

IN CONVERSATION

BLAKE O'BRIEN AND MARISSA GRAZIANO

Brooklyn based artist, Blake O'Brien, sat down with Marissa Graziano to discuss collaboration and the inspirations that guided his curatorial decisions in A Secret Theater. The exhibition presents four artists who examine the preservation, exhibition, or containment of a subject against its observation or representation. On view February 3 – March 4, 2024; featuring work by Maggie King Johns, Adam Milner, Blake O'Brien, and Mack Sikora.

MARISSA GRAZIANO: On the heels of your curatorial debut at GH, it's a pleasure to have the chance to discuss some of the influences behind your expansion into curation. What do you think are the differences between artists and curators? Do they share the same theoretical background?

BLAKE O'BRIEN: Oh yeah, I'm a curator now. I don't actually know many people who just curate so I'm not really sure. But I think we do generally share a theoretical background, yeah: most of us study a similar art history and we're told similar stories about value, etc. Some of us are reverent of those stories and some of us are skeptical of them, but the overall background stands. And I think that's generally where the common ground ends. I've always felt a little dissonance with curators and historians because they don't put themselves into the discomfort of finding an idea through a physical process and so don't have the same toolbox for engaging with the results of that process.

Obviously there isn't a right or wrong way to engage, and curators bring something else to the table that many artists don't—it can be hard for artists to see what we're doing when we're inside the work, and historians can help us contextualize it—but sometimes that contextualization can feel a little clinical and alienating.



Blake O'Brien, *Herma (Anyone Can Grow Roses)*, 2021-2024, Oil paint, book, burlap, Apoxie-sculpt, canvas, wood, and found furniture fragment, 72 x 27 x 2 ½ in

MG: I can understand that sentiment. It feels like artists wear a lot of hats these days: curators, writers, critics, directors, etc. What we're doing right now is a good example. I think it's always been this way to an extent, but it feels like there's a growing shift for us to stretch beyond the studio. Is that just out of necessity?



Installation view; *A Secret Theater*, Greene House Gallery, February 3 – March 4, 2024

BO: It does seem like there are more artist-run spaces and publications and general cross-pollination than ever. And I think it is coming from necessity like you said—if you aren't being offered opportunities you have to make them for yourself—but I think it's also coming from this distance between the way artists think about art and the way the rest of the world thinks about it. I think the two groups envision very different art-worlds. And so eventually it's like, there are a lot of artists who are not showing but are much more interesting than many who are, so artists become combatants in the gatekeeping war and start their own spaces, less for themselves than for their peers. And that's a nice little, like, insurrection or something. Although of course it's been subsumed by rich people and now people are running "DIY" spaces in their Soho apartments.

But anyway, I think most artists don't really know what we're doing in the ways that people expect us to know what we're doing. And the big thing is I think we shouldn't know what we're doing in those ways. I read a conversation between Robert Gober and Vija Celmins awhile ago and they were talking about how to respond to the question of what does this work mean, or what is it about. It's a tired question. Gober said when someone asks him, his impulse is to tell them what it's made of. And he isn't avoiding the question, he's saying that the meaning is in the materials and the construction just as much as it is in the symbols and referents or whatever. And that it all comes out of the residue of having lived life up to that point, rather than somewhere logical or at the surface of the mind. So, it doesn't really elucidate all that much (seemingly intentionally), but it offers a way of making connections and finding abstract meaning that I think is just a little foreign to non-artists, and I include curators and art historians in that group. But I probably shouldn't. I'm sure any reading this will be offended. But maintaining the mystery is important and the rest of the bureaucratic world wants things to be explained to them and curators and historians are a major vessel for that. So they have a hard task actually. Artists have the social

allowance to avoid talking about our work in practical language if we don't want to.

MG: What are some of the things you'd like to see curators and gallerists explore more?

BO: I think exploring me could be really interesting. Also, more challenging work, rather than so much harmless, palatable decoration. I love Matisse as much as the next painter, but I don't like the idea that art should be a comfortable armchair or whatever. I want it to unsettle normies. We also need better group shows; they're so frequently a grouping that's just arbitrary or far-reaching. Like, "this one's all animals". Truly who cares.

