

Joshua Abelow: 1982 - 2022

Joshua Abelow

April 8th - May 27, 2022

I've known Joshua Abelow and his enigmatic work since I was 18 years old. I was introduced to it in 2003 by his sister, Tisch Abelow, now a fantastic artist in her own right. Back then, I was working at The Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, the city where I was born, and Warhol was the only artist I knew very much about. Once Tisch introduced me to her brother, I knew two artists quite well: Andy and Josh. The former is one of the most famous people in modern Western history; the latter has always wanted to be a famous artist. This is a sentiment Abelow has expressed countless times on the surfaces of his paintings; he has even gone so far as to name a solo exhibition in Brussels FAMOUS ARTIST. Of course, the use of this phrase is tongue-in-cheek, but even when Abelow was an unknown in his late twenties, it was obvious to me, a bright-eyed punk, that my new friend was interested and invested in Warholian strategies and sensibilities. He wanted to build myths and spin narratives for far longer than 15 minutes.

Art and life are inseparable to and for Abelow, and the decisions he makes – both on a personal and a professional level – reflect this ideology. Art is why he has done surprising, to some confounding, things like leave New York City in 2014 to make paintings in a barn outside of his hometown of Frederick, Maryland, or to buy a dilapidated church in a random hamlet in upstate New York (to make and exhibit work) two years later. In some ways, acts like these are aspirational; but they're devotional, too. The choice of calling a church both home, studio, and exhibition space is a very pointed, poignant, and profound one.

The gallery, Freddy, which was founded by Abelow in Baltimore while he was living in Frederick, has been located on the other side of his bedroom at the church since May 2016. Visitors pass through his bedroom in order to enter the gallery, which is both an homage to the legendary Freddy Krueger and to the place where he grew up. The artist often talks about the significance of Freddy, the character, living in folks' dreams and Freddy, the gallery, being next door to where he sleeps. But when I consider this connection, I would say the focus ought to be on the fact that Abelow thinks about art even while in slumber on a desolate country road, as opposed to those who were perpetually haunted by nightmares on Elm Street.

Prior to Abelow leaving New York City to get a bigger studio and to start a gallery south of the Mason-Dixon Line, he like so many of his peers and other young artists before them had been under the impression – or the illusion – that the city was this magical center of the universe, that it was the primary place one could “make it” in the art world. When he was in art school in the '90s, this was the message that was reinforced to young students over and over and over again. So that's why once most of them graduated, they (Abelow included) moved from wherever their school was located to one of the boroughs.

baader-meinhof

1322 S 6th St Omaha, NE 68108 | info@baader-meinhof.org | www.baader-meinhof.org

For the entirety of his first stint in New York, Abelow worked as Ross Bleckner's studio assistant. After seven years, he left to attend the Cranbrook Academy of Art in suburban Detroit. A few years after graduating, he began to see the writing on the wall: It was becoming increasingly difficult for young artists to survive the constant aggressions and pressures initiated and enacted by neoliberal developers and faux-progressive activists, as well as the myriad excessive financial forces that assert dominance over the spectrum of culture. But Abelow additionally saw some hope and positivity: The Internet's continual expansion could and would finally provide decent exposure to artists working outside of major metropolitan areas; this also could and would allow artists to actually, legitimately connect with each other (and not just self-promote) via social media. This is not a knock on big-city life (I live in and love Los Angeles), nor is it a diss against commercial galleries (some are doing a fine job of supporting fine artists). Instead, it is an endorsement of alternative methods and methodologies for being an engaged and engaging artist in a forever-evolving, complex, and – at times – unforgiving ecosystem.

A few years after leaving Michigan, Abelow started his influential blog, ART BLOG ART BLOG. He shut this popular project down in 2015 after five years of obsessively and meticulously curating culture in his mold from his ideas and interests, determining his preferences and flooding the web with his presence. When I ruminate on how it directly and indirectly shaped a lot of things that followed, both online and in real life, I wonder why more of us don't think about this sort of constellation-making as an educational tool, in contrast to or in conjunction with more traditional modes of teaching. I suppose this especially comes to mind, given how much of a stranglehold the MFA programs have on the art community out here in Southern California.

The visual flow Abelow was creating with his blog was like his own fluid version of verbal or written criticism, and the organic offerings he was providing were either a precursor to or a reflection of the time in which he more formally came to prominence. His art-world breakthrough occurred in the years immediately following the 2008 recession, which turned out to be perhaps the purest creative moment that I've experienced as an adult. In a sense, it was the last time art made people think (critically), made people feel (on a deeper, more nuanced level), made people question ("major" and "minor" things) on a larger and broader scale, and at a more consistent rate (at least in America).

