

TROP

rhymes with 

Adam Berg: Rocks, Clocks, and the iPhone

by Emma Kemp in Interviews | June 3, 2013

I first met **Adam Berg** (a *Trop* contributor) as a student in his Perspectives in Modern Philosophy class at CalArts. I was intrigued but not surprised to learn of his prolific visual art practice.

His current show, ***Consensual* at Edward Cella Art + Architecture**, employs painting, video, and sculpture to explore the nexus between science and art, between tradition and new media, between evidence and fact, between reality, reflection, and perception.

I met him in the gallery where we sipped water from plastic cups and discussed his practice.

EMMA KEMP: This is the Art and Architecture gallery. All artworks, to an extent, are architectural in that they alter the space they inhabit, but several of your pieces seem pointedly so; did you make these works specifically for this show?



Evidence 9, 2010

ADAM BERG: Some of the works, but not all of them. The video *Consensual* is a kind of essential piece for the whole show; it was made specifically. With the video, what we're watching is a legitimate, functioning plasma lab, operated by the Bellan Plasma Group at CalTech. But in the video, the scientist is an actor. The experiment being performed takes place for only one millionth of a second, and what I decided to do was to extend this brief flash (which is all it takes to generate plasma), into a ten-minute video. I had to get consent from the lab. Many of the other works in this show are new, made to juxtapose the meteorite elements that I did for the series of paintings called *Evidence*.

EK: The *Evidence* series is a collection of paintings of rocks, rocks of various sizes and shapes, in varying forms of abstraction. Often they are held in the palm of a hand. Can you talk a little about the relationships at play here?

AB: These paintings form an evidence of display. If you look carefully you can see that all the hands are erroneously scaled. They're either larger or smaller than real human hands, and yet what constitutes the evidence is the gesturing of displaying the rock, not the rock itself. A hand that is bigger is registered as the evidence of the exact size of the rock it holds. The hand fixes the scale of the rock.

The title of this series also plays on the definition of what evidence actually is or can be. Here, it's the painting itself. It becomes a sort of first-order evidence, the evidence of art, or the perception of the artwork. The secondary evidence is that of displaying the fragment of meteorite. It's obvious that what we're looking at is a drawing but at the same time it refers to a fragment of real rock.

EK: "Evidence" is an interesting word here because in scientific terms, for instance, evidence is the matter we use to prove / disprove theory; it's the ultimate harbinger of fact, and yet these hypotheses are constantly changing as technology advances. We have evidence to suggest, but rarely to conclusively prove. The hand suggests the size of the rock, logically, but we have no factual evidence to prove the size of the rock or the size of the hand.

AB: Exactly. What interests me is the notion that so much of what is evidence and what is foundational, in terms of the world of science, is based on that which is imperceptible or invisible, on the fraction of a millionth of a second, on energy pockets and wave equations and phenomena that are very elusive and deceiving to perceive, and yet at the same time they are constituting what we regard as the ultimate evidence for what is real. So what I've tried to do with the pieces in this show is to either slow down or to expand a moment of invisible evidence until it is visible.



Evidence 4, 2010

EK: The paintings in this series are fluid, translucent, some are metallic. There seems to be an apparent willingness to exacerbate brush strokes, to make the movements of the artist's hand visible. These differ quite drastically in style from the *Acceleration* paintings. Can you talk a little about the material decisions with these two collections?

AB: With *Evidence*, the thinness of the paint and the evident brush marks give the illusion of immediacy and velocity. These pieces should seem as if they were just created now, in five minutes, the freshness of five minutes, even though it's logistically impossible. Whereas with the *Acceleration* series it's quite different. The oil paint is far more concentrated, thicker, allowing for a drawn-out drying time; it's all about the sense that it's still happening, it could still be happening, but it took years in the making, it's been happening forever. It provides a sense of slowing down, stretching time.

EK: The *Acceleration* series embodies a more traditional approach to oil painting. The imagery is abstracted, but I sense atoms, fractions, time machines, half-lives...

AB: Yes, they're based on the CERN accelerator in Switzerland. It's the largest Hadron Collider in quantum physics. This is a portrait of one of the magnet drums inside the collider, but rendered anamorphically. I distorted it so it's now polarized and in spin; it's accelerating the image of the accelerator.

