

ASHLEY BICKERTON: We Always Go Back

By Gregory Galligan

“

I almost think of my objects
as existing sometime in the
future, when the world has been
completely re-orchestrated in
terms of the hegemony of Western
culture, and [my works survive]
as...strange artifacts from what was,
when something else held the keys
to control.

”

Ashley Bickerton (1987)ⁱ

Truman: *Don’t you ever get restless? Itchy feet?*
Marlon: *Where is there to go?*

Truman: *Fiji!*
Marlon: *Where the hell is Fiji? Near Florida?*

Truman (using a golf ball as Earth): *See here?*
Marlon: *Mmmhm...*

Truman (with finger on one point of ball): *This is us...and all the way around here* (finger sliding around to opposite point on the ball)...*Fiji...You can’t get farther away before you start coming back.*—The Truman Show (1998)ⁱⁱ

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In the fictional town of Seahaven in the late 1990s American film, *The Truman Show*, protagonist Truman Burbank—an amiable if colorless life insurance salesman (played by actor-comedian Jim Carrey)—is hankering to get as far away from “home” as possible, even to the opposite side of the globe where “*you can’t get farther away before you start coming back.*” Truman has never set foot outside of the saccharine town of Seahaven, as unbeknownst to him, he is the star of a reality television show that has followed his life since birth, and will never let go of him. The entire film is a daffy slow simmer, as we follow Truman in his quest for psychic awakening, ultimately to where he questions every conceivable facet of his daily reality. That so-called reality gradually betrays itself as an elaborate and powerful *simulacrum*, a vast machinery of signs that French sociologist Jean Baudrillard claims has come to displace anything “natural” in favor of a comforting—if mortifying—fiction.ⁱⁱⁱ

At the center of this melancholic film is a terrible existential predicament: what might be said to truly constitute (at least by the standard of 1980s trans-Atlantic, or “Euro-American” culture) a truly *authentic* life, one transpiring largely, and perhaps ever more glaringly, within an entirely pre-packaged, hallucinatory reality bubble? In our own era, is the fact that over eighty percent of American households subscribe to *Amazon Prime* an entirely respectable human condition?

I want to create objects that are shamelessly beautiful at the same time that they invest in the utter bankruptcy of all possibility. But then again, I think that this is a possibility that creates its own poetic dynamic, that is capable of producing its own optimism.
—Ashley Bickerton (1987)^{iv}

By the early 1990s, the celebrated American painter Ashley Bickerton (b. 1959) found himself yearning to quit New York City. This was notably after Bickerton had racked up a decade in the fabled “center of the art world” and achieved an enviable, “bad boy” celebrity in critical and artistic circles that were now, all too predictably, turning away from him. From today’s perspective (a quarter century after the fact), it is easy to forget how the early 1990s New York “art scene” seemed to be slowly

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simmering in the wrong direction. After a decade of rollicking, “Greed is Good!” consumerism, the economic recession of 1990–1991 shook the New York art world in ways that led many participants to reassess their recent past and seriously question their immediate future.

In typically unassuming and articulate fashion, Bickerton cites the harsh New York winters as his immediate albatross at that moment. Having spent the bulk of his teen years in Hawaii, where surfing and sunscreen were as much a part of his daily ritual as were any formal school studies—no slouch, Bickerton boasts a polyglot background in Creole dialects due to his father’s career as an academic linguist and nomadic field anthropologist—one can readily imagine how Manhattan’s grey, frigid days of mid-February might have mortally worn on him (notably at an earlier moment in history, the “Park Avenue Cubists” found the frigid, monochromatic palette of New York winters indispensable for its “analytical” *chiaroscuro*).^v

For all its apparent humility, “blaming it on the weather” is, in Bickerton’s case, also a coy act of intellectual and spiritual *dissimulation*; the less flattering fact of the matter, at least when speaking *historically*, is that by 1993, when Bickerton finally packed up his apartment in the East Village and headed to Brazil in a quest for infernal and eternal sunshine, this cheeky figure of the infamous, 1980s Neo-Geo school was already, at thirty-four, a kind of “senior statesman” of a scene that was rapidly dating him. In hindsight, it is clear that Bickerton’s impressive inclusion in the 1989 Whitney Biennial signaled a pinnacle of professional achievement (in only eight, fast-paced years Bickerton had “made his mark” on the scene indelibly).^{vi} Yet again, the Whitney Biennial was also, sardonically, a peculiar kind of death knell. The ensuing five years between that 1989 pinnacle and Bickerton’s 1993 departure would indeed prove decisive, as during that time Bickerton mounted two solo shows, in 1991 and 1993, at the storied Sonnabend Gallery, each of which notably turned out to be, at best, “desultory.”^{vii} Once again, however, hindsight proves constructive, as both of these shows would play a decisive role in Bickerton’s ongoing development, even if certain contemporaries could not decide what to make of them.

As it turns out, the very year Bickerton took leave of New York City would come to be remembered by historians of contemporary art as marking a complete, and rather ruthless paradigm shift in American art production, which by that time was moving decisively away from the creation of self-contained objects (for solitary contemplation) toward employing art as a tool for social activism and “identity politics.” This trend was unmistakable by the 1993 Whitney Biennial, which many observers and critics found loathsome for its didactic chronicling of contemporary art as a catalyst for social and political protest.^{viii}

At virtually the same time, a new mode of “relational” art, which focused attention on human interaction, audience participation, and the “lives around objects” over the silent contemplating of wall-based art works was already swiftly in the ascendant, with New York hosting, in the early 1990s, two groundbreaking shows in the new genre (it would eventually be called “Relational Aesthetics”) by the young Argentine–Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija (b. 1961).^{ix} As much as Bickerton

ostensibly enjoyed these new developments—indeed various circles of artists intermingled and overlapped at this time, at least ideologically if not socially, due to their shared distrust of the machinations of the speculative art market by dealers and private collectors—there was no way that Bickerton could have felt he was riding the “new wave” of contemporary art in New York at that moment.^x

With the benefit of hindsight, however, it is now clear that Bickerton was never running away from anything. Viewed from another angle altogether, indeed one originating from the West Coast and the larger Asia Pacific, Bickerton’s developmental trajectory transcends the so-called “New York Art World” and suggests a much larger arc of self-realization and artistic production than what New York could have ever given reception to. If one stops long enough to look at the history carefully, Bickerton spent only a little over a decade in New York’s pressure cooker, where indeed he made his name as the participant of a so-called “movement” that would make an indelible impact on all of contemporary art history. That is a very big achievement, but it is neither the single criterion nor perhaps even the central artistic principle of Bickerton’s ongoing practice.

