

MATT FREEDMAN

Art is long, but sometimes it feels like life is longer. There is a moment in a lifetime of studio practice when every artist is pushed to the cracking point. Things will not work out as planned in artist's studio, or in the artist's head, or with the world that inspects the artist's work. There are times when the only sensible thing to do is to stop working and think for a while. After thinking, for some artists, the only sensible thing to do is never work again. For others the sensible thing is to get back to the studio. For most artists, the quality of being sensible has nothing to do with anything.

For three years back in the late 1990's Rick Briggs, trained as an abstract painter, stopped making art. He decided based on limited, but in his opinion convincing and objective evidence that no one was paying attention. It would be imprecise to say he stopped painting, for in fact he was painting more than ever. The problem for Briggs more precisely was he was painting houses, not canvases. Young artists make a heroic bargain with the devil to exhaust their energy perfecting skills unlikely ever to support them financially, but the perverse and entirely unintended consequence is all too often a life preoccupied with financial concerns. Still more perversely, the artist's financial concerns are dealt with by reconfiguring the very skills they had honed so carefully and impractically. Briggs spent those three years neck deep in work work, that redundant bane of the artist's life. He was not happy.

Then one day came a peculiar redemption. Briggs found himself galvanized by an image in, of all things, an illustrated how-to guide for adults who want to fix up their homes. The industrious hero of the pamphlet was an oddly familiar everyman who performed all his tasks with a detached beatific smile affixed to his face. Briggs' attention was captured by a drawing of the man rolling paint onto a wall while staring out at the reader. "This is fun!" said the caption. Briggs had a subject again; this oblivious, committed, happy Painter Man, enlarged and

ennobled in Briggs' imagination. Painter Man's face is a bland authoritative fusion of American tropes; part Alfred E. Newman, part George W. Bush, part, oddly enough, Rick Briggs himself. This cheerful striver, this survivor, this tragicomic martyr-clown suffering for his art became Briggs's tool for prying open his jammed studio door.

Using Painter Man as his muse, Briggs went back into the studio and began a series of narrative figurative work. Briggs moved the formal and intellectually pleasing challenges of abstraction from center stage in the work, though his paintings utilize gorgeous passages of textured and flecked enamels to animate and complicate the rigid simplicity of his schematic images.

Painter Man works all day every day painting houses, piling up a body of work on a scale studio artists can only dream of, but of course no one cares. When artists repeat a behavior over and over day after day they are investigating the esthetics of obsession. When ordinary laborers do the same thing, it is called a "job." There is no question Painter Man works hard. If you piled up the lids of all the cans of paint he has exhausted into a tower, it would easily reach the top of a large room. Briggs did just that, and the tower, "Tired Monument," reclines in the corner of the gallery.

The disconnect between ordinary labor and artistic labor is not Briggs' main argument by any means. In fact, it is his idealistic embrace of the high purpose of art that has led to his disillusionment, not so much with the economics of the art system, but rather with the false meritocracy that places value on certain work and certain artists to the exclusion of others of equal or greater worthiness. To Briggs, esthetic merit is absolute, even tangible, but has been corrupted by a culture of art that anoints its heroes on the basis of the most dubious of careerist and whimsically personal criteria. Briggs believes in genius, perhaps, but not the Genius.

Sweet earnest Painter Man is perfectly willing to play The Genius, but he can't quite get with the program. He is a little too real for his own good. Painter Man tries on the Van Gogh role in the seminal myth of the misunderstood and doomed visionary in "Wounded Painter," but his goofily determined grin gives him away. He will not brood for his audience. Painter Man was created to fuel other, competing myths; the All American myths of "You Can Do It!" and "Everything is Okay!" He cannot help himself; he is painted that way and Briggs will not change him. Painter Man can speak with beautiful obscurity as in "Black Hole", and he can confront the most grandiose of human emotions, see "Epic Saga," but he cannot escape his defining limitations.

Briggs began this particular project with the kind of despair that makes or breaks an artist - the sense that nothing will work and no one will notice. The crisis is mortal and its resolution is either artistic death or rebirth. Briggs took a deep breath and made a brilliant, terrifying leap of faith back into the studio to begin to work with whatever was on hand to say whatever he wanted, damn the consequences.

The gift bestowed on the artist who makes the decision to shake free of his own conventions and precedents is a body of work generated from lived experience that no other artist on the face of the earth could produce. Beyond taste, beyond talent, beyond everything but honesty, the reborn artist stands alone ready to work and work and work till he drops dead. Perhaps no one will notice the byproducts of this last incarnation either, but that doesn't matter anymore. Painter Man has inoculated himself with failure. No one can infect him now with the disabling contagion of disappointment. He is free forever. This is fun, indeed. Halleluiah!