

BAD AMERICA, MAGICAL WORLD

There's something I keep telling myself about my work, to help me remember what I'm doing: *the world is not a symbol for something else in the world*. I try not to paint as if the thing I'm painting is somewhere else. I try not to paint myself an explanation, that I explain to you, of something that is happening somewhere where we are not. Where the painting isn't and you wouldn't recognize if you haven't been where I've been...

...On a night like this, I was driving through the desert having never been there before. I was scared of the landscape, Bad America. I saw two new things at the same time. I moved across the US in late 2015 and stepped into geography that didn't look like anything I was used to at the same time we found out the hearts of our neighbors are so much crueler than we could have hoped or feared. I felt like I got in the car "before" and by the time I got out in California it was "after." But that was just the timing for me. Lots of people stayed put, and their backyards and neighborhoods changed shape. Suddenly you could see all the shadows that had always been there.

What's the point if you don't see the shadows creep up, or the sun come out? I know how it feels when you finish a days work and you can't tell if anything got better. But, I'd like to be here to say what I saw and what I believe in because I do think that's what matters. The Magical World, the blue and pink sky at dawn, the cowboy painting above the fireplace at the hotel, the puma sticking its head out of the bushes to look me in the face and turn away uninterested, the cricket that jumped out of the bushes and almost into my mouth, lucky to be here, even by myself. Seeing the things that you've read about because other people lived there and wrote about them reminds you that you can give yourself to your friends and to strangers by recording for them where you were and what you did. I clarify my thoughts and feel camaraderie in the Magical World when I look at a picture or read that poem. Other travelers were dreaming the same dreams and taking care with the world. We do it too, for each other, and onward...JPF, October 2020



My Dreams (Walking), 2017

I couldn't sleep so I put on the Stieglitz/O'Keeffe book [Foursome: Alfred Stieglitz, Georgia O'Keeffe, Paul Strand, Rebecca Salsbury by Carolyn Burke.] Alfred writes to Georgia describing Duchamp's Fountain as a urinal signed by R. mutt and for the first time I got how fucking funny it was. I laughed so hard I gave myself the hiccups and was more awake than ever. In the next paragraph Georgia, who was in Texas teaching at the time, observes her students driving to El Paso to enlist in the war and writes to Alfred asking: "what's it all about anyway?"



Figural Absence, 2017 Oil on linen 80" x 60"