There are hints of this as early as 1996, when Bickerton, residing and working by that time in Bali as a full-fledged “expat,” sent a recent series of figurative works back to Sonnabend Gallery that Roberta Smith, writing in the *New York Times*, found impressive, namely for “how contemporary they feel, how fiercely, grimly up to the fin-de-millennium minute.”^{xi} Arguably the most important work in that solo exhibition was *All That I Can Be: Triple Self-Portrait* (1996), which the Whitney Museum of American Art subsequently acquired for its permanent collection. In this unnerving triptych, Bickerton imagines himself as potentially embodying three vastly different characters (to call them “figures” would be to grossly understate their narrative potential and nearly grotesque presence) if he had taken any one of three “completely different life paths.”^{xii}



Fig 1. *All That I Can Be: Triple Self-Portrait* (1996)

I don’t believe that individuals really do exist. I believe the individual is constructed through an elaborate and ritualized system of cultural codes.
—Ashley Bickerton (1987)^{xiii}

All That I Can Be explores various identity tropes from body builder, to transgender, to tattooed New Jersey biker, each figure presented in forensic, upright nudity and labeled like a specimen in a genetic lab experiment. The work speaks forcefully if not shockingly to one of the most persistent tropes in Bickerton’s oeuvre since arriving in New York from the California Institute of the Arts (hereafter simply CalArts) in 1981, which is the highly constructed, if not artificial nature of all human identity, as well as the haunting absence of fixed meaning or redeeming “content” in any artistic representation that aims to capture it.

This artistic “bankruptcy” to which Bickerton refers in virtually all his production over the last several decades is the common, skeptical (and sometimes initially repulsive) thread that unifies his practice, indeed even as he has shifted provocatively from an abstract to a figurative mode of painting since his relocation to Bali in the mid 1990s. In several series that are simultaneously beautiful, intellectually hermetic, and even optically grotesque, Bickerton at once appeals to the beholder’s worst instincts to stare at an image of onanistic, self-pleasuring and narcissistic exoticism, and then suggests that it is up to the viewer to fill these tableau with his or her own “content.”^{xiv} The painting becomes a trigger for all sorts of flight of fantasy and apology, a container for the *pouring into* of one’s own moral fictions, learned biases, subliminal eroticisms and—to quote a newly popular thematic in current psychological, self-help literature—*motivated perception*.^{xv} In a moment of recognition and repulsion, we find in these works what we are looking for. And in a disturbing sense that recalls some of Bickerton’s deepest moorings in the conceptual, “post-studio” curriculum of CalArts in the late 1970s, otherwise known as the *Pictures Generation*, one suspects that with many Bickertons we are looking upon “*images that understand us,*” namely in the sense that the media culture from which we have emerged has largely preceded us and stamped our sense of self identity indelibly.^{xvi}

The artistic object has thus become a kind of *decanter*, out of which one may pour, or *pour into*, multiple and sometimes mutually contradictory fragments of autobiography, concocted scenario, orientalist cliché (hence the purposeful references to Paul Gauguin), and over-the-top eroticism, ultimately to where no single reading, or discursive transcription can proceed without descending into a disturbing mode of self satire. It is at that point that Bickerton may be said to comment on the act of art production itself as constituting both a meaningful yet manic enterprise, that message returning us to his earliest forays into “Commodity Art” in the mid 1980s, namely via exploring themes of branding and the infiltration of consumer culture into nearly every aspect of our lives via his infamous, if exquisitely handcrafted “wall contemplation units,” or “Susie boxes.”^{xvii} With their commercial, corporate logos plastered across their surfaces like colonizing, colonialist encampments, Bickerton considers the Susie boxes (they were featured prominently in the 1989 Whitney Biennial) not wall reliefs but *paintings* signifying how art is no longer immune to conscription by the world of capitalist commodity production.

Perhaps most surprising, the industrial-looking format of the Susie boxes, with their metal wall mountings, rolled up rubber covers, silkscreened logos, and cool yet declamatory graphics can be traced back to Pacific surf culture. As Bickerton relates in regard to their earliest manifestation in about 1987, it was the increasing branding of surfboards with corporate logos at that time that first suggested to him how to conceive a wall-mounted work that might refer to a similar predicament in the realm of painting, which by the mid 1980s was fast becoming a kind of consumer trophy for private collectors playing an increasingly speculative contemporary art market for personal profit.

I noticed that surfboards, which throughout most of the ‘70s had been almost uniformly monochrome and in many instances even defiantly pure white, suddenly began to blossom with a virulent fungus of sponsorship logos. It turned out to be a sport-culture pandemic, with every visible and glamorous surface colonized by iridescent corporate mildew. —Ashley Bickerton (2011)^{xviii}

