

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



MAILINGLIST

ArtSeen

November 5th, 2015

WEBEXCLUSIVE

JOHN LEES

by Ed Breslin

BETTY CUNINGHAM GALLERY | OCTOBER 23 – NOVEMBER 28, 2015

John Lees's hallmark obsession with his interior life is legendary. The twenty-seven works on view at Betty Cuningham Gallery are concrete examples of his introspective style; they are ponderous, blisteringly intense, and hyperspecific. While his obsessiveness may fuel a rich interior life, it has clearly come at a cost. He seems to have little time or energy left over to pursue that elusive possession of the comfortably successful artist: recognition.

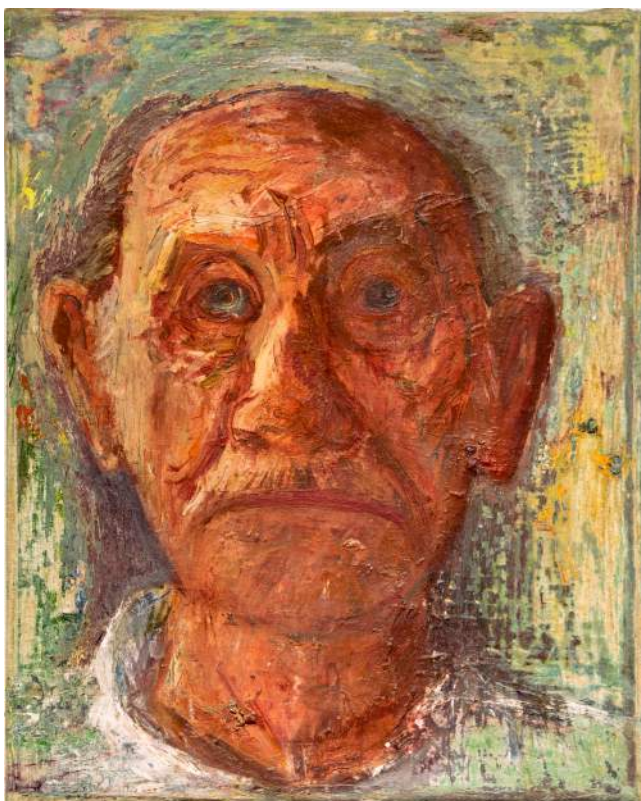
The works on the first floor of the gallery serve as a primer to his two main obsessions. Lining the wall to the left are multiple paintings of "42nd Street"—a reference to the 1930s American musical film—while on the right are profile drawings of his father, drafted with a Renaissance style, along with a few smaller drawings and a single painting titled *Clown in a Frame* (2015). His signature painting of jazz legend Lester Young, *Polka Dots and Moonbeams* (1978; 2001; 2015), hangs at the front.

His works grow even more obsessive as you descend the staircase to the lower gallery. With the exception of a mountainscape, all eleven works either depict Lees's father or the more recent motif of "42nd Street." On the left wall, a drawing in ink and graphite, *Emil Jannings in The Way of all Flesh (Paramount 1927)* (2008) reflects both Lees's delicate touch and his deep knowledge as a cineaste. Next to it is the winking masterpiece titled *In the Park* (2008 – 2015), in oil on canvas, depicting Lester Young strolling the greensward, infused with a playful, Hitchcock-like self-portrait of the painter. Completing this trio is another drawing in graphite and ink titled *In the Park/Early Morning* (2015).

Next, mounted alone on the back wall, is the pièce de résistance, the large oil on canvas painting titled *Man Sitting in an Armchair*, painted between 2008 and 2015, as the seeming culmination of all the smaller drawings and paintings of his father. The painting is layered, just as time and memory are layered.

By exposing the thickness of memory and its multi-dimensional quality, Lees also exposes the dynamism of his process. His multiple applications of a palette knife and multiple scrapings show not simply the length and breadth of memory, but also its depth, which underscores its persistence. For Lees, time is as important an element of painting as it is for a novelist or memoirist. This painting seems to speak to the viewer clearly and deeply, though in a baritone whisper.

On the wall



John Lees, *Portrait*, 1972; 2005. Oil on canvas, 20 × 16 inches. Courtesy Betty Cuningham Gallery.



John Lees, *In the Park*, 2008-2015. Oil on canvas, 21 × 14 3/4 inches. Courtesy Betty Cuningham Gallery.

opposite is a similar culmination of the many “42nd Street” renditions. At first glance, *42nd Street (Main Title and Dialogue)* (2015) has the primitive energy of folk art, but a closer look shows that it also captures some of the zest of Pop art as well as the sophistication of postmodern appropriation.

Back in the gallery’s office, the particular work *Portrait* (1972;2005) depicts a recognizable figure: the man in the armchair. Look closely. Hold his stare. Though his face is scored with life’s setbacks and scarred with life’s pains, he is steadfast, dignified, and valiant.

CONTRIBUTOR

Ed Breslin

RECOMMENDED ARTICLES

Seeing Stars: 2015 Toronto International Film Festival

by *Steve Macfarlane*

OCT 2015 | FILM

Close your eyes and imagine a megaplex—say, the AMC Regal E-Walk 42nd Street—converted into a massive, orgiastic, and yet somehow profitable bonanza of world cinema for ten consecutive days. Apparently, this is what happens every September at the Scotiabank Theatre (alongside ten other, also ridiculously huge venues), all nestled between skyscraper-condo construction sites in the main drag of downtown Toronto for said city's International Film Festival.

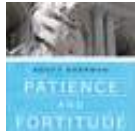


INCONVERSATION

GLENN GOLDBERG with Phong Bui

APR 2015 | ART

I've been following the evolution of Glenn Goldberg as a painter since I was exposed to his work in 1986. It was on the occasion of his recent exhibit *All Day* at Betty Cuninghame Gallery (February 28–April 4, 2015), in cooperation with Jason McCoy Gallery, that I was finally able to view his latest output, and to sit down with him afterwards on-site to catch up and discuss his work, and more.



The Good Fight

by *Hilary Reid*

JUL-AUG 2015 | BOOKS

There are few façades in New York City as iconic as the main branch of the New York Public Library (NYPL) on Fifth Avenue at 42nd Street. 104 years old this year, what is now known as the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building operates in much the same way as it has since 1911—admission is free and any cardholder can access the research collection housed in the stacks under the Rose Reading Room.

BEAUTIFUL VIOLATION

Art and the Predicament of Emotional Exposure

by *Alana Shilling*

OCT 2013 | CRITICS PAGE

It is a Saturday afternoon in April, 2009. Visitors flow through the Metropolitan's Bonnard exhibition like a restrained fluvial event. It's not really in fashion to approve of Bonnard too strongly these days. But suddenly, amidst those straggling final frames of the show, was that self-portrait.

SUBSCRIBE

to the *Brooklyn Rail*
start your subscription today!