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JEFFREY BEAUCHAMP: Freefall
By DeWitt Cheng

From the Renaissance to the middle of the nineteenth century, artists believed in the power of the visual image to comment on the world. Painters were taught to create skillful depictions of observable reality. With the modernist revolution of roughly1860 to 1960, artists asserted their independence from what was characterized as the slavish imitation of reality; this revolt was in part a response to the advent of photography. With the postmodernist revolution—by this term I include Pop art, land art, minimalism, conceptualism, and social-relations art—that began in 1960 and is now five decades old, the notion of the art object as personal expression came into question and under attack. In today's pluralistic, anything-goes ferment, no central organizing principle predominates; there is indeed no consensus about what art is or does, since the anti-art ideas of Duchamp and others, promulgated through academically oriented art schools, define current practice for many. With the rising popularity of what has been "crowd-sourced curating," i.e., interactive art situations, described recently by Ellen Gamerman in *The Wall Street Journal* ("Everybody's an Art Curator"), it appears that art museums, too, are stepping away from the idea of personal expression toward what might be seen by old-school lovers of aesthetic visual experience as audience-friendly, risk-free group play.

The title of Jeffrey Beauchamp's painting exhibition, *Freefall*, could plausibly be misinterpreted as a commentary on this current atomization of culture, but for this Bay Area painter it represents the condition of art-making, and even, more broadly, living: there are no guarantees (or recipes or formulas); everyone is free-falling from birth toward (spoiler alert!) the ground. (If you don't believe me, see Dino Buzzati's story "The Falling Girl" or Max Beckmann's painting, "The Falling Man.") Beauchamp's goal, he says, referring to the Buzz Lightyear character in the *Toy Story* movies, is "to fall with style." Contemporary artists who believe that only the new is significant deny themselves both aesthetic pleasure and a broader perspective if they fail to see the great works of the past as imaginative flights that never end—that transport viewers, century after century. Beauchamp is a consummate painter who was cautioned many times in art school, the San Francisco Art Institute, with "the F word," i.e., facility, a bugaboo of the Abstract Expressionist generation, but who, suitably 'inoculated' against art fashion, uses his skill in the service of an eclectic mind, restless imagination, trust in instinct—and playful sense of humor. Beauchamp: "I go with the flow and follow my impulses and assess as I go. I try to bring both sides of my brain into play and get a good balance."

In 2012 I wrote in *Art Ltd* magazine:

A skilled realist, he [Beauchamp] became dissatisfied some years ago … and loosened up his style with what he has described as "busting out" brushwork and a "caveman dance" process, of making gestures guided by intuition and improvisation, in the abstract expressionist style. His turbulent landscapes all but fly apart through sheer bravura, but somehow remain legible and coherent, due, no doubt, to his apprenticeship in realism in the late 1980s, when nothing could have seemed more *demodé*. It was a self-guided study, of course. Beauchamp ensconced himself in the school library, studying Turner, Monet and Lorrain, emerging only to explore northern California's "amazing garden," hiking and painting with a friend. His work thus derives from both tradition and nature, and oscillates between realism and abstraction, but in an odd way: the modes are not fused, as in Cézanne or the Bay Area Figurative painters, nor are they confined to separate bodies of work, as in Gerhard Richter (whose soft-focus realism Beauchamp explored for a period). Rather, they are presented simultaneously in parallel, in the same paintings, as double images. As we change focus from depth to flatness and back, the hazy, golden-hued landscapes dissolve into energetic calligraphy, and vice versa, with each aspect canceling and superseding the other, like the complementary but incompatible partners in optical illusions: duck and rabbit or goblet and profile. Despite their humorous, absurd, enigmatic titles (some bearing excruciating puns), Beauchamp's small landscapes … reward serious, sustained looking.

The dozen-plus paintings in *Freefall* reward slow looking, too, their opulent color and brushwork complemented here and there by the artist's philosophic humor (exemplified in a series made several years ago of carved, painted books — perfect for bibliophiles and bibliophobes alike). *All the Good Little Californias* appears to be a traditional landscape in the grand, turbulent, Romantic style of Turner, though loosely set down in quick strokes, as if by Manet, but it's a conceptual work as well, an imagined landscape synopsizing the state's geographical features. *Bridge Out, Race On* and *I Hear Voices in My Head and Only Just Realized They're All Actually Mel Blanc* (referring to the voice of many Warner Brothers cartoon characters) are similarly faithful to the Romantic landscape tradition—in its own way, commenting both on the natural subject and the ways in which culture presents it for vicarious consumption. *Cocotron the Chocolate Robot* depicts a massive oak tree, hyperreal in its high-contrast modeling and implied anthopomorphism, rooted, like the boulder-like group of trees in the background, amid rolling hills that are delineated with expressionist brushstrokes—a crashing surf of vivid color. *Familiar Balance of the Hasty Glacier* and *Landscape When Her Bread Machine Went Awry* add figures to the landscapes; in the former, a small girl playing with a hula hoop between art books on Degas and DeKooning, two consummate draftsmen whose styles are represented here by the realistically rendered girl and the fluid, calligraphic landscape' in the latter, a small girl, her back toward us, approaches a pile of burning leaves taller than she is—a miniature volcano. *Longest Truce Ever* and *Proper & Common —Some of My Best Friends Are Nouns* also play with traditional genres: the medieval city as depicted before artists mastered perspective, with its jumbles of masonry, and the bucolic forest scene, here contemplated by two inquisitive but hardly decorative crows. *Birth of the Audubon Venus*

is a nude figure study of stunning realism and sensuality, but also an allegorical figure in the nineteenth-century style: woman as force of nature. *Frida Be You and Me* riffs on the title of the 1972 feminist book encouraging kids to question restrictive gender role models, and may incidentally refer to Frida Kahlo, who challenged stereotypes in her semi-autobiographical work; in Beauchamp's painting, a solemn-looking teenaged girl sits on the floor or ground, kneading her hands, enlarged because they are extended toward the viewer, with strings of red and white paint squeezed from between her fingers; it can be interpreted as premonitory or symbolic, like Renaissance depictions of baby Jesus playing with toy crosses and flails, or as a metaphor for artistic creation derived from profound feeling, in the Van Gogh/Munch/Pollock mold. The two *Resolution de Fleur* paintings depict the same model, wearing a floral-print dress, seated, and dramatically lit in a dark interior, the first loosely rendered, with the face actually 'out of focus,' and the second, more 'finished'—a nice conflation of the styles of, say, John Singer Sargent and Gerhard Richter. Two more related paintings, these depicting traditional bedroom suites, *Blue Four-Poster* and *Red Four-Poster*, lack the stylistic playfulness of the other works, offering instead the *plaisir* promulgated by Matisse a century ago with his ideal of paintings that would be as restful as armchairs for tired businessmen, not the sordid contemporary delights of real beds with real stained sheets. Those who love painting's traditional pleasures and also enjoy intellectual provocations in the contemporary mode will find much to peruse and consider in Beauchamp's generous, lively, irreverent painted world.