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Benjamin Rubloff

Conobar, 2011, oil on canvas, 56cm x 56 cm

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Meetings



SPACE OF ENGAGEMENT

More than a year ago, I met Benjamin Rubloff by chance at an art exhibit at the Contemporary Fine Arts in Berlin. We talked on the terrace overlooking Museum Island until the place emptied and we were asked to leave. At the time, I was doing a series of interviews with Berlin artists and designers, and Rubloff played into my paranoid delusion that everybody in Berlin is an artist. Rubloff was then finishing up an MFA at Cornell University in Ithaca, NY. He could no longer say he was 'in Berlin' with perfect accuracy, though he'd lived there for several years prior, and was looking forward to moving back.

We didn't exchange cards, numbers, or even Facebook invites. But there are other ways to stalk an artist online, you know. I followed Rubloff's drawings and paintings as they mushroomed on his website, and I read into the lonely spaces of his works — sometimes incorrectly (well, 'incorrectly' in quotation marks) it turns out; something I discovered when I finally caught up with Rubloff again, as he was driving from Ithaca to Boston, in the process of relocating back to Berlin. Since we'd last met, Rubloff had finished his MFA, and was now in the middle of packing boxes, and packing more boxes. Very good. There's no more exciting time to talk to a person than when he has no time to talk. Rubloff and I picked up from where we'd left off.

— *How did you end up in Berlin, in the first place?*

Back in 1998, I was living in San Francisco and had saved up money to escape the States and travel to Eastern Europe. I was vaguely planning to live out there for a while. I planned to hitchhike from Amsterdam to Poland, but a couple from Berlin gave me a ride and insisted that I come see their city. It was one of those transformative travel experiences. I managed to find a friend I'd made in Seattle years before who was from East Berlin, and for a few days she drove me all over the city on a motorcycle. I saw Potsdamer Platz, which was then this enormous, theatrical construction site. And there were all these amazing informal kinds of places that had begun popping up around the city, which were really like nothing I had ever seen before. I thought about staying and was even offered a job playing music there, but I left because I was just beginning this trip I had been planning for so long, and I was really hungry to see more. I ended up settling in Granada, Spain that year, but when I returned to the States, I started thinking about moving to Berlin. It took five years, but I did finally move there in 2004. Then, after five years in Berlin, I felt a need to get out and get some fresh perspective on things, so I went back to the States to do an MFA. Now I'm returning to Berlin for what I imagine will be another significant stretch.

— *What's driving you back?*

I am productive there in a way that stems from some degree of isolation: it's a city where I can still be a complete stranger and go for long stretches of uninterrupted work. But when I want to go out, there is always something interesting to see and a contagious energy that accompanies things. I have a great community of artists there, as well. The people I know there are really engaged in their work and I get a lot from just talking with them — a lot of them aren't even visual artists.

— *What's your abridged autobiography, outside of Berlin?*

I grew up in the suburbs of New York City. In college, I floated around a lot, until I finished with a degree in American Studies from Wesleyan University. During college, I focused my energy on writing — I really wanted to be a fiction writer, but I struggled with sitting still at the computer every morning. Immediately after college I was working as a cook and playing jazz in bars. I guess it's pretty clear that there was a lot of floating around back then. Later, I became a public school teacher in Boston, where I worked on a number of documentary projects with teenagers. I didn't really start painting seriously until I was in my late twenties.

— *Was that a romantic moment in your life: you finally knew you were going to be an artist?*

It was never a romantic thing, really. It actually took me a long time to call myself an artist — largely because of those romantic associations. It evolved pretty organically, though: everything I had done before I began painting worked its way into how I approach my work. It's informed not only the references, but also what I want from a painting and how I expect it to function.

— *What was your idea of an artist before you actually called yourself one?*

I was incredibly lucky to have a great art teacher in high school who communicated to all of her students that art was a radically open way of engaging with the world. I think it took me a long time to be able to understand it that way, but I think that idea was always there. Making things and responding to things was always an important part of my engagement with the world. Even as a kid, I remember being really caught up with my experience of things. I suppose I always knew I would be making something.

— *Do you consider yourself an 'American' artist? It's an adjective that comes up in what's written about you. Also, many of your subjects are geographically American, and series like Ecologies or This is a Wilderness seem to bottle an atmosphere and stillness specific to the lonely stretches of America. What's funny is that work was often seen as American in Berlin, but when I went to the U.S. for graduate school it was seen as European. Still, I see my work as American insofar as I have been preoccupied with ideas about American mythologies for a long time. So there is certainly a good deal of cultural specificity in the set of references that I respond to, but I also feel that those references have expanded, as American culture has been so widely disseminated, especially*



in the post 9/11 era when its anxieties have become infectious. In that way, I think that talking about art as American, German, or whatever has really begun to lose traction.

