

BODE (/)



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In Conversation with Seth Cameron

A few months ago, during the opening of *Measure for Measure*, I was able to sit down with Seth Cameron following a talk with Tom Healy at *Nina Johnson*. While Seth is perhaps most well known as the President of *Bruce High Quality Foundation University*, he is also an acclaimed writer, artist and educator. I had the good fortune of being able to speak with him about his background, new work, and the state of art education at present.



BODE: When did you first become interested in art? What compelled you to go to art school?

Seth Cameron: I don't remember a time before making art. My mother recognized early on that I had some visual acuity and left me to explore it as I saw fit, and that's really all I could have asked for.

So the question of being an artist never happened. I was always going to make art, and when it came time to graduate high school the best way to make art seemed to be to get to New York and meet the best artists I could find. I considered studying other beautiful, useless activities like music and literature and philosophy, but the point was always to make art.

I was lucky enough to be accepted to the Cooper Union, which at the time awarded full-tuition scholarships to all admitted students. My parents couldn't really say no to that, and without it I have no idea how long it would have taken me to get to New York and what sort of community I would have been able to make there.

BODE: Where were you before Cooper?

SC: I grew up in South Carolina. When I was 15 I joined a drum and bugle corps and spent the summer living on a bus, sleeping on gymnasium floors, touring the country. So we had a day off, somewhere in the dusty middle, and I wandered into a used bookstore and found a book called *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition* by Robert Rosenblum. The crux of his argument is, in essence, that there is a formal and conceptual link between the transcendently empty skies of Caspar David Friedrich and the color-fields of the Abstract Expressionists. It's a novel conception because it traces a lineage to Modernism that doesn't really need Picasso and the French. But what mattered to me was I could see a project in it – I recognized, unbounded by time, an art problem that I could contribute to. So when I returned home, I covered the walls of my bedroom in garbage bags and started painting.

BODE: So, you were drawing up until that point and then you started delving into painting?

SC: Yeah, I'd made all sorts of things up to that point. But what changed was that I understood what I was doing as part of a larger shared human investigation into how fictional space works. I wanted to figure out what art *is*. This question led me from color-field abstraction to language-based practices and Institutional Critique. But the problems of abstraction have persistently held my concern.

BODE: How was Cooper? Did it provide, what you imagine to be, the ideal art school experience?

SC: It was right for me at the time. It's only now that I've been a visiting artist all over that I can really make any comparisons, but that's also the key to what made Cooper special: it didn't compare itself to other schools. It built a curriculum, a faculty, a diverse student body, all in order to educate artists, and not to compete in the marketplace of education.

BODE: Yesterday, you spoke about preferring viewing art in a record store or a book store. I enjoyed hearing that because I also share an affinity for cover art and album art, and I can have as much of an appreciation for something like that, something that's considered "low art" or "kitsch", as something in a gallery or a museum. Do you have any other thoughts on that? How important is it to break down this barrier between "high" and "low"?

SC: I'm very much a defender of the high, fine, free art tradition. I just don't think the fashionable museums of today are always such a part of that tradition. They're becoming, more and more, spectacle malls, kitsch propagandists, peddlers of the politics of self-congratulation. So where is someone looking for true art to go? You'd think maybe it's hiding out in schools, but it's really not anymore. MFA programs are now all about entrepreneurship and dentistry. So when I make the allusion to fading commercial spaces of popular culture (bookstores, record shops), it's in recognition of their liminality – right now, as their lights go out, they have the capacity to be the keepers of high art.

So real art, in all its transcendent timelessness, is constantly on the move. Maybe we can hide it at a friend's house, somewhere with lamplight and a thoughtful conversation. Maybe galleries are as good as it gets. I particularly love the idea of days when no one comes in the door and the paintings are left in peace. But my bet is that we're going to have to rebuild our academies of fine art, and rebuild our public museums. They should be free to visit, but much harder to access.

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BODE: For the sake of the interview, can you explain this idea of curriculum, the ledge, and the thought process behind deciding how to display your works in the way that you did?

SC: The works are small, which could become a bit twee if displayed too preciously. So the ledge is a solution, allowing the paintings to relate to our bodies in a particularly haptic way. You have the sense that you could pick them up in your hand.

The ledge also introduces the question of arrangement, of making order of some kind. I doubled the ledge to allow for a divergent organizational strategy, the way footnotes might interrupt an otherwise linear argument.

And so the paintings become a kind of curriculum, a map of thinking that may function in irregular formal cycles through ideas about color or compositional relationships. The paintings themselves are premised on destabilization – foregrounds and backgrounds existing dialectically, and so the doubled ledge is of a similar order, introducing narrativity with one hand while disturbing it with the other.



BODE: I'm thinking about how you were saying that these paintings don't stay with one sense or another, that they go back and forth between surface and depth, that you can't locate whether or not something's in the foreground or background, and that you like things to be in conflict...to be this, that, neither, and yet both. What I'm saying is, there seems to be this sense of dynamism in both your work and the identity of Bruce High Quality Foundation, and the University. This sense of an ever-evolving, unlocatable identity. It's multi-layered and incredibly nuanced. And, so much of education is about creating conflict, about placing emphasis on asking questions over answering them. This is what I find so intriguing about your work. Some people see these pieces as playful and minimal, but that's only one level. And from what I can tell,

you purposely wanted your work to exist in many worlds simultaneously. Essentially, whenever you spend time with the work, you're having a new conversation.