EK: It's exciting to have these two pieces facing each other from across the room, especially given their status as opposing mediums, video and painting. It's interesting

that you chose to render the particle collider in an oil painting, which is a traditional medium. A photograph would perhaps provide a better evidence, yet you've chosen to make a painting, a form known for its ability to distort, mislead, interpret, abstract...

AB: What I'm interested in is exposing the idea that science is just as much about the fabrication of fact as art, which we think is pure fabrication, artifice. Art, in my opinion, actually provides the experience of the real. Almost the inverse relation to the traditional belief that science would give us the world and art, only fiction. I think there is more reality in art and more fiction in science than the other way around. The other question I try to interrogate is the notion of phenomenological stratum. What is science, phenomenologically?

My intention is to show the ethical dilemma in what Husserl would regard as *the natural way*. The vulgar attitude of today is that the world is real in the way that's perceived through technology.

It's sort of like this iPhone and this plastic cup of water. The plastic cup is creating a mythological tension between the organicity of the water and synthetic nature of the container. The mythical position between what is pure nature and pure not-nature.

Here, in my sculptural piece, the fabrication of the rock, the fake rock, which appears to be the natural thing, is bound to the fabrication, the crystal manifold. But in a way, the metallic manifold is more real than the rock. I call it the Photoshop aesthetic of LA. It's a post-simulacrum experience because it's no longer even imitating the real; it already constitutes a first-order category of things that are made that way.

EK: How long have you been working with rocks in this way?

AB: I've been working with, not so much rocks in particular, though I've been working with them too, for at least two decades. My interest in meteorites has more to do with that they come from outer space, there is a sense of the notion of what is extrinsic to the artwork, that it comes from outer space.

EK: I think of these rocks as coming from a different place and a different time, quite literally. They travel in orbits different from our own. They exist in space-time and are alien deposits on our Earth. How does the notion of time function in your work?

AB: A lot of the works in this show manipulate time. There are also referents to temporality—the most constitutive aspect of time because temporality is that of being, becoming, apropos of sensing connectedness or differential relation to things. Temporality is something that is exceptionally more difficult to understand. As technology advances temporality becomes marginalized, it's becoming a secondary order. It's a little like the disappearance of the poetic space. Time, for an artist, is analogous to a poetic space. I'm revamping a connection to temporality.

EK: Given your interest in time and time scales and notions of synchronicity and premonition, how do you feel about the proximity of this show to Michael Heizer's boulder? [Heizer's 340-ton *Levitated Mass* rests on its brackets across the street from the gallery at LACMA] Isn't there a sort of cosmic irony here?

AB: Well, I think for me it's the difference between literalism and art. I think there is a myth with the rock because of the brackets which "suspend" or support, which in a way deplete the magic because it's not really levitating. It's more of a mass than levitation. I am however interested in the social engineering aspect. The museum invested a huge amount of money and effort, and also space, in addressing something which is not really addressed: the place of the museum in relation to the Natural History Museum and the La Brea Tar Pits.

EK: I heard that they ripped out lots of trees in order to get the rock to the museum, which is bizarrely incongruent. Heizer's rock, to me, felt like a pebble in a hand. There are so many skyscrapers and towers which dwarf it. I expected to be presented with this enormous boulder but instead, to me, it felt like a pebble in a hand.

AB: Yes, this is precisely the notion of scale I am trying to explore. It is always about the perception of size in relation to us, not independently.

EK: I was thinking about how you're also a philosopher. Do you find painting, or art-making in general, an adequate or successful way of transmitting the things that you're wrestling with cognitively? Several of your paintings incorporate text and I wonder how you move between language and text in painting?

There is a fascinating critique by Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations* which deconstructs phenomenal descriptions. He says that even drawing is a language game. Picture making never relies on naive, direct perception but is intertwined or filtered through language. This interests me because at the same time it has an immediate response which is non-linguistic; there is a complexity because we relate to texture, shape, color. So I don't really see them as two totally separate things. There is no difference between drawing a line and drawing a letter. It's like drawing a face, a face is always anchored and stabilized by the eyes. The text for me, functions this way. It stabilizes perception, even for a fraction of a second.

EK: Yes, but the nature of reading left to right alters the way we read a painting with text, in that our eyes move across the painting left to right. A purely imagistic painting doesn't contain these pointers.

AB: True, a painting as a pictorial rendering of a thing, an atom in a bubble chamber, for example, has no stabilizing element—it is a graphic experience.

EK: With words, you have more control when anticipating reader response. With image, it's a little less definitive. How do you operate between the two poles?

