

Special Report

Jake Berthot and Me

By **Joe Fyfe**



Jake Berthot, *Grief For That Past*, 1992-94. Oil on linen, 22 x 20 inches. Courtesy the artist and Betty Cunningham.

in my final year of art school in the mid-seventies I was a miserable, wiseass painting major who had been in good shape previously but was again totally lost and confused then one day my assigned painting teacher Warren Rohrer asked us students who we might like to have as a visiting artist and soon after he said he invited the painter Jake Berthot down to Philadelphia and I said to him, yeah, you asked everybody and then you just got who you wanted anyway

all my friends had just graduated and I took it out on Rohrer,

I referred to him behind his back as The Preacher, he was rumored to have been a Mennonite minister, he had told me he thought I would like this guy Berthot because his smoky surfaces were like mine and for all my resistance to Rohrer he has been an influence on my work, that is the thing about art school, you are not exactly being taught, you are being inoculated by various artists

so Berthot shows up from New York, I guess he's in his thirties and he's hard to a make out under his long hair, he's wearing beat-up cowboy boots and jeans and a dark green bulky-knit turtleneck sweater and he's got a tobacco pipe sticking out of his back pocket, he's nervous, he chain smokes unfiltered cigarettes until they burn his fingers then rubs them out on the floor with the toe of his boot

ON VIEW

Betty Cunningham Gallery
*What happened to
Abstraction?*
February 2 – April 15, 2023
New York



Jake Berthot, *Egypt*, 1972. Oil on canvas, 80 x 100 inches. Courtesy the artist and Betty Cunningham.

there was a xerox of an essay on him in Arts magazine by Dore Ashton, titled something like Jake Berthot Paints Quietness pinned up outside the studios and he'd brought a few small paintings along and they are hanging in the painting department's office, they can't be more than eight inches square, it's obvious they were worked on and worked on and the paint was scratched into them to make a square inside them and then more paint was put on and they all looked like he did, all this smoky dark green obscurity, and like New York, where if you came from there at that time, a barely perceptible filter of soot seemed hang over you, surrounding you in an ashen cloud

that was in his paintings, too, as was an aura of danger via the legendary and real violence of this city at that time, he makes reference to his kid almost being killed in Union Square in the Dore Ashton review, and then there was the general seriousness attached to making art there

but I was simply puzzled by the work and by him

he gave a talk to the assembled students and faculty and showed some slides of his rat-colored slab-like paintings and he gestured towards two equidistant centers of one of them and explained that these were focal points and that he painted towards a non-color color and that he liked Giacometti's color

this was the first thing he said that made me sit up

in some ways PCA was the southern extension of the New York Studio School and Giacometti was a kind of demi-god and that whole idea of never being satisfied with your work, that it was in the

striving was the essence of making art and here was this guy talking about Giacometti's color, like he was just another painter, well that was news, that you could just interpret an artist anyway you like but then there was how he liked to put paint on, he said, until it's built up and then push the tip of a piece of wire into it and dig up the surface, which seemed to me that he liked frustration, which was what I was exactly trying to avoid

he described going to see Monet's Water Lilies in France in Monet's studio that was still a mess and hadn't been cleaned up since the war but the paintings were there, with the sky there on the water, he said and it was Berthot's way of talking plainly, slowly and thoughtfully, not trying to be entertaining, in unadorned language devoid of reference other than to things, he compared one painting to a breast, or that he liked to fish

