

James Brinsfield

A TWENTY YEAR RETROSPECTIVE



Tomlin's Forest (2011) oil on canvas, 74" x 60"

James Brinsfield—a retrospective

BY JAMES MARTIN

If this overheated and surreal political climate of the second decade of the 21st century can be characterized at all, descriptions such as “polarized” or “binary” seem to apply. The media, whether social media or traditional mass media, appears to contribute to divisiveness: Is one for Trump, or against Trump? A believer in climate change, or a denier? A supporter of refugees, or of stricter immigration policies?

In such an atmosphere, how relevant are paintings that are predominantly gestural and non-representational?

Very relevant, it turns out, if the paintings were made by James Brinsfield.

Brinsfield's mini-retrospective at Joseph Nease Gallery gathers 19 works from the period 1994-2017. The veteran abstractionist, based in Kansas City since 1991, is having his first solo show in the new Nease location in Duluth through September 22. Nease and Brinsfield first met in Kansas City, and the artist exhibited at the KC iteration of the Joseph Nease Gallery three times between 1998 and 2002.

Brinsfield has also exhibited regularly at KC's acclaimed Haw Contemporary and now-legendary defunct spaces like

Jan Weiner Gallery and Dolphin, as well as in Washington, D.C. and Chicago. His works have been collected by noted institutions such as the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO, the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Overland Park, KS and the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City.



Bluesology, mixed media, 49" x 69", 2001

In his review of Brinsfield's 2011 exhibit at the Albrecht-Kemper Museum of Art, Professor David Cateforis, Chair of the Department of Art History at the University of Kansas, praised the works in the show as “abstractions equal in their aesthetic rewards to the masterpieces of Pollock, de Kooning and company, while at the same time standing as original, conceptually driven

statements rather than retrograde attempts to revive abstract expressionist techniques and attitudes.”

The works selected for the Duluth retrospective provide an excellent introduction to the artist's impressive diligence in pushing himself in new directions inspired by his widely varying interests, from jazz to automobile design to Cold War history to current events.

And like all serious abstractionists, Brinsfield is mindful of tradition. He explains, “The first art that I really responded to was Abstract Expressionism. The other love of mine is Post-Minimalism.”

Gallery Director Joseph Nease notes, “People might think of those schools as examples of extreme control versus looseness. But actually, they're both under control.”

Nease's perceptive comment reveals why art is more important now than ever before. Many of us in America seem to have forgotten this timeless truism: Things that

can be looked at and explained in one way can be looked at and explained in another way just as easily if we are not willing to educate ourselves about the topic under discussion.

Brinsfield's retrospective should serve as a metaphor for how one becomes an expert at something, and why expertise still matters. A key influence

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Long Division, oil, pencil, enamel, enamel marker on linen, 78" x 62", 2017



No Ticket - No Ride, oil and enamel on canvas, 48" x 72", 2007



Hubbub, oil and enamel on paper on canvas, 66" x 44", 1998



Brinsfield (L) and Nease in discussion at the Joseph Nease Gallery.

was groundbreaking artist Stan Brakhage. His experimental approach to filmmaking set Brinsfield on a path to abstraction while he was an MFA student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. This overview demonstrates abundantly the artist's skill at juggling a sincere love of the abstract tradition with a serious investigation of its limits, while their playful and humorous spirit breathes life into the abstract tradition.

In *Hubbub* (1998), Brinsfield riffs on the grid patterns found so frequently in classic abstract art, as in the work of Mondrian. The artist first glued paper to the support, and then applied gesso over it, forming a grid before making any marks. He explains, "I tried to use a painted line that looked like my pencil lines. The difference between the two is about dimensionality."

According to Brinsfield, the cubic forms can be likened to boxcars, prison bars and buildings. He adds, "The viewer doesn't need to worry about that. It can be anything you want it to be."

Bluesology, a 2001 work, hails from a period in which the artist used tape more often than paint.

"At the time, people asked me why I stopped painting," states Brinsfield. He cites his undergraduate education at the University of Illinois at Chicago, where design tendencies established by Bauhaus luminaries such as Mies van der Rohe and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy were influential among the art faculty. "I wanted to rebel against that background, so I played around with these modernist lollipop-like forms and made them look like surveillance satellites."

Colorful hard-edged design elements show up again in *No Ticket - No Ride* from 2007. In this instance, lozenge-like forms appear next to and bisected by curving black lines. In what is the show's best example of the artist's sense of humor he states that the black lines were inspired by the Nike Swoosh logo.

In *Tomlin's Forest*, a 2011 oil and canvas work, Brinsfield pays homage to famed Abstract Expressionist Bradley Walker Tomlin, whose works often featured restless vertical and horizontal marks that were frequently white.

Brinsfield states that one of his goals in *Tomlin's Forest* was "to remove the Abstract Expressionist bravura brushstroke without being anti-Abstract Expressionist." The work's gestural-looking marks evoke Tomlin's experiments, yet it was constructed in a mechanical fashion by transferring marks to the canvas instead of painting directly onto it. Brinsfield painted sheets of paper and then pressed each sheet onto the canvas, beginning with the upper left corner and continuing in a grid pattern until reaching the lower right corner. He then made a second pass to obscure the grid pattern. As each mark is transferred from paper to canvas its periphery is left somewhat to chance, determined by the amount of pressure being used and invisible to the artist's eye

until he lifts the paper. He finished the work by adding a few areas of color.

More recently, 2017's *Long Division* features a bold vertical line that bisects the painting. While visiting Minnesota the artist went to a café, where he witnessed a very vocal and nearly physical argument between Republicans and Democrats. He thinks of *Long Division* as a metaphor of the political divisions in the U.S. that the argument illustrated so well. At the bottom of the work, blue horizontals on the left are balanced by reddish verticals on the right. Black rectangles appear at left and right margins; the one on the right is hard-edged, while the one on the left is more loosely defined. Areas of thin white wash appear throughout the work, which Brinsfield associates with "the false lies, the things you don't believe in. The fake news. Where do you go with all that?"

Most critically, the exhibition demonstrates that throughout his career, Brinsfield has asserted the value of art that leaves the door open for dialogue — about painting, and by extension, the real world of conflicts and events that inspire his abstractions.

James Martin is an independent consultant, curator, educator and writer based in the Kansas City area. From 1996 to 2001 he served as assistant curator in modern and contemporary art at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. Since 2001, he has focused on working with art located outside of typical art venues, such as public art and corporate and hospital art collections. He holds a B.A. in Art History from the University of Kansas and an M.A. in Art History from Case Western Reserve University.