

Art in America May, 2011

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BORN ON THE ISLAND OF BARBADOS, Ashley Bickerton was raised in Hawaii, where he learned to surf. He made a name for himself in Manhattan in the 1980s as one of the Neo-Geo group, the so-called Fab Four, with Peter Halley, Meyer Vaisman and Jeff Koons. The cool precisionist efforts by these artists stood out from the messy Neo-Expressionist work that had dominated the East Village scene, from which the four emerged. In the midst of the art-market collapse in the late 1980s, the unchecked onslaught of AIDS that decimated the downtown cultural landscape, and in the wake of Operation Desert Storm in 1991, Bickerton prepared to leave the city—and the country—for good. By 1993, he was gone: first to Brazil and finally to the island of Bali, where he settled with his Indonesian wife and their two children.

As a Western emigre artist working in an exotic locale, Bickerton, now 52, is too often compared to Paul Gauguin. They are paired by some critics in terms of their self-imposed exiles from the West. While in the tropics, both produced colorful figurative works, often with erotic overtones, but the resemblance pretty much stops there. Bickerton is largely uninterested in the theme of the noble savage that preoccupied the Post-Impressionist painter, as well as in highlighting the romantic stereotypes of the island. Instead, he uses his isolation to help deliver a sharp critique of Western culture. In his works, which are hybrids of painting, photography and sculpture, there are few obvious "good guys; and protagonists are at best rather ambiguous characters. He invented a "blue man," sometimes a self-portrait, often a grotesque, lecherous oaf. Hardly an incarnation of Vishnu, he is even more vulgar than the Ugly American, and encompasses a truly international delinquency.

Bickerton does not directly explore or exploit the rich ancient traditions of his adopted home; even so, the elaborate frames he designs and constructs for his works—sometimes made of what looks like worm-eaten driftwood—seem handcrafted in the long tradition of Balinese woodworking. And certain of Bickerton's recent works do in fact convey the heady atmosphere of the tropics and even the exotic allure of Bali, despite the initial harshness or abrasiveness of the imagery. The large *Yellow Canoe* (2006), for instance, conjures a tropical romance of an uncanny sort. It shows a couple and a child in a boat—the blue man sits under an umbrella and a green rifle-toting woman wears a floral crown—floating over crystal clear waters.

In his studio, Bickerton creates elaborate sets and photographs actors and model-friends wearing garish makeup and costumes, often covering them in body paint. Selected photos are subsequently transformed into inkjet paintings on canvas, which he further embellishes with pigment and sets into thick, elaborate wooden frames lavishly decorated with found objects, including incised and painted mandalas, found carved-wood figures and mother-of-pearl inlay.

Red Scooter (2009) encompasses a self-portrait, with the artist on a motorbike, wearing a red-and-white striped shirt and sporting a blue face. Confidently grinning,

he speeds down the road with an attractive rainbow-hued woman and child in tow. Despite the outlandish elements, some of the recent compositions convey a sense of order and beauty. In *Smiling Woman* and *Kid* (both 2009), the vividly painted single heads flirtatiously stare out at the viewer, while *Bed* (2009) shows an adult female couple, one of them embracing a small child, covered head to toe in wildly colorful body paint with dollars and gold bars scattered across the bed. They are all no doubt deep in a dream-filled, sensuous slumber. Decorated with an assemblage of coconut shells, mother-of-pearl and coins, each of the thick, shaped frames adds to the sumptuous whole.

Certain pieces have a sci-fi feel, including a series of works on paper and prints produced while Bickerton was an artist-in-residence at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute in 2006. He created a group of compositions featuring monstrous heads emerging from water (based on images from an elaborate photo shoot in which he was director and performer). In each piece, one or more heads emerge from a pool strewn with all sorts of consumer-culture refuse, such as beer cans and chips bags, which assistants had meticulously cut from silkscreened images and attached to the surface with pins. Large oil-on-resin sculptures from 2009, including 5 *Snakeheads* and *Flower Pot*, featuring snakelike creatures with screaming human heads, continue the nightmarish monster motif Bickerton has pursued for some time.

FROM HIS GEOGRAPHIC ISOLATION, Bickerton maintains a constant dialogue with the New York art world and addresses its concerns by means of the Internet and telephone as well as through his work. In his most recent efforts, he examines the West's misguided attitudes toward the "mysterious East." In increasingly outrageous compositions, he depicts Western transients trolling the hot spots and sex shops of Southeast Asia.

Photographing the neon-filled, jammed streets in the seedy areas of Bangkok, and the bars and strip joints in a raucous seaside resort, Pattaya, Bickerton homes in on places where local barflies, tourists and hustlers commingle. He transposes the photographic images into ever more theatrical tableaux. The "blue man" makes an encore appearance, this time more hideous than before. Large works from 2011, such as *Neon Bar* and *TITNW6*, show an obese ogre who recalls Paul Cadmus's ravenous protagonist in *Gluttony* from his 1945-49 series of paintings "Seven Deadly Sins."

