

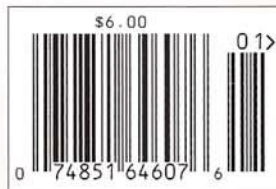
# ARTnews

JANUARY 2009

## Artists to Watch

**The Mona  
Lisa Theft:  
Missing  
Pieces?**

**The Hidden  
Clyfford Still**



Bradley's spring 2007 show at Peres Projects in Berlin included (from left) *Cavalry*, *Itz*, *Night Runner with Strike*, and *The Thing*.



## Color Forms

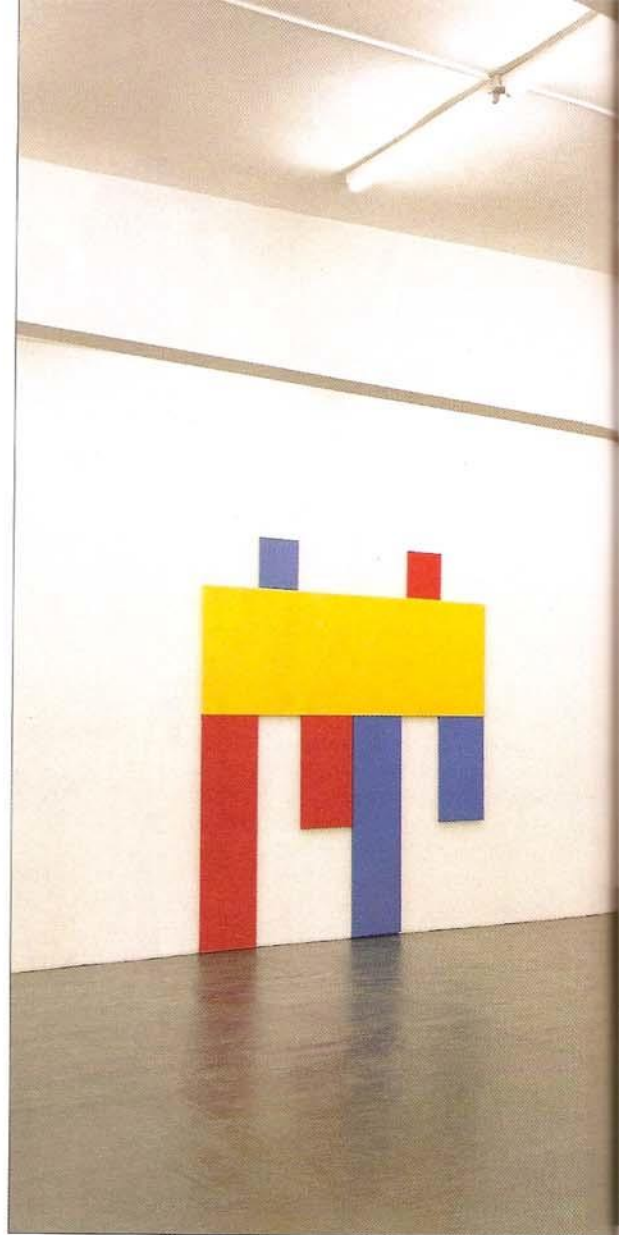
**Joe Bradley's**

bright, blocky works send up Minimalism while following in its footsteps

**BY CARLY BERWICK**

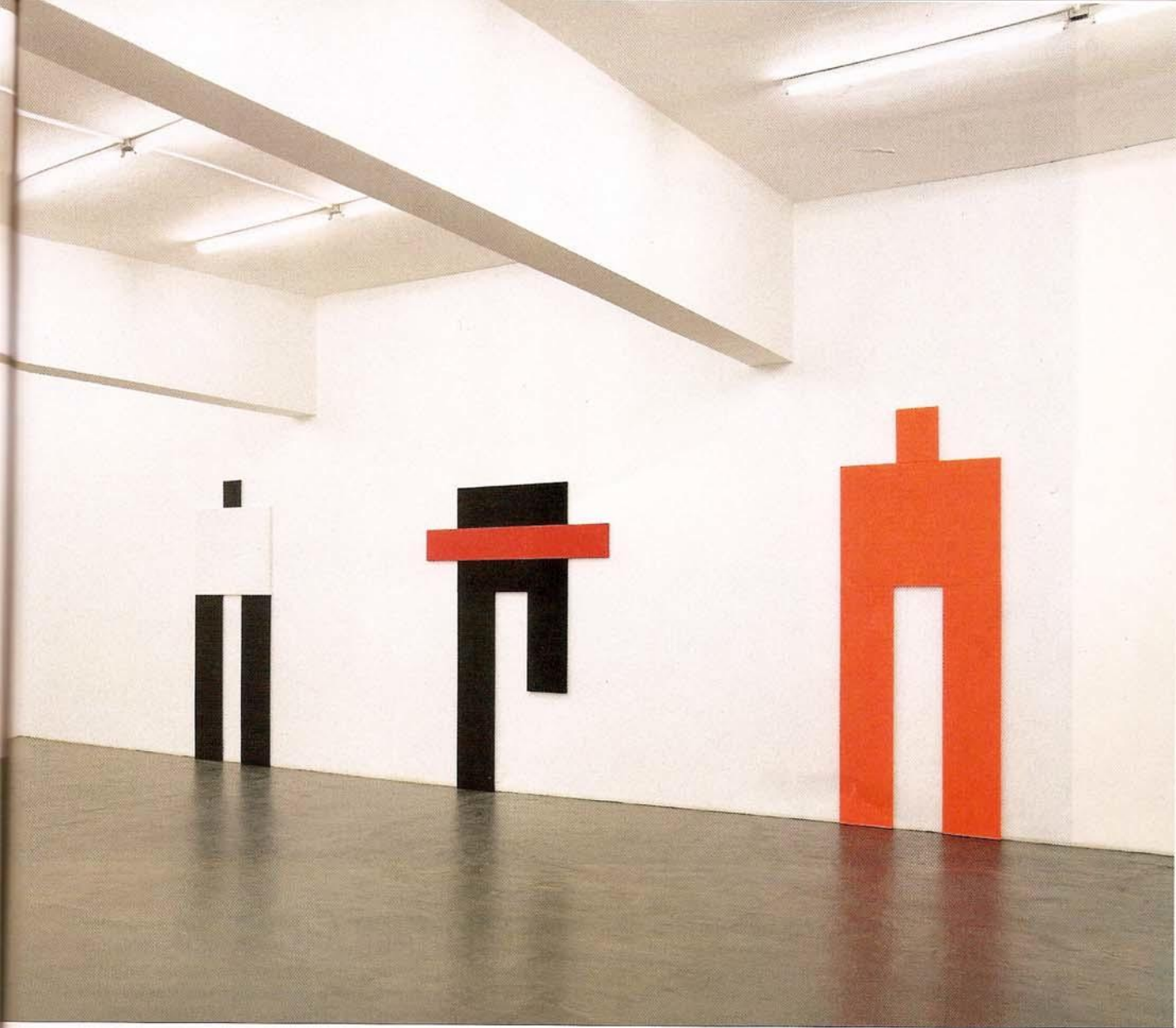
**CRITICS AND VIEWERS** have not always been kind to Joe Bradley, but that's OK: the artist isn't afraid to risk rejection. He makes paintings that look like sculptures and sometimes aren't even painted at all. Three of his stretched-vinyl monochromes filled a room at the Whitney Biennial last year. One resembled pinheaded square-bodied figures linking arms, like characters out of an early 1980s video game blown up to the size of giants. The smooth works, with their wrinkled edges, made irreverent allusions to Minimalist paintings by Frank Stella and Ad Reinhardt, and their part in the endless, doomed human search for perfection.

The laid-back humor of Bradley's paintings has endeared him to some writers and curators and made him anathema to others. "I first became interested in Joe's work because of a perhaps childish obsession with early video-game esthetics," says Kathy Grayson, a curator and a director of Deitch Projects in New York who picked him for a group



show at Deitch last summer and is including him in museum shows in Athens, Rome, and Lisbon this summer. But *New York* magazine critic Jerry Saltz called his paintings "boring, puckered versions of Ellsworth Kelly." Bradley is not entirely offended.

The 33-year-old Brooklyn-based painter, with his unkempt hair, scruffy beard, and low-key manner, projects both rebellion and calm. He concedes that his monochromes shown at the biennial contain "equal parts homage and send-up" of his eminent predecessors. "The vinyl, I thought, was ugly, and it reinforces the idea that these are objects as well," says Bradley, who graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1999. "It's something borderline-monumental in scale, but has some goofy, sad quality to it." One such work—plain and beige, made of four pieces of square vinyl—was displayed at the booth of his New York gallery, Canada, at last spring's Armory Show. "It was about seeing if I could make some-