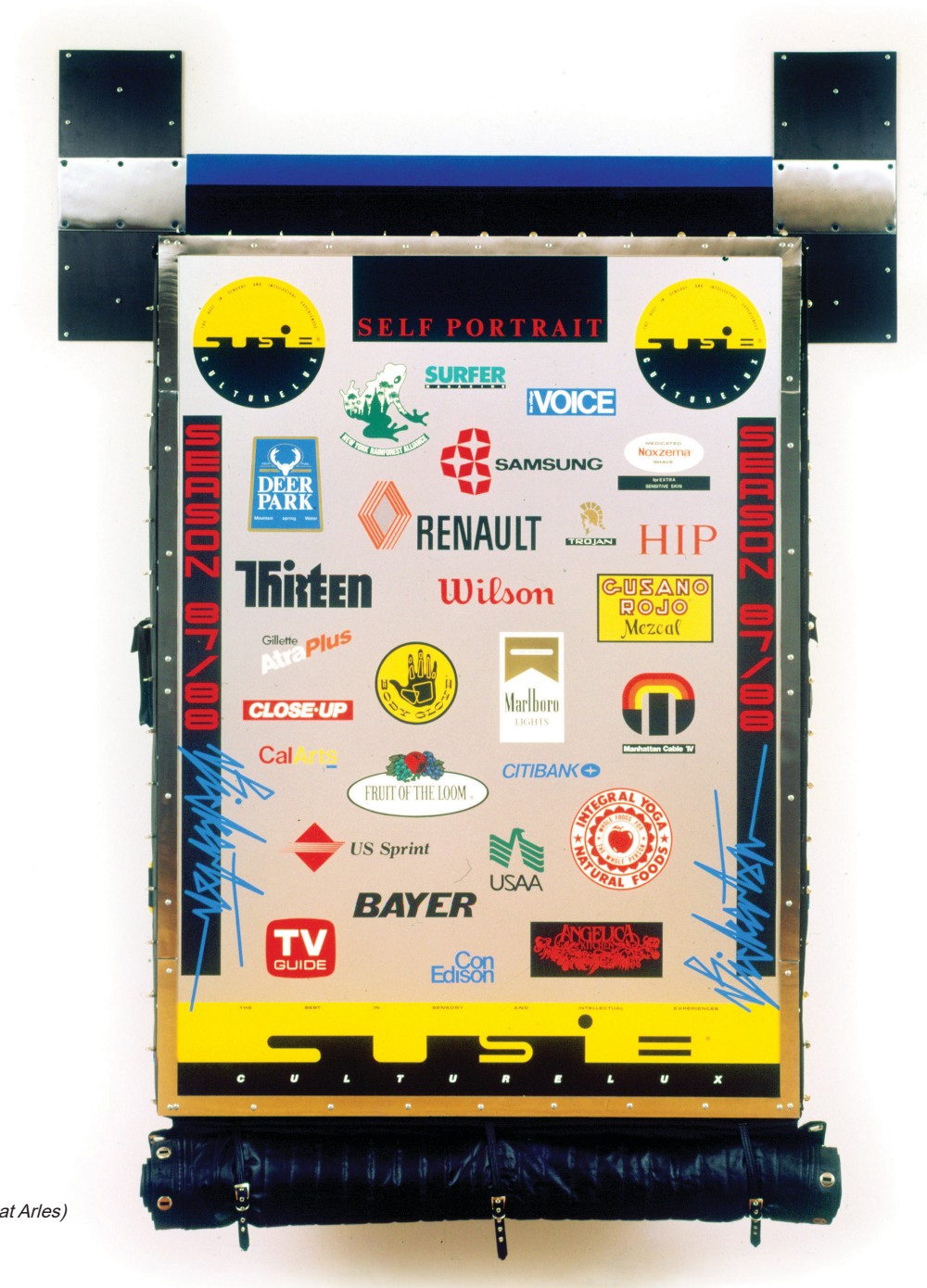


Fig 2. *Tormented Self-Portrait (Susie at Arles)* (1987-1988)

Since that time, the Susie boxes have arguably become a kind of artistic brand identity for the artist himself, indeed ever since they were first exhibited within the New York art world in the late 1980s. That reflexive branding of the artist as a Warholian “producer” of consistent and instantly recognizable consumer objects is not unlike the corporate ideal dictating that a Starbucks *mochaccino* should look and taste exactly the same in Abu Dhabi as it does in Dallas. This is one reason why, when in 1993 Bickerton’s work began shifting away from the, as it were, *expected product* and began embracing more tropical and South Pacific themes and sources, some observers were completely baffled by his new direction.

A solo “travelogue” show, all in sculpture, at Sonnabend Gallery that same year hinted at his future trajectory (Bickerton now recalls the show as indicating his “yearning to *get out* [of New York] coming to the fore”).^{xix} There is a marvelous photograph in a 2003 issue of *Artforum* of Bickerton standing in his New York studio in the early 1990s in his Bill Cody hat, an unlit cigarette dangling from his lips, and looking rather ‘prairie punkish’ in the midst of his recent combine-like works inspired by the tropics—“beachcombers” and “fresh-off-the-boat” and “desert island” bio-cobblings. It seems that by that time Bickerton was dragging selected items of beach flotsam back to New York in his sandy suitcases, namely after periodic surfing junkets, until he could finally bring himself to “cut the cord” with the East Village scene that had “made” him (when, as we commonly say of artists when they reach full mastery of their recognizable signature style, “Bickerton *became* Bickerton”). By that time the Susie boxes poking stylish yet acerbic fun at the way art (and even its creators) had come to embody over-branded products in a system that yearned to turn everything into a luxury consumer item had essentially run their course.^{xx}

Thirty-five years on, if we might take Bickerton’s New York debut of 1986 as a launch date, audiences to the artist’s recent production over the last two years (with the minor exception of two works dating from 2011) in the current show at Gajah Gallery will find some of the most momentous contemporary art histories embedded in their surfaces and profiles.^{xxi} We are privileged to view this work from this “Global South” side of the planet, not for any implied luck in its arrival from foreign places, but for the opportunity to consider that the long arc of its production arguably *originates in the Asia Pacific* in numerous ways that, albeit hard to recognize, are proving uncanny and, at times, even bittersweet.

We push frontiers, we push envelopes, we push margins. We’re always looking for something beyond. Sometimes we do it in studio, what’s often referred to as “deep studio space”...sometimes, as in Gauguin’s case, or the orientalist before, with geographic movement. Sometimes it’s a ripping up with context... What Magritte did with Surrealism, and perhaps Van Gogh and Gauguin were attempting to do by their move to Arles. And since I grew up traveling, in order to sustain the dialogue was the essential concept in my mind. I had to move. I had to re-contextualize myself in different geographic settings. I did not want to become one of those people who is chasing what I felt was a retrograde fantasy in Bali. I wanted something else...—Ashley Bickerton (2018)^{xxii}

The artistic pushing of envelopes, of frontiers, and of margins is everywhere evident in this exhibition of recent work by Ashley Bickerton, dating roughly from 2018 to the present (two montages of acrylic, digital print, bamboo, wood, and fiberglass of 2011 are the only exceptions). All of this work therefore issues from his resident studio in Bali. One is tempted to speak of a *neo-surrealist* impulse at work here, and in some cases Bickerton himself refers to Surrealism, proper, as a source of inspiration (René Magritte, in particular, is a frequent point of reference in conversations and published interviews). But the surrealist discourse of the unconscious as we have come to know it, in other words, the one handed down from its European wellsprings in the work of Tanguy, Dali, and others of the interwar period, depends for its success on one’s willingness to accept that the work of art is somehow evidencing the artist’s communion with suppressed fantasies and prohibited impulses, if not a whole psychic life of dark leanings only sporadically breaking through into consciousness and manifesting themselves as signs pointing to an entirely other realm of human cognition.

But the world of the *dream*, or the unconscious “dream state” as a fundamental point of departure for a transgressive act of painting, indeed one in which we are willing to entertain a definition of beauty as “the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella” simply does not apply here.^{xxiii} Instead, Bickerton’s figurative (or “representational,” as opposed to “abstract”) paintings issue from a much more *appropriationist* history of late 1970s, reaching all the way back to his earliest experiences at CalArts, when a “post-studio” culture of neo-conceptualist experiment called into question the very possibility of painting to “signify” anything without being compromised by an all-pervasive media culture that quite literally constructs us. Michel Foucault would be perfectly at home here (Bickerton claims, like many of his generation, that he absorbed the French author’s *Power/Knowledge* by a kind of social osmosis, as well as skimming the actual text).^{xxiv} If long before the artist takes up any intentional act of “personal” or “sincere” expression s/he has been largely formed by a system of signs already possessing complex histories of power and societal coding, painting becomes as much, and as little as an ecstatic anachronism. This is not to say that it will no longer move us, but rather that it will do so in ways that are perplexing for our inability to define some kind of essential, unassailable content, or “significance” beyond all the art work’s busy machinery.

This is partly why some of Bickerton’s representational output of roughly the last twenty-five years can seem, at first glance, remarkably “sophomoric,” or indicative of some kind of reversion to infantilism after the artist reached certain heights of postmodern—dare one say it—classicism. If the *Susie* wall units represent for a Western observer one of the “great achievements” of 1980s Commodity Art and Neo-Geo, “theory-driven” painting, the more recent canvases and sculptures referencing—often very emphatically—“intentionally silly” subjects can seem either philosophically nihilist or aimlessly salacious. No matter what one might find in them, and indeed this work delights in providing the beholder with all sorts of possibilities, the recent paintings seem to be attesting to Bickerton’s embrace

of what musicians call *decibel creep*, that phenomenon of gradually raising the sound level from one band to another until the music itself approaches the status of white noise. At that moment (and it is possible to find it almost anywhere in this body of work), the painting, as a multi-layered sign system, implodes into pure nonsense. This is the artistic and cultural bankruptcy of which Bickerton so often speaks—and speaks so courageously and eloquently, unafraid to expose the wizard in the control booth jerking levers and pulleys frantically to produce the audience-desired spectacle.

