Spence, Suzy, "A Season of Psychic Noise: An Interview with Bo Joseph," Artsy.net, November 16, 2016, https://www.artsy.net/sears-peyton-gallery/article/sears-peyton-gallery-a-season-of-psychic-noise-an-interview-with-bo-joseph

ARTSY

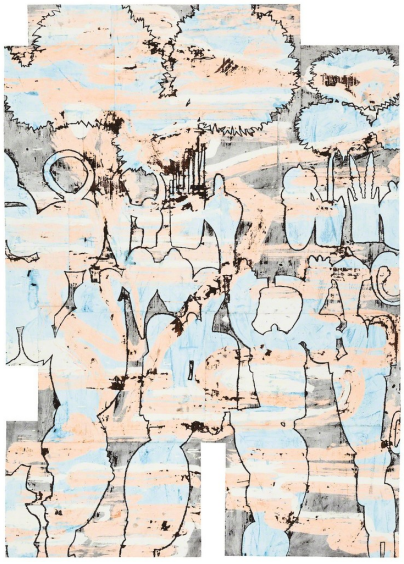
A Season of Psychic Noise: An Interview with Bo Joseph

On the first day of his exhibition *A Season of Psychic Noise*, I had the pleasure of speaking with fellow painter Bo Joseph. Bo and I were born the same year and attended New England colleges where our initiation to art history in the late 80s was through Louise Gardner's encyclopedic tome *Art Through the Ages*. We were in agreement that the book had been useful (we still own our copies), and that it was regrettable to have professors skip entire chapters on Africa or Asia in the service of presenting a linear Western leaning history. I was fascinated to learn that he'd remedied this with extensive travel and research, a journey that has enabled him to define art on his own terms.

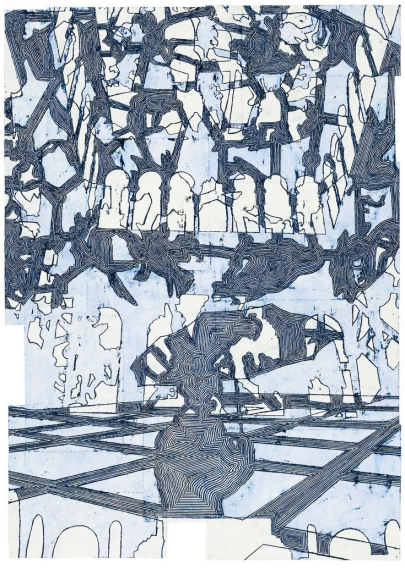
SEARS-PEYTON GALLERY

NOV 16TH, 2016 2:45 PM

Bo Joseph
Virtual Artifacts: Effigies, 2016
Sears-Peyton Gallery



Bo Joseph
Legacy of Lost Planets, 2016
Sears-Peyton Gallery



Bo Joseph
A Season of Psychic Noise, 2016
Sears-Peyton Gallery

S. Your paintings seem to be elaborate systems with a range of references. What attracts you to your source material?

B. My mark making and methodology always references something real. It has its beginnings in things I am interested in, whether that is Chinese scroll paintings or Northwest Coast Native American carvings. For a while I was obsessed with embroidered Japanese material used in kimonos and *noh* robes. As a student, every time I studied a western art movement in a formal way, I wondered what was happening on the other side of the world. That led me to study African Art, Sufi Art, I took classes in world religion, Jungian theory, and I became really interested in Art Brut—I found Dubuffet.

S. Dubuffet came to mind looking at your smaller pieces. They are so densely worked, there appears to be an awful lot of medium on that paper. How do they become so thick?