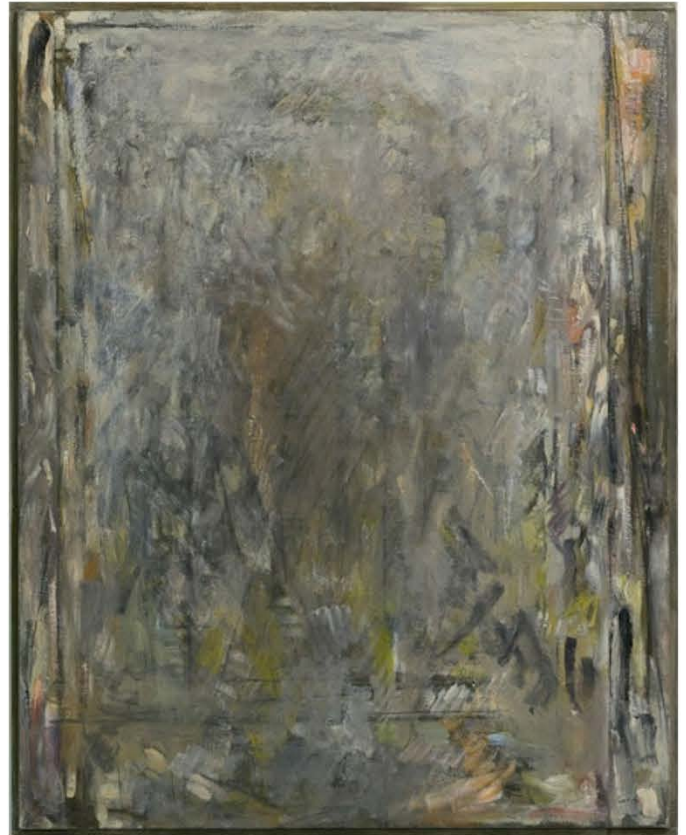
and there was a palpable weight to these unaffected declarations and observations, not humility by any means, but a matter-of-factness almost to the point of being boring

he was from central Pennsylvania, where my father was also from, we used to go back there sometimes to visit where he spent his childhood and it seemed like the most boring place in the world

my teacher from the previous year, Larry Day, I had had a better relationship with him than I did with Rohrer, was at Berthot's talk, and crossed and uncrossed his legs through it and was visibly restless, telling me later that they all come down from New York and talk that way and I said to him if they talk that way in New York, I want to go up there

when Berthot went around to the studios we followed and we began to see through his eyes, he picked out things that I wouldn't have looked at twice and remembered his time spent with an unremarkable drawing by an unremarkable student, a favorite of Rohrer's, and I see its closely varied tonalities and when we got to my work I had put up the best painting, a figure, from the year before, I was so at sea, I had nothing new that I cared about at all and he was pretty dismissive, only remarking about how I should have painted the whole thing like I had handled one corner of it and talked about how it's harder to make an abstract painting because there is nothing to paint

I got out of Philadelphia and was married and we were living in Tribeca and I had a busboy job in SoHo and the most interesting art around was the punk bands but it was where I wanted to be, I intuited it as a place where there was a living stratum of painting and painters piled up in the lofts, generations who were dug in there, some showed at Betty Cuninghams original gallery over Fanelli's or Oscarson-Hood but Berthot had gone to OK Harris then to McKee Gallery where I had seen the new Gustons and I kept up with Berthot's work there and elsewhere though I didn't find anyone else in New York that talked like him



Jake Berthot, *North*, 1995. Oil on linen on wood panel, 20 x 16 inches. Courtesy the artist and Betty Cuninghams.



Jake Berthot, *Untitled*, 1973. Oil on canvas, 32 x 36 inches. Courtesy the artist and Betty Cunningham.

a year or two later his painting *Double Bar Orange Square* (1977) was on the cover of *Artforum* and Monet was more apparent, it looked like a minimalist impressionist painting with two rectangles side by side surrounded by lightly dappling brushstrokes and a surprising burning sunlight yellow

there was a full essay by Steven Kasher including a quote from Berthot, when I can feel the difficulty I know I'm getting there, something he seems to have stuck to for the rest of his life, and years later he told me something similar saying that he mistrusted the state of grace, as when early on in the painting something arrives as a gift, one of the ways I differed from him is that I learned to take a gift if it appeared

back then I had seen a recent acquisition at MoMA of one of his dark paintings called *Walken's Ridge* (1975–76), two canvases butted up together with two interior rectangles doing the same, *Water Lilies* still buried in the messy, greasy facture, and though he was often compared to Marden and Novros at the time with his adjoined and shaped canvases, like theirs and a lot of others

he never seemed to stay within the format and keep, say, one color to a panel, but he seemed to need to paint all over the thing, and disobey the set boundaries, using a frame as an additional structure to paint over, foregrounding the necessities of some kind of impulse via the brushwork

Berthot didn't seem to care much about stylistic boundaries either, or protecting his brand, many of the past reviews I have looked at were withholding, in an *Artforum* from the early seventies when he was receiving quite a bit of attention, Roberta Smith chided him for his being too up on his contemporaries including Marden, Twombly and Johns and calling him lazy, in another Jeff Perrone disparaged a drawing called *Trout* (1974), fishing again, for looking like a Johns coat hanger



Jake Berthot, *David's Clearing*, 2003. Oil on Panel, 24 1/2 x 27 1/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and Betty Cunningham.