I received my BFA from Rutgers University in 2008, the same year Abelow received his MFA. And I did the same thing Abelow did when he graduated from RISD ten years prior: I fucking moved to New York City. I was poor as shit. But I didn't feel as alone as I probably would as a poor young artist living in New York nowadays. Of course, there were the trust fund kids I inevitably met at openings or parties: You know, the folks who didn't have jobs but could somehow afford a big-ass storage space in the Navy Yard for all their sculptures still waiting to be sold, or the ones who had a giant painting studio with beautiful light in Gowanus and yet somehow would have the gall to ask you to spot them for a slice or a beer. The irony, huh? I guess that's how the rich stay rich (and get even richer). Having said all of that, though, it did feel like there were a lot of artists I could understand and relate to, who just wanted art to be raw and real and relevant, and for it not to be a waste of time, money, energy, or effort.

[CONT.]

baader-meinhof

1322 S 6th St Omaha, NE 68108 | info@baader-meinhof.org | www.baader-meinhof.org

This was my attitude towards art back then, and it remains the same today: It can be fun and funny; it ought to be thoughtful and thought-provoking. Art has so much potential, and during this time, when so much seemed so bleak, there were plenty of people seeing the potential in art and trying to make good on that potential. Around the time I was an undergrad, an exuberantly fresh scene exploded in New York's Lower East Side, and Chinatown in Los Angeles put the slippery West Coast mega-city's name on the map more forcefully than ever before. Despite the market crash leading to many great galleries unfortunately folding, the enchanting spirit of these spots lived on for another half-decade or so. I believe it's telling that it was in this climate that Abelow really started to set the stage for his career.

In 2007, when I was a junior at Rutgers and Abelow was a graduate student at Cranbrook, he showed me an installation of 72 paintings he had made, all hung in a grid. The grouping featured alternating paintings that read, "HANG ME" and "HARDER FASTER." It was titled "Mystic Truths," after the Bruce Nauman spiraled neon sign that reads, "The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths" in a blue text highlighted in red. Nauman's piece remains beautiful and poetic because it is at once idealistic, sardonic, and declarative in such a deadpan manner. When I think about the evolution of Abelow's work since then, I always come back to this installation because I see it as the foundation for everything that was to come.

Some of my favorites over the years have been explicitly self-masturbatory, like the appropriately titled "Masturbate Often" (2007), which Abelow painted in his first year of grad school, an occasionally isolating time when crippling doubt can be cast on even the most assured artists. Others have been simultaneously self-aggrandizing and self-deprecating, like "Self-Portrait" from 2010, which showcases the artist with a long schlong, smoking a cigarette while giving birth to another smoking artist out his asshole. 2012's "Mr. Big Dick" once again depicts the artist in the nude, this time sharting while walking, with his big dick hanging down below his knees and another cigarette hanging out of his mouth. In recent years, many of his paintings have mellowed out, balancing bravado and humility with bright humor, like in 2019's "Planet Earth."

I think this mellowness is worth pointing out. For as long as I've known Abelow, he's been an ultra-mellow dude. But he can also be a neurotic perfectionist, who has little patience for drama or nonsense and requires routine to function at full capacity, and he always wants to function at full capacity. He cranks out hundreds of paintings a year. But unlike many of his contemporaries, some of whom have an incredibly productive output themselves and whose paintings fetch six figures or more at auction, Abelow's assembly line is not impacted by current market trends or those being forecasted.

It's funny – I used to think the term "art practice" was kind of a silly one; like, are artists really practicing something or for something, and if so, what is that something? But after all these years of having Abelow and his work in my life, I kind of just think of the notion of an art practice in possibly the simplest way imaginable. For Abelow, he really is executing the old adage "practice makes perfect." Think about it: How do certain basketball players get so good at shooting? By practicing their shot. How do most chefs get so good at cooking? By messing around with recipes and ingredients. And they do it for as long as they can every day. They do it with fastidious fervor. Abelow's not much of a hooper and he pretty much eats the same things every single day, but after two decades of practice, it's perfectly clear that he's currently entering his prime.

[CONT.]

baader-meinhof

1322 S 6th St Omaha, NE 68108 | info@baader-meinhof.org | www.baader-meinhof.org

The works in this exhibition can be broken down into three groups: Work from the artist's childhood/youth (1982 to 1995), early work (1999 to 2006), and work from graduate school and that has been made since (2007 to 2022). The earliest piece is a drawing of E.T. that Abelow made in 1982, the year the film was released; he was five years old at the time. The artist's first-ever oil paintings are also included; these are works he produced with a palette knife when he was approximately ten years old. A moody self-portrait from 1994 is of the artist as a high school senior. The works made between 1999 and 2006 display a range of sizes and styles, as well as a natural inclination to experiment with materials. It was during this period that Abelow began to fine-tune his practice, using an economical and precise application of paint. From 2007 onward, the work experienced two important shifts: First, the artist's insecurities became more overt subject matter; second, color uniquely became part of his subject matter, and it was extensively researched through disciplined note-taking, resulting from various systems of trial and error. After 2010, Abelow had become acutely aware of the digital framework that informs and extends the presentation of art. This revelation, that in hindsight is now obvious to the artist, was like his own personal big bang that has propelled him forward and has led to exponential new developments in the ways he approaches art-making and exhibition-making.