MG: Yes, you can always tell when the market is suffering. Who are some of the artists, writers, academics, and other creative thinkers who have influenced your practice?

BO: Too many, I'm too easily influenced. But the biggest impacts have been from some of the people I've studied with: Caleb Weintraub, E.E. Ikeler, Sedrick Chisom. I've gotten a lot from studio visits with them.

MG: In the press release, there's a quote by Julian Jaynes from *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (1976) "...And the privacy of it all! A secret theater of speechless monologue and convenient counsel, an invisible mansion of all moods, musings, and mysteries, an infinite resort of disappointments and discoveries." What's your interpretation of this?

BO: When we're making something, there's a parallel and alternating structure of thinking and doing—of joining idea with material, and vice versa. And that joinery is one of the unique things visual art offers us: the physical imbued with the metaphysical. A transubstantiation. In the quote, Jaynes is describing the experience of having a little mind of one's own. Consciousness is the cognizance of that imaginary tympanum that separates our metaphysical and physical existences, our subjective and objective realities, our self and the rest, etc. It's the self-awareness that we can be self-aware, and in a world that is not us but that we are inextricably part of. Making art can be a journey outward in which the studio becomes an extension of the brain and one moves in the studio the way they move in their mind, and things get jumbled. This show is kind of about that boundary and that scale shift, where the objects artists make become proxies for themselves. A self portrait at a really elementary level: a vessel holding something mysterious inside.

MG: It's almost akin to an internalized Situationist International idea of the *dérive*, where the psychogeographical effects are happening inward, instead of in response to external, physical space.



Adam Milner, Untitled, detail, 2019–2024, Pink marble, stones, quartz, porcelain tooth, disco ball fragment, plastic gemstone, Swarovski crystal, agate, mole hand, 3D printed bronze cherry stem, plastic glasses, wax, 11 ½ x 7 x 5 in

BO: Yeah, the stimulus and effect are both coming from inside. Or from both inside and outside I guess. It does feel related. I think a lot of artists are really focused (which I'm jealous of), but I'm not as much, so it feels relatable to say that it's like wandering around my mind and my studio and allowing those landscapes to make impressions on me that I react to.

MG: There are a lot of interiors happening within this exhibition that sit on the periphery: drawings hidden in drawers, works atop pedestals, paintings nestled in frames, objects within objects – there's even a secret piece that's not on the checklist. How important is the viewer's curiosity?

BO: I haven't really thought about that. My impulse is to say that that's up to them. I don't know. I guess it's important for the reasons you just listed, and in that way rewards close looking. Although sometimes it requires maybe even chatting (because that's become our unofficial rule for showing people the unlisted artwork lol). But, I don't know, I'm generally pretty pessimistic about the art audience at-large. If people aren't curious, if they don't put in a little, they won't get much back. And that feels like a little justice I guess. I think the people who come to a gallery like Greene House are generally curious, but I feel like I see a lot of people going to shows and museums and just glancing at and dismissing things, or taking a quick picture or whatever, you know the story; it's bleak. This probably isn't the direction you were hoping the question would go, but part of this project for me is to get people to register that people are putting themselves into these things. And that they, the viewer, can do that too, and it doesn't have to be an ego contest of "getting

it" or not. It should be about correspondence, not a linear exhibition of, I know this thing and don't you feel stupid for not. I want people to feel less alienated by art, but I also have a hard time sympathizing with them sometimes because it seems like so many just want to be entertained and jerked off and put to bed.

MG: We had a visitor by the gallery recently who connected the curation in *A Secret Theater* with Greene House as an exhibition space. It bridged that concept of works "holding each other" with GH as a space within a space; this multipurpose room on wheels that functions as a gallery, studio and/or living room. What do you think about the many forms of collaboration happening within the exhibition and, serendipitously, outside of it?