I remember seeing another small work on painted paper in the late seventies where he delineated a rectangle in pencil that hung from the top edge like Motherwell's "Open" series and it seemed to say that to concern oneself with borrowings was superficial and maybe dishonest because you take what you want from whatever is available to get where you are going, that you're not supposed to work with one eye on the audience and what you need is what is important

the person I was married to at that time had a former friend whom I had heard had begun dating Berthot and I thought shit missed my chance to meet him again but then we split up and this former friend of hers invited me to the Catskills where they were staying that summer and within an hour or so of small talk I was asked if I knew his work and I blurted out that not a week went by that I didn't think about it

this current girlfriend took me aside and said that he would make a good mentor, he may have already been known as a good teacher and for the next few years I was able to spend a lot of time with him and ask a lot of questions

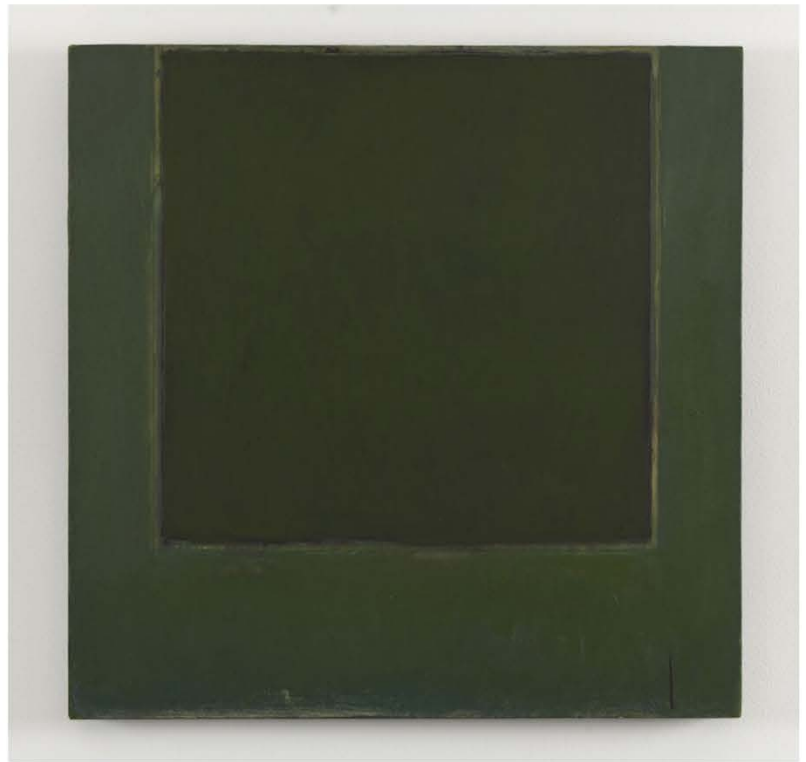
he was literary, for one thing, and read philosophy, and he had spent time with Guston, and talked about Guston's relationship with his wife, Musa and I told him about how I was informed that Philip Roth's novel, *The Ghost Writer*, was a fictional version of the Gustons' fraught relationship so I had things to add

a bit later maybe that same year I met Philip Roth and what never left me from that one encounter was his concentrated attention on me as we spoke, similarly, that was what Jake was like in front of a painting, any painting, he seemed to only come fully alive when he was looking at one, even a student's or mine, the few times I had had him over, a simple continuation of what he did in front of his, he seemed to just need his cigarettes and a painting on the wall and a place to sit and the sky could fall and he'd keep looking at it, completely engrossed