Now, nearly 15 years after the most recent financial crisis, we are all facing a new financial crisis: Rents, tuition, and debt are all rising; artists and galleries are pushing longtime residents out of their neighborhoods, and wealthier artists and wealthier galleries are pushing those artists and galleries out of those same neighborhoods. These are issues that have been present since the beginning of civilization, as far as we can all tell, but the effects are so rapid and damaging at this stage of late capitalism that it almost feels too late. It almost feels impossible for change to happen. But it's not. We may never be able to completely coexist like the infamous bumper sticker suggests, but we don't have to collectively continue to succumb to "conventional wisdom" or laissez-faire mentalities and behaviors, either.

Abelow has long been conscious, even self-conscious, of these things. He knows he has the potential to be a problem or part of the problem, but he wants and tries to avoid doing so. At the same time, he must know that he can never truly be the problem, or even really part of the problem, because in order for that to be the case, you either need to have real money, and in turn, real power, or you need to be willing to be complicit. The thing is: Abelow just wants to be true to himself and his practice, and he refuses to comply. His indulgence is more akin to asceticism than hedonism. That distinction is crucial, as the former can lead to introspection and intellectualism, and the latter can easily lead to philistinism.

Hedonism is often rather appealing, isn't it? Every American president since the 1980s has been a hedonist: Reagan ushered in the "greed is good" movement; Daddy Bush saw society as a game he could play; Clinton went public with toxic masculinity; Dubya abided by the Texas rule of thumb that "bigger is always better"; Obama fooled the nation into thinking he cared about the middle class; Trump got off on fucking everybody over; and Biden might just be the most entitled president we've ever had, with Hillary probably being the only person who's ever felt that they deserve the position any more than he does.

[CONT.]

baader-meinhof

1322 S 6th St Omaha, NE 68108 | info@baader-meinhof.org | www.baader-meinhof.org

Republicans want to privatize the arts and maximize their profits, while Democrats want artists to believe that they are sympathetic to their causes and situations, as they similarly attempt to privatize the arts and maximize their profits, albeit more covertly, of course. It's pretty wild that we've been dealing with this bullshit for four decades – the same amount of time encapsulated by this exhibition.

As the decades have passed, many artists have expectedly given in; sadly, many others have ultimately given up. Some have instead decided to retreat a bit; like Nauman eventually did, this too is what Abelow has done.

Being as close to Abelow and his work as I have been for now half my life, I can't think of a more perfect time or place for him to show all these pieces together. An artist who runs a DIY gallery in a place where most of the people who view its shows do so on the Internet is having his first retrospective at a DIY gallery in a place where most of the people who view its shows do so on the Internet. I mean, how could it make any more sense?

- Keith J. Varadi
March 2022

This exhibition opens in concurrence with solo and two-person exhibitions at five venues this spring. Each exhibition will present a unique facet of the artist's work, providing a comprehensive showcase of Abelow's multivalent and deeply collaborative practice.

Zoom, JIR SANDEL, Copenhagen: March 27 - April 17. Extended through May 4.

Joshua Abelow featuring Joshua Boulos, A.D.NYC, New York: April 8 - May 14

Joshua Abelow: 1982 - 2022, Baader-Meinhof, Omaha: April 8 - May 27

Joshua Abelow: 2022, Apartment 13, Providence: April 9 - May 10

Anti-Magic with Dani Arnica, Et al., San Francisco: April 15 - May 21

Joshua Abelow (b. 1976, Frederick, MD) earned his MFA from the Cranbrook Academy of Art in 2008 and his BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1998. Recent exhibitions were held at Jir Sandel, Copenhagen, DK; Anthony Greaney, Somerville, MA; Magenta Plains, New York, NY; Sydney, Sydney, AU; Apartment 13, Providence, RI; Harkawik, Los Angeles, CA; Et al. San Francisco, CA; James Fuentes, New York, NY and Halsey McKay, East Hampton, NY.

Abelow's work has been included in numerous group exhibitions internationally. The artist has several published books including *Painter's Journal* (2012), *ART FICTION* (2013), *DRAWINGS DRAWINGS* (2018), and *Good Morning* (2018). From 2010 to 2015, Abelow ran *ART BLOG ART BLOG*, which functioned as an art blog, temporary gallery, print publication, and sculpture. Additionally, the artist is known as the proprietor of *Freddy*, a curatorial project he founded in Baltimore (2014). Abelow lives and works in Harris, NY and New York, NY.

Keith J. Varadi is an artist, poet, critic, curator, and researcher, living in Los Angeles, California. During the week, he works for the long-running television game show, *Jeopardy!*. On the weekends, he roams the city.