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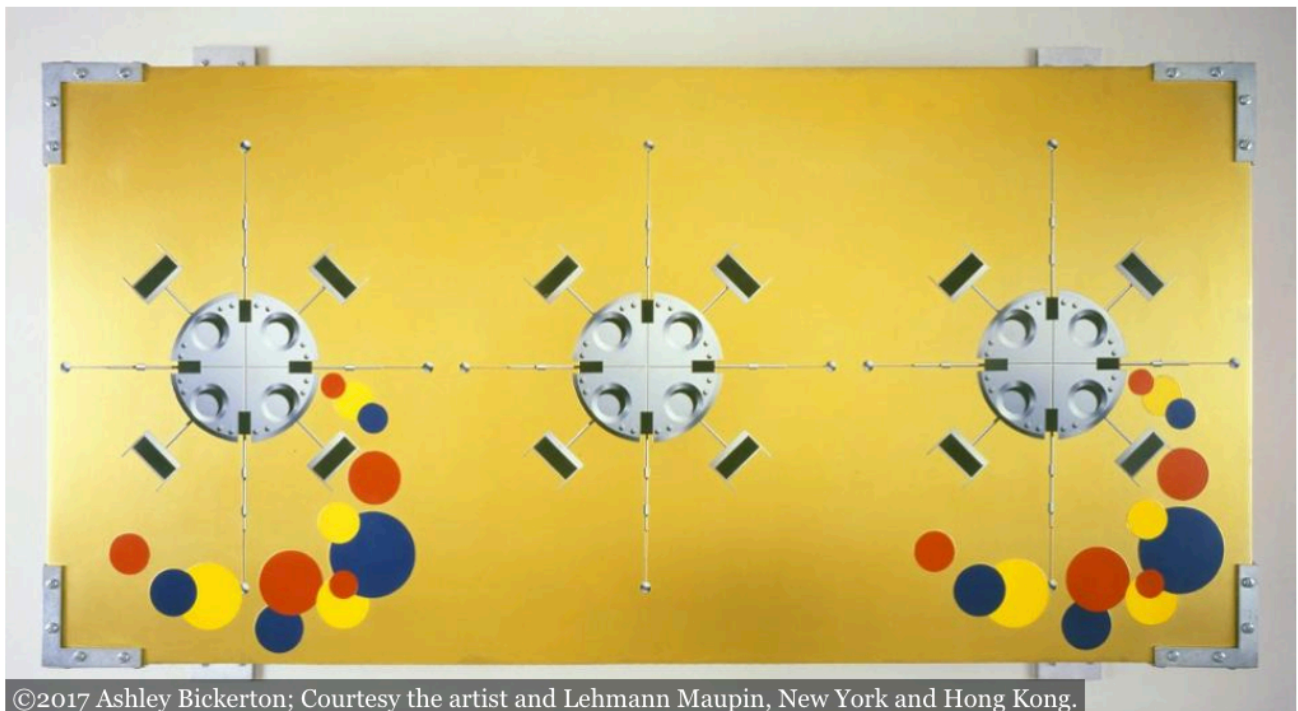
Lightning Strike: Ashley Bickerton At The FLAG Art Foundation, New York



Clayton Press, CONTRIBUTOR

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Ashley Bickerton. GOG, 1985.

According to Derek Bickerton, Ashley's father, the artist "was conceived in the mid-Atlantic, in the cabin of a passenger boat, during a thunderstorm. Maybe a lightning strike had something to do with it" [with Bickerton becoming an artist.] Or perhaps Bickerton was touched at birth by a *duppy*, a ghost or spirit in local Bajan dialect. He was born in 1959 in Mrs. Stout's Nursing Home in pre-independence Barbados. The Fates favored him with an exotic path from Barbados to Spain, from Ghana to Guyana, from Hawaii to California, from New York to Bali. Along the way, Bickerton became conversant in five variants of English. In true anthropological terms, Bickerton's art—like his life—is syncretic, yet authentic. It is a mix of high and low culture references in a truly exhilarating way.