he had pride in his concentration, he'd mention that he never noticed the noise outside on the Bowery when he was working, or once, when one of the high points of Western oil painting, two impossibly wonderful Watteaus had come temporarily to New York to the Met, *Voyage to Cythera* (1717) and the *Gersaint's Shopsign* (1720), he went to see them and before he knew it two and one half hours had gone by, he had lots of stories like that, but the point of looking at the Watteaus was he said that each part of it had been painted differently, there was always a wealth of insights, a lot of his learning had taken place in front of pictures in museums

after the art world had exploded in the eighties, I remember he had said that he thought the east village art scene was stuffy

and that he had gone to the Whitney Biennial and he was only able to stay if he resigned himself to not seeing anything that he understood to be painting, something I did not quite understand at the



Jake Berthot, *Untitled*, 1973. Oil on canvas, 24 x 24 inches. Courtesy the artist and Betty Cunningham.



Jake Berthot, *Night, Sea and the Rock*, ca. 2014. Oil on linen, 34 1/2 x 41 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and Betty Cunningham.

time, but do now, that as time passes a painter has an increasingly critical relationship to painting, in both senses, in its relation to other paintings and in its importance, as more and more of one's life is invested in it

and of course, he talked about Cezanne all the time and was enamored of that grand, cerebral and somewhat somber line of French painting that goes from Poussin, Chardin, Corot, through to Cezanne and I would include the Le Nain brothers and Rouault I remember he had a Pissarro print and his comment on Johns's *Seasons*, he said that they were sad

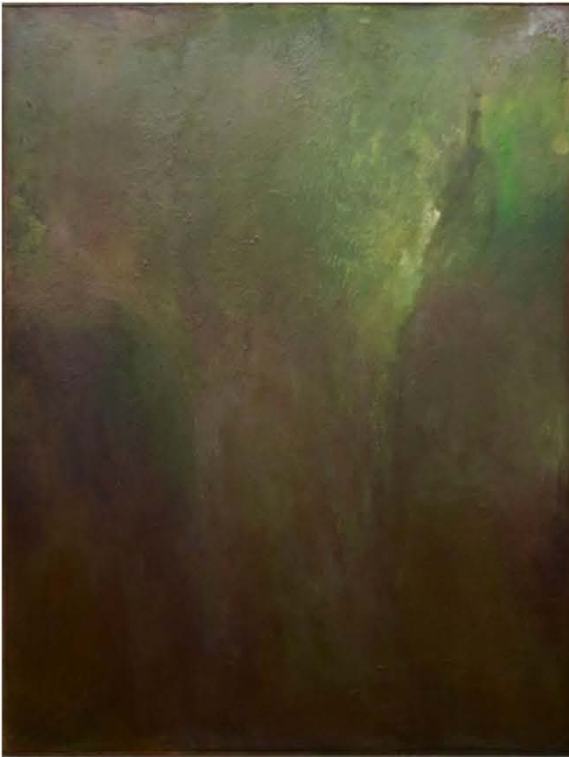
I was really drunk at his Brandeis retrospective and Jake was in a tuxedo and I was trying to talk to him about the work in the middle of it and I remember his patience and forbearance with me and him giving a very short speech how he was there so his friends could see his work and the pithy statement for the catalog about how he had really loved the romance of the studio—the oil, the turpentine, the smell of the varnish, the touch and feel of painting and there were some letters back and forth between us during that time, one where he quoted Nietzsche about going deeper, deeper, into your solitude!

and I took some walks in the woods with him, by then it was casual, I wasn't so hungry for every thought of his after a while, I had become suspicious of the kind of seriousness that surrounded his brand of painting, not him, he was a lovable guy, always, but he remained inside of the canon, inside painting culture, and the traditionalism that attached to it, and to him, not so much by him, but by whom he allowed to write about him in later years, where they would position him as a real artist as opposed to Jeff Koons or some straw man they had set up who pushed theory but I never thought of him as a conservative

one time I had criticized a painter by saying that he always made me feel like I should eat my vegetables and Jake reacted, saying that is the worst thing you could say about an artist



Jake Berthot, *Old Birch*, 2000. Oil on panel, 22 x 23 inches. Courtesy the artist and Betty Cunningham.