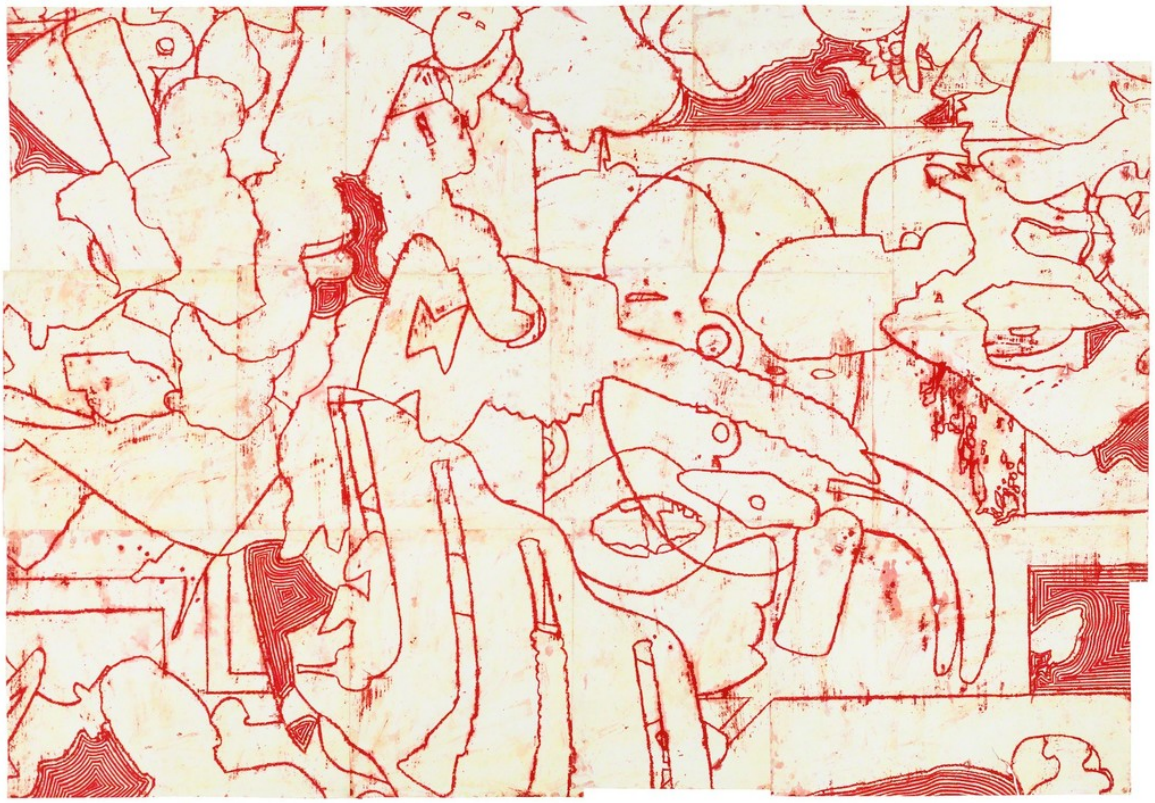
B. Those works are made primarily of coated auction catalog pages. I'd cut catalog spine off. I'd work my way through the stack of pages cutting out the objects, to create holes. Often I would cut the reverse of the page too, so the original objects didn't look quite like themselves. I'd keep the positive and the negative of the page because I was interested in the hybrid -- this idea that they were two things at once. Ultimately the negative cut outs became more intriguing to me because they maintained the contours of what they were. I used those as stencils, working with tempera paint, which was then washed over with acrylic paint. The paper got pretty brittle and pretty beat up and so I started gessoing them to give them more structure. I used them on and off over the years. When they started to crack I harvested them as the grounds for a body of work. They had this life to them, this energy of use. It wasn't the patina so much as the energy they still held that I wanted, and so I salvaged them and glued them together. A friend refers to this work as "uncollage."

S. How did growing up in California -- the colors, surf culture, hippie culture, pop culture -- impact your visual choices now?

B. I didn't grow up surfing, but eventually I did take up snowboarding. My parents were definitely looking for alternatives. They were both disillusioned with their upbringings to some extent, and with politics. Nature was some antidote to the fundamental questions they had. We did a lot of hiking, camping. Eventually, being practical, my father became a commercial photographer, my mother a make-up artist, in order to maintain a creative endeavor and keep their imaginations engaged. What it meant was I grew up around a lot of creative people.