BO: I don't think I know what you mean about collaboration outside of the exhibition. But, *in* the exhibition, the major thing is that we all collaborated with Mack. Or rather Mack collaborated with each of us (all her idea). Which turned out beautifully and was a gesture that helped expand on the holding thing. The idea for the show actually came out of mine and Mack's collaborative piece, which we made like a year ago. She was just beginning her reliquaries and asked me to make a painting to go in one of them, to be framed by it. I spent a long time thinking about what kind of image to paint and ended up with a section of the unicorn tapestry at The Cloisters with the unicorn photoshopped out. I did a content-aware removal and it conveniently made it look like the fence had been broken, which introduced the narrative potential that the unicorn had escaped its enclosure. (I used another version of that image for the show flier). Mack's reliquary has many little compartments, and one "relic" enclosed in the back of the panel I painted on. I don't remember if what that relic is is disclosed to the viewer or not. So there's a lot of play with interiority, containment, presence and absence, denying and offering, etc. And those threads run through the whole show with the other artists as well.



Mack Sikora and Blake O'Brien, Reliquary 1 (relic undisclosed - 2009), 2022-23, Flashé on wood with metal hinges, oil on board, 11 x 7 ¼ x 2 ¼ in

BO: In the months leading up to the install, I made a group chat with the artists so we could collaboratively plan things out. That ended up being too many cooks in the kitchen but I think it still helped us all get on the same kinds of pages. During that period, like just a couple weeks before the show opened, Mack decided she wanted to make two new pieces to hold something by the other two artists as well. So she made a box (“Adam’s Box”) to hold Adam’s wrapper drawings, and a frame to hold a small painting by Maggie (“Maggie’s Frame”). Mack is the mortar of the show.

MG: Her reliquaries have always played off the idea of holding vs. withholding, which creeps up in different ways throughout the exhibition. At this point, she’s left enough breadcrumbs through hearsay for viewers to know that there are a series of drawers and compartments hidden within her geometrical framework that hold a ready-made object, but the tension comes from not knowing if you’re able to *touch* the work. And when it’s in a setting like Greene House, it almost reads as institutional critique by questioning the traditional roles of viewership; ‘Am I allowed to touch this..’ It’s something that you’d never even consider asking in a white cube setting. The answer is no, for those wondering, but it begs the question. I guess that’s what I mean about the space informing the work and vice versa as a form of collaboration that I think our visitor was picking up on.

BO: Ok, right. And I think actively begging the question but still denying access makes it even more interesting. And the kind of sexy, withholding desire-role feels appropriate given that most of her relics are from past relationships. Another thing that comes to mind is when we were in the early stages of talking about the show, Adam immediately made the point that holding isn’t always about protection. Which is like, oh, of course. But I somehow hadn’t really thought about it. It can be possession, or imprisonment, etc. Mack’s boxes feel a little like they straddle both sides of that. Like trapping a princess in a tower.

MG: The toy and its replica in Maggie’s two larger paintings also point to that. What I love about those pieces in relation to the viewer is that it beckons and detracts simultaneously. The buttery paint application, her palette, the whimsy of it all – you want to look, but that vibratory color is punishing.

BO: Totally, there’s a borderline clown/fun-house aesthetic that feels a little insidious. They’re unexpectedly mysterious.



Maggie King Johns, Primary Objects (Piano house 1), 2024, Air Dry Clay, epoxy, Flash and acrylic paint on, foam and wood panel, 34 x 38 x 3 ½ in

Blake O’Brien received a BFA from The University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS, and an MFA from Indiana University, Bloomington, IN. Recent exhibitions include: Alphabet Soup, Essex Flowers, New York, NY; Staring into the Sun (solo), Kent Place School, Summit, NJ; Friend of a Friend, pop-up curated by Tiffany Wong and Montserrat Mayor, Brooklyn, NY; Spooky Show, Greene House, Brooklyn, NY; The Patriot, O’Flaherty’s, New York, NY; Tactile Sublime, Dōdōmu Gallery, Brooklyn, NY. His work has been included in New American Paintings issue #141 and Artmaze Magazine issue #20. O’Brien lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.