An Interview with James Brinsfield

David Cateforis

From November 19, 2011 to January 15, 2012, the Albrecht-Kemper Museum of Art in Saint Joseph, Missouri, presented the exhibition *James Brinsfield: Paintings 2007-2011*.

James Brinsfield, the son of an army officer, grew up in Germany, Massachusetts and Washington state. He received his B.F.A. from the University of Illinois at Chicago and his M.F.A. in painting from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He has had numerous solo exhibitions, including shows at the Nancy Lurie Gallery and Asperger-Bischoff Gallery in Chicago, Feature Gallery and Anton Gallery in Washington, D.C., Acuna-Hansen Gallery in Los Angeles, and at several galleries in Kansas City, where he is currently represented by Dolphin Gallery. Since 1998 he has served as a lecturer at the Kansas City Art Institute.

James Brinsfield was the first painter to receive a Charlotte Street Fund Award, an annual grant recognizing Kansas City artists begun in 1997. His one-person exhibitions have been reviewed in *Art in America, New Art Examiner*, *Art Papers*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Washington Post* and the *Kansas City Star*. His paintings are in many private and public collections, including the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art.

David Cateforis is professor of art history at the University of Kansas, where he has taught since 1992. He earned his B.A. in art history from Swarthmore College and his M.A. and Ph.D. in art history from Stanford University. He has lectured and published extensively on modern American and international contemporary art.

The following is an edited transcript of an interview that took place at the Albrecht-Kemper on November 26, 2011, with some subsequent elaboration by the artist. The installation photographs are by E. G. Schempf.

David Cateforis (left) and James Brinsfield at the Albrecht-Kemper Museum of Art, November 26, 2011

David Cateforis: Why do you paint?

James Brinsfield: It's because I knew – as much as you can know when you're a young person – that this is what I could do better than other people and there was simply a natural inclination to do that. At night after school my sister and I would sit at the dining room table drawing and then we started entering art contests together. It was simply a progression. But then my dad, who was in the Army – and it's funny, he was a cultured man, he loved opera, the theatre – but insofar as his son or his daughter, but especially his son becoming an artist, he was totally against it. And so not only did I know what I wanted to do after a while, I had to fight for it, and if anything it made me stronger. And you know, in teaching, I'm always delighted to hear of these young people being encouraged by their parents. But the other thing is that by the time I got to high school, I had a great art teacher, a woman named Mary Di Napoli, and the principal at the school was Carmen Rinaldi. Both of them helped me get scholarships to go to school. Actually, I got two, one to the art school at the Worcester Museum, and one in Boston. And then when I was in my senior year, I got a scholarship to go into Boston and take classes on Saturday. So it was me knowing that I wanted it, but also in the background, a reinforcement by some of my teachers contrasted by the other side of my mother and father not being happy about the turn of events at all. Especially when I was in high school, they didn't like it at all.

DC: What did they want you to do?

JB: I was supposed to join the army and become a general. (Laughs)

DC: You've also told a story about your first transformative encounter with an artwork – I think it was with the Calder mobile.

