



BRENDAN MONROE
INTERVIEW BY KRISTIN FARR / PORTRAIT BY STEPHANIE WIEGNER

BRENDAN MONROE REVELS IN THE ZEN OF NEUTRALITY. AN INSIGHTFUL OBSERVER, HE CONTEMPLATES PHYSICAL FUNCTIONS, VISCERAL SENSATIONS, AND VARYING STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS, THEN TRANSLATES THESE DIFFICULT-TO-EXPLAIN EXPERIENCES THROUGH PAINTING AND SCULPTURE. THE BEST WORDS TO DESCRIBE HIS WORK ARE THE ARTIST'S OWN, "A DREAM BIOLOGY."

He seamlessly but vaguely references scientific facts without being didactic. Brendan recently relocated to Sweden where he continues creating his signature, unidentifiable, organic blobs while exploring new terrain. —*Kristin Farr*

Kristin Farr: What made you leave Berkeley for Sweden?

Brendan Monroe: My wife, Evah, is going to grad school here. And, for a long time, I felt the itch to move out of Berkeley because it seemed like a place where I wanted to live for a long time. I'd like to end up there, but for now I wanted to experience a completely different place.

What are your least and most favorite things about your new location?

My least favorite thing is the alcohol-buying system. I don't drink a lot of alcohol in general, but it's all sold through the government, so only certain stores sell it, and there's only one price for everything. Say you buy a Corona; it's always the same price. There are no sales.

They don't have BevMo?

No. They don't have anything! The only thing you can buy at the grocery store is beer with 3.5-percent alcohol. Whenever you buy beer, the alcohol content is always printed pretty large on the labeling. Usually the price goes up with higher alcohol content. It makes sense, but it's strange. And they aren't open on Sundays.

What do you like the most?

Nature is really nice and easy to get to. We're at the edge of the city, but there's still a lot of nature. We can walk five or 10 minutes in different directions and find water and forests. I haven't been here long enough to find the other reasons why I like it a lot.

Where are you from?

I grew up in Southern California, and only four years ago moved to Berkeley. Even that was a big change for me. I thought it was going to be so cold and rainy.

And now you know what cold really is.





For at least a month and a half, it was negative 10 or 20 degrees Celsius here.

You seem like a better fit in Northern California than Southern California.

I didn't want to move at first because I thought there were fewer art things going on in Northern California compared to Los Angeles, at least from the perspective I had. I also had the idea that LA had pretty much anything you needed. Let's say I needed to find a part of some machine; I could drive to the shop that had it. Or maybe a rare type of wood, I could find it. And I was just getting comfortable and fitting into the art scene there. Evah and I were dating, and she moved to Berkeley with her brother who was going to Cal. I moved up

about a year later with a good friend who got a job up there. I only went because Evah was there, but I ended up liking it a lot. Everything seems very simplified compared to LA. You don't have to run errands for three or four hours driving around. I like it more than LA now.

How do you influence each other's work?
Some of the figures look like you and Evah.

A lot of times I actually try to draw her. But then it ends up changing and not looking much like her in the end. They begin that way, and then I don't worry about it. I'm not exactly trying to make a painting of her. I'm trying to make a painting of a conventional woman figure. It's similar with the ones that look like me. I don't really try to make them look like me, they just

sort of end up like that. I don't want to place myself in there as me, Brendan, in the painting. But I want to imagine what it's like to be in that place. It doesn't really matter who it is. It's just a figure realistically interacting with the environment, which isn't a real environment at all. I think a lot of artists tend to paint themselves, even if they aren't trying. One of the most familiar human images to anyone is their self.

Your newer work seems very contemplative and self-reflective. What was going on in your life when you made your fall 2009 show at Richard Heller Gallery?

I was getting married. One painting is called *Self-Interpretation*, and there was also *His*

Interpretation and *Her Interpretation*. Those were made around the time we were getting married and planning to move. I was thinking about the rest of my life with Evah.

Break down the different characters in your work.

There are the human people, and then there are humanoid people who are mysterious and much more anonymous. And then there are the creatures that I imagine to be related to microorganisms. They have really simple, utilitarian shapes. Their legs might move through water, but that's about all they do. They don't necessarily have to be small, just a very simplified form of life. The last category would be the activity of the paint. It isn't

so much a character or figure, but it's still something that's alive. I tend to call it The Blob. It has its own life, and its own interactions with the other things. A blob could be anything. It could be paint, or maybe it's a weird cell that has no specific form. Or maybe it's just energy, or activity. Everything and everyone fulfills their functions, and everything's happening in a similar place.

Your figures are always very neutral looking.

