

The Highlights - Interview with Brian Bress



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Brian Bress' photographs and videos are full of odd characters, and anachronistic objects. Vestiges of familiar narratives are everywhere, but are made strange through recombination. He performs each step of production, both behind and in front of the camera. This singularity of sensibility has uneasy moments for viewers accustomed to the overproduced standards of television and commercials. Bress' movies distinguish themselves by employing Brechtian devices at expense of the auteur rather than the audience. In his videos the high holy efforts of early performance and conceptual art are recast to exploit the comedic desires of a YouTube public.

JESSICA JAMES LANSDON: What's the earliest thing you remember being really into?

BRIAN BRESS: My mom's leg. Is that what you mean...infatuated with? The look on your face right now!

JJL: No, that's what I get for a quasi-psychological question. I meant hobbies, activities...like flying a kite?

BB: Drawing, I was drawing all the time. Intense pen and ink drawings.

JJL: What did you draw?

BB: Spaceships. I still make huge spaceship drawings.

JJL: Big ones?

BB: No, tiny spaceships, repeated over and over again filling up the whole page.

JJL: Did you want to be an artist?

BB: No.

JJL: What did you want to be?

BB: Anesthesiologist.

JJL: Really? Where did you come up with that?

BB: They made the most money and didn't have to do much. I was looking for easy money.

JJL: Were you worried about the liability?

BB: I knew I would need insurance. What about you? Did you want to be an artist?

JJL: Yeah, pretty much.

BB: So that's a no?

JJL: No, it was a yes. I won some poster contests in grade school. I liked to draw saguaros reading books, wearing glasses, and having little families.

BB: Because they had arms? They were easy to anthropomorphize?

JJL: Yeah, plenty of room for faces...After, "what did you want to be when you grew up", I'm out of questions...

BB: These are the standard questions people ask me: "How much of what you do is improvised and how much is written?" And you know the answer...

JJL: Mostly improvised?

BB: Some of it is written, but only notes. If you looked at my notebook, you would think it belonged to a bad poet. The other question I get, the two other times people have asked, is related to the idea of entertaining versus arting; like kunst versus entertainment or something. The assumption seems to be that if you are laughing, if it has a hook, it is not art. I have a real problem with that hierarchy. To begin with, some entertainment is art. Art needs to leave questions on the table; if it entertains while it does this then great. Someone once said to me, "Well if art can't be entertainment, then is it punishment?"

JJL: So you sometimes need to defend humor in your work?

BB: Yes, but I've also realized that not everything has to be funny. I like funny, but creepy is also something I like to do. Blurring those lines, fuzzing the edges, is something that funny and creepy have in common...showing people their boundaries.

JJL: Your movie *Undercover* seems to work between the two; as opposed to earlier projects that isolate single scenes. It gives it to you together, faster, without having to flip the channels.

BB: I start with the smaller ideas. Often isolated, repetitive actions. The relationships and how characters can enter different sets come later. Maybe it's a little like Thai food. It's

good, because it's spicy and sweet. Before, I think it was more like pizza...just salty. Just the one thing. But pizza still has its place.

JJL: You make your videos very accessible.

BB: Really? You think so?

JJL: No, not in terms of content. I mean, you make them available online, for free, 24 hrs a day.

BB: Yeah, would I like for people to buy the videos? Yes. But not at the expense of everyone else watching them. You can see how those things are mutually exclusive. People want to own videos no one else can see. There are very few people who are selling their videos for x-thousands of dollars, and simultaneously saying, "Here is where you can see it for free."

JJL: It seems like a false dilemma. If you own it, you have the real deal. Isn't resolution important?

BB: It is, but so is the experience...

JJL: But doesn't market value reside in the close-up appreciation of details? Some sort of aesthetic experience? You couldn't sell paintings if the market didn't appreciate the difference between the original and a copy. Don't online versions emphasize entertainment over formal issues?

BB: Entertainment value is less concerned with physicality. The art market is used to selling paintings, even photographs, sculptures, objects, whatever. Then they get something you cannot hold, and you need to experience it over physical time. You watch it from start to finish, and then it's over. Owning the tape is only so satisfying to some collectors. Even a shitty digital copy creates the experience. It is so close to the real thing. A reproduction of a painting is so different. When you see the painting it's huge. You can get up close to it...When you see a fucking Dana Schutz painting, you're like "urrrgh." When you see it online, you're like "I'd like to see that in person." The discrepancy between seeing my video online and seeing it in a gallery is not so big. You still get 98% of the satisfaction.

JJL: Well, I am always being disappointed by big paintings. But I've seen your movies projected, and I think it's more than 2% better. Maybe it's analogous to the difference between small and big screens...The democratic potential of television aside, it will never be as good as going to the movies.

BB: I try to make my videos very detailed.

JJL: More recently you have been making videos with people. Actors besides yourself?

BB: Yes, they were always just me, alone, in the room. The first successful video with other people was *The Portrait Room*. That was a good one to start with because it was about pretentious art making, ego, but it was also making fun of myself. To have someone else introduced at that moment was appropriate. Plus, he looks like me. He has a beard.

JJL: So, he was someone else, but you as well?

BB: Yeah, a doppelganger, and he was literally wearing half my face. That's hard to do...get into someone else's face.

JJL: Are your videos therapeutic?

BB: Totally.

JJL: I hate the word cathartic.

BB: I hate the word cathrapeutic.

JJL: (Laughing) No, that's a great word.

BB: Actually, I prefer cathartic. They don't solve anything. The immediate act is not helpful. For instance, a while ago I was stressed about my living situation. I could hear every little rattle, every neighbor, every car, everything. One of the videos ended up being about my frustration, but I didn't make it out of that anxiety, I made it about something else, and then I used it to express my stress about the little sounds...It's the scene in *Undercover* where I'm in a white suit, and I am covered with collage bits, and the room is full of little clippings.

JJL: So, the bits are sounds?

BB: They operate as sounds, like synesthesia.

JJL: That's interesting to know. I like that scene in particular. I was relating to it in terms of abstraction, like a post-painterly Color Field joke. These kind of scenes feel different from more character-driven ones, but hearing you talk about it, takes it out of art history land and grounds them.

BB: The sets start as images. They are referencing paintings, but the content is varied. It's not important that the viewer gets it all. That would be boring.

JJL: Did you do theater when you were a kid?

BB: No.

JJL: Really, I was guessing that you had.

BB: No, never in any play. It's too awkward. I know what I do seems embarrassing. I might be embarrassed for someone I was watching do this, but if it's done with enough confidence...

JJL: But kids in musicals are confident.

BB: It is the live performance aspect that makes me uncomfortable.

JJL: You have the distance of editing.

BB: Do you think I traffic in embarrassing content?

JJL: Certain characters make me uncomfortable. Masks get creepy, or the video where you are just a head...

BB: That one's embarrassing. It is hard for me to watch. I am always surprised when people

bring that one up, but someone came up to me just a couple of nights ago and said how much they loved it. I'm not ashamed of it.

JJL: Are there others that are embarrassing?

BB: Yeah, a few, the raw footage, it is like a train wreck. In one video, I lean a metal grate up to the camera so it looks like a cage, and then I run around in my underwear. I am running around singing, "Trapped! Trapped in this cage. Trapped in this cage." I write this song on the spot about being trapped in a cage, and it's unbelievably embarrassing. Even for me. I fast forward through it.

JJL: I think that sounds great.

BB: I'm sure if someone else was editing it, they would pick the parts that I skip. What I want to say and what I am able to show are sometimes at odds with each other. I'm almost ready to reveal everything but there are limits. Sometimes things are too transparent, too evident.

JJL: Are you worried revealing too much would alienate your audience? Lots of video art purposely makes its audience uncomfortable. Without those edits you might be documenting a performance.

BB: Yeah, it's not performance in that way. I'm not into things being so easily understood. I'm more interested in whatever is motivating me to make the video. Going in and pulling out things that I see as content. Being interested, wanting to show people, and letting them sort out what it means. There shouldn't be a one to one relationship between what I think I'm doing and what people get. If everyone can agree about what it means there is a problem.