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Featuring the 2017 BLR Prize Winners

“To make art one must maintain a certain amount of optimism...”

Interview With Our Cover Artist, Bo Joseph

By Matthew Weinstein

Bo Joseph, whose artwork is featured on the cover of this issue of the *Bellevue Literary Review*, became connected to NYU Langone when his wife Simone was treated for breast cancer at the NYU Perlmutter Cancer Center. Here is an excerpt of an interview of Bo Joseph by Matthew Weinstein, visual artist and critic. (The full interview is available on www.BLReview.org)

Matthew Weinstein: How did optimism serve you during Simone’s illness—not just as a coping mechanism for being strong while someone you love is suffering, but also within your work?

Bo Joseph: I have always thought that to make art one must maintain a certain amount of optimism, if only because the outcome of art making involves so many unknowns—how the final piece will be resolved, the behavior of materials, if the intent will carry through in the final work, etc.

During Simone’s illness, this optimism played a large role in getting into the studio at all, despite how trivial art seemed in light of her condition. There were days when she was resting and I could do little to help, and though I felt conflicted, she and I agreed that getting into the studio would be good for me, and good for her.

MW: The connection between art and disease is very tricky. Susan Sontag’s *Illness As Metaphor* explained how illness becomes associated with character, and how this is used to shame the sick. How does your recent work reflect Simone’s struggle?

BJ: My experience of Simone’s illness did trickle into the work, intuitively at first. How could it not when I often found myself suddenly well up with tears in the midst of painting? The connection to that state of mind became very vivid while I was working on a large drawing that includes a silhouette of Simone standing under an umbrella, surrounded by layers

of superimposed architecture and bird forms. I think it reflects the tangle of emotions Simone and I both experienced around her illness.

MW: You both love art and you both love each other. Since the advantages of human love need not be explained in relation to coping with enormous suffering, it is curious that the love of objects can help. What is the power that objects contain?

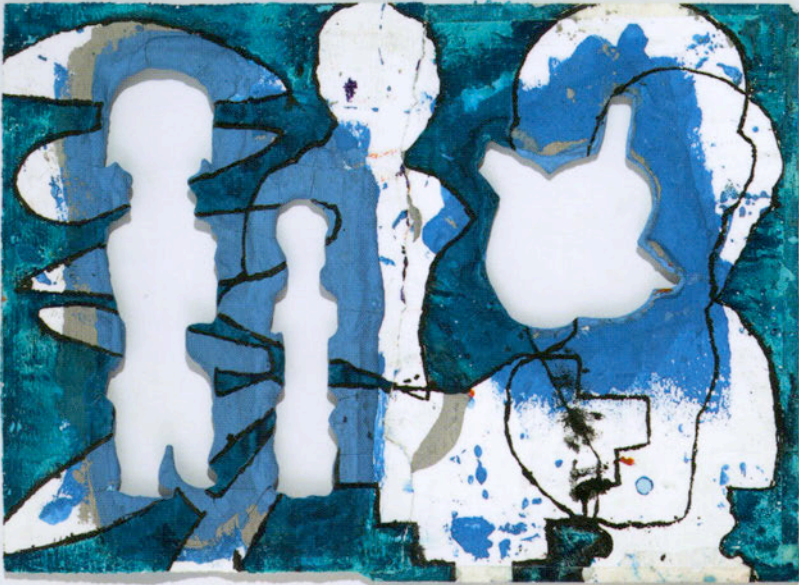
BJ: Love of objects and the energy they exude can, at its most superficial, provide a healthy distraction, and at its most profound, provide emotional and spiritual nourishment. One obstacle is that confrontation with suffering brings a lot into question, not the least of which is the value of material things. But then, over time, as you get some perspective and begin the painful but proactive effort of recovery, these touchstones begin to regain meaning as they are woven into our lives and our psyches.

MW: Making art brings one very close to finality as we, even if we don't admit it, are making objects for perpetuity. When faced with the tragedy of illness while preparing for a show, did artistic ambition (both creative and practical) become more absurd or more meaningful?

BJ: It often felt absurd, even offensive, to be making art. But going back to the question of optimism and even activism, we both felt that without it, Simone's illness would somehow be getting the better of us both. I think that the element of choice helps to cope with the question of finality or mortality, hopefully, embedding a sense of imperative.

MW: We have just entered a very cruel period in this country. Simone has just endured a very cruel period of her life. There is also an innate cruelty to art and literature in that they "cannibalize" any experience they need in order to take form. Can art combat cruelty without trying to be empathic?

BJ: I think artists are innately empathic to the extent that they nurture the capacity to analyze and process their surroundings, even if they are cruel (sometimes famously) in their social behavior. Even while "cannibalizing" experience, an artist is simultaneously relating to that information and resonating with it in order to process it. If that act of circumventing the self, of putting aside filters in order to perceive vividly, is deliberately incorporated into the work, then I do feel that art can help without even trying because that act assimilated into the work is then accessible to the viewer. ☺



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