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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

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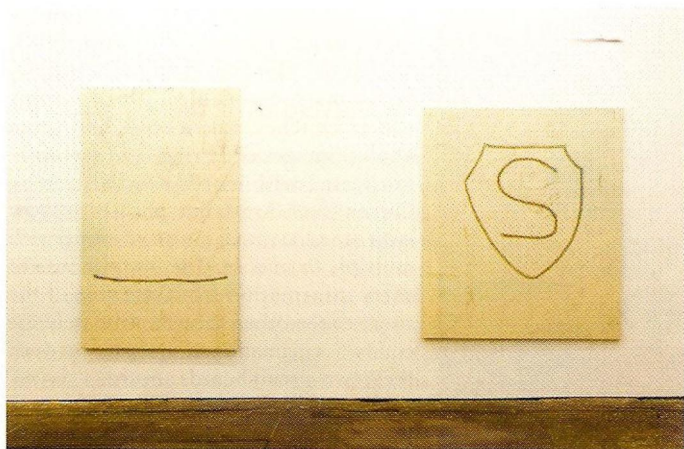
Joe Bradley

CANADA

There has never been much evidence of *work* in Joe Bradley's art, and therein resides much of its signification. The individual units of Bradley's paintings have always been literally blank and, more significantly, militantly haphazard. With his works' scabrous, cheap surfaces; his "casualness" concerning proper leveling and hanging; and his ambivalent (if not antagonistic) attitude toward the conventionally stretched canvas, Bradley falls somewhere between a heroic practitioner of "grunge art" and a loafer.

His breakout body of work consisted of pieces he has called "guys": several rectangular monochromes of various sizes hung as a single unit (though often with a furtive sliver separating them) in the guise of extremely simplified, pixilated, sometimes deformed, well, guys. These could occasionally be found commingling on the wall with single-panel monochromes—Bradley has a taste for primaries and brown—or, at his most evocatively deflated, lurking on the ground like forlornly strayed appendages. The guys eventually morphed into totemic shapes: not quite David Novros's abstract forms; more like crosses and strangely indeterminate symbols. Suddenly, Bradley's works seemed to speak in hushed tones and took on a context of spiritual elevation. Enhanced by their rather large size, the abstractions began to read as icons, the guys as gods.

In his recent exhibition at Canada, Bradley debuted an entirely new body of work—the "Schmagoo Paintings," *schmagoo* being '50s slang for heroin. The "paintings" consist of white, unprimed, clearly soiled canvases, most of them baggily stretched, with all of their sundry imperfections (invasive paint splatters, unsightly folds) enhanced by the spartan compositions. Startlingly enough, imagery, sketchily rendered in grease pencil, appears: for example, the number 23; a clumsy cross; a horizontal stick figure; an awkward sketch of the Superman insignia; and a horizontal line situated on a vertical canvas, wryly suggesting a stonily neutral mouth lacking a face. "They are a waste of time to try to understand," the press release polemically advised. Perhaps they are meant as caricatures of the archetypal male hero: virtuous, "flying" superheroes (keep in mind that 23 is the jersey number of two of the best basketball players of Bradley's lifetime: Michael Jordan and LeBron James, now referred to as "The Chosen One"). And then of course there's that cross.



View of "Joe Bradley,"
2008. From left:
Neil, 2008;
Superman, 2008.

In 2007, Bradley published an artist's book, *Tuff Stuff*, which combined his own drawings with those he paid children to execute. There's a logic of beatitude in that latter gesture, and it carries over into the "Schmagoo Paintings," though their heroes come across as less "heroic" than pathetic. Philip Guston's almost-not-there forms drawn on otherwise blank paper in the mid-1960s and Lee Lozano's investigations of the degradation of masculinity come to mind as forebears. Whether motioning toward the sublime or the base, Bradley's work is always formally elegant, and the "Schmagoo Paintings" are no exception. Bradley makes that which initially appears devoid of gesture somehow gestural; his nostalgia isn't for the hedonism or political militancy of the '60s, but for the graphic simplicity of that decade's signage. He comically, and convincingly, rarifies that which is base, aligning himself with Lozano, Georges Bataille, and Iggy Pop, figures who, although wildly dissimilar in their media, were all proponents of the gloriously ignoble, but whose works scream much louder than his do.

—Nick Stillman