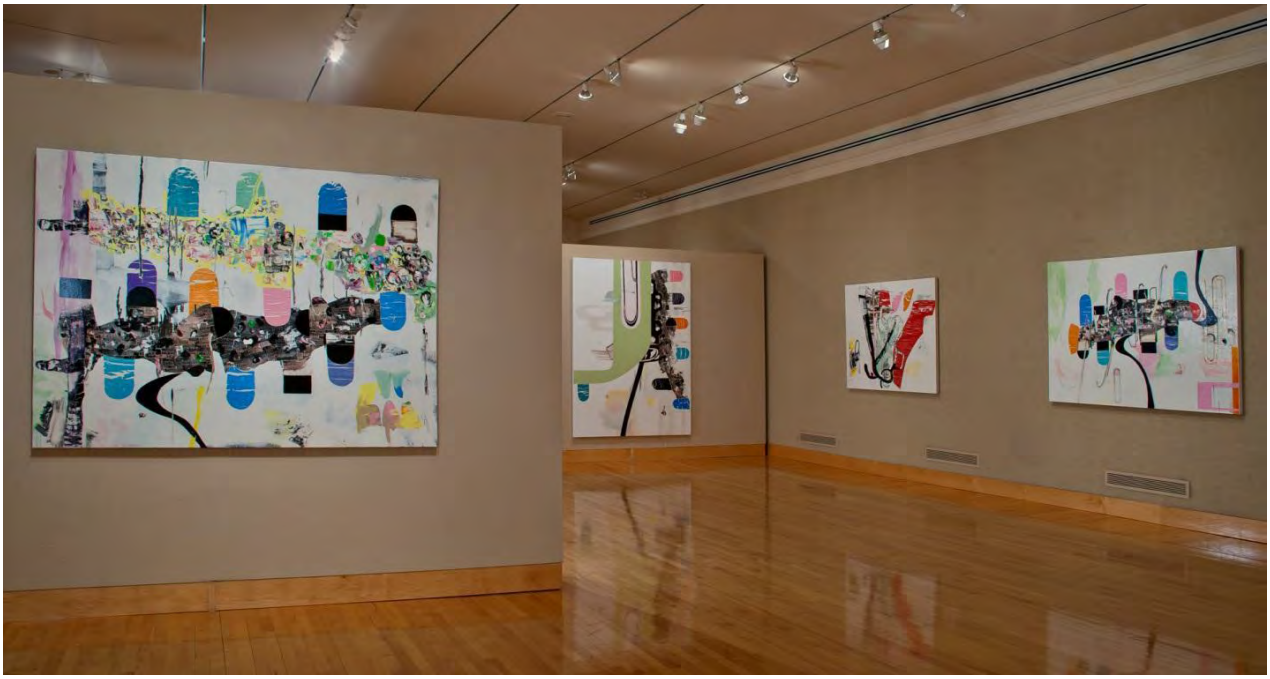
JB: That's true, it was in Frankfurt, Germany. I would've been a sophomore or junior at Frankfurt American High School and I had never seen a work of contemporary art or modern art, I'd say modern in the case of Calder. And we took this class trip in my art class – I had a German-American teacher in that art class and we went to the first museum where I saw contemporary art – this would be 1962 perhaps – and I saw an Alexander Calder mobile hanging in the middle of the gigantic white box gallery and I couldn't move. I couldn't get over how anything could be so magical and perfect and wonderful and they had to come get me – I honestly couldn't move. And it's happened again. With Jackson Pollock's *Lavender Mist* at the National Gallery of Art, I was actually escorted out of the building because I kept getting too close to the painting.

DC: It's interesting, both of these works of art that you've singled out are abstract, so along with the question of why do you paint, why do you paint abstractions? And have you always painted abstractions?

JB: No, I have painted figuratively. Especially in Chicago, that was just simply what you did at the time at School of the Art Institute. This would have been in the '70s; I took a little time off after I graduated from high school. I went to the Boston Museum School of Fine Arts [now known as the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston] on a free ride after high school in '65 and I simply stopped going to class. I was in the wrong school at the wrong time, did not like the regimentation, and I felt very out of place there. My particular way of doing things – simply the way I would move a pencil or the brush – no one else was quite doing it that way and I felt like such an outsider. It was very hard for me to be in what I regarded as a competitive situation feeling like something was really, really wrong with me and I was confounded by the whole thing and I stopped going to class and eventually I lost my scholarship.

DC: So you were painting figuratively for a time in Chicago. Was that because of the influence of Chicago imagism?

JB: Absolutely. There were my teachers, my fellow students. I was in the first class that went into the new building, but the year before we were still in the old building, in the basement of the museum itself, and to get to the school, you could cut through the museum, or you could go around Adams but I cut through the museum because you'd see art. And they had a Jackson Pollock, *Greyed Rainbow*, and they also had right next to it de Kooning's *Excavation*. And I thought, 'This is what I want to do: I don't want to paint the figure, I want to move paint around, I want to be about paint.' And with figuration it seemed like it was serving the image, that paint was almost secondary. And I guess that was my big revelation, that abstraction has paint as its content – that the possibility exists to use materials as the meaning of the work.