AB: For me it's one of the most fascinating questions about making because making, as opposed to thinking or analyzing, or even writing, is not so much about explanation but it's more about experience. So the question, how can you start with experience, not just end with it, is fascinating. Often I find that most of what I do is embodied through experience. You have to, in a way, take the risk of not being in complete control and at the same time trust your senses, let them guide you.

EK: Indeed. I relate this to the title of your show, which if you break it down to its Latinate connections you get, "con" meaning "with," and "sensual" with "senses"...

AB: Yes! That's partly why I used it. It's kind of a play on the notion of having to "consent" and the complicity of the viewer in relation to the art work. And I like the sensual component—it's a conceptual-sensual compound. I think much of the register of colors and forms have to do with introspection. Before I even start I have a total sense of what it's going to be like, without knowing how it's going to be generated. I pay focused attention kinesthetically, whether through the brush, pencil, whatever, it's already embodied by my addressing it. And that's why the act of making is a very rarefied experience. I make sure I'm never too full, too caffeinated, too upset.

EK: It's almost a Taoist approach to the process of making. You begin from this place of spiritual balance and awareness. I am thinking now of the rise in popularity of a sort of new age mysticism, of using rocks as charms and vessels to a higher state of being...

AB: Well you have to be a conduit. The mystical way was originated in medieval times through an intellectual engagement with the elements, it was always contingent with reading and writing. But today we have a kind of counter-culture mysticism which is New Age, and in a way it's contradictory to the tradition of mysticism because it's almost there in a consumeristic sense, a kitsch culture of religious and spiritual props, but it's interesting that this happens, nonetheless. In a way it relates to something which we are all lamenting...

EK: A sort of primal connection to an archaic ancestral existence.

AB: Yes, and touch is especially poignant, which is why the hands are so important in these *Evidence* paintings. The first thing we want to do when we approach something seductive or new is to touch it. It's like the iPhone! The culture not just of commodity but of the magical gadget, the thing. Touch is also a way of connecting the experience of tactile vision to experience; it's the surface.

EK: This show incorporates an array of media to explore its theme. Can you talk a little about the materials with which you work?

AB: The diversification of media is my sense of two opposing aesthetic possibilities. On the one hand we have the aesthetics of critical autonomy, the post-Adorno-Beckett-Joycean view of the art work as massively gravitating towards its own resilience; and on the other hand there is this contextual aspect to art making, that it's part of a system, part of a context of making. Painting, for example, has a solipsistic sense of being. It exists already at least 500 years and it doesn't need you, it uses you! It's almost like playing the violin or the piano—you have to master it in a way that will allow you not to express yourself, but to express it. It's like reading Virginia Wolfe today and saying, wow, that work is extremely political, feminist, and critical, and not just literature...



Universe, 2013

EK: And yet it is literature! These relations are dependent on time, and are in perpetual flux. Which makes me think of your bronze sculpture, *Universe*, can you talk a little about the sculptural pieces in the show?

AB: I wanted to sculpt a topological object which visualizes a negative space. It's mostly seen as a diagram of space time, or a diagram of space. It's like a tunnel or a wormhole from

within and from within out. I think it exemplifies the boundary conditions of the universe. Thinking of traditional bodily sculpture, Brancusi for example, and the modernist tradition and its relation to non-western art, the exotic today is science, it's no longer culture. This is the aftermath of colonialism.

EK: What do you think will happen when the cosmos is no longer an exotic other?

AB: I think we're trashing the cosmos already! But it will take millions of years before we understand and exhaust it.

This [Manifolds I, a shiny, silver object on the far right of the room] is by far the most phenomenological of all the works in the show. It is a sculpture not in traditional sense but optically and perceptually. As you move around you create, what Husserl would call a retentive object.



Manifolds I, 2012

EK: Yes, you make up the planes.

AB: Exactly, a profile that keeps changing, making you aware of time itself, of your own temporality. Instead of it being a space articulated, it's more of a temporal relation between the aspects of space.

EK: With these folded flaps making intersections of space, even the slightest movement adjusts the image drastically. The reflections of our bodies are skewed, almost anamorphically like the objects in your paintings.

AB: Yes, they all have a nod to the body, but it's sense of exaggeration of the body, like Francis Bacon, the bestiality of the body, and how we are doing that today through genetics. And you see here, we can see ourselves reflected, this speaks to the devil because we are reflected in two places simultaneously.