

Peter Bradley, Chromophone

by Nancy Princenthal

Evoking lava still on the move, lichen clinging to rock, and moss of an acid, nearly toxic green, Peter Bradley's monumental *Circle of Fifths* (1973) is a volcanic abstraction. The acrylic paint, thickened with gel medium in a method that Bradley helped pioneer, appears to churn in some passages and to slow and harden in others. A crevice at the center marked by a streak of pink would be fleshy if the painting's primary impression, of actively unstable topography, were not so vivid it is almost narrative—a story of the planet being born. By contrast, *Port Royale*, also from 1973, is closer to fog than solid rock, and appears to have been executed inside a siege of heavy weather. Its ground is a shifty gray, modulating from storm-cloud blue to a warmer, earthier haze with hints of orange and yellow. Thinly knifed lines sweep across the surface like driven rain, mostly diagonally from the upper right, although in some places the wind shifts and strokes descend in a different direction. In a third register, small incidents interrupt the linear veil: a little flurry of white, red, and black strokes suggests a bird on the wing, its feathers wet. A thicker smatter of lines evokes denser rainfall, or hail, and a muffled eruption of heat slowly emerges at lower right. Embedded in the complicated surface are scribbly black lines, like traces of a lost alphabet.

Circle of Fifths is nearly eleven feet wide; *Port Royale* is more than a foot wider, and feels larger still. In fact, a signal characteristic of Bradley's work, both early and recent, is that it defies a secure sense of scale. That resistance starts with the mystery of paint application; there is no clear register of direct touch, no determined orientation, or even a fixed frame. It looks to

have been poured, or propelled, or flung—to have involved anything besides a brush in hand and a stretched canvas hung on the wall. It does not seem bound by human measure. One point of reference for Bradley’s defiance of finitude is his interest in deep space, first explored by manned spacecraft shortly before he began painting in earnest.¹ His attraction to limitless night skies can be seen in paintings as recent as a pitchy, light-studded nocturne completed this past summer. Connections have been made between Bradley’s work and the spiritual, cultural, and historical currents of Afro-Futurism; he has also been linked to the Romantics Delacroix and Turner, with their spatial exploits and emotional transports. Then too, there is Bradley’s own outsize life story. The house he grew up in, in western Pennsylvania, had twenty-seven bedrooms; his adoptive mother fostered sixty-four children. A remarkable roster of jazz giants were regular guests, living legends all.

Along with boundless scale, indefinable color is a key feature of Bradley’s work, another quality that opposes fixed measure. Always unstable, changing with context, distance, conditions of light, and every set of eyes, color in Bradley’s hands is almost mystically mercurial. “Color supersedes subject matters. . . . Once you see the color you don’t have to care about the subject matter,” he told Shanna Farrell in a 2019 interview, adding that what he is after is “a color that has never been seen before.”² The tall, narrow paintings *Mayfair* (1971) and *Oblivious Venus* (1974) both seem, like *Port Royale*, to have been painted inside stormy weather, where chroma are particularly hard to define. *Mayfair* features skittery slashes of dried-blood brown that rain

¹ “Peter Bradley: A Life in Paint,” interviews conducted in 2019 by Andrianna Campbell and Shanna Farrell, Getty Trust Oral History Project, African American Art History Initiative, Getty Research Institute/Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 85, https://www.getty.edu/research/special_collections/oral_histories/pdfs/bradley_peter.pdf.

² *Ibid.*, 85–86.

down here and there, beneath which shadowy shapes emerge slowly in shades of maroon and salmon. *Oblivious Venus* captures a downpour; in this dark painting, an arc of warm yellow is mirrored in a gray wing below, amid a drenched thicket of greenish brown.

In a different temper, *Barbantum* (1972), another slender vertical canvas, is made of a rich, unpolished gold that looks like it was just dug out of the earth. The surface of this painting is unevenly thick; it too offers glimpses of deep red. But the color and the proud verticality give it majestic force. If the big early paintings in landscape orientations invoke Jackson Pollock's wildly digressive classic drips, these narrow verticals suggest Barnett Newman's terse, declarative "Zips." Completed shortly after Bradley organized a legendary exhibition of abstract painting and sculpture at Houston's DeLUXE Theater in 1971, *Barbantum* has the ring of authority—of empire—evoked by its title. It also has something of the period glamour discernible in Agnes Martin's *Friendship* (1963), a grid laid onto gold leaf that approximates silk shantung; Andy Warhol's *Gold Marilyn Monroe* (1962), with its echoes of religious icons, comes to mind, too.