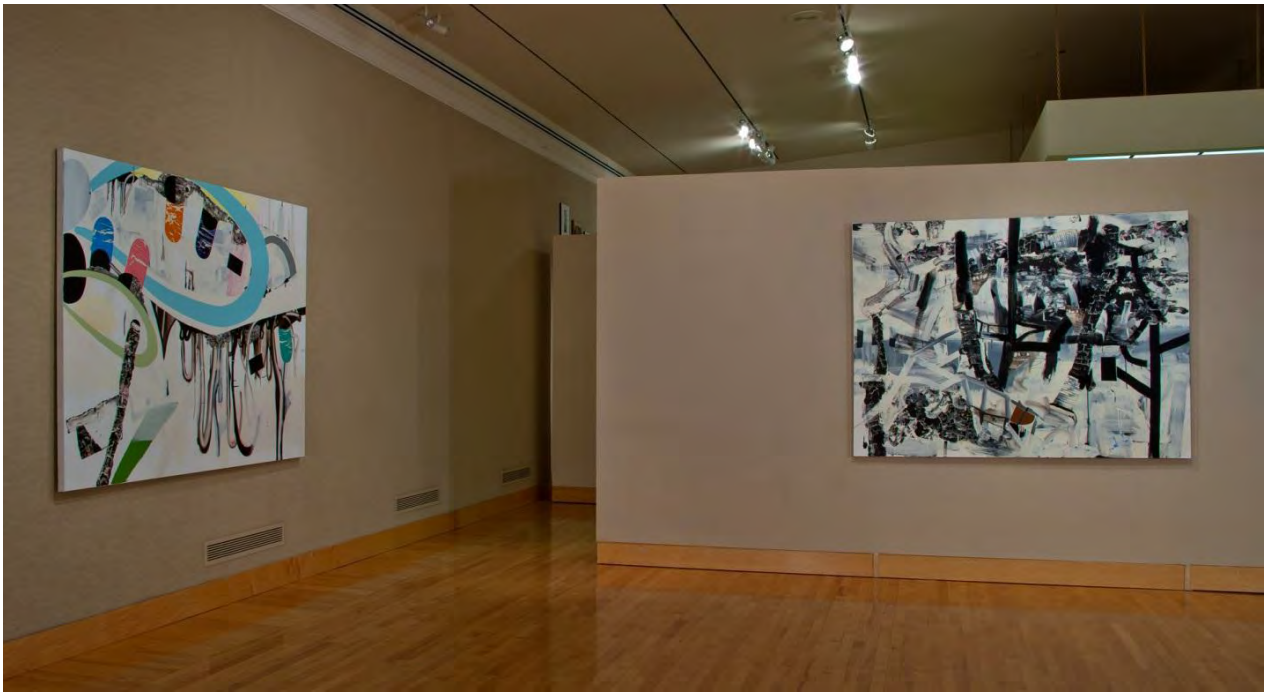


DC: So you made this commitment to abstraction in the 1970s and you've been painting for several decades since then. How do you understand your painting in relation to the history of abstraction, and to the history of modernism, which are intertwined?

JB: I think that abstraction is about itself, but we're always involved in the history, we're involved in, perhaps not reinterpreting history, but in relearning from history and then going on about our merry way. I mean, you could think in our time, "how could one possibly extend abstraction?" and yet there are so many pathways that are open that lead to something that is, if not new, then is a rumination on the idea of being new. It's a circular sort of thing. I describe it as, when I go into the studio, suddenly it's filled with ghosts, there's Mondrian, there's Pollock – you become aware of it and then you have to learn how to get away from it. It's simply inside – it's something you absorb and then you simply rethink it. And some of it is dropping the romanticism of that era. I don't necessarily want it to be a kind of postmodernist critique and yet it can end up being that by default. My work shares affinities with it, and yet it's quite different. For example, content – it can be simply about materiality, as it is partly for me, but it can also extend a metaphor in a way that I think the abstract expressionists didn't really push. I don't think that they were after that in a sense. In other words, like de Kooning delineating a landscape, say, in one area or the figure in another area. I think I have a different idea of what I want the abstractions to accomplish.

DC: So you're saying that de Kooning's work had a more direct relationship to a motif in the world? And your work is more metaphorical?

JB: I think so, yes. There might be a motif, but I can change it around and it may not refer to landscape or necessarily hook up to an image that exists in reality. With de Kooning, I always get the feeling that I knew what he was looking at at that moment.



DC: You mentioned postmodernism. On the one hand it seems like you see yourself as part of the modernist tradition, and yet you are also aware of your relationship to postmodernism, so it's complicated. You don't want to call yourself a postmodern painter, full stop.