It's interesting you mention *Ecologies*, though, because that's a series of paintings based on German allotment gardens. But you see it as having a specifically American quality. Maybe there is something about the way I process subjects that is informed by an American idea of space, that is still and contemplative, and that also lends itself to the kind of economy that you get in the writing of Raymond Carver, or Stephen Shore's work in *American Surfaces*. Their works have been really important for me. I think I respond specifically to the idea of an expansive space that also has the potential to collapse or refuse access. It's an interesting contradiction about space in the American imagination. I've increasingly come to think about American conceptions of space in terms of territories that are invested with notions of secrecy and privacy. In the last year and a half, my work has moved away from landscape, but these issues of space are still there. In a way, the move away from a more explicit topographical kind of space has opened up possibilities to think about space more conceptually. It's pushed me to think more about the space of engagement, about the viewer's experience of that space.

— *Did you consciously move away from landscapes?*

It was surprising. I just couldn't really get behind the work anymore; it felt too illustrative somehow, which seems to always be a struggle in painting. In retrospect, I think I was able to do a lot of that landscape work in Berlin, because the references were more distant.

Once I moved to upstate New York, I was immersed in a place where there is a very different relationship to the landscape than the one I had growing up in suburbs of the city. In the suburbs, nature was a kind of periphery; it was a space apart where a lot of transgressive kinds of things happened. But upstate, it was a different reality — the specificity of it made it harder to work with. The psychological and mythological dimensions that interested me seemed less accessible. So I guess I had to move on to other subject matter to get at the things that had interested me in the landscape work.

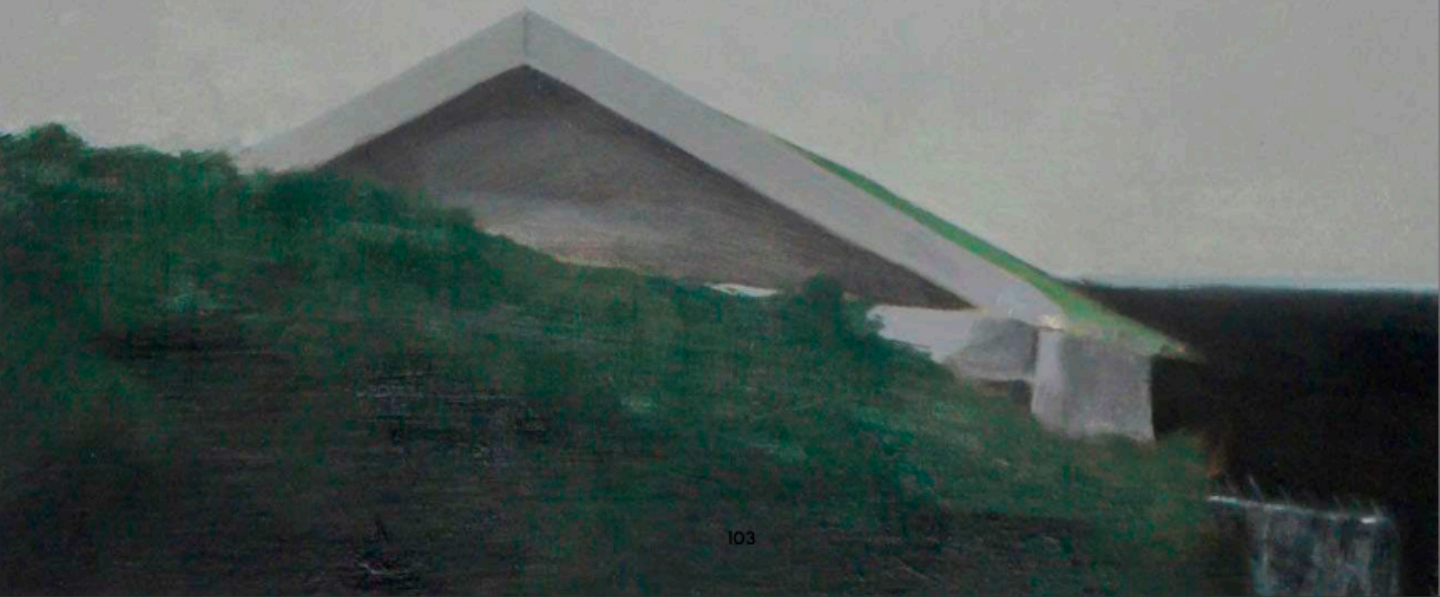
— *Are the settings in your paintings 'real' places — have you been to them?*