Figural Absence, 2017

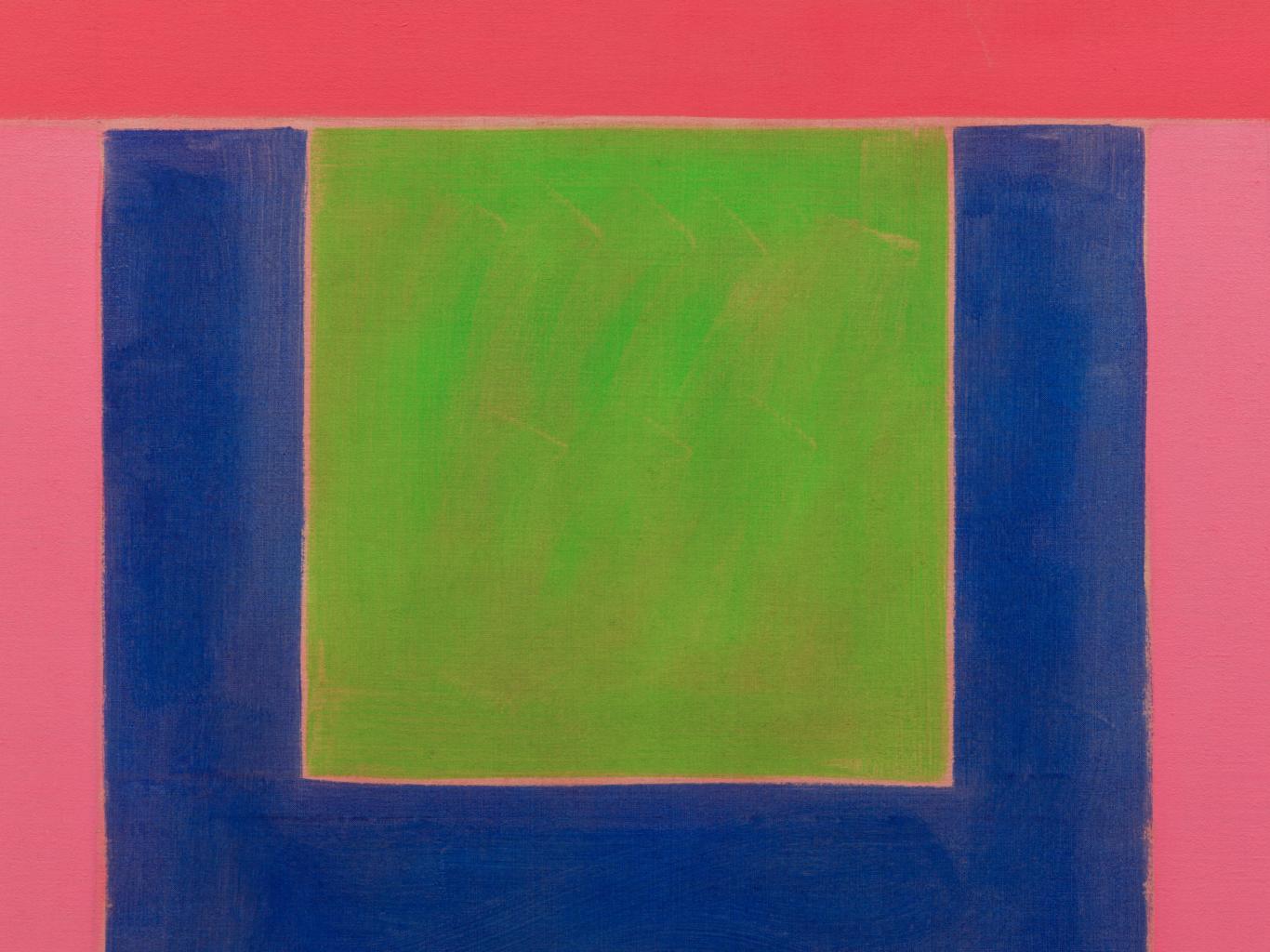
After structuring my paintings around un-structuring figures for what felt like ages, but was actually a fairly brief excursion, I found myself living alone again in a new city with no feeling left for the figure in a painting. One of the longest running fights I've had with subject matter is about whether or not I have any freedom to find it outside of my own biography. And I lost.

Crocodile Tears, 2017

This isn't a landscape, but it's kind of a place where things are happening. It's also an incredible expression: Crocodile Tears, the idea that a crocodile cries fake tears of grief as it eats its prey. There's been a lot of that going around. There's crocodiles crying everywhere.



Crocodile Tears, 2017 Oil on linen 80" x 60"





Town By The River, 2019 Oil on newsprint on wood panel 20" x 16"

Town By the River, 2019

Towns are by the river, including Memphis, Presidio, Port Norris, Shell Pile and Bivalve. New York where I'm from by the East River, near the LA River where I am now. Tom's River where I woke up in the back seat when my parents pulled over to switch drivers on the Parkway by a grey house that never had any lights on.

Green Elephant in the Green Grass, 2018

I had a nightmare where people were racing past me carrying my older paintings, and they were better ones than I'm making now. When I was little I dreamed of the King of Elephants, who I thought was Babar's grandfather who ate a poison mushroom and died. I've made at least five paintings of an elephant turned on its back. Subconsciously reliving the drawing of the dead king. Babar didn't turn out to be timeless, just the opposite. And I'm stuck with the memory too.



Green Elephant in the Green Grass, 2018 Oil and charcoal on linen 80" x 60"





Green River, 2018
Oil on linen
67.25" x 78"

Green River, 2018

Once I went swimming in the Rio Grande East of Presidio, TX near Big Bend State Park. It was in September and it had rained quite a bit the week before so the river was rushing. But I was with a friend who lived around there and had been swimming in the river before and she just hopped in without a warning about the current, so I followed her. She was immediately swept about fifty feet down the river and was yelling something back to me where I was wading in. I couldn't really hear her so I swam into the current and was also swept down river about half way towards her but I grabbed some reeds along the banks and was able to hold myself there. Also at that point I was close enough to hear her and she was saying the current is too strong and that I shouldn't swim down there. I turned to swim back to where I had waded into the river and was only able to swim in place for a few minutes before I grabbed back onto the reeds. The moment I realized I couldn't out swim the current a jolt of panic shot down my core. I really wasn't in danger, but I felt the feeling of danger for a second and it changed the tone of our afternoon. My friend who was swept even further away was very quiet for a while after we pulled ourselves back ashore along the reeds. Afterwards we drove East along the River Road to a bar in Terlingua and when we walked out of the bar after an hour or two the sunset sky was incredible.



