

BOMB

Painting's Small Infinity: Alex Carver Interviewed by Blake Oetting

Mining the painterly allegories of medieval torture devices.

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[Interview](#)
[Art](#)



Alex Carver, *Brazen Bull*, 2022, oil on linen, 80 x 156 inches. Courtesy Miguel Abreu Gallery. © Alex Carver.

In Alex Carver's practice, the painterly apparatus—its tools, techniques, and history—is self-reflexively matrixed through the lens of extra-aesthetic discourses related to the breakdown and reconstitution of the body. In addition to the creation of paintings that index their own conditions of possibility, his work lends a distinct approach to the question of "figuration," framing it as an allegorical process in which the body of the art object undergoes critical interrogation. While an earlier series took surgery, specifically grafting, as its thematic center, in Carver's current exhibition at Miguel Abreu, *Engineer Sacrifice*, he plumbs the painterly subcurrents of medieval torture devices in which immolation and dismemberment double as aesthetic strategies.

—Blake Oetting

Blake Oetting

Medicine and medical instruments have long been integrated into your painting practice both allegorically and as imagery. Before Covid, in 2019 when I first saw your work, these motifs were already present. When and why did you begin gravitating toward that material?

Alex Carver

Yes, the surgical motif really came to the forefront of the work with my dad, who had an aortic aneurysm. Encountering the image-making and surgical technology involved in his treatment—scanning, grafting, splitting, re-stitching—is where that first show with Miguel Abreu, *External Fixations*, came from. For that show, I was interested in modeling

a cycle of breaking the body down—the human body as well as the body of the painting—and putting it back together, moving from dismemberment to chimerical recombination.

BO

That cycle has such a strong art historical resonance. It makes me think of those Dada heads, for instance, or the broader cyborgian motif we see throughout Weimar aesthetics. It also brings up the very old tradition of painting on vellum—an epidermal, grafted surface. And then there is the painterly subtext to so much of the medical practice you're interested in. Stenciling and grafting have both artistic and surgical functions. In *External Fixations* you play with that overlap.

AC

At that time, I was struggling with the problem of composition in painting. I was working very diagrammatically. I was using texts from patents, so there was a givenness to the question of composition. I had a moment when I didn't know what kind of images I was trying to make, so this idea of "external fixation" was useful for me in asking myself, "What is going to lend me compositional support?" The procedure of making the painting—in a classic postmodern strategy—also showed up in the work. I started painting trompe l'oeil images of the vinyl and the tape that I use to make the paintings. In addition to the fear of my father's aortic aneurysm, the show was about very basic painting problems: What kind of marks am I making? What is a composition? Does composition matter?



Alex Carver, *Two Wheels*, 2022, oil on linen, 79 x 60 inches. Courtesy Miguel Abreu Gallery. © Alex Carver.

BO

Those paintings featured snippets of actual bodies as well, in addition to their robotic analogs.

AC

The images of the body were taken with a Mars scanner. It uses different

types of particle beams and a sophisticated detector to see soft tissue versus hard tissue and recompose the body into a three-dimensional image. You end up with a picture that looks like a gelatinized version of the body.

I remember I showed some progress shots to my friend Walter Benjamin Smith, and he was making fun of me. He said, "Oh, you're making paintings from the year 3,000 now." There was something very posthuman about the show, but with nothing to fall back on, like animals or the wonder of nature. It was pretty brutal. I was as confused about the work as anyone.

BO

If *External Fixation* relied upon relatively contemporary technology, you look back to medieval, extremely brutal mechanisms of bodily dismemberment in your new work.

AC

Yes, I have these two apparatuses to make images with. Both are mechanisms of human torture. One form of torture, demonstrated through a device called the Brazen Bull, is immolation. People were placed inside of a sculpted bull, the door was closed, and a fire was lit underneath. They were incinerated, turned into smoke that came out of the bull's nostrils. That is a really horrifying idea, but, for me, it's incredibly beautiful to think of the body's atomization. In my mind, the Brazen Bull relates to high-resolution scanning technology—point cloud, MRI, sonar—which is a way of converting the body into digital smoke. The transubstantiation of the body is coupled by the other apparatus in the show, the Catherine Wheel, which is more about dismemberment.

These are the dual engines of image production in the work, the results of which are less about showing the body as a stable identity than they are about turning the entire apparatus of image production into a body. When I paint the figure, what I mean is that the whole painting is a figure or a body that I take apart and put back together.



Alex Carver, *The Work of Wheels*, 2022, oil on linen, 78 x 132.5 inches. Courtesy Miguel Abreu Gallery. © Alex Carver.