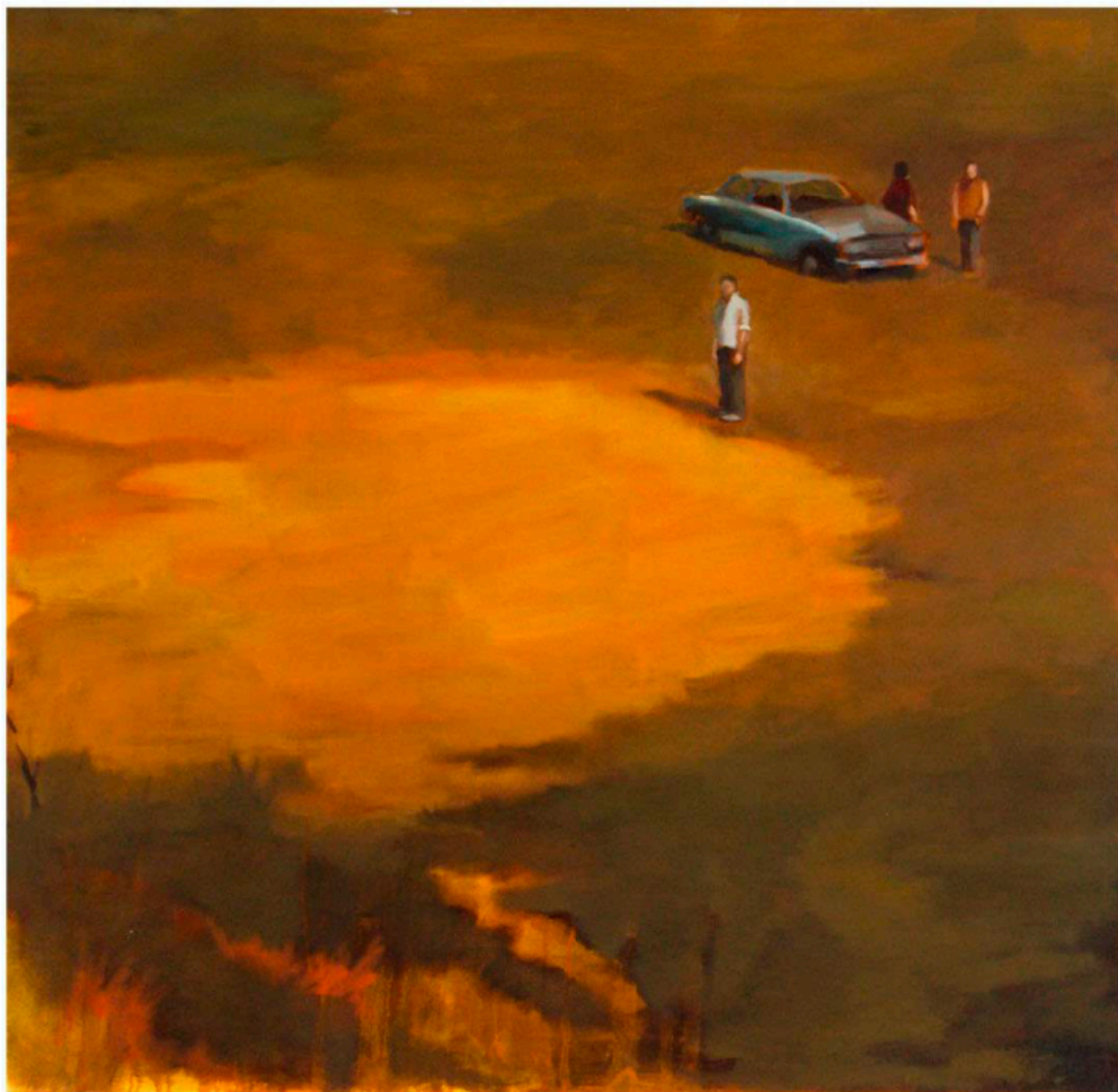
Very few works are based on firsthand experience. I work from images. I search through archives to see what resonates. I'm especially interested in how that resonance occurs when the images are removed from their original context. I have boxes and boxes of images, and have spent more



Zone, 2009, oil on canvas, 80 x 100 cm

Ecologies, 2010, oil on linen, 60 x 45cm





Shethers, 2007, oil on canvas, 83 x 60 cm

and more time collecting images online in the last several years. I find it incredible that out of this increasingly fast stream of images, some still rise up and resonate in unsuspecting ways. Once I locate an image, I can become quite obsessive about it. I work slowly, often painting it over and over again, trying out different approaches until it takes on a form that has a particular effect that brought me to the image in the first place.