When around 2006 his Western audiences decided, after much consternation (and not a little embarrassment) that his move to Bali signaled the advent in his life and work of a dissolute, *Gauguinesque* orientalism, Bickerton was all too pleased to feed it back to them in a monochromatic series of “extradition” paintings partaking of “campy fantasy fiction.”^{xxv} Sitting at his computer on the tropical veranda; standing at his easel in paint-smeared cargo pants; and finally directly confronting the viewer with fistfuls of luscious Polynesian fruit (in sardonic mockery of Eve offering an apple to Adam), the series *en plein air* features a campy backdrop of naked women and children frolicking around Bickerton like unapologetically colonialist clichés of fecundity and equatorial eroticism. Bickerton’s own role as a sly creator of such depraved machines is reduced to a kind of “bespoke product” supplier. A little Commodity Art, anyone, with that *amuse bouche*?

It’s exotic: there’s bare chests, breasts, buttocks, florid colors; there’s flowers, there’s sex, there’s happiness, there’s fecundity. They’re all silly. Intentionally silly. [Paintings] are just things, you know. You want a painting; I do a painting; that’s it—you’ve got a painting...You want a frame? I’ll give you a big frame. You wanna make it loud? Turn everything up to eleven!

—Ashley Bickerton (2018) ^{xxvi}

Bickerton’s *Extradition* series had its roots in a slightly earlier, almost ludicrously hallucinogenic mixed media series in which a “blue man” is the central protagonist in “bacchanalian” settings of South Pacific debauchery and yet implied, onanistic languor.^{xxvii} In what are now classic works from a feverish rush of production, there is a cinematic immediacy to Bickerton’s hyper-keyed palette (Bickerton later speaks of Balinese “Batuan” painting as an undeniable influence, even if “coming in the back door,” as it were, without his realizing it at the time). One thinks of Peter Greenway’s 1989 classic *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover*, with its relentless, sensuous visuality and yet subversion of nearly all narrative content—the piling up of rapid-fire motifs that trigger, but never fully fire off the moral or intellectual messaging we so badly want from them. Greenway’s “paintings with soundtracks” are summoned here, but on Bickerton’s terms, silently.^{xxviii}



Fig 3. *T17nEXP* (2018)

The Gajah show that gives rise to this commentary includes choice specimens of this epic, bacchanalian excess that has marked Bickerton's production over the last two decades, while this exhibition hints at a new, comparatively vulnerable direction. The "blue man" making his appearance in several canvases reminds us of how Bickerton's figurative work of the last twenty years represents an unsettling amalgam of fact, fiction, and sheer—"silly"—fantasy, given the character's multiple sources of origin and periodic resurfacing. The blue man is, perhaps surprisingly, present as early as 1981 in Bickerton's Super 8 film, *The Love Story of Pythagoras Redhill*, a punkish, dada-like riff on Malcolm Lowry's powerful *Under the Volcano* (1947), a bracing tale of British dissolution and decadence in Mexico^{xxxix}. He then resurfaces as a self-portrait sculpture, *Self-Portrait: Desert Island Head*, of 1993, symbolizing Bickerton's own physical and spiritual adjustment to the tropics after his having taken permanent leave of New York City. Ultimately the "blue man" descends from something sublime to something far more specious, as he comes to signify in various tableau a dissolute Western, male wanderer, he who "wears a Picassoesque French sailor shirt and slinks round the ports and brothels of the South China Sea...", in the words of the painter himself, who continues, "I don't know if [the blue man is] me or Malcolm Lowry or some person Shane Macgowan or Leonard Cohen sang about, but he's sort of a composite kind of creature...He's also a twentieth-century white man but he's blue, merging into the kind of expatriated figure. Or he might be of mixed blood, I don't know. He's central to all the new paintings."^{xxx}

In Bickerton's recent figurative work, here spanning a productive period of about 2017 to the present, flashes of autobiography thus alternate, like cameo references, with fantastical scenarios that hint at multiple kinds of "bankruptcy," at once cultural and artistic, as they are thrown against a Southeast Asian context that both accommodates and exposes them. And who, exactly, are these futuristic, yet terribly familiar Mona Lisa's, in all these female "Head Paintings" (the artist's term) that represent both a

tremendous feat of labor to execute and yet the most vacuous kinds of artistic—to quote the title of one of them—"codswallop and doggerel?"^{xxxi} We have all seen the real-life equivalent of these characters somewhere, perhaps after a botched job of plastic surgery in Vegas, but then Bickerton would remind us that we are not looking at *characters* in these instances but *images of character production*, or what he refers to as "painting-like things, or stand-ins for paintings," the oil and acrylic squishing around and obscuring and then *projecting processes of signification* that accrue in mere flashes of self recognition, before imploding and atomizing before conjuring anything "meaningful."^{xxxii}

The unsettling fact, if one is capable of rallying to it, is that in Bickerton's recent work, as in Bickerton's classic, late-1980s Susie boxes, there are no easily identified, desirable "takeaways." The art history behind this principle is staggering: already some forty years ago, the Pictures Generation proposed (in the immediate wake of Minimalism, Pop, and Conceptualism) that "images that understand us" are mercilessly opaque things, resisting definition and description in a world in which they often precede us, and are *the first things to make us*. The artist arrives late, as if in costume for an already completed mythology, like a pathetic Gilles or Pierrot, embodying little more or less than what is described by a silly Wikipedia entry: "[Gilles is] a type of bumbling clown, stupid, credulous and lewd"—to which we might add, "and dressed appropriately in terribly silly, baggy pajamas."^{xxxiii} How Bickerton can brilliantly bring you all the way back to Watteau, of all painters, one working at another moment in history and within another culture when art was the servant of an altogether other kind of political and artistic buffoonery, is deliciously shocking. (It is rather ironic, and perhaps sweetly so, that just as Bickerton arrived in New York in the early 1980s to airbrush pictures for Jack Goldstein, an historic, sprawling retrospective of Antoine Watteau was playing itself out in Washington.)^{xxxiv}

Bickerton is ultimately a kind of mirror bearer, montage cobbler, and media collaborator, but certainly no priest, no shaman, and—thank god—definitely no “Jack the Dripper.”^{xxxv} And here we are shuttled *back to the future* of John Baldessari arriving in class at CalArts, in the mid 1970s (Bickerton would matriculate in the autumn of 1978,) tossing magazines on the floor while telling his students, *Here, all of this stuff you can use in your art.*^{xxxvi} It was the historical moment of no return to straightforward “signification,” that “before the Fall” condition of actually, fully *believing in* what you were looking at. Somebody was always implied as standing behind the curtain, always frantically, even ruthlessly pulling the ropes, pulleys, and levers of “ART” to direct you. Now you know why Bickerton’s early fascination with the industrial accoutrements of mountain climbing and sailing—all that *cool stuff* implied in hoisting into position grand spectacles and remarkable feats of purposelessness—was so familiar to us. It made for the grandest kind of theater in which we are all waiting for Godot to get here and fix something.