JB: Not necessarily "full stop," and yet I can't join that earlier generation of abstract expressionists. That's not me, you have to be of your time and of your generation. I think of it in a way as trying to acknowledge both worlds and coming up with something that begins to belong to me. On the other hand, I think it's hard to do anything that's significantly original, I really do. Maybe that's the postmodernist in me. As I was walking through the exhibit there are some paintings that feel right to me and I'm semi-happy with them and others that I'm still okay with, but I'm thinking 'What if I could've done this with that?' Part of what the retrospective is about for me is to walk through it and say, 'Okay, this is what I was doing in 2007, why did I go on and do this in 2008, what did I leave behind, what did I choose to incorporate next?' It's an interesting thing. But to get back to the model of abstraction and the abstract expressionists, Amy Sillman had an interesting article in the *Artforum* (summer 2011) issue about abstract expressionism, and she seemed to have difficulty grappling with its influence – and she's such a good thinker and painter whose work has some very close affinities to abstract expressionism – and she chose to make a little bit of fun with it, in a very hipster, maybe too hip, tongue-in-cheek essay about abstract expressionism and her relationship to it. She talks about it as an antecedent for her to absorb and yet to include aspects of being a gay woman who uses this super macho historical model of painting. If your work looks gestural or is immediate there's always going to be that linkage to history, as this touchstone that you have to go back and reexamine again and again, say like Clyfford Still – the new museum in Denver and it's like, 'Oh now we get to look at Clyfford Still, what an incredible present that is' and yet is it really astounding work or is it very, very good work? I think abstraction is part of the cultural heritage of America and about who we are.

DC: And maybe specifically abstract expressionism?

JB: Absolutely. And I think that all painting is still judged by abstract expressionism as a model for painting – a touchstone. I think there's too much at stake financially, there's too many institutions that have built up collections that have privileged this work, until it has become a primary source of what painting is supposed to look like. It serves as a definition of what painting is. It's heritage and hegemony determined by abstract expressionists and deified by many of the museums across the country but specifically raised to high status by the museums in New York.

DC: So with postmodern abstraction as practiced by someone like Peter Halley, it's theory driven rather than driven by materials and process.

JB: The thing I like about Halley is that he went beyond theory. As someone who teaches I can testify that you can get high on theory as a crutch for justifying and explaining painting's intellectual motives. Theory can be an end in and of itself. It can be the drug of choice and that work – work that is theoretically based, frankly in other people's hands can simply become an academic exercise that turns out to be a bore. It may illustrate theory very well but as a painting it's not very good. In the two classes I teach, I realized that it can hold a kind of allure – that veneer of prim academicism that overlooks the basic sensuality of paint and painting.

DC: For students?

JB: For teachers. I mean, we're the ones up there talking about Baudrillard and Deleuze. And in a way you can start believing theory as solutions or answers to the questions that art and painting ask. There can be a pitfall that can get in the way of your growth as a painter. Just as one can sort of sneer at talented unschooled painters there's an equal and opposite effect of the academic who uses theory to cover up a lack of creativity.

DC: Well I know you read a lot of theory, philosophy, and criticism, but I don't think that that's what emanates from your paintings.

JB: No. Thank you, I'm about knowledge but not purity or allegiance.

DC: You talked about this exhibition as a retrospective and yet it only includes work from the last four years. Why did you decide to concentrate just on this period?

JB: Because there was a time from 2004 to 2005 when I stopped making paintings. I started making what I thought were simulacra – simulacra of painting. And what I did was substitute materials – tape, plastic, paper for paint.

DC: No brushes allowed.

JB: No brushes allowed, yeah. And it was a nice lesson for me – that I could do it and the work finally began to become interesting. At first it came out very draftsmanlike, cutting everything out with razor blades and saws and gluing it together. And one day I thought, 'This just isn't me.' I'm hunkered over a razor blade cutting a strip of paper and it just felt wrong. I started tearing the paper and that got another result – more immediacy. And I started gluing objects together without a nice clean cut and that felt better – like I was going toward something. And I realized that I could go on like that and probably make some pretty good work, but did I want to? And just about the time I thought, 'Oh, I'm getting somewhere with this' I realized: I don't want to do it, I don't want to be a success at this – I don't want to be stuck with it. So I began painting again. And it took me 2005 to 2007 to get my painting chops back

– get the paint doing what I wanted it to do. I had to get it so that if I wanted it to be awkward, it would be awkward; if I wanted it to be elegant, it could be that. I wanted to get that down. And I wanted to rethink what content was in the paintings for me. So by 2007 I'm finally starting to make some work that I think 'Oh, this is right.' So that's why the 2007 starting date.

DC: So these are paintings that were featured in your last show at Jan Weiner (fall 2007) and your first show at Dolphin (spring 2010) and some subsequent work.

JB: Correct.