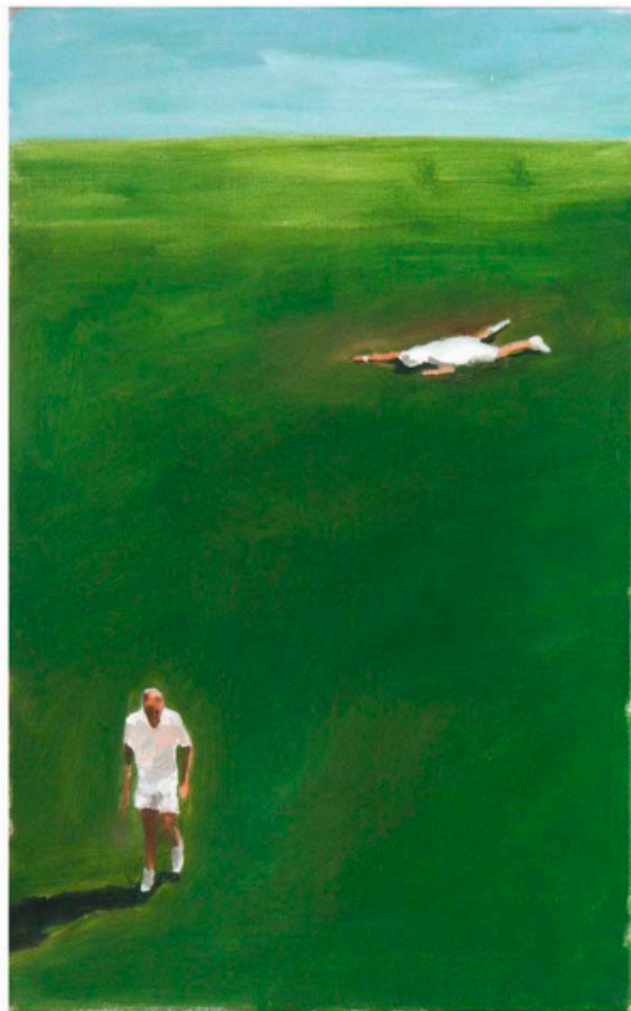
Of course, nothing ever goes where I expect it will. I try to plan my work — I do a lot of looking around until a series comes into a kind of partial view. But so much happens in the studio. I back myself into a corner, get frustrated, or fail miserably at an intention and then something emerges from that. It's maybe a brutal way of working, or at the least, a punishing way, but it's almost always the outliers and impulsive works that become the most significant for me.

— *Do you ever think of your works in terms of narrative, of fiction and nonfiction?*

I am actually really interested in ideas about narration. My work certainly engages with the expectation of narrative, though I've sought to undermine that a bit. Narrative is interesting for me when it challenges viewers to become aware of their desire for narrative, for coherence and meaning.

In my most recent works, I'm thinking about how constellations of paintings can provide a kind of loose scaffolding for entering the work, though I think about it less in terms of narrative these days and more in terms of correspondences, or image relations. As for fiction or nonfiction? I guess painting is always a kind of fiction. But when it's really working, I think it functions more like poetry, in that it can point in so many directions at the same time.

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A Killing, 2008, oil on canvas, 70 x 44 cm

— In 2009, you co-founded an artist collective called *La Chose*. What is it, exactly?

The idea started from sharing a studio with two Berlin artists: Julien Rouvroy and Betti Scholz. After days in the studio, we would often go to exhibitions together and spend a lot of time talking about the problems of exhibition, and imagining the kinds of exhibitions that we would find more interesting. After a lot of long nights like this, we simply got tired of talking about it and started putting the thing into action. I think it would have become insufferable otherwise. Suddenly, it wasn't an abstraction, but a kind of imperative.

We were interested in collaborating on large group exhibitions that would directly engage with the sites where they occur. That's a great thing about working in Berlin: there are all these incredible spaces with different histories that pose really interesting challenges for exhibition. In the process of putting on our first large exhibition at an abandoned bathhouse in 2009, we met a lot of artists who shared similar interests. I am really excited about the work we do together. It takes on such a different kind of energy than the solitude of a studio practice, and you get a lot of unexpected ideas through the exchange. We meet and work with new artists in each exhibition, and the shift in venues keeps things from getting tired. We are in the process of planning to establish a more permanent home for the collective, where we could also host a residency for international artists who want to come and work in Berlin.

www.lachoseprojects.com

www.benjaminrubloff.com