A bronze sculpture of a shark, as found in the current Gajah show (it was cast recently at the gallery’s foundry in Yogyakarta) is just formerly molten metal canalized by a mold to cool and assume a form you might visually dance with. But if that definition seems philosophically deflating, the same sculpture harks back to Bickerton’s early-in-life fascination with the talismanic power of Polynesian sculptural forms he had been collecting since his well-traveled childhood.^{xxxvii} Bickerton’s work of the present and, presumably, near future bodes well for this kind of “duck-rabbit” post-conceptualism. You might be forgiven for crying a little while watching the opening sequence of a video walk-through—the Covid-19 pandemic has precluded any possible visit in person—of the artist’s studio, which Bickerton had produced by assistants while he was stranded in London. As the studio tour commences, we are taken on a 360-degree spin around a hanging piece in that features—note this—a *chuck of ocean* (it is a resin simulation), which is strapped into the familiar sporting paraphernalia and *just hanging there*, a mortified and mortifying replica. At once precious and pathetic, something immeasurably beautiful and bankrupt, the thing hurts and seduces one repeatedly and ruthlessly.



Fig 4. Installation view of *Shark* (2019) [left] and *Wahine Pa'ina* (2015) [right]



Fig 5. Installation view of *Flotsam Painting Fire Plane* (2019) [left] and *Flotsam Painting Blue Brown No. 1* (2019) [right]

In *Heresy or Codswallop*, there are two works that hint at this re-engagement with landscape in Bickerton’s current output. They are the *Flotsam* paintings, beautiful things that hint at Bickerton’s long interest in landscape stretching back to the minimalist Catalog: *Terra Firma Nineteen Hundred Eighty Nine* (1989), which at the time led some critics to equate Bickerton with a burgeoning genre of environmental art.^{xxxviii} But more than that, in some ways these *Flotsams* reach all the way back to Robert Smithson, not as tributes but nasty little deflations and cameo satires of the heroic, post-studio conceptual premises of the earthwork *Spiral Jetty* (1970). The *Flotsam* paintings (there is to be a larger show of them in New York soon) bring within the steely bounds of a different kind of *Susie* box the most gorgeously haunting tableau of painting and found objects (i.e. beach garbage) since Max Ernst left us. Bickerton admits to the surrealist roots of the series in the split, blue-horizon landscapes of such precursors like Tanguy, Dali, and others, and in this regard it is notable that some early followers of Bickerton detected strong surrealist influences in his work as early as the mid 1980s.^{xxxix}

But Bickerton would categorically dismiss any sentimental, ecological reading of these *Flotsam* tableau, in which he incorporates painted backgrounds with what are apparently chance, or lightly choreographed arrangements of free-floating ocean litter: partly crushed water bottles, rubber flip flops, plastic straws and picnic dining ware—the standard banal but tragic stuff of the “Great Pacific Garbage Patch,” which he and studio assistants cull regularly, at low tide, from the Bali shoreline. It would be easy to make much of this, and certainly it is tempting to read into the *Flotsam* series an ecologically conscientious “message.” But to do so would be to commit a kind of violence to these paintings, as Bickerton has already suggested in having stated that the human detritus in this body of work actually constitute beautiful things in their own right (at least, one presumes, within the parameters of such measured and finely finished constructions).^{xl} This artistic principal returns us to Bickerton’s roots in the “appropriation” school of the 1970s Pictures Generation, when virtually any element of Pop or “commodity” culture had a place in an artistic practice that aimed at exposing the highly constructed and subjective nature of all human identity, or system of signification—when the pictorial or objectified commodity *understands us* better than we might ever interpret it.

What a strange notion. But this material and expressive opacity of Bickerton’s *Flotsam* paintings is just the kind of thing he should ultimately be remembered for, no matter how he has chosen to embody the discourse in abstract or figurative terms over what is, to date, a wide body of work now representing some forty years of ceaseless production. The cool *pigeoning*, Creole-like, of such diametrically opposed systems of signification—the painting of sublime nature with the disjunctive syntax of montage—is a dada-like gesture approaching noise poetry.^{xli} There are principles of rebellion and renewal in constant tension under such circumstances: ecstatic pleasure and disgust that just hang there, exchanging nods dumbly. In 1987, Bickerton foresaw this future.

Decadence does not have to be equated with oblivion...
Decadence can be fiery and combative. Essentially,
I’ve always struggled to get out of what I considered
the neon-lit laboratory of art thinking, in which a
virus could be moved from one test- tube to another
under the most optimal conditions, which had no
bearing on the organic reality of day-to-day existence.
But this is how so much art-thought was done, and so
many factors were left out of the equation to create a
structural scaffolding of information exchange: factors
like human desire or human weakness, factors like the
desire to escape all cultural production. All these things
were never ejected into the equation; [modernity] was
always utopian in that sense. I want to load up the
polyreferent, and then set it adrift. —Ashley Bickerton (1987) ^{xlii}

“Setting adrift the polyreferent,” and watching what happens when
painting is proposed as an “empty vessel, one into which we can
pour all sorts of delusions...and inject...any sort of escapist desire
or hyperbolic theoretical promise we want to wallow in,” is what
characterizes Bickerton as one of the most contemporary of artists
among us—no matter whether on an Atlantic or a South Pacific
meridian. The long arc of Bickerton’s development stretching from
Hawaii, to Los Angeles, to Bali, even increasingly suggests an
“Asian,” or an Asia-Pacific trajectory that begs closer attention. The
congested surfaces of Balinese Batuan painting; the florid palette
of Hindu temples and fantastic deities; the tropical motifs and expat
orientalisms...all have crept into Bickerton’s studio as surely as any
other source learned in art school or Western art history.^{xliii} But one
suspects that the affinities between Bickerton’s work and Asian kinds
of imagism are ultimately far more *conceptual* than stylistic in basis.
What is certain, at this juncture, is that while the postmodernist,
1980s Los Angeles and New York art worlds fashioned him artistically,
Bickerton was always a temporary sojourner lent temporarily to that
rough circuit, indeed just as it was beginning to cede to a rising tide of
contemporary *Asian* artistic production.

History is, once again, instructive on the matter. In 1996, when
Bickerton sent back to Sonnabend Gallery that bevy of figurative
pictures from his Bali studio, Asian contemporary art arrived bigly
at the Asia Society & Museum in the form of the expansive survey
Contemporary Art from Asia: Traditions/Tensions.^{xliv} On the cover
of the show’s catalogue was an iconic self-portrait by Thailand’s
Chatchai Puipia (b. 1964), in which the artist seems to be screaming
ecstatically. The talismanic force of that picture is embedded in
Puipia’s frenetic application of paint to canvas. But what a laugh!
Puipia has admitted, many years later, that the yellow palette he
chose for the rendering was inspired, on a whim, by his bemusement
over happening one day upon a Thai magazine advertisement for a
yellow Volkswagon. That kind of collision of sincerity and absurdity
is something that Bickerton’s work perpetually excels in, work that
is and increasingly as much a part of the Asian horizon today as the
East Village “scene” of well over a generation ago.