S. We have to start someplace.

B. Yes, and I don't think it's about the medium. It's about how you think. I've tinkered with some contextual objects. For example, I used to collect tribal rugs. They'd be hanging on the wall, and they'd be interesting to me. These are rugs from eastern Persia primarily made by women who were the keepers of the visual information of their culture. Rugs are sculpture because they're three-dimensional, they're painting because they're color, but they're also drawing because they're made from lines. They are made of organic material that has changed form and as objects they become embedded with the values and ideologies of their society with deliberate moments of error in the patterns. These mistakes were meant to deviate from the divinity of perfection, which was also meant to ward off ill-will.



Bo Joseph
Disunified Theory: Hoarding Voids, 2016
Sears-Peyton Gallery

S. I'm glad you bring up rugs because I sensed that connection in the red and white piece *Disunified Theory: Hoarding Voids*, made of oil pastel and paint on paper. It has tiny holes in a few places. I love these accidents.

B. Those come from the scraping of the piece with a razor blade, and rinsing them in a sink. To me they are just some of the many anomalies that I invite, points of reorientation. They push back against my expectations. As the artist you're the first viewer of the work. The piece is separate from you, but you're also watching it unfold. These little anomalies indicate how it's out of my control. I think about loss, absence, entropy, and how matter breaks down over time. When a piece has loss and evidence of entropy it seems to ring more true, so to speak.

S. So you're not after perfection.

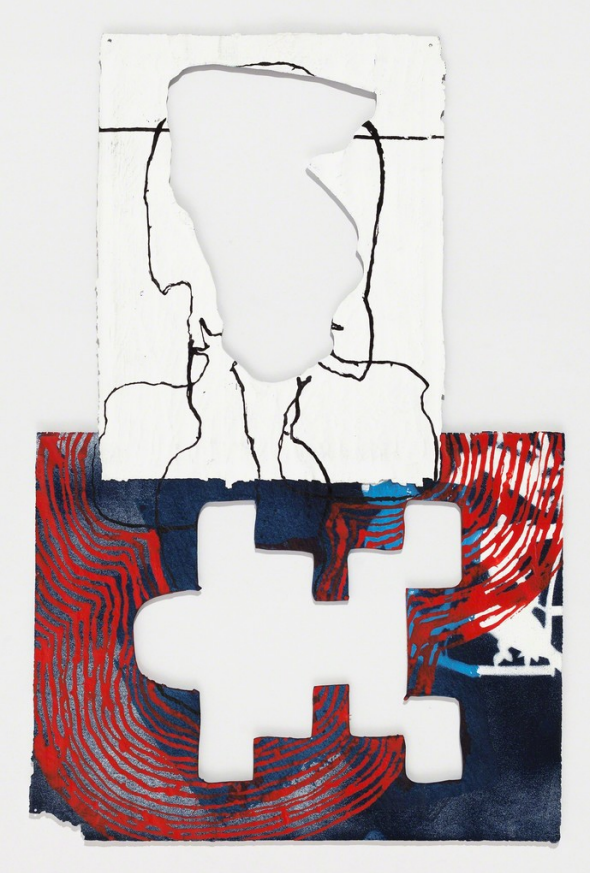
B. No, not by any stretch.

