti-conformist, Bickerton followed his instincts and left New York permanently after 12 years, taking with him his singular approach and vision to the antipodean reaches of the Indian Ocean. His most recent body of work on view at Various Small Fires includes three new series that collectively take us back full circle to a much earlier phase of the artist's career. Indeed, this newest body of work can be seen as the natural progeny of the artist's *Landscapes and Seascapes* series from the late 1980s— first shown with critical acclaim at Sonnabend Gallery in New York during the same era. Encased in packing cases and travel modified vitrines, these works quote liberally from the historic traditions of landscape painting and reference an array of artists that range from JMW Turner to Milton Avery and Albert Pinkham Ryder. Bathed in both organic and acid hues, and dissected by undulating lines of ocean borne flotsam and detritus, these works, like traditional Chinese landscape do not so much describe a place, as trigger the experience of immersion in landscape itself. Bickerton himself has described this series as follows:

“When I think about these pieces, I think of words and terms like flotsam, borderless oceanic detritus, seascapes, culturescapes, swirling cosmologies of micro plastics, fragments of human narratives, residues of lives lived, of vestiges of human presence now swirling in great molecular vortexes. Landscape and seascape is where I have always been happiest. I long for great silence.”

Bickerton is particularly intrigued by the great gyres, or so-called “trash islands”, the Texas-sized and decades-long swirling accumulations of non-degradable plastics that today occupy vast tracts of our open oceans. While some might see these works as a lamentation of the planet's demise, Bickerton takes a decidedly different, perhaps almost gleeful approach. He sees this ‘garbage’ as a thing of beauty, as much a part of the natural order as the ingenious adaptations of microbes as they take to a new host species. If these works may or may not direct us to consider the destruction of our planetary home, as ‘landscapes and seascapes’ they certainly throw into question our complicated relationship with the natural world. There is a strange futuristic and celestial lyricism to the work that serves to underscore a dark humor that drives it all, or as the New York Times Critic Holland Cotter put it, “It's easy to forget what natural-born moralists American artists are until you encounter someone like Ashley Bickerton. His work doesn't just wag a finger or propose reform. It offers a worldview that is basically an end-of-the-world view, beyond solution, beyond revulsion, blissed-out on the

terrible wonder of it all.”

The often sleek and polished exteriors of the *Vector* and *Ocean Chunk* series in this exhibition are a longtime hallmark of Bickerton’s aesthetic, and as has often been noted, recall the so-called “finish fetish” of the California minimalists of the 1960s, an influence Bickerton attributes to growing up in the related surf culture of Hawai’i. The reflective glass surfaces of the *Flotsam* and *Vector* works serve a seemingly anthropological or scientific purpose, preserving a taxonomy of detritus in hermetically sealed displays that conjure an eerie version of the museum vitrine. With the glass faces also alluding to a storefront showcase window, we see a classic play of multi-edged Bickerton relativism, drawing unflinching attention to the art object’s status as a temporally fixed commodity object, while at the same time making fun of itself as a mute philosophical provocation in the face of the eternal.

Two works from the *Ocean Chunk* series are included in the exhibition, one in the project room and another taking its position centrally in the main gallery. Bickerton claims to have conceived the series back when he lived in New York after enduring one grueling North Eastern winter too many. He says, “All I wanted to do was swim.” These are surrogates for the balm of warm tropical water. They are an attempt to give flesh to the unattainable, a symbolic facsimile of a piece of ocean and its relevant bathymetry— a visual pill that can offer momentary transportation, a repository for all longing.

Along with the floating *Ocean Chunk*, a collection of Bickerton’s *Wall-Wall* works line the walls of the project room. He sees these ‘visual tautologies’ as literally snap on walls to sit on walls, to fill space with color and meaning, to essentially stand in for and act as ‘real’ paintings. Bombast and hyperbole are the operative terms here. Resembling both a technicolor rock wall and a carefully arranged constellation of shiny candies, some of the works are adorned with short, poem-like snippets of text— running like subtitles at the base of the works. If these small paragraphs purport to narrate the glossy assemblages above, they also fail to provide any conclusive “solution” to what we’re looking at. Like the rest of the artist’s oeuvre, this is what makes Bickerton’s work most engaging: his works are endlessly inquisitive, exploding forth with a fusillade of questions, but offering precious little in the way of any kind of tangible answers.

Ashley Bickerton received his B.F.A. from the California Institute of the Arts in 1982 and continued his education in the independent studies program at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Solo exhibitions of his work have been organized at Newport Street Gallery, London (2017); The FLAG Art Foundation, New York (2017); and Palacete del Embarcadero, Autoridad Portuaria de Santander, Spain (1997). Select group exhibitions featuring Bickerton’s work include *Drawn Together Again*, FLAG Art Foundation, New York, NY (2019); *Brand New: Art and Commodity in the 1980s*, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C. (2018); *Human Interest: Portraits from the Whitney’s Collection*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY (2016); *L’Almanach 16*, Le Consortium, Dijon, France (2016); *Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age*, Museum Brandhorst, Munich, Germany (2015); *Ileana Sonnabend: Ambassador for the New*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY (2013); *Aquatopia*, Nottingham Contemporary, Nottingham, United Kingdom, traveled to Tate St Ives, Cornwall, United Kingdom (2013); *The Living Years: Art after 1989*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN (2012); *This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s*, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Chicago, IL, traveled to Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN, and Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA (2012); *Postmodernism: Style and Subversion 1970-1990*, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, United Kingdom (2011); *Skin Fruit: Selections from the Dakis Joannou Collection*, New Museum, New York, NY (2010); *Pop Life: Art in a Material World*, Tate Modern, London, United Kingdom (2009); *Allegories of Modernism: Contemporary Drawing*, The Museum of Modern



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Art, New York, NY (1992); Word as Image: American Art 1960-1990, Milwaukee Art Museum, WI (1990), traveled to Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, TX (1991); and the Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY (1989).

Bickerton's work is in numerous international public and private collections, including The Broad, Los Angeles, CA; Ellipse Foundation, Amsterdam, the Netherlands; Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, Japan; Museo D'Arte Contemporanea Donnaregina, Naples, Italy; Museu Coleção Berardo, Lisbon, Portugal Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Chicago, IL; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA; The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; The Robert & Elaine Stein Galleries, Wright State University, Dayton, OH; Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the Netherlands; Tate Britain, London, United Kingdom; Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, Canada; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY.