

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Repairing the Damage of Haste: The Still Point and Stir of William Bailey

by [Barry Nemett](#) on June 4, 2016



William Bailey, “Blues” (2016), oil on linen, 30 x 40 inches (all images courtesy Betty Cunningham Gallery) (click to enlarge)

Minutes before seeing a collection of William Bailey’s meditative still-lives and figure paintings, I heard, yet again, a series of small-minded and reckless comments by Donald Trump. How soul enriching to leave behind a sleazy Presidential candidate’s hate and hubris to be in the presence of a masterful artist’s refined vision and voice. Bailey’s exhibit at the [Betty Cunningham Gallery](#) provides a welcome respite from the kind of nasty energy and ideas Trump-like politicians spew—so different from the picture-perfect, yet unconventional, world to which Bailey transports us.



William Bailey, "Dreaming in Umbria" (2015), oil on linen, 28 x 22 inches (click to enlarge)

His compositions may at first look naturalistic, but you will find little of the visceral textures seen in the still-lives and figure-in-interiors of 18th-century French painters such as Chardin. Bailey's paintings have more in common with the idealizations of the Early Renaissance master, Piero della Francesca. Tempered by the kind of stylizations seen in other more ancient traditions, like Egyptian art, as well as by twentieth century painters like Balthus, Bailey's carefully considered mix of artistic influences accounts, in part, for the strangeness that informs his imagery. It is at once graceful and awkward, right and wrong. He can make a seated person or a standing cup look like gravity simultaneously is at work in their behalf and has taken the day off. This quality lies at the heart of his paintings' mystery, magic, and personal voice.

His canvases stir my imagination: The barefoot young woman leaning against the tree in "Dreaming in Umbria" (2015) seems as if she has not budged all day. She holds a cigarette, but I can't picture the motion of smoke any more than I can imagine her turning a page from her open book or donning her straw sunhat, the flap of a bird's wings stirring the sky, or a breeze rustling an overhead leaf. Here, the sun will never shift, so the cooling shade won't either. She stares. Her eyes are fixed. Besides the flow of *our* eyes following the curves of hills, hat, dress, figure, and tree, any movement is imperceptible, like her dreams. The one feature that threatens to disturb the peace of this bucolic scene is the long strip of gold that edges the base of the rolling, wooded hills. But the artist is careful not to disturb the Umbrian dreamer's restful afternoon by pitching the color too high, making that distant band of light too bright, or making its edges too straight or sharp. To control the mellow sound, mood, and muted colors he wants to maintain, to tie the painting together, and to keep the horizontal strip in the distance, the artist deftly finds just the right note of sunlight and wobble.



William Bailey, "Primavera" (2016), oil on linen, 65 x 75 inches (click to enlarge)

Tomorrow, a friend will stop by, as she does in "Primavera" (2016). They will linger together in silence beneath yesterday's tree, which grows beside yesterday's house before a new field. The straw hat will become a straw basket at their food-less, blanket-less picnic. The daydreamer's home that once upon a time bordered distant hills will be gone. The two friends will trade outfits. The girl whose skirt matches the sky and her blouse the sun, feels like she got the better of the deal.

Shortly after the painter was born eighty-six years ago, the poet T.S. Eliot wrote, in lines that could have been composed to describe every image in Bailey's show:

Time past and time future

What might have been and what has been

point to one end, which is always present.

—*Burnt Norton*, Number 1 of *Four Quartets*

Echoes and rhymes: Bailey's timeless, dreamlike still-lives are as otherworldly as his figures in

landscapes and interiors, and they are just as rigorously ordered. In the same poem, T.S. Eliot writes:

Neither movement from nor towards,

Neither ascent nor decline.

Except for the point, the still point,

there is no dance, and there is only the dance.

In "Reprise" (2015), I follow the syncopated rhythm of patterned and solid forms; big and small vessels; fat and slender, alongside tall- and stump-throated vases; poignant silences; adjacent and far-apart echoing lines, as well as various-sized intervals between the medley of overlapping objects. This layered composition can be read as a still-life or group portrait, the vessels as actors on a stage, a sky-lined row of towers and monuments, a geometric abstraction, or an exercise in social/familial relationships. Every sensuous form or figure is distinct from the others, each an integral part of the whole ensemble. The slender tone cast by the wide, blue-and-white striped bowl near the painting's center lends extra life to a plain pitcher by literally overshadowing it. The bowl, in turn, is made more special by its metamorphosis into the lidded pitcher behind and by the small cup in front. The delicately striped cup enjoys a special place at the table between objects with stripes of different widths running in opposite directions.