While Bradley is no fan of either painter, he was an art dealer at the prominent Perls Gallery, in New York, before he became a painter, an art handler at the Guggenheim Museum before he got the job at Perls, and an unabashed proponent of high style. The gallery's clients included Gregory Peck and Greta Garbo; Bradley met Picasso and Braque, Mark Rothko and Anthony Caro. While at Perls, where he became associate director, Bradley insisted on handmade Italian suits, and favored luxury carmakers; a photo of a Ferrari he then owned (and customized, painting it chocolate brown) remains on his studio wall. In defiance of protocols encouraging the appearance of a modesty that, in successful artists, is all too often false, Bradley

has not been shy of celebrating his good fortune—that is, of embracing life’s material, sensual bounties, which are, after all, not foreign to art.

He has been equally willing to own his darker moments, which are plenty bleak. The pendulum of his life has swung wide, with an arc more familiar to musicians than painters. Indeed, music is fundamental to both Bradley’s work and life. His adoptive father was a cook on the Baltimore and Ohio railroad who helped steer Black musicians to Bradley’s childhood home, which is how he came to know so many jazz greats, including Miles Davis, Art Blakey, Max Roach, and Dizzy Gillespie. Aretha Franklin, a friend while he was in high school in Detroit, sang at Bradley’s first wedding, he says; he was seventeen. To be sure, there was instruction in art as well. He started painting at ten, with his mother’s support, and as a child visited the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh. Later, he frequented the Detroit Institute of Art, where he was impressed by an eclectic roster of artists, from Diego Rivera to Anthony Caro. In the mid-1960s he spent a couple of semesters at Yale. He did not take the famous Albers color course, and he does not recall getting support from Al Held, the leading Yale instructor the time; there is some bitterness in Bradley’s recollections of the school. One artist he met early and has referred to with unvarying admiration and gratitude is Kenneth Noland. Somewhat more reluctantly, Bradley notes the influence of Dan Christensen and Jules Olitiski, and says Larry Poons was a friend. Clement Greenberg, whom Bradley also knew, remains a touchstone, still mentioned in studio conversation.

But music is probably the single greatest influence on Bradley’s painting. Recorded jazz plays continuously, quietly but clearly, as he works; a priority in the recently completed construction of his current studio was the installation of an excellent sound system. Bradley’s

connection to music is evident in his work's improvisatory composition, virtuoso licks, and complex gestural rhythms, and above all in perceptual effects best described chromatically. In an interview with Steve Cannon, he offered that "sometimes I'm consciously making a move with color and it might have a sound to it."³ To Quincy Troupe, he explained, "sound, to me, created color and light. The thing that interests me the most is how color dictates sound, feelings, the whole bit, it's all there. It's all color."⁴ The solipsism of this statement feels intentional. The world created by sound is the world of color, which in turn creates sound in a reverberant feedback loop. Music is often said to have coloration, and the link between music and visual art is as old as either discipline; relevant modernist examples include Kandinsky's symphonic "Compositions" and Whistler's moody "Nocturnes." While music can't be touched, it is physical and has form, in the cloud of vibrations that touches our eardrums, closely echoed in the nebulousness that has been a condition of Bradley's paintings from the start. Fred Moten writes of a "chromophonic or color-sound montage" in the painting of Tshibumba Kanda Matulu, applying concepts developed by filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein.⁵ Moten's emphasis, in his analysis of diasporic African culture and selfhood, on language that is layered and resistant to fixed definition—his firm preference for descriptive terms that embrace "both," not one or the other, and emphatically not in between—also offers a way to think about Bradley's painting.

At the same time, openness to accident and unexpected incident is complemented in Bradley's work, as in jazz, by exacting, unremitting discipline and underlying structure. The

³ "Oral History Project: Peter Bradley Interviewed by Steve Cannon, Quincy Troupe & Cannon Hersey," *Bomb Magazine*, January 17, 2017, <https://www.bombmagazine.org/articles/peter-bradley-1/>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Fred Moten, *Black and Blur: consent not to be a single being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 22.

connection is illustrated in the early painting's titular "circle of fifths," a system of harmony that goes back to Pythagoras and is a scaffold for millennia of Western music, including classical, folk, rock, and jazz, providing the tonal intervals on which improvisation is hung. Lauren O'Neill-Butler cites Bradley's admonition that painting is a practice you have to do every day, and while she calls his a "truly shambolic" process, she also describes the discipline on which it depends. "Do it every day," she says Bradley advised students in 2019. "This paint will lead you to someplace you haven't seen before if you do it, try it, every day. It really will."⁶ Along the same lines, "Notes from the Woodshed," the title artist Jack Whitten gave to a log he kept of his goals and practices in the studio from the 1960s until his death in 2018, endorses the habit of dailiness in both writing and art-making. Along with frequent references to spirit, light, and the puzzle of abstraction, all equally pertinent to Bradley, Whitten recurs again and again to jazz, whence "woodshed," a term musicians use for practicing privately, to the benefit of both rigor and invention. In a consideration of interdisciplinarity and the performative basis of art, Moten suggests we "accede to the surplus's demand that any thought of the object take into account its nature as practice."⁷

Bradley is a great experimenter not only with color and form, but also with materials and processes. When Simone Swann asked him, in a 1971 interview for the *De Luxe Show* catalogue, why he had been experimenting with spray paint, he responded that working eight hours a day at the gallery left him pressed for time, and he was looking for "a way to apply the paint faster in order to see more color each time I painted." He had been impressed by what Olitski had done

⁶ Lauren O'Neill-Butler, "By Chance," in *Peter Bradley* (New York: Karma, 2021), 19.