The Snow Leopard, Green Saddle, 2017

Often on a long trip that I think will be full of a lot of open space for thinking I'll re-listen to *The Snow Leopard* by Peter Matthiessen. Once with the book running low in my ears I fell into a kind of half sleep on a landing approach into El Paso. The airplane vibrated in tune with my part consciousness and the words, read by the author late in his 80s made another deep vibrating sound. In that state my mind made up a snow leopard standing on a hill in the Himalayas. I knew it was a snow leopard but it took the form of a pack mule, in the sun, with a green saddle. I'd never been very comfortable using the color green in a painting (for a lot of reasons) but when I got back to LA I made this drawing of the leopard who is a mule with a green saddle and set it aside to give to my friend's young son as a gift on some future birthday when he's old enough to hear the rest of the story.

Giraffe, 2019

The green giraffe, with its blue head, makes an arched doorway. Blue sea and orange sunset through the threshold. Far inland from the sea at the same time of day you'd see a garden instead or looking out from within you'd see the road in front of your house.



Giraffe, 2019 Oil on linen 72"" x 64"







Green Grass in the Window, 2019 Oil on cardboard 10" x 8"



Green Grass in the Window, 2019

A meadow in South Jersey, the salt marsh, sea grass. Green in the spring, still a bit green against a grey sky in the winter. Green through a warm window.

<u>Tucson</u>, 2018

Tall Tucson in its yellow boots. Riding around my imagination in a place I never thought I'd go more than once or twice that I've now been sort of often. T-blue, u-yellow, c-green, s-black, o-white, n-different green.

Driving West (NM), 2019

On the way back from Truth or Consequences I drove up through a corner of the Gila National Forest. So vast, and grey, and me in my blue car.

Ziggurat Silver City, 2018

In glass in the sun, or glass in the lights with the sun going down, you can't really see everything you're trying to see. When you're driving by you could try and make sense of the shape of the city as the ring road you're on twists around its center. Or just try and enjoy the sunset reflected in all the tall buildings they built for who knows what.





Ziggurat Silver City, 2018 Oil and charcoal on linen 90" x 60"



Leopard in a Texas Storm, 2019

In the fall of 2018, just before Halloween, I drove two days from Los Angeles to Guadalupe Mountains National Park, two hours East of El Paso. In a hotel near the airport in El Paso on a full moon I dreamt that I hallucinated a blue puppy. I kept saying "Help! I'm hallucinating a blue puppy and I can't stop!" More and more frantically and fearfully. I tried handing the puppy to a few people who were there in the dream, letting it nuzzle them and lean on their shoulders or chest but they couldn't see it or feel it. When I woke I drove to the Guadalupe Mountains while the sun came up and spent two nights and three days hiking. On the second day I was walking up Bear Canyon and I wished that I would have some kind of revelation or vision in my thoughts that would explain the puppy dream to me or even what I was doing all the way out where I was. While I walked along the trail each of my footfalls would flush out jumping and clackering red and blue crickets. The moment I expressed this internal desire and impatience for revelation a cricket jumped out of the brush and crashed headfirst into my front teeth. I hiked the rest of the day without thinking much about anything. After dinner at my campsite I lay on my back on the cold metal picnic table and watched as the sunset left pink light in the face of the mountains that shifted around in various images the way clouds do. I saw mainly dinosaurs and bears.



I have a newcomer's simple feeling towards El Paso that its a place with significant energy. Its far enough out of my lived experience of America that I want to think about it and see it again to convince myself that it exists. I'd read about the danger and darkness on both sides of the border. I felt it confirmed to me by the warning oppressiveness of the light and heat. But people live there, so there must be love there too. It's wrong to think about these places as if I'd discovered them and have to explain to anyone what they're like. Plenty of people know, and you can ask them. I just went through a handful of times.