James Brinsfield, *Himmel, Wir Erben Eine Schloss*, 2007, oil and enamel on canvas, 37 x 48"
Collection of Ann and Harold Scott

DC: It seems that this might be a good time to look at a 2007 painting. This one has a German title, *Himmel, Wir Erben Eine Schloss*.

JB: *Heavens, We've Inherited a Castle*.

DC: And we should explain that you grew up in Germany, because you were an "army brat," as you've put it.

JB: Right. Twelve years living in various German cities. We never lived on the American compounds. My father always rented apartments within the city he was stationed in.

DC: I do want to ask you about the titles. Do they come after you've made the painting, or are they in your mind while you're working on it?

JB: Usually they come almost right away.

DC: During the process of making the picture?

JB: Yes. Because when I leave the painting in the studio and I'm walking around I want to be able to think of a name that I'm associating with the painting instead of 'Oh, the painting that I'm working on right now.' So it helps to identify the painting, for me, to have a name.

DC: And does that relate then to the idea of the painting having content?

JB: A bit. This one's kind of a goofy title. I love film, and particularly German film, and during the last part of World War II the German film industry made these hare-brained comedies – slapstick comedies – just to keep the civilian population happy, so that they had an escape from the reality of war. So many of these films have been completely lost – they're just absolutely gone. But I found a couple of stills to this particular film, and I thought, 'What a great title, *Heavens, We've Inherited a Castle*.' You could think of Cary Grant and Katharine Hepburn being in a film like this. As for the painting, I had begun with small works on paper and I wanted to be very quick, very immediate. I had put down some white enamel and I was waiting for it to dry and I was in a real hurry so I put down some oil paint and it started cracking. And I thought, 'Oh wonderful, this is such a painterly effect, I can use that' and I knew that, in a way, I had a phenomenon. And I still think of that as a signature moment of definition by being able to manipulate the inherent property of paint and utilize it as content.

I started doing this [in the upper left passage of *Heavens, We've Inherited a Castle*] and hooking up gesture [in the line that meanders down toward the right] and thinking 'Oh, I like this gesture coming across the piece' but it seemed a little decorative for me. This was about the time that I was realizing that there were a number of things I wanted to do in the painting and asking how would I be doing them in the future, after a large painting like this one had been done. I wanted to change the gestural tone of what I was doing, get away from that elegant ab-ex line and come up with something more of my time. Another thing is this little glow motif on the side [in the lower right corner]. I realized later on: that has to leave, it has to be boiled down to an essence, in a way. So little things like this on the side – they start to disappear from the paintings as the years go on. But this was probably one of the first where I thought, 'Oh, there are a bunch of things that I could do here with this.' I realized that this one was a real lesson plan for what I wanted to do.

DC: You mentioned earlier the importance of materials, and obviously process is very important to you, and you're discovering through the act of painting and manipulating materials – you're discovering things that you can do again.

JB: Yeah, again and again. There's that, and then there's kind of an attitude of asking myself, 'Well, what is gesture to me now?' And by this time I knew I could make a nice mark – a loaded gestural arabesque –but I thought, 'It doesn't feel right yet.' That beautiful composition is no longer valid for me. And this might have been the beginning of it. And then, hooking content in comes through the idea of the cave [at the upper left of *Heavens, We've Inherited a Castle*] and this sort of tunnel [the curving band that extends from the "cave" the left toward the right] and cliffs with stalactites, stalagmites within it, and the metaphor being one of enlightenment, and on the other hand, isolation. That was big.

DC: But the tunnel doesn't lead anywhere, it's cut off by the flat black mass at the upper right.

JB: Yeah, but I'm not quite thinking of it that way. I'm just depicting this thing, and I don't have to worry about whether it extends over or it gets blocked. I mean, there may be something psychological there but mostly it's simply about composition: I'll stop it here and then I'll do something else. It's really a record of me trying to work out an idea.

DC: Can you say more about what you called the "glow" at the lower right?

JB: Truthfully, it may have been just about cadmium yellow and the color of knowledge, enlightenment, and I wasn't quite sure where I wanted to put it so compositionally it made sense to balance the painting down here in this corner – it felt like I needed something. Looking at the painting now, I realize that it's a deeper work than I originally gave it credit for, and there's some good thinking in it. And now I'm glad I took the direction that I did, because I realized that I didn't want to tweak these ideas too much, I wanted to really concentrate on the paint – how do I work this idea into paint, and how do I get looser, how do I get further away from a narrative and closer to simply using paint.