Author’s Note: The title of this essay has been borrowed from
the title of a “head painting” (the artist’s own category for his
female portraits) by Ashley Bickerton, *We Always Go Back*
(2020), which is in the current exhibition.

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the critical importance of visual art archives in Asia will be
published in an anthology on the topic to be published by
Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences Press in mid 2021.—

END NOTES

i Dan Cameron, “Signs of Empire,” *NYART NOW: The Saatchi Collection*, 1987; pp. 13–56.

ii The Truman Show, 1998, Screenplay [digitally accessed 1 December 2020 at http://www.msina.de/Schule/Material_fur_Lehrer/Full_Transcription_Truman_Show.pdf]. Notably, Bickerton echoes Truman’s notion of going to the opposite side of the earth in an interview of 2014; see *Ashley Bickerton: A World within a World*, INFRAME TV, January 27, 2014 [digitally accessed 20 December 2020 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6XDdA3tmKQM>].

iii On the *Simulacrum*, see Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, translated by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor, 2004; 1994; French orig. 1981); see also Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. by Phil Beitchman, Paul Foss, and Paul Patton (Cambridge, MA, 1983).

iv Ashley Bickerton as quoted in a “collaged” group interview by Dan Cameron (as in n. 1), p. 32.

v Bickerton frequently cites the influence of his father Derek (1926–2018), a widely published academic linguist originally specializing in the study of Creole dialects; see Derek Bickerton, *More than Nature Needs: Language, Mind, and Evolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); and Bickerton, *Dynamics of a Creole System* (Cambridge University Press, 1975).

vi Bickerton showed three mixed-media constructions (what the artist called “Susie boxes”) in this biennial, which are all illustrated in the show’s catalogue; see Richard Armstrong et al., *1989 Biennial Exhibition* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1989), pp. 24–27.

vii Both the artist and period critics shared this conclusion, but the choice word is quoted from Roberta Smith’s subsequent, largely favorable review of Bickerton’s 1996 solo exhibition, *Back to the Wall* (Sonnabend Gallery); see Smith, “Art Review: Humanity and Self: a Nay Vote,” *The New York Times*, May 10, 1996 [digitally accessed 12 December 2020 at <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/05/10/arts/art-review-humanity-and-self-a-nay-vote.html>]; for an example of the lukewarm reviews coming out in by the early 1990s, see Michael Brenson, “Art/Review: Ashley Bickerton’s Pleas to Rescue a Threatened Earth,” *The New York*

Times, Oct. 27, 1989. Brenson faults the thirty-year-old artist’s most recent work as “designer art with a message” that exhibits “no sense of conflict or struggle” [digitally accessed 12 December 2020 at <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/10/27/arts/review-art-ashley-bickerton-s-pleas-to-rescue-a-threatened-earth.html>].

viii For an informative overview of this historic shift, see Jerry Saltz and Rachel Corbett, “How Identity Politics Conquered the Art World,” *Vulture*, April 18, 2016 [digitally accessed 12 December 2020 at <https://www.vulture.com/2016/04/identity-politics-that-forever-changed-art.html>]. See also the manifesto-like essay by Whitney curator Elisabeth Sussman, “Coming Together in Parts: Positive Power in the Art of the Nineties,” in Sussman et al., *1993 Biennial Exhibition* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art), pp. 12–25.

ix For an informative account, see Pauline J. Yao, “The Lives of Objects: Rirkrit Tiravanija in Conversation,” *M+ Stories, Podium Issue 2: Objects*, June 24, 2019 [digitally accessed 12 December 2020 at <https://stories.mplus.org.hk/en/podium/issue-2-objects/the-lives-of-objects-rirkrit-tiravanija-in-conversation/>]; see also Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Les presses du réel; Dijon, 2002). Tiravanija made his solo debut with the show *Pad Thai* at the Paula Allen Gallery in Soho in 1990, where he convivially cooked with the convivial assistance of attendees—Bickerton among them—in the gallery’s small project room; two years later, Tiravanija elaborated upon this improvisatory format at 303 Gallery in his exhibition *Untitled (Free/Still)*, where he designated the gallery’s office furniture and supplies as a “platform” for feeding Thai curries to bemused visitors. Again, Bickerton attended the momentous opening. As Bickerton recently recalled of the experience, not unlike many at the time, he “wasn’t sure it was art...or even what it was, but it was fun, and Rirkrit was a hell of a guy and part of our general gang”; Ashley Bickerton in e-mail correspondence with Gregory Galligan, 12 December 2020. Looking back, one can hardly imagine anything more diametrically opposed to a contemporary art show of wall-mounted art works than these audience-participatory events. Notably, only months following upon the 303 Gallery show, Bickerton, with his “career...in the toilet, my marriage in tatters, and my financial prospects bleak,” installed himself ruefully along the bay of Bahia; see Ashley Bickerton, *Ashley Bickerton* (London: Other

Criteria, 2011), p. 139.

x Art critic Jerry Saltz also points out that by the early 1990s, New York was increasingly mesmerized by the meteoric rise of Damien Hirst and Matthew Barney, although Saltz suggests that Bickerton was somehow intimidated by the new generation. In reality, both young artists owed a debt to Bickerton’s example and camaraderie at the time, something attested by the fact that Hirst has since become one of Bickerton’s strongest private collectors; see Saltz, “Ashley Bickerton,” *Frieze*, Issue 30 (9 September 1996), n.p. [digitally accessed 14 December 2020 at <https://www.frieze.com/article/ashley-bickerton>]; on Hirst’s support, see Hugh Allan et al., *Ashley Bickerton: Ornamental Hysteria* (exh. cat.), Newport Street Gallery, 2017. For a highly informative walk-through of the Newport show by curator Hugh Allan and the artist, see <https://vimeo.com/215645083> [digitally accessed 14 December 2020].

xi Smith (as in n. 7). Smith’s sentiments would be subsequently echoed by art critic Ken Johnson, who would come to write of Bickerton’s 1999 show, “[The artist] doesn’t show us the way out of this decadent terrestrial entrapment, but he captures the spiritual nightmare of modernity with visionary exuberance”; see Johnson, “Art Review: Ashley Bickerton,” *The New York Times*, May 28, 1999, Section E, p. 32 [digitally accessed 19 December 2020, at <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/05/28/arts/art-in-review-ashley-bickerton.html>].

xii For an excellent, full-color illustration of, and informative commentary on the painting by the artist himself, see Ashley Bickerton (as in n. 9), pp. 171–75.

xiii Cameron (as in n. 1), p. 36.

xiv Certain critics of Bickerton’s Bali-based work have remarked upon his turning out pictures that are “easy to hate, unsettling to look at and difficult to ignore” (Robert Smith, 1996); that discourse recalls the topic of so-called “Bad Painting,” first treated extensively by curator Marcia Tucker in 1978—notably concurrently with the rise of the so-called “Pictures Generation”; see Tucker, “Bad’ Painting,” in *“Bad” Painting* (exh. cat.), The New Museum, 1978, n.p. [digitally accessed 13 December 2020 at <https://archive.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/5>]. See also Corinne Robins, *The Pluralist Era: American Art 1968–1981* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), esp. Chapter 6, “Representation: Super

