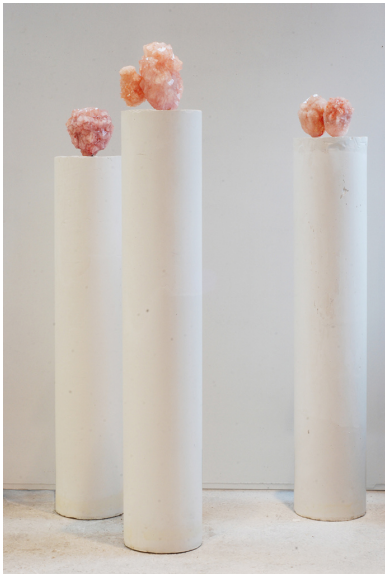


Cox, Steven. *Ben Weiner*. Hunted Projects. March 2016.

HUNTED PROJECTS

Ben Weiner



Ben Weiner in Dialogue with Steven Cox

Steven Cox: *Your works touch upon Marshall McLuhan's notion of the medium is the message, for your explored subject matter is also the material that your works are made from. To begin, what interested you to begin making works that examine the materiality of your chosen materials?*

BW: I think my interest in materialism comes from having parents who were in the sciences but were also ex-hippies and unconventional thinkers. While I was growing up my Dad was doing DNA research at a lab - gel electrophoresis and stuff like that, but there were also all these weird projects they had at home - like, my mom had an herb garden with psychedelic plants like marijuana and jimsonweed.

I always wanted to be an artist, and I had this scientific/materialist prototype of doing experimentation with the aim of answering big questions. Early on I was drawn to a bunch of 60s and 70s theorists like Clement Greenberg, Barnett Newman, Robert Smithson, and McLuhan who applied materialist concepts to art. For me, it's an ontological pursuit - an access to existence beyond the anthropocentric.

SC: *You have created a series of process based abstract psychedelic colour field works that are essentially material representations of mind-altering chemicals. These works are scientific and showcase chemical reactions of recreational and pharmaceutical drugs mixed with coloured inks. By applying these concoctions to Chromatography paper you manage to create these otherworldly colour fields that look like psychedelic Rothko's. When did you first begin exploring Chromatography paper as an alternative surface? Are you knowledgeable of this paper from using it in high school chemistry?*

BW: Well, the idea came first. I have, um, done some research on chemically altered experience, haha. But in all seriousness, having experimented with psychedelic drugs I was interested in how,

by altering my perception, these drugs brought the mechanics of consciousness itself to my notice, like raindrops on a windowpane making you focus on the window. And so, going back to Clement Greenberg's medium specificity, I had this idea of doing a series that defined consciousness itself as the medium. So I started reading about experiments done with psychedelic drugs, and somewhere I came across chromatography paper. And when I ordered some from this chemistry website, I realized it is just really beautiful paper. It's heavy cotton, and has this satin texture that creates a diffuse, hazy surface like that of a flat-screen. And it contains no size (glue) so it has a beautiful, cool-white hue. I have not seen anything like it in art supply stores or anywhere else.

SC: *I am curious to know about the archivability of these works, will they eventually erode or subtly change through time? Is this something you have considered?*

BW: Yeah, after the chemical reaction, I let them dry completely and then spray them with a very intense UV coating to prevent the inks from fading. But the works are meant to have a life of their own—and as far as I know there is no existing research on these drugs being used as visual media, so who knows, maybe fifty years from now they'll continue to evolve, which would be pretty awesome.

SC: *Furthermore, I am aware that chemical reactions and the transformation of materiality is something that you are also exploring through the growth of crystals mixed with other chemicals. In one particular case Collage (2014) consists of the crystallization of 5-Hour Energy drink. Can you tell me about these works...*

BW: Actually, it's just 5-Hour Energy, no crystal growing kit involved. All the sugar and preservatives in 5-Hour Energy crystallize when you let its water evaporate, like rock candy. I like the idea that 5-Hour Energy is marketed as this productivity supplement, and so rather than craft a sculpture, I'm letting it do the work for me. While many of my drawings are made with illicit drugs, I like that 5-Hour Energy is legal, because it reflects the idealism about science and technology that permeates consumer culture. And by returning 5-Hour Energy to a chaotic, natural state, I want to provoke an anxiety response in viewers - like, this thing that was meant to make me a superhuman has scary, unpredictable side-effects. I think that anxiety cycle is central to consumer body culture - the hope of resisting mortality through science, and the accompanying fear of messing with nature.

SC: *It is pretty scary that so many people consume energy drinks such as 5-Hour Energy to help them get through their day, especially after seeing the products natural transformation into crystals. Though in relation to getting through ones day, can you tell me about your daily studio routine?*

BW: It's generally Monday through Friday 9-5, with sometimes a late night. While my projects vary, I generally focus on one at a time, seeing it through to completion. I am pretty type A, so having a routine helps both in being focused, and getting myself to step away instead of banging my head against a problem for too long, haha.

SC: *What are the fundamental issues surrounding the consumption of artificial substances that you are wishing to both examine and portray through your work? Do you see this subject as being one that you wish to explore indefinitely?*

BW: My larger concerns as an artist relate to the anxieties surrounding the body that I just mentioned- synthetic enhancement as a resistance against mortality. Issues of preservation and mortality are central to the history of painting. I feel that this history makes it an ideal medium to process what it means to be human as we integrate synthetic components and technology into our bodies. Hence, my studio practice involves working with a variety of materials and media, with painting at its philosophical center. I am not tied to a specific process, but I think these issues will fascinate me for some time.

SC: *As well as exploring these recreational and pharmaceutical chemicals, you also create photorealist paintings of artificial liquids like hair gels, body wash, moisturizers and nail*

varnishes. These paintings are swirling masses of hyper-saturated colour that simultaneously play with two opposing practices (abstraction – realism).