In Bickerton's image, the monstrous shirtless figure wearing only shorts, with sagging Viagra-blue flesh, is being embraced by a nearly naked, svelte young woman with a green face standing to one side. The artist's wacky sense of humor comes through in the work's thick black frame, which is adorned with surfboard-style decals featuring cursive and block-type inscriptions of Bickerton's name, like the schematic lettering, watches, digital counters and industrial logos attached to the 1980s works that established his career.

It is not all shrill decadence in the new work, however. Some pieces are subtly haunting and dreamlike. In one group, the bulky frames—more like sculptural reliefs than ever-bear elaborate coral-like excrescences. They surround images of delicately colored faces that are barely visible on surfaces perforated with large holes. The works are like ghostly echoes of the sea. These pieces and others lack any kind of blatant vulgarity; instead, they prove Bickerton more than capable of conveying a

quiet, gentle reverie.

DAVID EBONY Do you keep an apartment here in New York?

ASHLEY BICKERTON No. I did. But fate intervened. I had a studio that somehow got wrangled out of my hands. It's water under the bridge now. It's been over 17 years since I left the U.S.-in 1993-for Bali. The Bali that I moved to is a very different place from Bali today.

DE I visited Bali around that time: it was really fantastic then

AB It is still a bit unspoiled, but I meant that the infrastructure stuff is different now. It's easier to get to. There's now a direct, 18-hour flight from Singapore to New York; basically it's just two Xanax pills and a good novel away. The trip used to be a multiday ordeal.

DE Are you connected to the art scene in Bali, like the artist colonies in Ubud?

AB I stay the hell away from Ubud. There are too many artists there. I set up my studio so that when you close the doors it could be a studio anywhere in the world. It could be in Williamsburg or Silverlake. I avoid that washed-up-on-the-shores and paint folklorica kind of fantasy. I can't stand the idea of making art as wispy exotic and escapist kinds of things. It actually took years and years before I faced the elephant in the room – that I was, in fact, living and working in an exotic place. But by that time, the international art scene had changed. Now the energy in the art world has shifted; you can find it in Hong Kong as well as in New York. Bali is, after all, a resort; it's international and incredibly heterogeneous. Also, artists are like antennae, we can pick up information and ideas from all over the place. And, of course, the Internet has changed everything.

OE Do you consider yourself a part of any kind of community there?

AB For an extremely reclusive person, I do have a few close friends, yes.

DE Do the local artisans help you with your works? I am thinking especially of the elaborate wood carved frames, as in *Yellow Canoe*.

AB People bring that up all the time, and ask if the frames are addressing colonialism. It's very simple. When we lived here in New York, we used to go to Canal Street for materials. In Bali, we have Sunset Road, with all of its used and unused things, antiques shops and whatnot; it's the same thing. I realized I had to buy existing objects like wood carvings to add to my work.

DE It looks, though, like you are very particular about the image, that the images carved in the frames have a specific meaning.

AB Essentially, it's bombast. The frames are bombast for the sake of bombast. It's not so important what the images are. Basically, it's about sexuality and color. I just put this stuff on like I used to put counters on my early work. If they represent exotica to some, I'll run with that. It's not important what they represent. You can think of them as kind of inverse Allan McCollum "surrogates." I bought existing

mass-produced carvings and incorporated them into the piece, The frames address value, pomp or packaging.

DE I guess critics try to read your works in a specific way. It's tempting to try to find an allegorical meaning in your images. I can understand that paintings like *Red Scooter* are about hedonistic excess in an exotic setting, but for me that's as far as it goes. Your images ultimately resist allegory.

AB Some people say this work is finger-wagging at society, like Hogarth or something. Someone wrote that I was being more moral than Koons. It's not that Jeff is amoral. I'm really not moral. People see my stuff and think that it's railing against excess, but that's not it. I invented this blue character.

DE That's you, isn't it?

AB Well, not really. There are bits of me there, but it is a composite. I invented it in my youth, it followed me into the weight of middle age, and now it's more elaborate. The clothes are made up and now I mix blue makeup with mud and glitter, and it's all getting kind of crazy.

DE Do you have a group of collectors, curators, dealers and critics who have followed you throughout your career?

AB Well, I ain't exactly a curatorial darling. There are artists who fashion their careers for curators. There are some who have followed my career the whole way so far. Not a whole lot of them, but there are a few.

DE Despite the diversity in the work, there does seem to be a sort of curatorial continuity or at least a thematic unity to what you do. I was imagining how it could be described.

AB I am creating a kind of specimen.

DE What do you wish critics had observed about your work, or what have they consistently missed over the years?

AB I am surprised that there are some who do get it. But I'd say if there's something they have missed it is the scale of the ambition. My work does go for the big stuff on every level. There's no drifting in the work,

DE What is your response to critics who say some of your works are sexist?

AB The criticism comes from those who mistake me for a moralist and the work as moralistic, My last body of work was all about the end of the world. It was all about a kind of dazzling apocalypse.

DE Tell me about the new works you're showing this spring in New York.

AB My last show was successful, so I should have kept doing the same thing. But the problem is I get bored. The new work is darker, even black at times. I must have shot every neon sign in Thailand. The work is about the tawdry places people go to

end their dreams, There is something so tragic about it, yet it is all about dreams