Realism, New Image Painting, and “Bad” Painting,” pp. 155–79. Bickerton has also had the dubious distinction of being cited—along with Julian Schnabel—for a painting that is “so bad it’s good” in a year-end roundup in *Artforum*; see Ali Subotnick, Massimiliano Gioni, and Maurizio Cattalan, “Everybody Was There: The Wrong Guide to New York in 2004,” *Artforum International*, Special Issue, December 2004 [digitally accessed 13 December 2020 at <https://www.artforum.com/print/200410/everybody-was-there-the-wrong-guide-to-new-york-in-2004-45366>].

xv For an accessible account of “motivated perception” as a cognitive misreading, or distortion of what one perceives of reality through various lenses of cultural conditioning and socially constructed biases, see Brian Resnick, “How Desire Can Warp our View of the World,” *Vox*, August 8, 2019 [accessed digitally 13 December 2020 at <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2019/8/8/20706126/motivated-perception-psychology>].

xvi See David Salle and James Welling, “Images that Understand Us,” *LAICA Journal* No. 27 (June–July 1980), pp. 54–57 [digitally accessed 13 December 2020 at <http://www.davidsallestudio.net/Salle%20and%20Welling%20Images%20that.%20LAICA2.pdf>]. For background on the Pictures Generation and the “post-studio” era characterizing the CalArts curriculum under John Baldessari, see Douglas Eklund, “Image Art after Conceptualism: CalArts, Hallwalls, and Artists Space,” in *The Pictures Generation: 1974–1984* (exh. cat.), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2009, pp. 22–117; see also Richard Hertz, *Jack Goldstein and the CalArts Mafia* (Ojai, CA; 2003); also Douglas Crimp, “Pictures,” October Vol. 8 (Spring 1979), pp. 75–88; and Cornelia Butler, “A Lurid Presence: Smithson’s Legacy and Post-Studio Art,” *Robert Smithson* (exh. cat.), The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2004, pp. 225–43.

It is important to note that by the time Bickerton arrived at CalArts, the school was witnessing a trend among some faculty back to studio-based production, owing partly to practical concerns over having to sell work if one were to have a career outside academia. Bickerton was among a second-generation of students at CalArts that was part of this general retrenchment “back to the studio”; see Craig Owens, “Back to the Studio,” *Art in America* (January 1982), pp. 99-107; and Daniel Buren, translated by Thomas Repensek, “The Function of the Studio,” *October*, Vol. 10 (Autumn

1979), pp. 51–58.

xvii On the genesis of the “Susie” boxes in about 1987, see Ashley Bickerton (as in n. 9), pp. 58–89.

xviii Ashley Bickerton (as in n. 9), p. 59. Bickerton recounts how his realization of the proliferation of corporate sponsorship of surfboard culture melded with his interest in Frank Stella, namely that in Stella’s minimalist work “the form defines content; the content defines form.” For a firsthand account of how Bickerton valued his participation in surf culture as a kind of “private laboratory” and “microcosm that seemed to encapsulate all the meaningful shifts and crystallizations of the larger culture,” see Bickerton, “Notes on Surf Culture,” in *Ashley Bickerton* (as in n. 9), pp. 403–08.

xix Ashley Bickerton in email conversation with Gregory Galligan, 14 December 2020.

xx On the hyper-commodification of art and the neo-conceptual art of the 1980s, see Amy L. Brandt, *Interplay: Neo-Conceptual Art of the 1980s* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), especially pp. 47–84; see also Gianni Jetzer, *“Brand New: Art and Commodity in the 1980s,”* Brand New: Art and Commodity in the 1980s (exh. cat.), The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C., 2018, pp. 20–36. It is notable in this context that Bickerton has stated publicly that he always identified more with the “Commodity Art” movement of the 1980s than the so-called “Neo-Geo” school, the latter in which he was summarily lumped (largely by chance association) with Peter Halley, Jeff Koons, and Meyer Vaisman in the historic group show at Sonnabend Gallery, New York, in late 1986 (on that show and the critical “Neo-Geo” literature that it generated, see Brandt, cited above, pp. 1–20); for an account of the highly “chance” nature of Bickerton’s association with Halley, Koons, and Vaisman on the occasion of the Sonnabend show, see Steve Lafreniere, “Ashley Bickerton Talks to Steve Lafreniere,” *Artforum* 41, no. 7 (March 2003), pp. 240–41/281.

xxi Citing the Sonnabend group show of 1986 as Bickerton’s “New York debut” is arguably to engage in a bit of art-historical distortion, as Bickerton showed work in New York on two occasions prior to that date: first, a short “Super 8” film, *The Love Story of Pythagoras Red Hill* (1981), which Bickerton produced as a student at CalArts (Baldessari and other faculty

were also working in the medium), had its first-ever screening at Artists Space in 1982; this was followed by Bickerton’s first solo exhibition, largely comprising a series of graphic word pictures, at the storied White Columns “alternative” (i.e. “artist run”) gallery in 1984. While the film is not currently accessible beyond a brief mention in a recent video interview, the White Columns show is documented in the gallery’s digital archives; for the latter, see <https://whitecolumns.org/exhibitions/ashley-bickerton-installation/> [digitally accessed 13 December 2020].

xxii *Ashley Bickerton, Looking for Something Beyond*, HENI Talks, 2018 [digitally accessed 15 December 2020 at <https://vimeo.com/265969003>].

xxii The French Surrealists originally borrowed the line from the work of the nineteenth-century poet Isidore Lucien Ducasse (1846–1870; nom de plume Comte de Lautréamont).

xxiv On the era’s infatuation with theory-driven painters, Bickerton has remarked publically that he “carried around Foucault’s *Power/Knowledge* for years, and I did skim it. The words “power” and “knowledge” worked on my brain for sure, and then certain ideas [derived from deconstruction theory] were just in the air. We had access to them via osmosis”; see Steve LaFreniere (as in n. 20), p. 240; see also Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, 1972–1977, ed. by Colin Gordon, translated by Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, and Kate Soper (New York: Pantheon, 1980/1972). On the related subject of how a theory-driven art criticism of the time would mirror the production of theory-driven painting, see Howard Singerman, “The Myth of Criticism in the 1980s,” in X—TRA, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Fall 2005), np. [digitally accessed 20 December 2020 at <https://www.x-traonline.org/article/the-myth-of-criticism-in-the-1980s>].

xxv Ashley Bickerton (as in n. 9), pp. 289–92. The tripartite series, part painting and part photo montage, consists of *Extradition with Computer*; *Extradition with Palette*; and *Extradition with Fruit*, all dating from 2006. The works are now in the Damien Hirst collection; see *Ashley Bickerton: Ornamental Hysteria* (as in n. 10), p. 121.

xxvi *Ashley Bickerton: Looking for Something Beyond* (as in n. 22).

xxvii Ashley Bickerton (as in n. 9), pp. 320–25.