⁷ Moten, *Black and Blur*, 38.

with spraying, creating atmospheric fields of glittering indeterminacy, but likely wasn't aware of Man Ray's experimentation with a spray gun around 1919, of which the Surrealist painter and photographer later said, "When I discovered airbrush it was a revelation—it was wonderful to be able to paint a picture without touching the canvas," adding that it was "like painting in 3-D; to obtain the desired effects you had to move the airbrush nearer or farther from the canvas."

Working this way, Man Ray said, was as much performance as painting.⁸ Bradley's accounts of working with a spray gun are strikingly similar. "With the gun I can see more color than mixing by hand," he has said. Just as important, he added, it precluded "indulgence" in the kind of process that leads to something "for which I already knew the answer. With a spray gun I can't foresee what will happen to the surface. . . . The spray gun, you know, has a kind of mind of its own." Notably, the tool he was using is not the aerosol can, producing a mist of color, that Olitski used, or the airbrush used by Man Ray; instead, it was an industrial machine, about the size of an upright lawn mower; advertised as "airless," it propelled un-thinned paint (or primer), and was a resourceful choice for getting a quantity of paint on the canvas at speed.⁹

In Bradley's later works, the paint has gotten more fluid and evanescent. Bradley has been working wet into wet, with the soaked canvases lying flat, so the paint seeps and spreads. At the same time, the surface is complicated by fragments of solid material, including bits of broken crockery and glass, leaves and flowers, and peels of "skin" from the bottoms of paint cans, which yield wildly various textures and colors. Until the new studio was completed, Bradley painted for many years outdoors, and the weather that seemed present as content in early

⁸ Arthur Lubow, *Man Ray: The Artist and His Shadows* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021), 35.

⁹ I am grateful to Suzanne McClelland for this information.

abstractions became part of the process. In *Out of the Blue* (2021), the effusions of color are particularly aqueous. The colors are bright, sometimes neon, and alternately poisonous, irradiated, and sublime. Sometimes the artist still leaves his canvases outdoors; faint animal footprints are visible in *Rockie and Ruddy* (2022), alongside two oval pours of diluted inky-black paint and two broad strips of heavy paper that look like bark. *Turn Out the Stars II* (2021), by contrast, is an explosive composition of contrasting reds: a very dense, opaque sea of magenta flecked with fiery orange sits on a thinner sea of brown, itself flaring, and a peel of paint skin is attached to the surface. A spreading pool of deep cerulean dominates the right side of *Gee Baby* (2021); face down in this small sea of paint are a pair of small, dried sunflowers. Grown in Bradley's flourishing garden, sunflower blossoms and also their seeds appear in other recent paintings as well: a homage, perhaps, to Van Gogh, or a challenge.

Abstraction is always oppositional. It displaces language, is subversive of the prosaic—of the ordinary, and of explanatory or narrative text—and can only be approached indirectly, by simile and metaphor. Our minds and perceptual faculties acknowledge abstraction but are organized to prioritize recognizable form; as animals, we need to know danger, for instance, when we see it; also sustenance, and alliance. Some abstract painting tends toward amatory swoon. Some sounds alarm bells. As a rule, though, abstraction's affective cues are conglomerates. Bradley claims he's not interested in words, explaining that it "freaks me out, that someone can write something down" and thereby summarize an artwork. He believes in art that moots criticism. "If you can paint a picture that someone understands, an abstraction you can get over in a new way, you can do something no one else has ever done. That's what's

important.”¹⁰ As Jack Whitten puts it in his “woodshed” notes, in an uppercased and underlined entry, MEANING IS THE ENEMY OF ART.¹¹ But despite its promise of transcending the quotidian and unseating logic, abstraction is contingent—on particular people, places, and conditions, on character and emotion, tempo and timbre, energy and desire. Bradley chafes against the presumptions associated with identity, race not least among them. “It’s stormy weather out there. It really is,” he warns. “Now the *New York Times* is talking about Black artists and this, that, and the other; but they’re not talking about anybody for real.”¹² His storm alert is a restatement, in political terms, of the essential indefinability of color that is fundamental to his painting. As Bradley sees it, this freedom from definition is an alienable right.

¹⁰ O’Neill-Butler, “By Chance,” 19.

¹¹ Jack Whitten, *Notes from the Woodshed*, ed. Katy Siegel (New York: Hauser & Wirth, 2018), 335.

¹² Getty Trust Oral History, 15.