BO

These engines—again, mechanisms of torture—seem to demonstrate a certain disdain for or anxiety about the medium, no?

AC

I don't mean to imply that painting is a torturous process—that isn't the allegory at work. Rather, I want to architect a kind of sacrifice that breaks down the painting into its constituent parts. I am interested in that destruction as a form of image production. How can we frame a moment of expression as annihilation?

I'm interested in painting because it's what I call a small infinity. Sculpture is a large infinity. What constitutes sculptural practice is big, but part of

what makes painting interesting to me—and might make it boring to others, understandably—is that it is so hermeneutic: painting is often about painting and instructs the viewer how it produces itself.

BO

Recently you've been approaching painting from without, so to speak, in writing about the contemporary state of the medium.

AC

One way for me to get out of painting's hermeticism is to speak and write about it. I wrote my first public essay for a group show I was included in over the summer entitled *The Painter's New Tools*. Basically, it's about the state of contemporary painting and new possibilities for how to discuss it.

BO

You discuss the Janus-faced dimension of contemporary painting. You argue that painters are reaching back to historical movements to unlock or decode them, or looking forward to a posthuman consciousness that is dependent upon artificial intelligence rather than a traditional notion of the subject. You deal with the past, specifically a medieval and medicinal history, but your work feels primarily oriented toward the question of what is produced when human subjectivity is no longer viable.

AC

Yes, I think that's exactly where I would locate myself within my own map of painterly discourse. The principal problem for me in painting is what happens in the absence of the human subject. For me, though, it's not exactly a given. I'm standing on a threshold where, compositionally or thematically, I always start with the human subject and then eradicate it. What I hope to find is something productive in this period of erasure that isn't some pastiche of existential dread. How can we take this moment of radical precarity and make it energetic and expansive?



Installation view of *Alex Carver: Engineer Sacrifice*, 2022. Courtesy Miguel Abreu Gallery.

BO

You also want to avoid the rhetoric of expression that is involved in that sort of existential dread, presumably.

AC

Exactly. There is ultimately something lucky about painting that negates that type of expressivity. This is why the debate between skilled and de-skilled painting doesn't interest me. De-skilled painting can obviously produce a transcendental result, just like skilled painting. It becomes rather arbitrary, or alchemical, what lies behind a genuinely dynamic image. Some of my paintings could be seen as skilled or virtuosic, and others as de-skilled or discursive. This is one of the allowances of painting—that you can shift from work to work.

Ultimately, I am anti-brand coherence. I don't think painters should reduce their practice to a single modality. To only produce virtuosic painting is boring, but refusing to make that type of work is also boring. Artists need

to transit.

BO

Partially what you're bringing up is the possibility of bridging the long-held gap between good artwork and "good painting." Is there any space that those two concepts share anymore? In your *Brazen Bull* work, for instance, you offer a properly postmodern, self-reflexive allegory but also vaporous vignettes of rainbow paint that tap into a tradition of painterly expression.

AC

Yes, this is probably the most painterly show I've done so far. It is interesting to think of the persistence of that expressionist myth. We know it is a propagandistic conceit; but when you look at painting now and see gestural marks, we still equate that with ideas of freedom or, for those with a certain conceptual profile, ironic commentary on the myth of expressive freedom. Whether there are quotation marks around that freedom or not seems totally arbitrary, though, since viewers have no orientation between earnestness and irreverence anymore.

BO

Isabelle Graw writes about this inevitably vitalistic relationship between painting and its maker that we are circling around.

AC

I'm reading *The Love of Painting* right now, actually. I am really interested in her social constructivist view of painting, even if my practice wouldn't excite her that much since the map of my social fabric isn't indexed in the work. In fact, because the conditions of the social are so toxic at the moment, I worry that tying my work to them would end up as an ironic reinforcement, or re-statement, of the forces I want to critique. What I think we need right now instead is people setting themselves up for vulnerability. This is a complicated idea, particularly in the space of art, because earnestness and other affective registers of vulnerability can quickly become superficial tropes that gloss or conceal a lack of intellectual or artistic rigor. To be vulnerable in a meaningful way in the space of art is not to merely present oneself or one's work in earnest terms—after all, ironic distance is an essential part of both the creation and reception of art—but more so as a form of energetic investment.

Alex Carver: Engineer Sacrifice is on view at Miguel Abreu in New York City until December 18.

Blake Oetting is a PhD student at New York University where he studies modern and contemporary art. In addition to BOMB, his writing can be found in Artforum, Texte Zur Kunst, Flash Art, and The Brooklyn Rail.