©2017 Ashley Bickerton; Lindemann Collection, Miami Beach.
Ashley Bickerton. Famili, 2007.

Jonathan Rider, The FLAG Art Foundation's associate director, has written an engaging and unusually intelligible press release—effectively a career synopsis—that traces Bickerton's evolution as an artist. Rider's style is *ekphrastic*, a Greek term meaning a vivid, often dramatic, verbal description of art, either real or imagined. It prepares you for the seeming visual cacophony of the exhibition, which begins in the mid-1980s with signs, symbols and logos of commodities and corporations mixed and accessorized with readymades on minimalist supports. Currently, Bickerton focuses on raucous figuration paired with or framed in tourist-trade wood carvings. Language and symbols are pervasive.

A key to understanding Bickerton is to know about his father, Derek Bickerton, an innovative, if not rather radical, linguist-anthropologist who described his field work "as total lack of respect for the respectable." In the interest of studying creole

language formation, the elder Bickerton once proposed an experiment that involved marooning six couples who spoke six different languages, along with children too young to have acquired their parents' languages. The National Science Foundation deemed this proposal unethical, and refused to fund it. Go figure.

The crisp, elegant production values of early works and series—*Susie* and *Non-Word Word* pieces—have specific grammar and syntax. They intentionally reflect Bickerton's shared interest in language, in utterances and in animal communications and theories, all subjects of his father's studies. Language appears literally and symbolically. *Tormented Self-Portrait (Susie at Arles)* (1988) was Bickerton's specific response to a van Gogh self-portrait he had seen at The Met. He used the logos of products and services to create a personalized puzzle of himself. A recent *Wall-Wall* painting resembles a Jasper Johns' flagstone work, but it differs in its loud psychedelic palette and its protrusions from the canvas. Like Bickerton, it is attempting to assemble syllables, utterances into something linguistically intelligible.



©2017 Ashley Bickerton; Collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong.
Ashley Bickerton. *Tormented Self-Portrait (Susie at Arles)*, 1987-1988.

What may make this exhibition confounding to many is the apparent lack of brand consistency the art market embraces. The early *Susie* sculptures may seem to be at odds with recent work. To the contrary, not only is Bickerton exploring language, he is also mining multiple cultures, looking at “talismanic” values. *The Ideal Collection* (1988), which suggests a readymade modern art collection, is Bickerton’s attempt “to remove the middleman and give the prospective collector an already selected list of works,” including Manzoni, Ryman, and Warhol. It is a prophetic list of eight works by eight artists who have not only entered the contemporary art canon, but whose works have come to epitomize commercial success.



©2017 Ashley Bickerton; Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong.
Ashley Bickerton. *Wall-Wall SnS-S*, 2017.

It is impossible to describe every object or type of object in this retrospective. There is incredible detail—dazzling, almost hallucinatory. Go slow. Take your time. After seeing the exhibition, sit at the conference table in the Foundation's upper level and peruse *Ashley Bickerton*, a 2011 catalog-cum-art-object that is filled with reminiscences and explanations from Bickerton. It begins with quasi-paternal reflections by Bickerton's father titled "Fathering an Artist," that describes the younger Bickerton's life of re-invention. Equally important, many of the works in the exhibition are described in exquisite detail by Bickerton himself. *Joan and the Cosmos* (1996) is barely a portrait of a woman urinating. It is a cosmological contortion. A brainy, almost sensual, essay by Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Bickerton's 'Bickertons' in the Realm of the Fetish," is launched by a 1967 quote of John McHale's: "The future of art seems no longer to lie in the creation of enduring masterworks but with defining cultural strategies, through a series of multi-media forms."

Bickerton asserts, "I don't believe in truth, I believe in drama." Drama abounds at The FLAG Art Foundation, but so does truth.

The FLAG Art Foundation

545 West 25th Street, 9th Floor

New York, NY 10001

(212) 206-0220

Wednesday through Saturday, 11am-5pm

<http://flagartfoundation.org>

Clayton Press