S. I've noticed a sort of mapping quality to your work. What are your other image sources?

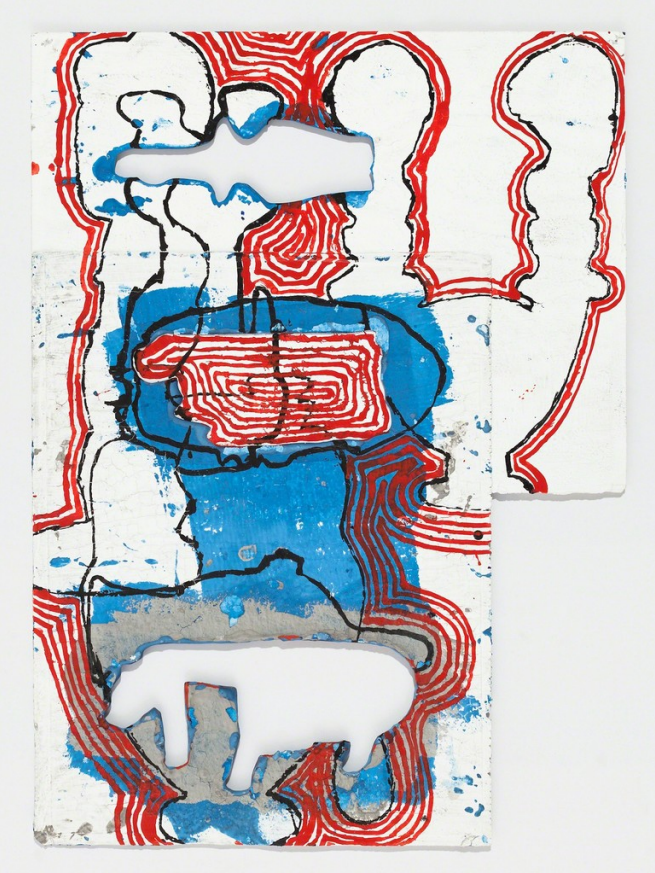
B. In Berlin I found these sheets of antique German clip art made for children. I think they are called "abse-builder" or something like that. It's basically a sheet of paper, a whole sheet of birds for example held together with tabs. Children cut and paste them into books, but they're actually wild abstractions if you look at them from the back. I wanted to work with these on a larger scale. I had them scanned and laser cut so they were stronger and could be reused and they are sort of kicking around the studio now. I also take photographs myself and create stencils with those. Even photographs of my wife will get used. I will silhouette her out of the scene, so it's not a direct 1 to 1 appropriation like Richard Prince. When they are abstracted I see these images as archetypal forms, so that if you change their context they still have a universal presence. They keep their charge.

S. How many pieces at a time do you work on?

B. Three to a dozen at a time. From the table to the wall to the table, or floor. There is always something learned moving between pieces.



Bo Joseph
Virtual Artifacts: Rudiments, 2016
Sears-Peyton Gallery



Bo Joseph
Virtual Artifacts: Propagation, 2015
Sears-Peyton Gallery

S. I've lately been thinking about regionalism. I wonder if you believe it still exists for contemporary artists? For example, I've become more aware of my unintentional stylistic alignment with Maine artists like Alex Katz, Fairfield Porter, and Lois Dodd. Can you speak to your own experience?

B. I do believe there are glimmers of regionalism, though they are often difficult to quantify, and I definitely think going to school in New England, living in Providence while attending R.I.S.D., had an effect on me. I felt a kind of unexpected permeation of nature. the idea of the small early American town was strong and there is something there about the architecture and the residue of Edgar Allan Poe and H.P. Lovecraft, some of that seemed to get under my skin.

S. We talked a little bit about painters Ross Bleckner and Phillip Taaffe? How do you see yourself in dialog with their work? You're the right age to have seen them at the important moment in their careers, the 1990s.

