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ARTS REVIEW: BRADLEY EXHIBITS AT GRAYSPACE

by Joanne A. Calitri



Artist Peter Bradley at his closing exhibit at the GraySpace SB with his daughter, Garrett, and the Squire Foundation executive director Ashley Hollister next to his painting titled *Not Amorphophallus* (photo by Joanne A Calitri)

Where does one begin to write an art review about an artist who was instrumental among his peers in the NYC art scene since the 1970s in abstractionism as a purist and supporter of it, beyond the expected art of African-American artists such as Norman Lewis?

I'll start my review of Peter Bradley with Darby English's latest book ceremoniously presented at the Whitney Museum of American Art January 2017 titled, *1971: A Year in the Life of Color*. The book presents the historic values of *The DeLuxe Show Houston, Texas 1971*, credited as the first integrated art show of black-and-white U.S. artists, which Bradley installed and brought fellow artists to exhibit.

English writes that "black modernists - among them Peter Bradley, Frederick Eversley, Alvin Loving, Raymond Saunders, and Alma Thomas - rose above the demand to represent or be represented, compromising nothing in their appeals for interracial collaboration and, above all, responding with optimism rather than cynicism to the surrounding culture's preoccupation with color." Bradley has stayed the course true to his art and optimism, which he brought to our town during his artist residency at the Squire Foundation SB this spring.

I first met Peter at a welcome luncheon sponsored by the foundation at the end of February. He is a most warm and welcoming person who greets with a both-hands handshake and a straight NYC look into your eyes; he really wants to hear what you have to say. Engagingly knowledgeable about art and music with close friends from Mark Rothko to Miles Davis, Peter speaks first hand with insights one can't find in at history books or gallery shows.

During his residency, he created art at the foundation and kept a full-on public schedule: a 3 day intensive abstract painting workshop; an art critique workshop at the Creative Arts Workshop SB; meeting with UCSB MFA students; a salon with SB poet sojourner Kincaid Rolle, musicians Mary Grace Langhorne and Peter Clark, dancer Kelli Forman, and local artist Pali X Mano; plus meetings during the SB Jazz Festival at SBCAST and the Lobero Theatre.

The whirlwind schedule concluded with the most talked-about Funk Zone art exhibit to date

at the GraySpace Gallery on March 31. There he displayed four large-scale acrylic on canvas paintings he created while here, titled *Araucaria* 162" x 77", *Not Amorphophallus* 105" x 78", *Binky I* 74" x 71", and *Binky II* 72" x 77". Adding to the high energy at the opening was his daughter, Garrett, who flew in from New Orleans on her way to Japan. She said, "The Squire Foundation provided an incredible amount of support for Peter to make such ambitious beautiful work. We send our deepest thanks to everyone who supported this effort: the Squire foundation, the community in Santa Barbara, and of course, GraySpace. Such fantastic work."

Ashley Hollister, executive director of the Squire Foundation, added, "Working with Peter redefined the Squire Artist in Residency experience by solely elevating the arts from the community level to a museum experience. He produced commissioned works of art with the entire process accessible to the public to inspire creative thinking. Our Squire visitors witnessed firsthand the artistic process, observing an internationally recognized artist in a working studio environment. It was absolutely amazing Peter was here, and it wouldn't have happened without the recommendation from the great friend of the Squire Foundation Nancy Gifford to contact Michael Marzolla at the Abstract Art Alliance, who had an artist they had been wanting to bring to SB for years, Peter."

Back at his New York studio, Peter spoke with me by phone; here are highlights:

Q: Tell us about your residency here...

A: It was an extraordinary time, and the Squire Foundation treated me very well. I've been to L.A. and San Francisco, but Santa Barbara is really different.

Q. Was SB inspiring for you to create art?

A: Yes, I was inspired by the color palette here, which is completely different light from NYC.

Q: Looking at your GraySpace exhibit, you used more pastels then?

A: Well, let's put it this way, I had asked for certain paints while I was here, but when the paints were delivered some were missing. I couldn't work with the colors I wanted, and I just made the best of it.

Q: What's on your music set list when you paint?

A: James Brown, Miles Davis, Clifford Brown, Dizzy Gillespie, and Bill Evans - we were really great friends.

Q: What was the art scene like for you in the 70s in NYC?

A: I worked at Pearl Art Supply on Madison Avenue; we were all there, it was an exciting time, but it was also anti-black at that time, and I was the first black artist they had to deal with. Since I wasn't doing stereotypical African renderings, I didn't have an art dealer to represent my works.

Q: How did you work around that...and you hung out with Rothko?

A: I'm an artist. I try to stay away from it [racism], and I don't buy into it either. I' African-American; I'm not from Africa. And I'm doing abstract art. What many don't recognize is that abstract art and cubism originated in Africa. It may be documented now; Picasso stole it, similar to Beethoven being black. Listen to the bass lines and rhythms in his music; it's there. And yes, Rothko was very cool with me.

Q: Would you say your realm is abstractionism because it's how you experience the world?

A: [laughs] Exactly.

Looking at his entire body of work, and the ones currently up at GraySpace, one easily concurs with Steve Cannon, who said, "Bradley's objective, of course, was the primacy of color. He kept himself busy defining his own space in the world of abstract expressionist art, determined to assure us and himself that space - and his statement - was unique in comparison to the likes of Jules Olitsky and Larry Poons."

Clearly, the only colors Bradley sees are the ones he paints with - colors worthy to focus on and experience. Enjoy!