William Bailey, "Reprise" (2015), oil on linen, 30 x 40 inches (click to enlarge)

Despite all the adjustments that bring his works to life, Bailey's canvases immersed me in their calm. And despite the numerous visitors who came and left while I was in the gallery, there was stillness. The longer I stayed, the calmer I grew and the stranger his works grew. They look true at first, and then they don't. Then, if you take the time, they assume a unique form of fiction. Part of their fictive nature is due to the atmosphere that envelops the images and their inhabitants. It's not the air we breathe. It's too thick and palpable. And yet, this "too-thick" air contributes greatly to making his paintings and drawings convincing by suggesting a pocket of space, not a flat design.

Take "Septet I" (2015), for example. The objects and their grouping are convincing because they do not seem to be painted on top of the canvas, one bowl or candlestick at a time. In fact, the artist doesn't seem to have painted them at all. Rather, it looks like he painted the air *between* each item and between them and us.

There is also a "Septet II" and a "Septet III." Each measures sixteen by twenty inches, smaller than the three- to six-foot range his work usually runs. And each of these "Septet" paintings is limited to the very same seven objects—this artist finds freedom in limits. Viewing the subtle changes between the trio of compositions is a quiet delight. Few artists appreciate subtleties like Bailey does, whether the nuances occur within one image or three similar but unique ones. Devotion to time is an integral, charming, deep part of this man. The speed and hectic nature of today's computer-age world makes what Bailey does look particularly remarkable by its contrast to the way the majority of us live. Perhaps the most cherished of the extraordinary gifts that he offers to his viewers is the gift of slowing down time. It's not a fancy offering, but it's an important one.

My viewing experience at Betty Cunningham brought home the poet Theodore Roethke's description of art as "the means we have of undoing the damage of haste," an observation that he caps by adding, "It's what everything else isn't."

Talking with Bill about his paintings at a dinner party in Italy, I once mentioned that I envied the slow, open expanses of wall that he includes within his interiors and above his still-lives. "Night Niccone Valley" (2011) and "Turning" (2003) are the kinds of paintings I had in mind. I compared the large expanses to long pauses in conversations, which I tend to fill, even if I don't have anything special to say. Not so with Bill, whose thoughtful, reserved nature leads him to wait until he knows what he wants to say before he says it, softly. After my comment, he didn't say anything. "You don't agree?" I asked. He cut into his steak, dipped it in sauce, and chewed. He took a sip of wine, savored the taste, and waited for it to go down. Then, he cleared his throat and reached for a napkin before he finally replied with a simple, "No."



William Bailey, "Afternoon in Umbria" (2010), oil on linen, 51 1/4 x 63 3/4 inches (click to enlarge)

He might have been putting me on, just being Bill with his dry sense of humor. But his paused response captured how I see his paintings: patient, right on, and living gracefully with time and timing. His paintings marry sober humor with playful rigor. And in Bailey's case, I'm not talking about playfulness as anything less than a contemporary Master's control of his sublime form, content, and craft being so profoundly internalized and impassioned that walls between seeming flip-sides of life – like gravity and whimsy, weight and flights of fancy – merge. Pausing an extra beat within a visual rhythm, playing with how his objects touch or don't touch, or choosing an object that's a little too big or too small for a given tabletop are sight gags that too often go unnoticed.

One feels the love and respect Bill has for the painted actors that have waltzed barefoot across their stages for more than half a century. Some of these objects are elegant, like the tall-necked vase located near the left side of "Reprise." Most of them are fairly common, like those eggs of his that have been making appearances in his work, individually or in chorus lines, since the 1960s.

But none of his still-life props look common once they make their way from the bristles of his brush to stand loyally beside one another. His pepper mills, pitchers, eggs, and egg cups don't *actually* stand together. He doesn't pose them; he works from memory and imagination, selecting and then portraying objects from what he terms his "repertory company." I suspect that this contributes significantly to the quirky, chimerical qualities that distinguish his imagery.

William Bailey's artwork is about digging in toward a place of exquisite balance and quiet power –the still point – being true to who he is and how he sees the world, and exploring his vision and dreams ever deeper. This is exactly what the world needs : dreams that are open, gracious, genuine, and tenaciously embraced. Dreams that strive to undo “the damage of haste.”

William Bailey continues at *Betty Cunningham Gallery (15 Rivington Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan)* through June 11.

Betty Cunningham Gallery**William Bailey**