Jake Berthot, *Forest, Moon, Tree*, 2014. Oil on linen, 41 x 31 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and Betty Cunningham.

I could not wholly reject his influence, probably it was fortifying as even my ideas changed

at a Painting Center opening a few years later my thoughts were like oh great another one of these fucking sanctimonious painting people and Jake was there and he said aren't these great paintings? and it was one of the many acolytes that had sprung up around him and I said yeah, they're great if you think that you and Milton Resnick are the center of the universe and he thought that was hilarious

I always had respect for his work and for his mentor Resnick's but I think I must have been reacting to a perceived complacency of remaining inside painting culture as I saw it and I was still looking around for a way forward and this was a long time ago

Jake and that same girlfriend bought a house in Long Eddy and he had built a small studio up the hill from it, then later they broke up and I rented it one summer when I was going through a second divorce and used that studio, that was in the early nineties and I haven't been up there or I

did not see him regularly after that in the early nineties

but I always kept up with his work and sometimes went to his openings and would say hello and wrote a review of his 2006 show for *Art In America* and one day a few years later I saw Jake and James Clark at one of my shows and that was nice

come to think of it I met him once with his second wife and once with his busted hand which was an awful thing, I used to occasionally tell people that I had had two mentors, one ended up in the woods alone and the other in a mental institution but that's another story

I have gone three times so far to the current mini-retrospective *Jake Berthot: What Happened to Abstraction?* at Betty Cunningham it was as much being with Jake as with the paintings and I am sure a lot of people felt this way but this time I had a new problem because the first thing I thought of was the films of Wes Anderson, and what I have seen of his films I don't like very much, but I should

explain that when I have a thought like this, one that I don't understand, in front of works of art, I turn it over and look at it because it doesn't happen very often

like at the last retrospective of Frank Stella at the Whitney I found myself thinking that these were the



Jake Berthot, *Hardline*, 1980-83. Oil on linen, 60 x 50 inches. Courtesy the artist and Betty Cunningham.

least narcissistic paintings I had ever seen, and asked myself, what do you mean by that? I eventually figured out that I considered that Stella thought more like an architect than an artist, that he saw painting very much according to specific problems that needed to be solved, not this makes him less of an artist at all, but that the character of an artist's intellect and the problems he chooses to solve are as personal as anything else

so, thinking about Wes Anderson in relation to Jake made me sit up too, and I thought about what it means to be a miniaturist

as I was looking at the 20 × 16 inch *North*, from 1995, and savored the delicacy of the touches, thinking that it was precious, but in a positive sense, wonderfully precious, I wrote down, then moving on to *Untitled*, from 1973, overall 32 × 36 inches but made up of four attached canvases, two narrow ones in the center, a long vertical butting the short vertical below it and two full length panels, one to each side, he has painted it in the characteristic gray green of that period, with the paint sometimes filling in the gaps between the panels, and the brush work sometimes not coming out to the edges, or *Old Birch*, 2000 22 × 30 inches, with the greasy paint covering over the nubby textures and mounds of the underpainting

wherever I looked, for all of the intensity I was so familiar with, the undeniable ferocity of his commitment, how he kept changing, admirably, and finding new problems and was always obsessed, there was a reminder of what either Leland Bell or Avigdor Arikha said about their friend Alberto Giacometti, that most art makes it seem easy, Alberto makes it seem hard and W. H Auden's comment that the muse is a lively girl but if you offer her slavish devotion, she lies

and there was this new difficulty with the extremity of his project and then this feeling that the works were too detailed, and I think this was the crux of it that though the works are to be considered late modernist, his brushes belie that

I remember him once telling me, not without skepticism, of his painting students and their glass palettes with their little piles of colored shit on them



Jake Berthot, *Round*, 1972. Oil on canvas mounted on wood, 24 x 24 inches. Courtesy the artist and Betty Cuningham.