thing really boring and pull it off," he says. "It was like slices of Wonder Bread."

This talk of "ugly" and "boring" stands in contrast to more sentimental past art-historical discussions regarding beauty and meaning. Yet the artist's work makes use of subtle suggestion, through color, shape, title, and context. The geometric canvases are heads, totems, marching robots, drastically foreshortened people, Cyclopes, or night watchmen, frightening and inept, valiant and sleepy all at once.

Raised in southern Maine, the son of an emergency-room doctor, Bradley devotes his off-hours to, among other things, reading such psychedelic writers as Terrence McKenna and William S. Burroughs. "I have an interest in the occult," he says. This may be the source of some of the enigmatic titles that hint at backstories for the paintings. *Night Runner with Strike* (2007) is an ominous-looking figure with black rectangles for a head and legs and a wide red dash for a body; the floor piece *Resurrection* (2007)

presents red, white, and blue stripes that seem to be held in place by taupe rectangles. Those works were seen in his first solo shows at Peres Projects in Berlin and Los Angeles, in the spring of 2007. A follow-up show of his paintings, which sell for between \$10,000 and \$20,000, will take place at Peres in Los Angeles this March.

For his solo exhibition at Canada last fall, he surprised the gallery's owners with a suite of huge, scuffed, raw canvases adorned with big grease-pencil drawings: a cross, a stick figure lying down, the number 23 (which appears on both Michael Jordan's and David Beckham's jerseys). These works, Bradley says, came out of a "renewed interest in drawing, comics, children's art, Dubuffet, Twombly, and also just lowest-common-denominator-type art: stick figures, peace signs, toilet graffiti, personality-free stuff." ■

*Carly Berwick, an ARTnews contributing editor, writes about art for Bloomberg News and many other publications.*