

AMERICAN ARTIST

WWW.ARTISTDAILY.COM

MARCH/APRIL 2011

300 SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT:
BECOME A BETTER ARTIST
+ WAYS
THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO
WORKSHOPS AND CLASSES

PLAY THE ROMANTIC LEAD

HOW A MASTER ARTIST
STAGES A SELF-PORTRAIT

THE PENDULUM SWINGS BACK:

A Fresh Look at Regionalism

(Re)Imagine the
American Dream:

Paint Your Hometown

HOW TO CREATE FIGURES AND STILL LIVES

FROM MEMORY
AND IMAGINATION

The Photoartwork: Contact
by Ed Ruscha





Bo Bartlett

In his recent paintings, Bo Bartlett explores many sides of American life and cultural heritage, and although the resulting images are sometimes brooding, they also show hope for the future.

by Michael Gormley

& the American Dream



Inheritance

2011, oil on linen, 40 x 60.
All images in this article
courtesy P.P.O.B. Gallery,
New York, New York.

T

he image that flashed in my mind upon first viewing No Bartlett's exhibition

"Paintings of Home" this past November at P.P.O.B. Gallery, in New York City, was Grant Wood's *American Gothic*. That painting captured the budding contradictions besetting a rapidly changing and divided America, and Bartlett's work, like Wood's before him, reveals the cultural tensions that divide us from our cherished ideals and render us, in a sense, homeless.

Like all great storytellers, Bartlett is on a mission, and he discreetly delivers his message in subtly veiled parables: his narratives, although universal in scope, are acted out by seemingly normal folk. But as with *American Gothic*, upon closer inspection and further contemplation, deeper—and perhaps darker—truths reveal themselves. Bartlett leads us to the realization that the citizens of America are busy beings; behind their stoic facades is a continuous melange of grappling with life's impossible dualities and conflicts. In his paintings we can feel quiet rage being played out in American families, hometowns, and souls. For example, *Inheritance*, a sweeping double portrait of the artist's parents seated at opposite ends of an antique divan, is Bartlett's *American Gothic*, and it well represents the isolation of our modern lives.

Tellingly, Bartlett's initial calling was filmmaking—he studied at New York University's film school, and many of the paintings included in the exhibition reference this second love. Lavishly composed and exquisitely framed, Bartlett's complex multi-figure compositions and accompanying leading-character portraits play out like an award-winning independent film.

Bartlett is the creator of the film *Snow Fall*, about the life of Andrew Wyeth. In Wyeth, Bartlett found a kindred spirit, and the influence is evident in his artwork. Bartlett adopted Wyeth's sense of light and painting style influenced by bravura brushwork, simplified massing, and suppressed modeling. Bartlett's subject matter also

Penance 2011, oil on panel, 24 x 36.



name
Shawn

2010, oil on panel, 17 x 17



name
Soup

2010, oil on panel, 17 x 17



name

Belief in the Afterlife

2010, oil on panel, 28 x 25

name

Shine

2010, oil on panel, 17 x 17

"I am told these things: We are made up of two halves, a light upper half and a dark lower half. We are to let the battle rage between the two halves of ourselves."

—BO BARTLETT





Jeff Koons
The Shomviakana
 2010, oil on
 linen, 78 x 68.

Walter Dzierżynski
Self-Portrait as Asher Lev
 2010, oil on
 panel, 17 x 17.

Dr. Penberth
Business
Cuba
 2010, oil on
 panel, 17 x 17.

Mind Tom
 2010, oil on
 panel, 17 x 17.





School of Charm, 2010, oil on linen, 76 x 90.

school Wyrth's preference for down-home rusticity. Unlike Wyrth, however, Bartlett is a gifted colorist, and his earlier training under Nelson Shanks reinforced his cinematic leanings. Like a Technicolor production, Bartlett's work offers bigger-than-life experiences that paradoxically lead viewers away from the real world and its surface appearances into the inside spaces of the mind and spirit.

Bartlett achieves this inward view by balancing a realistic painting technique—essentially an imitative motive—with the addition of symbolic and allegorical elements. His work's true ambition is to pull subconscious triggers and elicit associations. The artist states that his work “both reveals and fills in the gaps of life ... a giant unknown.” *Dislocation*, a monumental canvas offering a realistic depiction of a shark in a tank, reveals Bartlett's ability to deliver a pictorial expression exploring concepts that lie beyond the reach of the spoken word or our ready comprehension.

In “Paintings of Home,” Bartlett returns to his hometown of Columbus, Georgia, and paints scenes and people both past and present. The results are layered—they form a diary of latent meaning, conflicted feelings, and unexpected revelations, all filtered through the rabbit-hole surrealism of a journey back home.

The idea of the Promised Land—part of the myth of the American dream—runs deep in our collective cultural memory. The current appreciation and exploration of this archetype has been a chief activator of Bartlett's artistic production. Up until the present exhibition, Bartlett seemed intent on exposing the chilling contradictions and conflicting instincts that bedevil human existence—by depicting characters at odds with their fellows, themselves, and the cultural codes that inform moral judgment. Bartlett often left his viewers stranded, gazing across a gulf that separated us hopefully flawed humans from the mythological homeland and its promises of

Bo Bartlett: Working Methods

Bartlett generally works from life and composes his paintings with props and models like stage sets or film shoots. He often uses himself and his immediate family as models. His paintings are completed one at a time and are invented from an array of references including

drawings from life, painted studies, and his own photographs. His initial color studies are completed using acrylic matte paints from Golden, which he prefers because they dry quickly. He also recommends the studio practices described by Norman Rockwell.