Normally their expressions are passive, like they're asleep, or maybe they're awake but they're just staring. Or they're pausing between things. They aren't upset with where they are. They aren't trying to change anything. They're just being who they are.

You showed me some pictures of what you're working on now, and I noticed the blobs look more green than usual.

The worst thing is blue for me. I try to put it into paintings, the one you saw is a first wash, a lay-in sort of thing. I try to expand my palette in both directions and mix in a few other colors. I'll use purples on one end, and then move on to brighter greens, and even bluish-green in some places. I'll start mixing those colors into the whole image, and then I'll almost always edit them out. I'll just paint over them with a warmer color. I can use hot greens and lime greens. But if there's blue in there, it's probably not going to make it into the finished product. Or even purple. Purple isn't going to make it.



Why do you think that is?

Maybe I'm not using enough of that color. If that color is in there, it looks too foreign. It just bothers me. The warm palette is so comforting.

How do you feel about red?

I love it. It's something that I've attached myself to for a while, and now I want to make myself break away a little more. It's easy for me to compose with it. I can make this really busy scene, and then I can have these hot spots of red that are bringing you to focus in one place. And it's really alive.

Tell me about your painting with the red figures, *The Competitors*. Who are they?

There are basically generations of characters that I'll go through, figures I'll use in one place and reuse in another. Those guys came out of the previous ones, which were squatty and less human. I use figures to show a social happening of sorts. There's an evolution of figures; they change from one thing to the next. So they aren't specifically anything. I wanted those red guys to look very human, but I also didn't want them to have faces. I wanted them to be almost like mannequins of humans, or just the body shape without specific features. The idea is that they could be anybody or anything, or they could be doing anything, but the focus is on them meeting, for some strange reason, in this place.

That painting came second to another painting

of anonymous figures. The other one is of these guys who are grouped together in the same way, but they're hairy. It was the same idea of an anonymous meeting, but these guys are more in disguise. They're just another type of figure that's unidentifiable besides maybe one having darker or lighter hair than the other. That piece is called *The Conspirators* because it was a mysterious act in the first place. When I decided to paint the red guys, it was because I wanted to have some of the other figures doing a similar act, but amongst their own kind.

A lot of your characters disguise themselves. Why is that?

I imagine it to be for all different purposes. I think of it more as going through different

changes, like waking up out of sleep. You might be in a different place when you're dreaming than you are when you're awake, or even when you're daydreaming versus when you're paying attention. It isn't a disguise purpose, but maybe more of a transformation purpose. Generally, everybody and everything going on is very comfortable and normal, and I want the characters in their environments to feel that way. It isn't really a disguise so much as something to put on, or something that's flowing over them. That's just what they do to be in this place, and to exist with the things around them.

Say more about that place.

It almost always has this off-white, creamy

background; it's so unspecific. There could be anything thrown in there that would change the whole thing. A monster could pop out of the ground or fall down from above. Or maybe a hurricane of swirling paint could appear. My idea of it is a subconscious place, or a dream place. Like when you close your eyes and you see black but you don't really see black you see all these weird spots. And if a light is on it's going to be brighter when your eyes are closed. It isn't necessarily a place, but a space where all of this stuff exists in. Maybe part of that comes from beginning with a white page or canvas. Anything can be realized there where originally, nothing existed.

Do you have strange dreams?

Yes, but they're always the nervous ones where my teeth fall out. Strangely, I don't directly reference my dreams to make paintings. I try to imagine these living and organic shapes. It comes from what I imagine to be biology, but it's a dream biology. Nothing is necessarily real. I don't think my actual dreams make a lot of sense but they come from real life, so they're more grounded than my paintings. There's more scenery and background in my dreams than in my paintings.

I'm curious about the process of dreaming and the fact that we have dreams in the first place. We have a reality, and we have different perceptions of it in our own heads. It boils down to a science that can be measured,



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which is really interesting. I try to make that the beginning of my paintings.

But you don't directly reference biology.

The thing I like about biology is that there's a way to see and explain things that are impossible to know by just living your life regularly. It's fantasy in a way, even though it's a very clear and specific science. The discovery of that is interesting because that's why we exist to a certain extent. I've tried to make paintings that are more specific, and they lose the fantasy aspect. When I'm discovering what everything does, like the way the world functions on a molecular and cellular level, it's really special. If you just repeat and explain, it seems less special, just illustrating fact.

When a microbiologist interviewed you for your monograph, he recognized specific clogged arteries and cell formations in your work. But you didn't intend that?

It's more about the excitement and magic of life. It isn't so important to be deemed malignant or benevolent. It's really strange, even the fact that we're alive, or that things can be alive. We can't revive ourselves after death even though we have all the same parts, technically, but the initial life is out. Those are things that I think about.