if he ever moved onto a flat glass palette, I don't know, but he used to use a hand-held palette, like the old masters, and mostly did not use large brushes and it seems to me that they inadvertently supply an excess of detail, and this is where the trouble lies for me, that Berthot, in his reverence for past masters, did not to allow for the break that took place with the advent of modernism via the photograph, that is, the beginnings of what I would characterize as a generality of emphasis, where the painting has to exist as something seen all at once, like a photograph, if one does not acknowledge this one becomes a kind of miniaturist, where the picture is a collection of details

Berthot often spoke about how he learned from Milton Resnick that you need to let the painting take over, so that one avoids designing it, but what he never forsook was every illusionistic or gestural painting trope, sfumato, glazing, dry brushing, drips, etc. and the traditional position of standing in front of a canvas with a palette in his hand and traditional artist painting tools, so it becomes easy to start to look at the early abstractions, especially the multi-paneled ones, and the smaller ones, as very contemporary supports with fairly traditional facture laid on them, there is too much painterly incident, too much touch

in contrast to Novros and Marden, a panel was not a container of one colored tone, not an enlarged Cezanne brushstroke, which was a mini counterpart of the plane of the picture, the way Berthot handles his attached panels makes him seem skeptical of them, as if he only half-believed in them, or it was more likely that he just accepted his particularly antiquarian eccentricities and this take brings me to the work in a new way, that is, that he is the painting equivalent of an artist like Joseph Cornell, that he is poetic, not in the sense of what a painter friend said about the show, that Jake was too poetic, but that the paint applications can be considered as proper nouns, not raw material forming signs, that he was not so much expressing feeling, as he was recycling and combining, though imitation, how traditional paintings evoked feeling, but also for private pleasure, he liked dwelling there the way he seemed to live in his reading, where he was always retrieving passages from poetry and other literature to quote, his paintings retrieved passages from the history of painting surfaces



Jake Berthot, *Night Meadow (Summer)*, 2004. Oil on linen over panel, 32 1/8 x 42 inches. Courtesy the artist and Betty Cunningham.

we can look at the different devices he used, the lozenge shapes, the inner frames, circles and ovals, as like the various boxes that Cornell used to house his objects and imagery, but in Berthot's case it was passages of painterliness, marks, fragments of vocabularies, from other paintings

Janet Koplos, in a review from 2002 picked up on the degree of artifice present in the then relatively recent turn to landscape paintings where she observes a feeling of theatricality, even mentioning trolls and wood sprites, and I think that fancifulness was always there, Dore Ashton, who was always partial to artists who prized the imagination, must have sensed this early on

something less distilled, less purified, more vulgar, even, than a lot of late modernist painting, but I don't like to think of them upholding anything, or attempting to preserve something that might be lost

then what you get with Berthot, I think, is

lately I have been reading *Septology*, by the Norwegian writer Jon Fosse, and in this piece of writing I have been trying to imitate its style, but the book is a narrative of an aging painter who lives alone, and he talks about how there is no difference between painting and writing about how what impresses him is not what the words mean literally but in the silent meaning that's behind them

similarly, I want to give him the benefit of the doubt, I don't want to think of him being as sentimental as some painters who appear exultant in the seeming availability of authentic emotion in their chosen medium



Jake Berthot, *3 Columns in Memory of Gertrude Stein*, 1971. Oil on canvas, 83 1/2 x 143 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and Betty Cunningham.

as much as Jake was a declared romantic regarding the traditional atmosphere of the studio, (the stink of it, I think he says someplace, no doubt slyly referring to the Victorian surgeons that eschewed the new antiseptic technology that rid them of their favored stink of the surgery room)

rather he was ultimately a quietly bemused examiner toying with the various rhetorics of the classic easel painting, as engaged as he was entrapped in the history of his practice as he wrote in *Art in America* in mid-career in general terms about the experience of the young painter

One day, after painting for a number of years, this painter

walks into his studio and discovers that he is involved with his own history. At that point, the connection he makes with the world changes. Up to that point, he's trying to connect to the world; after it, the world either connects with him or rejects him, and there is very little he can do about that.



Jake Berthot, *Untitled*, 2008-10. Oil on linen, 44 1/2 x 51 inches. Courtesy the artist and Betty Cunningham.

Contributor

Joe Fyfe

Joe Fyfe is a painter and a writer who lives and works in New York.