DC: A lot of your works combine the gestural with the planar, the flat – the free with the controlled. And in talking about this work [*Heavens, We've Inherited a Castle*] you're alluding to changes that you make, and decisions that you make. And this is a very abstract expressionist idea – that there's a voyage of discovery. I'm assuming you don't work from sketches, you're working immediately in the picture?

JB: I would say ninety percent of the time, yes.

DC: Will you occasionally work something out separately?

JB: Absolutely. There might be a time when I've done a lot of small pieces and usually I think of them as complete in and of themselves – discrete objects on their own. But every once in a while I'll take out the small paintings and look at them and think, 'What would that be like if it were larger?' Or 'What if I took that little section there and blew it up bigger?' So that can happen. But usually for me in beginning a painting, what will happen is I'll think to myself [as, for example, in *No Room for Squares*],'OK, we'll take one line across the painting in color and one line in black and white.' And it'll be that simple. That basic.

James Brinsfield, *No Room for Squares*, 2008, oil and enamel on canvas, 56 x 78"
Collection of Bill and Christy Gautreaux

This [lower central passage of black oil over white enamel in *No Room for Squares*, approximately a foot square] is like two or three hours' worth of work, and I would feel like a worker – coming into the studio with my coffee and cigarettes and thinking 'OK, I'll try and get this one done before ten o'clock.'

DC: Here you are using that technique of applying oil over enamel to get that cracking effect, and you are using it here very deliberately in small rectangular patches to get a quality like skin or scales.

JB: Yes, just exactly that. And I also wanted to think about the phenomenon of looking at something like this from a distance. Would I be seeing black and white, or would it just mush into a murky kind of color? This one was fun to make because I wanted this [upper curving horizontal band] to be about an opening, or a kind of plateau of clean, clear light and color, and then this darker one below [the lower curving band] would be a sort of shadow land.

DC: So there are two horizontal zones or bands. The one at the top has a yellow ground and a lot of whites and purer colors laid down in a thick impasto that makes me think of someone like Philip Guston.

JB: Oh yeah, sure. He's there. He's family.

DC: And then the lower band is flatter but you do have some of that impasto over the scale or skin pattern so that there is that kind of relationship between the top and the bottom band. The other major element of this is what I've heard you call tabs, these kind of candy-colored rectangles with curved ends. Talk about those.

JB: At first they were merely decorative. I wanted to load the canvases up with some intense locations of color. Actually I would call them lanterns just to have a name for them. I haven't come up with a justification for them. I simply know that they belong on the painting and I feel compelled to do it. I also knew, compositionally, that they offered a counterpoint – a visual rhythm to the paintings that gives the all-over effect a rhythm, gives it a bounce for your eye to follow across the picture plane.

DC: Right – some of them point up and some of them point down.

JB: Absolutely.

DC: And then a couple of them along the lower zone have these black sort of shadows, and there's a black and partly empty one at the upper right sort of hanging out by itself.

JB: Right, just a lonely little teardrop over there.

DC: One other important motif in this picture is this black band curving up from the lower left center.

JB: It's a Nike swoop.

DC: You were thinking of that consciously?

JB: Of course. I wanted to say something like, 'I'm still here.' It's me playing.

DC: You with your sense of humor?

JB: Yeah, it's somewhat of a joke. Remember when I was talking about 'How do I play with the gesture? How do I move the articulation of what gesture is?' And I was thinking at the time that I would introduce a kind of industrial symbol or commercial symbol into the work that could stand in for gesture.

DC: This is a question that I think applies to your work generally: Do you expect people to detect these references or can it remain private and the painting still has the kind of effect that you want?

JB: I think people do know it. Here we've got a Nike swoop. Over here [the two hooked black bands in *No Ticket, No Ride*], the curving lines from the Coca Cola logo.

James Brinsfield, *No Ticket, No Ride*, 2008. Oil and enamel on canvas, 48 x 72"

DC: Maybe people detect these things subliminally if not consciously, would that be fair to say?

JB: I think that would be very fair. And I think we also know that we take in so much more information than we consciously process, and yet, it does get processed. So I think the viewer knows it even if they don't think about it, necessarily.

DC: So, in *No Ticket, No Ride*, the curving lines refer both to the Nike swoosh and to the Coca-Cola logo – they're multivalent?

JB: Absolutely.

DC: This painting is obviously a sibling of *No Room for Squares*. Do you work on paintings like these simultaneously or one after another?

JB: Usually one after another.

