

Joshua Abelow
Famous Artist
Sorry We're Closed

In Conversation: Joshua Abelow Interviewed By Jason Brinkerhoff

Jason Brinkerhoff: Are you watching the Olympics?

Joshua Abelow: Yeah, a bit here and there. I don't have a television, but if I did I would be watching all the time. I love the gymnastics and the high dives. I love the precision.

JB: Did you play any sports growing up?

JA: I was heavily into skateboarding when I was a kid and throughout my teenage years. I had a crew of skateboarder friends and we all were pretty good—some better than others. My ambition was to get sponsored, but toward the end of high school I got more interested in smoking cigarettes and other classy stuff like that so I guess that's when I decided to really focus exclusively on painting and drawing.

JB: Your paintings are made inside a system of rules. How does the act of painting influence these rules?

JA: My systems are more like guidelines that help me maintain control of the painting. Most of the time, I take a piece of linen or burlap and I stretch it over a store-bought canvas—I gesso it and let it dry. Then I flip the canvas over and I write a type of diagram on the back with a black Sharpie marker. The diagram outlines the composition and the colors I will use to make the painting. I started developing these color alphabets in 2007 when I was a student at Cranbrook and these alphabets are the legs my paintings stand on. In the beginning, I would make the paintings and write the notes after the fact, but now it's the reverse. It's sort of like I'm making ready-mades.

JB: Interesting. Your paintings begin with words. Codes. Do you ever change direction—the formula—as you are actually making the painting?

JA: Yeah, that happens. The paintings seem to have a mind of their own. Once I develop a code I almost always make other paintings that disrupt that code. Usually, this disruption comes spontaneously; a momentary flash of anger or frustration or boredom. But, more often than not, I stick to the code because a lot of my paintings have to do with restraint rather than spontaneity. My drawings, on the other hand, are very impulsive.

JB: Do the paintings then mediate intention versus production?

JA: Yes. It's very much a balancing act. I work on a lot of paintings at the same time so I can push different paintings in different directions. Little nuances, often made by mistake, can lead to entirely new bodies of work or new ways of thinking about older works.

JB: The self-referential touches—phone numbers, simple geometric self portraits, etc.—they seem to me to be a type of interruption to the original plan. How do these find their way into your process and final painting?

JA: I set out to create certain abstract rhythms and I sometimes find it necessary to disrupt these rhythms in order to undermine the logic of the system I've set in place. It's also a way to deface my own work. When I show my cell phone number paintings I get text messages and phone calls from strangers. One time I got a message from some guy at 2am telling me he hates my work and is “urging his associates not to invest in my bullshit.” Another time, a woman sent nude photos and asked me to come over for sex, but “no talking.” You never know what you're going to get. And this, too, is a type of (sometimes unsettling) disruption.

JB: There are presently 7420 entries on your blog. You began with a short essay by Martin Creed on the subject of work on March 30, 2010. What is the significance of this?

JA: Martin's Creed's *Work #470* (2005) struck a cord with me. "Work is a fight against loneliness, against low self esteem, against depression, and against staying in bed." I like thinking about this connection between work and loneliness. It seemed like an appropriate beginning. I think anybody who makes a lot of work probably understands what it means to be lonely and sometimes the only way to combat loneliness is to work through it.

JB: He also said, "I want to be on my own, but I don't want to be alone." Does your blog help to serve this paradox?

JA: Yes, absolutely. When I started the blog I was at a lonely point in my life and it felt good to put so much energy into a virtual reality space—a “safe” space. My I MISS YOU BITCH paintings stem from that sort of idea as well; the idea that you might have this desire or need to be close to someone or something, but at the same time you create a distance and you push them or it away.

JB: How do you decide what to put on your blog?

JA: I post what I find interesting or relevant to the conversation about art making at large. I’ve posted studio visits with artists like Cheryl Donegan, Noam Rappaport, Polly Apfelbaum, Ella Kruglyanskaya, Ross Bleckner, Jonathan Allmaier, Van Hanos, Joanne Greenbaum, Matt Connors, among many others. Doing the studio visits gets me out of my head and I like meeting artists and seeing what they are up to outside of a commercial context. I often post work by young or unknown artists alongside famous artists and vice-versa. When I’m reading a good book I sometimes post passages. I’ve posted a lot of poems by Charles Bukowski and Richard Brautigan. Recently, I posted excerpts from a book of collected essays by John Kelsey called, *Rich Texts: Selected Writing for Art*. The blog is basically a visual radio show and also a kind of personal diary. It is also operating as a free form, roving gallery. I organized ten shows (with the help of many talented curators and artists) in NY last summer and two shows in Miami at Gallery Diet this summer. There was a strong response to the exhibitions and I met and worked with a lot of interesting people. A young artist and writer named Stephen Truax is curating the next ABAB show, which opens at a space in New Jersey this fall.

JB: How long will the blog go on?

JA: I’m not sure — I started it on a whim and I’ll probably end it on a whim. I’d like to see a solid decade on there, but I might get tired of it before then — we’ll see.