These works, as featured in MaximumStrengthAgeDefy highlight issues surrounding self-fabrication through the daily application of mass-produced synthetic liquids that are very much part of a common daily grooming routine. I find that these works both highlight and question a visual and consumerist illusionism by addressing the somewhat unhealthy daily requirement to live by such products. Were these works created to highlight the manipulation of the consumer, or the fabrication/blurring of ones identity via the consumption of such products?

BW: Nice reading of that work. Yeah, I have set up this situation in which my labor reflects the body-enhancing purpose of the products I depict. Going back to my concerns about the synthetic as a resistance to mortality, I see my process of creating these works as a precision performance, in which my attempt to replicate body improvement materials will ultimately end in failure - up close, the works are painterly, full of gestures and blemishes. And this fulfills the painting's memento mori status, with the preserved gestures becoming symbols of my body's transience. Furthermore, these works reflect our alienation from our physical selves as we manipulate our bodies at the abstract level of chemistry. No matter how precisely I render hair gel, it will still verge on being unrecognizable. In a sense, I am restoring some of the original challenge of representation, because my eyes are literally not evolved to understand synthetic materials like clear gels or silicone. When I started this series, one of my inspirations was the 17th century Spanish painter Juan Sanchez Cotan. He painted still lifes of vegetables - cabbages, apples - in grain closets. He emphasized their geometry as a way to symbolize the higher power that he believed had created them (he was very religious). By presenting the body products essentially as large-scale abstractions, my aim is for them to represent forces outside of our control - to reflect the volatility of the synthetic.

SC: *Historically, representational paintings of landscapes or still lifes of food symbolically showcased the owner's personal wealth. The grandeur of the food would highlight the owners fancy diets whilst landscapes would also bring attention to the owners land. In cases, both would reflect the other if the owner lived off their land. What I find fascinating is that there is a psychedelic landscape quality to your paintings, with the mountainous globs of paint that also toys with perspective. Also, these liquids are mass-produced and have a questionable value based on artificial needs. I am curious to know your thoughts on subject matter in relation to contemporary living and how your works comment on contemporary lifestyles?*

BW: I use magnification to access a virtual perspective - a space, or landscape, but one that is of a different scale than the body, and thus physically inaccessible. As you illustrate in your analogy of traditional still life/farm-to-table food production, painting must now address a world in which we are often physically removed from the fruits of our labor. In "Paint Cycle," the series to which you refer, I paint close-up images of my palette, so each painting produces source material for the next in cyclical fashion. In these paintings I was exploring this upended relationship between process and product. Strangely, painting is a traditional pursuit, but it's also at home in a time when fabrication methods allow us to easily manipulate our physical surroundings-and ourselves - according to our imaginations. Increasingly, I am fascinated with materials, like silicone implants, that reflect this ability to mold our bodies based on an ideal.

SC: *Without questioning your painterly dexterity as your photorealist works are fantastically executed, can you tell me about your time working under Jeff Koons and how your time assisting Koons has influenced your practice?*

BW: My first job out of college was working for Jeff as a painter in his studio. I think he had around 50 employees at the time (now there are many times that). I worked on his show "Popeye" at Sonnabend - I painted Popeye in the eponymous piece, among other stuff. Seeing Jeff's devotion to the cannon and his place in it was definitely an inspiration. But after working there, I felt a need to emphasize my own hand in my work, to loosen up and show more

evidence of my personal struggle in making paintings. I paint from multiple images of my subjects, using an Ipad or computer screen, and my human process of observing and assimilating this visual information is an important part of the work. I think that the whole photorealist factory thing has been explored, and people really burned out on that work in the mid-2000s. As figuration returns with a vengeance, I am seeing an interest in the intimacy of representation-painting as a reaction to a personal digital device, where part of the work of image creation occurs virtually - a smooth synthesis of human and technological components rather than a stilted assembly line.

SC: *Can you tell me about your process of getting the job at Koon's studio? Was Koons an inspiration to you during college? Is he still? And today, which artists are you particularly interested in?*

BW: Yeah Koons was an influence back when I was in college, and that led me to apply. As far as who I'm looking at now, there are too many to list but some include Nicolas Deshayes, Pamela Rosenkranz, Kevin Beasley, Nicolas Lobo, Sean Raspet, Scott Lyall, Sascha Braunig, Brock Enright, Harold Ancart, Lucy Kim, Jana Euler, Anna Ostoya, Dike Blair, Paul Sietsema, Picabia's Portaits Mechaniques, Helio Oiticica, and Dieter Roth.

SC: *You have an upcoming exhibition at Mark Moore Gallery 23 June – 20 August 2016. What are you currently working on for this particular exhibition? Further more, do you have additional exhibitions planned for 2016?*

BW: The Mark Moore show will feature two new groups of hyperrealistic paintings- Gel Monochromes (paintings of blue hair gel) and Silicone Paintings (paintings of silicone implants) and maybe some sculptures. This body of work will riff on the painted monochrome's historical position as a hybrid of mass production and handcraft. I'm actually very excited about how it's developing - I feel like I'm synthesizing much of what I've learned from my recent multimedia work with aspects of my hyperrealist work.

I'm also co-curating a group show with Jessica Hodin for Zevitas Marcus Gallery in Los Angeles. This show will run concurrently with my solo exhibition, and its theme will address the relevance of the Uncanny Valley phenomenon to recent figurative painting and sculpture. The Uncanny Valley describes the discomfort people feel when viewing CG rendered figures and robots, and the show will explore the sense of unease that accompanies painting the figure from a digital source.

Some group shows in the works as well but those are the main things.

[Ben Weiner](#)

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