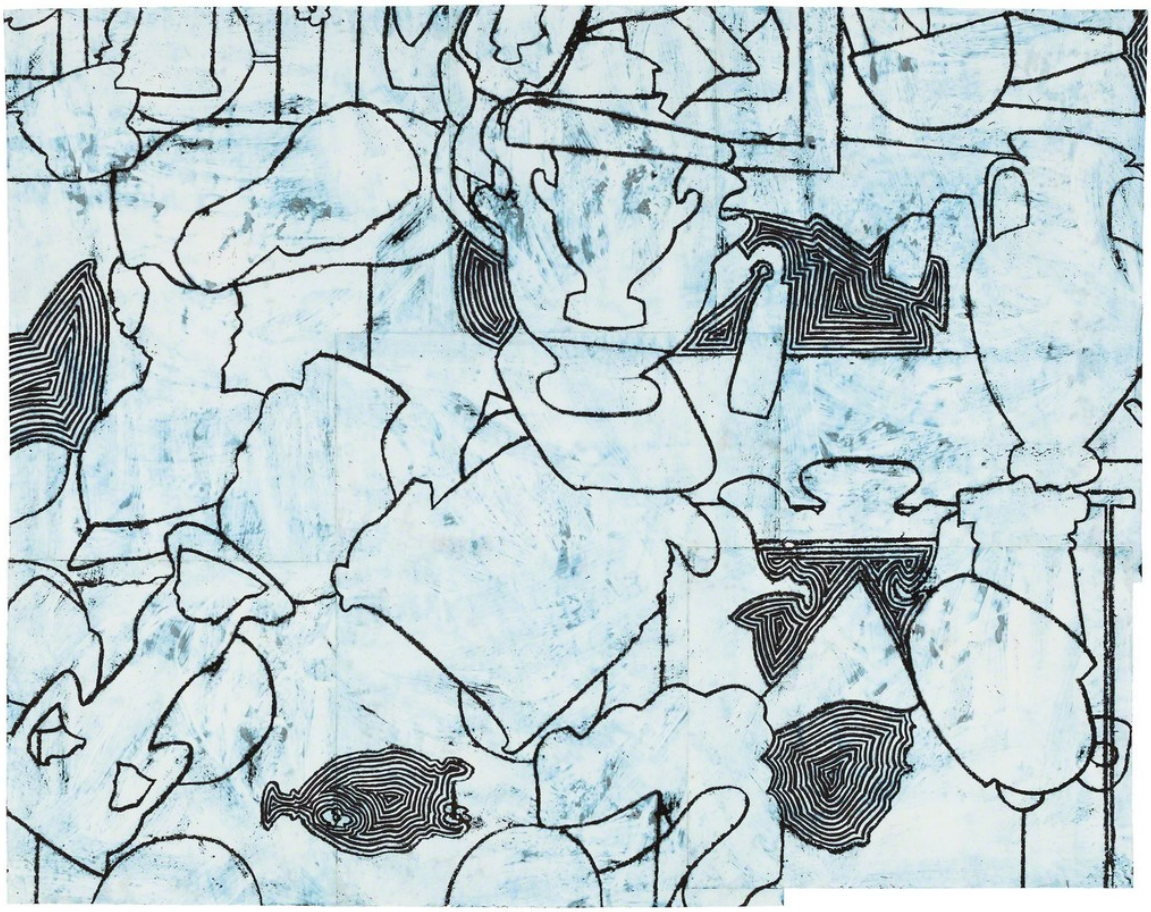
B. Whatever connection there was I noticed it after the fact. However, discovering Tim Rollins & K.O.S. while I was a student at R.I.S.D., that was a moment for me. I'd been doing drawings on found books, gestural ink pieces. Bumping into that work was exciting, I felt a kinship, and an affirmation. I was digesting so many art forms but I knew I wanted to make work about my culture, not "high culture". I wanted to find ways to let in my personal pursuits. For example, I used images of rugby players and when I cut them out as silhouettes they reminded me of battle scenes from murals in the Renaissance, or the marble floors of the Orvieto basilica. Popular culture started to resonate as being universal.

S. You've lived and worked in New York for a long time. Do you think the New York School of painting is still alive and well?

B. Well there's a thing about the drive and the energy and peers working among each other, akin to when, in art school, the guy in the studio next to you was pulling an all-nighter, it made you reconsider staying in your own studio later. I see subsets of it here and there. It's a common appetite, a common drive, an ambition, in the purest sense of the world. It's ambition to push boundaries, which in turn pushes things forward. But I worry about New York for artists with rising rents. It's as if the city has become hostile to us monetarily. I was in Bushwick for over 17 years from '96…watching that neighborhood evolve was really something.

S. Do you see the flaws in your work or do you see them the way I do? They seem to give pleasure.

B. That's a hard one to answer. Looking at your own work, you know the history, the challenges of making it. Its rife with all of that. Seeing it here as opposed to the studio it's almost like seeing something another artist made. I don't know if I enjoy the process. I usually come home from the studio a wreck. It's physically demanding and rigorous and the scale of my work can be hard to maneuver. There is a ride I am taking that is pretty visceral.



Bo Joseph
Disunified Theory: Matter Shift, 2016
Sears-Peyton Gallery

Interview by Suzy Spence