xxviii For many observers present in the 1980s and '90s New York art world, Greenway seems to finally foreshadow Matthew Barney's oneiric yet mesmerizing Cremaster Cycle (1994–2002), which former Guggenheim curator Nancy Spector has referred to as a "self-enclosed aesthetic system"; see Nancy Spector, et al., *Matthew Barney: Cremaster Cycle* (exh. cat.), The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2002.

xxix Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* underwent a kind of revival and critical reckoning in the late 1970s, just as Bickerton was studying at CalArts (1978–1982); see, for instance, the Oscar-nominated documentary *Volcano: An Inquiry into the Life and Death of Malcolm Lowry*, directed by Donald Brittain and John Kramer, National Film Board of Canada, 1976; [digitally accessed 17 December 2020 at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wma61_wfHqg].

xxx The blue-man statement occurs at the opening of a lengthy interview of the artist by Hans-Olrich Obrist, which is cast, comic-book style (illustrated by Ignacio Noé), as a freewheeling conversation between Bickerton and curator Hugh Allan as they indulge in the beer and girlie bars of Bangkok's "Patpong" district; see Ashley Bickerton (as in n. 9), "The Gold of Their Bodies: A Conversation Before Death," n.p.

xxxi In an unpublished video tour of his Bali studio of mid 2020, Bickerton describes the onerous production process lying behind such paintings: "The models are first sculpted and painted, then photographed, then heavily Photoshopped, then laid down on the fiberglass tablets, and then repainted again...[on] both the backs and the fronts"; for an instructive example of their creation, see *"Ashley Bickerton: A World within a World"* (as in n. 2).

xxxii Ibid.

xxxiii Gilles, Pierrot, and Harlequin are the names of stock male clowns of the Italian *Commedia dell'arte*; for an instructive essay, see François Moreau, "Theater Costumes in the Work of Watteau," in Margaret Morgan Grasselli and Pierre Rosenberg, *Watteau*, 1684–1721 (exh. cat.), National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1984; pp. 507–26.

xxxiv Ibid.; see also the catalogue entry by the Musée du Louvre for Watteau's celebrated painting at <https://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/pierrot-formerly-known-gilles> [digitally accessed 18 December 2020].

xxxv "Jack the Dropper" is the satirical moniker given to the American Abstract Expressionist painter Jackson Pollock by TIME Magazine in an unsigned February 1956 article on American "advance-guard" painting; see "ART: The Wild Ones," February 20, 1956 [digitally accessed 20 December 2020 at http://www.sosayethallie.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Art_The-Wild-Ones-Printout-TIME.pdf]. The extent to which Bickerton's post-conceptual circle defined themselves in opposition to the earnest, psychological sincerity and psychoanalytic principles of American Abstract Expressionism (as well as the subsequent, early 1980s school of German Neo-Expressionism) can hardly be overstated; see Amy L. Brandt (as in n. 20).

xxxvi This is not a verbatim quote but a paraphrase of Baldessari's class instruction by former student Jack Goldstein; see Hertz (as in n. 16), p. 55; on Baldessari's media-informed pedagogy, see Eklund (as in n. 16).

xxxvii Bickerton movingly recounts the critical importance to him of his personal collection of "talismans," which he often consulted even during his formative years in New York; see Ashley Bickerton (as in n. 9), p. 150.

xxxviii The late 1980s and early 90s critical reception to Bickerton's then-recent foray into landscape, or what some observers took for "neo-environmentalist" art at that moment, could be blistering ; see Peter Schjeldahl, "Ashley Bickerton: Sonnabend," *The New Yorker* (8 November 1989); for a more sympathetic treatment that placed Bickerton's *Catalog* among works by fellow contemporaries turning to nature by the early 1990s, see Peggy Cyphers, "The Consumption of Paradise," *Art Journal*, Vol. 51, No. 2, "Art and Ecology" (Summer 1992); pp. 52–56; on a broader note, see also Gregory Galligan, "New York Letter: Re-scripting the Sublime," *Art International* 7 (Summer 1989), pp. 56-59.

xxxix Critic Stephen Westfall expressly cited the

emergent Neo-Geo school as betraying strong surrealist influences, its various kinds of work constituting "enigmatic objects, disrupting reality through the intervention of a heightened, one might say intense, banality"; see Westfall, "Surrealist Modes Among Contemporary New York Painters," *Art Journal*, Vol. 45, No. 4, "The Visionary Impulse: An American Tendency" (Winter 1985), pp. 315–18.

xl In an unpublished 2020 video tour of his Bali studio, Bickerton speaks of being "obsessed" in this series with "the earth/sky binary, matter and emptiness... [as] throughout my whole career," and invokes Joan Miró, Joseph Mallord William Turner, Yves Tanguy, and Salvador Dalí as loose 'working references' for these paintings.

xli The principal of deconstructing the sound of words from their graphic, discursive systems was largely the subject of Bickerton's first New York solo show at White Columns; see Ashley Bickerton (as in n. 9), pp. 25–29.

xlii Dan Cameron (as in n. 1), p. 41.

xlii Bickerton speaks of the gradual infiltration of Asian contextual elements in his work after a decade of resisting such a process of osmosis; see Ashley Bickerton, *Looking for Something Beyond* (as in n. 22).

xliv Apinan Poshynanada et al., *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions* (exh. cat.), Asia Society and Museum, the Queens Museum, and The Grey Art Gallery, New York, 1996.

xlv Chatchai Puipia in conversation with Gregory Galligan, Bangkok, 2015–16.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Pg 13

Fig 1. *All That I can Be: Triple Self-Portrait* (1996), Colored pencil, graphite pencil, chalk, oil, and cut paper on plywood, three parts, 224.8 × 381 cm (overall dimensions)
Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art
Image courtesy of the Artist

Pg 15

Fig 2. *Tormented Self-Portrait (Susie at Arles)* (1987/1988), Synthetic polymer paint, bronze powder and lacquer on wood, anodized aluminum, rubber, plastic, formica, leather, chrome-plated steel, and canvas, 227.1 x 174.5 x 40 cm
Collection of MoMA The Museum of Modern Art, New York, United States
Image courtesy of the Artist

Pg 20

Fig 3. *T17nEXP* (2018), Oil and acrylic on jute in artist designed wood frame inlaid with mother of pearl, bamboo & found objects, 222 x 212 x 13.5 cm (inclusive of frame)
Image courtesy of the Artist

Pg 23

Fig 4. Installation view of *Shark* (2019) [left], cast bronze, Edition 2 of 3, 262 x 139 x 140 cm
and
Wahine Pa'ina (2015) [right], cast alumnium, unique edition, 210 x 86 x 50 cm
at the exhibition *Nagivating Entropy - Artist in Residence*, 2020, Gajah Gallery, Singapore

Pg 24

Fig 5. Installation view of *Floatsam Painting Fire Plane* (2019) [left], beach flotsam, oil and acrylic on canvas with plywood, glass, and stainless steel, 157 x 213 x 20.5 cm
and
Flotsam Painting Blue Brown No. 1, (2019) [right], beach flotsam, oil and acrylic on canvas with plywood, glass, and stainless steel, 157 x 213 x 20.5 cm
Image courtesy of the Artist