



John Bauer
BSOD

John Bauer is producing heat after death.

Around 1980, at about the time when the surviving members of Joy Division changed their name to New Order, Bernard Sumner said "Our music had become so incredibly dark and cold, we couldn't really get any darker or colder." Of course, as that statement suggests, their freshly minted new name was not the only change the group was fixing to make post-Ian Curtis. The band was set to embark on a turnabout of their sonic identity—modifying their iconic post-punk sound to something that would incorporate the synthetic instruments and some formal elements of electronic club music. It was these changes that were the bases for correcting their perceived temperature problem, to experience heat after death.

The idea of heat is an altogether important idea in the context of life and art. Metaphor or actual, for warm-blooded creatures like us there is a real understood and felt equation in place: heat = life, cold = death. As Ian Curtis's body grew significantly colder after hanging himself by a rope in his kitchen, the band responded by raising the temperature in the room.

John Bauer, who earned a BFA in painting at the University of California, Santa Barbara and lives and works in Los Angeles (after a significant stint in New York City), has spent much of his artistic career producing heat after death. He produces this heat in a far stranger way than simply incorporating elements that would hoist his work from dark, cold depths. In fact, his approach to producing vital warmth is counterintuitive to a conventional mind because his methodological and conceptual turf is hyperborean through and through, and he seems to keep doubling down on this icy reality. The place of cold is John Bauer's 'hood.

Let us break this down. First of all, what death? To determine the exact element(s) of death concerning John Bauer's work, one need only inventory the many autopsy reports on the state of painting over the last century: death of aura at the hands of mechanical reproduction (Benjamin), death of expressive and authentic mark-making at the hands of pop vacuity (Hughes), death of authorial agency at the hands of the risen reader (Barthes) etc. These supposed deaths are the very front-door entrance to his central themes.

Not only does his conceptual program move through and operate within a chilly graveyard, even his studio methodology and practice is of a frosty persuasion. Much of his output over the last ten years has utilized a strict palette of black, white and silver. When he has added color—a move that in the hands of most artists is an effort to lighten or warm things up—it's been toward two very specific, seemingly encoded colors: a kind of sultry but vacant lipstick pink and an icy azure blue.

Working in concert with, but proving even more important than his chilly palette, are his studio methods. He developed a twofold process that combines to actually distance his hand from his painting practice. Part one of the process is producing, photographing and archiving a bank of images

featuring painterly moves that bear the resemblance of authentic expression. These images are captured, compressed, disembodied and preserved in binary code and function as his raw materials. Part two is a hybrid process that involves Photoshop, stenciling, direct painting and silkscreen transfer, which allows him to combine these elements in various ways on the canvas, accumulating layers of "marks" that when seen semiotically are the equivalent of peering through vast screens of information. This information, however, is barely legible because of its fragmentary and profusely layered presentation, and is barely present because of the undifferentiated painted surface, deft use of transparency and a sometimes profoundly collapsing pictorial space. Information that is barely legible and barely present should therefore on all accounts be cold as hell!

Bauer's most recent exhibition, the occasion for this essay, is based on a small but focused selection of his blue paintings. The exhibition title BSOD—Blue Screen of Death—is a computer technician's shorthand for the blue error screen displayed on a Windows computer system after a fatal system error occurs. As a good exhibition title can often serve as a helpful interpretive framework and so shape the way one experiences and reads the work, BSOD is a prime exemplar. The notion of failure is a thing that factors heavily into Bauer's thinking as a particular threshold beyond which a system acts—if it acts at all—in erratic and unpredictable ways. At the core of paint production, breakdown is fundamental. Pigment is pulverized into miniscule bits and floated in a liquid medium. A pigment's material integrity must be broken down to give way to its full range of expressive and formal possibilities. Within a conventional user context, a Blue Screen of Death is the end of the road. But to a hacker, it is truly the beginning of something potentially far more vibrant and generative. From one point of view the BSOD is the cold, hard death of something; from another point of view it is the warm occasion of possibility. And so, seen in this way, we start to perceive the fulcrum —that point where Bauer's efforts, almost despite themselves, begin to pivot toward heat.

In John Bauer's work and working process, he is collecting the long dead residue of authentic expression, and through means of mechanical and synthetic processes is rearranging, re-layering, repeating, filtering, sifting, shifting, controlling, alt-ing and selectively deleting, these things into a re-actuated warmth. By virtue of constant movement and reworking, a kind of frictional heat has developed. By virtue of prolonged exposure and connectivity between his themes and his active mind, brought together by his sincere belief as conduit, there is an electrical charge that is dangerously warm to the touch. As Dr. Frankenstein channeled lightning into his nonhuman to give it life, Bauer channels the electric charge of his own corporeal presence into his non-paintings to give them the heat of life. This embodied presence of the artist, which need not be much more involved than just showing up, is what a daily practice of painting looks like in the twenty-first century. John Bauer is an artist making paintings after the end of painting—and those paintings are HOT!

Brent Everett Dickinson



Untitled, 2014, oil and enamel on linen, 98.5" x 78.75", photo credit: Fredrik Nilsen



Untitled, 2013-2014, oil and enamel on linen, 57" x 45", photo credit: Fredrik Nilsen



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