SC: My work has nothing to do with Bruce. But as to your larger point, I'll agree that works of art only exist when you're encountering them. And even then it requires effort to separate the art encounter from everything else. Most art goes unseen even when being looked at. Art demands resistance.

BODE: You spoke a little bit about color and its ever-shifting nature. That depending on where you look, black can seem blue or red or whatever it may be. That reminded me of this Mark Grotjahn painting that's actually at De la Cruz Gallery here in Miami. Initially, it seems purely black, but every time I look at it, I see a new color. When I look at your work I was also reminded of Agnes Martin, Rothko, Frankenthaler, Albers, and now certainly Reinhardt amongst others. For some people this might cause what Harold Bloom calls the "Anxiety of Influence". You actually spoke about Jonathan Lethem's essay, "The Ecstasy of Influence", and this idea of celebrating or finding joy in recognizing your influences... can you expand on this? Do you see your works as existing in conversation with other artists of this tradition?

SC: Absolutely. I make no claims to visionary status. My work aspires to be wholly a part of tradition. If we choose to experience a history of art with anxiety, one option might be to deal in appropriation – to re-present artifacts in such a way that amplifies their condition as tools of commerce, education, propaganda, etc. This is largely the approach Bruce takes because our project is, in essence, extra-art. But my work pushes toward the other end of the spectrum, toward art concerned with art problems. And some of the artists you've mentioned made work that offer me solutions I find partially adequate. Their works point me in the direction of new solutions. That's, more or less, how an art tradition gets made.

BODE: This may seem basic but, I'm curious, who are some of your favorite artists? Who else has influenced you?

SC: Specifically with the body of work in this exhibition, Susan Frecon has made some paintings that were in my mind. But favorites is another matter. I love Corot. Morandi. Manet.

BODE: Returning to your background, I remember you mentioning that your father was a preacher, right? Did that have any impact on your art? Your interests?

SC: Yes. Biological. My stepfather, who I grew up with, is in advertising.

BODE: I've always been envious of other readers who've had that background, those who catch the references.

SC: My grandfather was also a preacher. And my grandmothers were dedicated United Methodists. Knowing the Bible well is great support in reading literature. But I think the theological arguments I was exposed to were more instrumental in shaping my approach to critical thinking. The trinity, etc.

BODE: You wrote this article (<http://brooklynrail.org/2015/12/criticspage/professional-problems-amateur-solutions-seth-cameron>) in the Brooklyn Rail about the need for free art schools. You spoke specifically about art school, in its ideal form, as fulfilling this need for circumstance, for space and time away...it seems like the idea you got at was that you can experiment under the anxiety and stress of this looming or mounting debt, and perhaps that can be a valuable source of psychic pain and inspiration. But, for the most part, unless you're wealthy, that's the only route available. And, generally, that can be incredibly unhealthy. Can you talk about what this means, or what the consequences are of this current system?

SC: The consequences of the expense of arts education are one, that artists working today feel an oppressive urgency toward marketplace acceptance and two, we are narrowing our chances of giving talented people good entrances into the various traditions of art by only enabling people of means and conditioning everyone toward the marketplace.

BODE: In the article you also spoke about this idea of "critical mass", about the importance of meeting and talking with other artists, and simply being in a creative environment. In your opinion, how important is this to education?

SC: There are two ways to study art: Spend time with great art. Spend time with artists. I'd rate them in importance at around 70/30.

BODE: At the end of this article you say that artists that want help should get in touch. This is really what's so amazing about the foundation. You're incredibly well known and respected and yet there are really no pretensions. You're genuine about being accessible and truly helping artists. Is there anything more that you can say to this?

SC: I try to surround myself with artists in a circumstance that makes for meaningful exchange. And when I teach younger artists I'm hoping to help people along I might want to talk to. It's pretty selfish. And as for being "well-known and respected," I've had the good fortune to go to enough cocktail parties to know that they aren't very helpful for the exchange of ideas about art.

BODE: That's what occasionally bothers me about Miami. There's this obsession with status symbols and notions of celebrity. I guess that's why I'm at least partially interested in thinking about inclusivity and things of that nature...On a practical level, you can't accept everyone that wants to take a class. How do you implement a cut-off? Is it on a first-come, first-serve basis?

SC: Some classes are tailored to large groups and some are really only valuable when they are made selective. So we do both.

BODE: Part of what makes the university so interesting is that there are no set positions. Students can be teachers and vice-versa. How important is it for the University to deconstruct this traditional power dynamic?

SC: I prefer the ancient definition of a pedagogue: a *slave leading a child to learning*. Our classes don't have a traditional power structure because there is no grade, no degree, no obligation, no professional accolade waiting at the end. You come and get what you want out of it. The people who teach at Bruce literally don't have any power. They are here to help you get what you want. You can put whatever pressure you want on yourself.