Drawing of Grace and Alexis
2001, graphite,
20 x 24.



economic security, conjugal bliss, and societal fellowship. The artist presented this disconnect seemingly without moral judgment or resolution. Our collective future—depicted by an art form that has itself been called into question as a valid cultural expression—hangs precariously in the balance.

Bartlett began to turn a corner while preparing for this exhibition. He had begun to back off from the easy irony and snarky intellectualized trolling that pervades much post-modern production. In "Paintings of Home" he dares to offer a faint glimmer of hope—while viewing his current work, one might think that there is actually still some validity to the American

dream. Bartlett's art holds forth the promise of a new horizon,al open to the conscience of different people and sufficiently strong to stand as a bulwark against the dark tides of selfish discontent and social unrest.

This dual approach—mixing frank assessments of America's shortcomings with hope for its future—is exemplified by two large paintings that face each other in the exhibition, one titled *School of Charm*, the other titled *School of the Americas*. Both represent actual institutions in Columbus. The former offers classes in proper Old Southern poise and good manners. The painting style is a knowing nod and wink to Rockwell, yet the tone is not ironic so much as

good-humored—we are buoyed by the well-intentioned effort to instill a sense of civility in our children. The painting sets the tone for a political discourse, as it is a quiet call to reflect on what constitutes core community values.

Mirroring *School of Charm* is *School of the Americas*, a mystifying and attention-getting scene depicting beautiful young women (perhaps graduates from the *School of Charm*) splayed about unconscious. It could be the aftermath of a group suicide, a murder scene, or hopefully, an over-the-top party. But these well-dressed young ladies seem to have had proper upbringings—something out of the ordinary is going on.

As the title indicates, the painting concerns the *School of the Americas*, a Department of Defense-run facility near Columbus, which for decades

School of the Americas, 2010, oil on linen, 82 x 82.



has drawn criticism for training Latin American military leaders who later committed human-rights violations. The controversial program (which has been renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation) is the site of an annual demonstration that attracts thousands of activists. Among other activities, protesters gather on the grounds surrounding the school and enact a "Kool-Aid party," in reference to the Jonestown Massacre. Our School of Chaves girls are now participants in this demonstration against inhumanity—suggesting that a proper upbringing may indeed lead to assertive and moral behavior in adults.

The School paintings are able to deliver their message because Bartlett is a skilled visual storyteller. An heir to traditional Western painting—knowledge of which was handed down to him by Ben Long, who in turn studied with the famed Florentine painter Piero Annigoni—Bartlett knows how to use seductive coloring, masterful composition, and comedic elements to guide viewers through his paintings. Like many other artists, he notes that looking and learning to see things for what they really are, rather than seeing a projection

of a prescribed mental concept, is key to the development of a visual language.

Bartlett adds that with this language an artist can begin to make sense of and articulate the wonders of the world, which have a numinous and wordless quality. Ultimately, he believes the world is too complex to know, and he refrains from acting on the need to fill in what he refers to as the "gaps" in his understanding of it. He heuristics the need to either "figure it out" with a scientific model or assume a position of dictatorial authority through militaristic might. His worldview offers an alternative paradigm, based on compassion and empathy, that is evinced by an easily missed entry in the show—a small depiction of a bible, itself a great social leveler.

Working off the idea that it takes all kinds to make a village, "Paintings of Home" includes portraits of residents from Columbus's humorous but at times checkered past, and many of the paintings explore issues of art, science, religion, and tradition. Dr. Frederick Discoveri Cole depicts the inventor of Coca-Cola, perhaps the town's most recognizable former resident, as

a bespectacled and somewhat glazed-over charlatan.

The real Pemberton was administered morphine to stave off the pain from a Civil War injury, so he was well-acquainted with the magic of narcotics when he developed his cocaine-laced elixir. Blind Tom depicts Thomas Wiggins, a former slave and child prodigy on the piano, who overcame both slavery and blindness to become a famous composer. Self-Portrait as Asher Lev depicts a youthful Bartlett as the fictional protagonist from Chaim Potok's novel *My Name Is Asher Lev*, about a Hasidic Jewish boy whose artistic inclinations lead to conflicts with his family and community.

There are surely wandering ghosts from his childhood that haunt Bartlett—paintings such as *The Jesus-and-Johns* and *My Childhood Home* seem to reference horrors occurring

My Childhood Home 2010, oil on panel, 28 x 25





The Remembrance 2005, oil on linen, 62 x 82.

behind closed doors. There is no easy bridge back to those Southern Gothic memories or satisfying resolution that closes the divide between evolved sensibilities and the vagaries of human fallacy. Some things are perhaps best left unspoken. Yet unimagined occurrences beyond our understanding are apt to occur, as Bartlett depicts in *Belief in the Afterlife*. These works quietly urge us on and help us to recognize, rally against, and rise above our human failings and continue on toward that imagined ideal of home. ■

Michael Curtey is the editorial director of American Artist.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Bo Bartlett was born in Columbus, Georgia. He studied at the University of the Arts and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, both in Philadelphia, and also studied privately with artists Ben F. Long IV and Nelson Shanks. He is the recipient of numerous awards, and his paintings have been exhibited in museums and galleries around the world. For more information, visit www.lobartlettart.com.