DC: Does one painting lead to the next, in a way?

JB: Yes, very much so.

DC: Do you ever a sense that you are working on a series that will at some point end?

JB: Yes, and those are my favorite times, to tell you the truth.

DC: When you're in the middle of a series that's going right?

JB: Yes, and I can be on automatic pilot, and I'm not questioning myself, I'm not going through any kind of *Sturm und Drang* about anything – I'm simply doing the work.

DC: When you're there you want to stay there.

JB: Yes, and then you want to leave. It so funny and so contrary.

DC: Is it hard to leave? Or do you have to leave – the work is saying, 'Okay, you've done all you can do here'?

JB: I don't think you have to leave, because think of all the painters who basically turn out the same painting all their life.

DC: Which is not you, Jim.

JB: No, it's not me. But there's a part of me that thinks, 'Okay, I could do this or that for the rest of my life, and there would be a certain number of people who would be happy if I did do that,' but there's also something in me that says that I do want to push it a little bit more – that no single series of paintings can say everything that I want it to. And even thinking about the caves, the tunnels, the gesture, the color – I don't want them to be an end in and of themselves, I think that they can be a springboard into the next bunch of works.

DC: Do you have a name for this particular body of work – the 2007-2008 paintings?

JB: I call them my Slow Paintings, because they literally take a while to do. They're done in a deliberate, paced manner. There's a certain kind of controlled freedom to them – they must look free to other people – but on the other hand I know there's only so much I'm going to do with them and then I know when they're done. It has a kind of ending to it.

DC: Have you ever kept working on a picture and ruined it?

JB: All the time! I'd say every other painting.

DC: So you destroy work?

JB: Absolutely.

DC: Do you just trash the canvas or do you paint over it?

JB: Actually it's multi-staged. I paint over it, and I try to save it as best as I can, and then I make up my mind that I want to make the next painting that I haven't made yet on that canvas, and that usually goes badly and then I enter the terminal stage where I make a big black and white painting, and that's usually when it gets rolled up and tossed. To me it's very sad. I'm just furious.

DC: At the failure to save the picture?

JB: Every step of the way I'm furious, very disgusted with myself in my failure to pull it out.

DC: But you keep trying to save it, you don't just say 'Screw it, this one's hopeless' – that would be admitting failure.

JB: Yes.

DC: You want to win. (Laughs)

JB: Yes, and I don't it to be a failure until it's an utter failure.

DC: So what do you learn from that?

JB: A lot of times I learn the same lesson again and again which is to trust my instincts and forget about making masterpieces.

DC: Right, I think that's a lifelong struggle.

JB: Yeah.

James Brinsfield, *Good Citizenship*, 2008. Oil and enamel on canvas, 60 x 80"

DC: In the back gallery are two paintings from 2008, *Good Citizenship* and *Ghost Wars*.

JB: I wanted the white-on-blacks to be back here in the Esson Gallery. I think my white-on-black work is my favorite work. And for me, it's hard to pull off. They're my favorite paintings in history. When I think of say, Rembrandt, his *Night Watch* is a white-on-black painting, for example. I don't think there's anything quite as powerful, for a painter, as white on black – it just screams at me. It's Ur, it's transcendent in its elemental visual power. I could go all the way back to me buying the *Lonely Woman* album by the Modern Jazz Quartet, and the liner notes are white on black. And I remember being a kid just sitting there thinking, 'How incredible is this, white on black!' It just thrilled me.

DC: But you don't do as many of these paintings.

JB: No, I don't know why. But they're really some of my favorites.

DC: Let's talk about *Good Citizenship*. We've seen this before – this central band, the tunnel.

JB: It's another tunnel, absolutely. And there's a hint of this other world or space around it, with the tunnel being this space of enlightenment or knowledge shooting through the whole painting. I went into

the tunnel section using my palette knife and scraping layers of paint away so there's no attempt at organization or a willed logic whatsoever. And then at the end I thought, 'Okay, I'll put some squares within this tunnel as it goes across the picture plane.'

DC: Right, there are four squares that sort of divide the tunnel into compartments.

JB: Yes. And then little side passages coming down.

DC: Almost like legs or stems.

JB: Or those little side tunnels you'd find in real tunnels.

DC: And what about this passage at the left with the rectangles of bright color?

JB: Again, it was just compositional. I had to decide: do you end the tunnel about a foot from the left, or do you extend it all the way over? I decided that maybe the smartest thing to do was just to lay down a sort of grid of color – rough and patchy. And once I did it, I thought, 'Yeah, that's the only solution that makes any sense whatsoever to me.' The irrational was the correct move.