What do you think happens when we die?

I don't know for sure, of course; I don't think we completely disappear. But I also don't think there's much going on in terms of consciousness. The energy of life has to go somewhere. I'm not talking about reincarnation or anything, but if you have this certain energy that exists it has to go somewhere. Maybe it just goes with the air, or maybe it dissipates to some other place.

Your paintings seem very calm and unemotional. Does that reflect your personality?

I guess it does. I don't think about that when I'm making them, but I do tend to be very even. For example, let's say a cop pulls me over on a freeway or I ruin a painting or something like that. In my head I'll worry about it, but will tell myself that it isn't going to help me. Why worry about it? I just need to solve the problem. I try not to get worked up about things unnecessarily.

I noticed you've been using fewer faces in your new work. Your microbe characters are becoming more abstract.

I stopped doing the faces so much because I found a different solution to make things live. I feel like I'm better with placing them

in their environment and communicating the idea that they're alive. They're a different kind of life, and they don't need to have faces to make them more alive, or to be able to be identifiable with the personalities they might have. They are what they are, simple living organisms.

Tell me about the big fabric sculpture you made. What does its title, *Borborygmi*, mean?

It's a technical term for the growling in a stomach. I wanted to imagine shrinking oneself, going inside of one's body and interacting with physical things within. I thought of all the things your stomach tells you. You feel it in your stomach if you're nervous or in love or hungry, all these different things. Going inside of that place is dark, hot, and enclosed. I made the sculpture comfortable and cushy, but it could also be claustrophobic. It depends on who you are and how you feel about yourself when you go in there. The sounds of the sculpture made it interactive. You could squeeze certain parts of the walls, and it would make sounds. I wanted to record some actual stomach sounds, but that's hard to do. Evah and I made the noises, a whole bunch of weird, pretend stomach noises.

You turned that huge sculpture into a bunch of smaller ones.





JUXTAPOZ

Awakening
Acrylic on paper
13.75" x 17.75"

THEY AREN'T
UPSET WITH
WHERE THEY
ARE. THEY
AREN'T TRYING
TO CHANGE
ANYTHING.
THEY'RE JUST
BEING WHO
THEY ARE.

It wasn't really meant to last. It was just meant to be experienced, but I didn't want it to just go away. I wanted to hang onto it a little, and make something else out of it. I didn't want to just let it go to waste.

You seem like the type of person who wastes very little.

I try not to waste anything. I like to reuse and fix things rather than buy new things and throw them away.

You also reuse scrapings from your paint tray as a layering element in your paintings.

The scrapings come from making other paintings, so it's kind of like everything should be together in the end. It feels better that way. It ties things together. The scrapings build up; sometimes a painting is between one- and half-inch thick. It gives a little bit of an ecosystem to the act of painting.

That's thick for works on paper.

In the art world there aren't a lot of paintings on paper. It's always drawings on paper, and paintings on canvas. I'm going to start changing it up. I want to paint with oils. I get pretty good color with acrylic, but I feel that if I tried the

same thing with oil, it would be really rich. But I also like the way acrylic goes into paper; there are benefits to using both.

What other materials go into your collage work?

The collage is a really thin Japanese gampi paper used in printmaking. I'll overlay it on top of an under-painting to get a bit more space and depth. Most of the time, I've painted for a day or two, and then I'll put a whole sheet of this thin paper over it, let it dry, and paint on top of that.

Are there any misconceptions about your art that bother you?

Not really. Sometimes they aren't totally misunderstood, they're just slightly misunderstood. And that doesn't bother me very much. If someone can get part of what things are about, then make up their own journey, that's fine with me. This is sort of unrelated, but I'm not one who has favorites of anything. Evah will ask me to choose something based on what I like more, and I can't. I think there are good and bad elements about everything.

If you don't have favorites, then you might not be able to answer one of my last questions. If you were to be executed, what would be your last meal?

It wouldn't really matter as long as it tasted good.

What would you do if you could be microscopic for a day?

Walk everywhere. I could walk anywhere, and it wouldn't really matter how far I'd go because even if I only walked an inch, everything would be amazingly interesting. I would just take my time.

What would you create if you had endless support and funding?

That's really hard to decide. Sometimes I think I'd make more blobs. I like to create things that can bring people into a place, so they can walk around and pretend to be there. When I do shows in a gallery, I like for it to be my space. I like to take people out of the gallery and into my work. It would depend on the space, but I think I would just make what I have bigger and more interactive.

For more information about Brendan Monroe, contact Brendanmonroe.com.