DC: And what's going on in the dark environment surrounding the tunnel?

JB: I think of it as the darkness of being utterly lost.

DC: Again you're creating the cracking by painting oil over enamel.

JB: Right, and I've never made a painting where I've had so much of it in there. And it's partly organized in such a way that it comes down and repeats the shape of the little stems.

DC: Yes, you have these black enamel bands or extensions, so it's not a uniform field of the crackle pattern – it's divided.

JB: Exactly. I knew it absolutely had to have that in – that it counterbalances the composition.

James Brinsfield, *Good Citizenship*, 2008-9. Oil and enamel on paper, 14 x 16"

DC: Talk about these small works on the back wall.

JB: They're very immediate – they simply get themselves done. For instance, here's *Good Citizenship*, the small work on paper, and there's *Good Citizenship*, the painting, from exactly the same time. You can see how my head is in an entirely different place in making the two of them at the same time, and I'm not consciously plotting, really – I'm engaged, but on a different, more immediate level. At the end of the day, when I'm working with color, I'll look down into one of the butcher trays and there might just be a blob of diaphanous pink that I'm not going to use the next day, and next to the painting I'll have a bunch of blank papers pinned to the wall, and I'll simply put it on there. That's really how most all of these works on paper are made.

DC: So these are kind of satellites to the big pictures you are working on at that time?

JB: Yes. And usually they're freer – the idea of masterpiece has left the room. When I first showed these, people did not like them. And now I think the time has caught up to them and they look right. I think it's just the idea of the irrational – it's simply in the air and we can all identify it. Some of them look really on target to me.

DC: It helps me to understand them in relationship to your paintings – to know that you're using the paint this is left on the butcher tray and that the title you're working on ends up being written on the paper. So again, I think of them as satellites that orbit around the picture.

JB: Yeah, and anybody can see they're just so much freer. And I wish I could combine the two: the thinking that goes into the larger work and the abandonment evident in the smaller work – that would be a sort of bracket around what my thinking is about how I go forward.

DC: Well, again there's that kind of dialectic between spontaneity and control, calculation and accident, which seems to be fundamental to your work.

JB: Yeah, for sure it is. And yet sometimes you feel like you're a scientist, working around these mounds of paint, and still finding out simple elemental things like, 'Okay, what happens when this color hits this color and I push it down?' I guess the one that's really ongoing for me, though, is about gesture: how can I change gesture to something that doesn't have anything to do with history? And it starts to feel like an incredibly tough task. No slick, no primitive, no design, no beauty – after all of that is stripped away what's there left for gesture to portray?

DC: Why the title *Good Citizenship*?

JB: Well, it had so much to do with the presidential election of 2008, and just the general trend of the country. You kept on hearing about patriotism, and what is patriotism? How you feel about your country isn't a litmus test of a specific list of attributes where you can say, 'I'm a good citizen because I do this and this and this.' Truthfully, what I was worried about was the far right and the seeming inability of so many people in the country to bother thinking and just going along with the manipulation by the media – these simple sort of catchphrases, knee-jerk reactions. It felt very scary to me and still does. Now we have a government that not only doesn't work, but it's further to the right than at any time that I can remember. And if you read American history of the twentieth century, you have to go back to the 1920s to find similarities in the polarization of the country, whereas, say, when I was young, something like the John Birch Society in the '60's was regarded as being something so misguided and so far right, and now it's as if these extreme positions are morally palatable and taken seriously. The irrational is hard to comprehend in an age of instant access to knowledge and yet we live right in the middle of a time of ignorance and stubborn intransigence. So many issues seem to revolve around simplistic answers to very difficult questions, and it's as if nobody wants to pursue an equitable solution and figure a way out of it. That's good citizenship – a kind of democratic ballast. How do we get out of that dark place, how do we reinvent ourselves?

DC: So how does all of this relate to the imagery of the painting?

JB: Well, the light and darkness – it's that simple. I didn't want to portray all of those things that I've just talked about, but in a sense, I have, in a very bold and forthright fashion: you see it, and it's light and dark.

DC: Right, so again it's a metaphor.

JB: Absolutely, almost every time. The 2007-2008 paintings are glaringly easy to interpret.

DC: But the *Good Citizenship* title sounds more ironic than sincere in the kind of critical context that you've described.

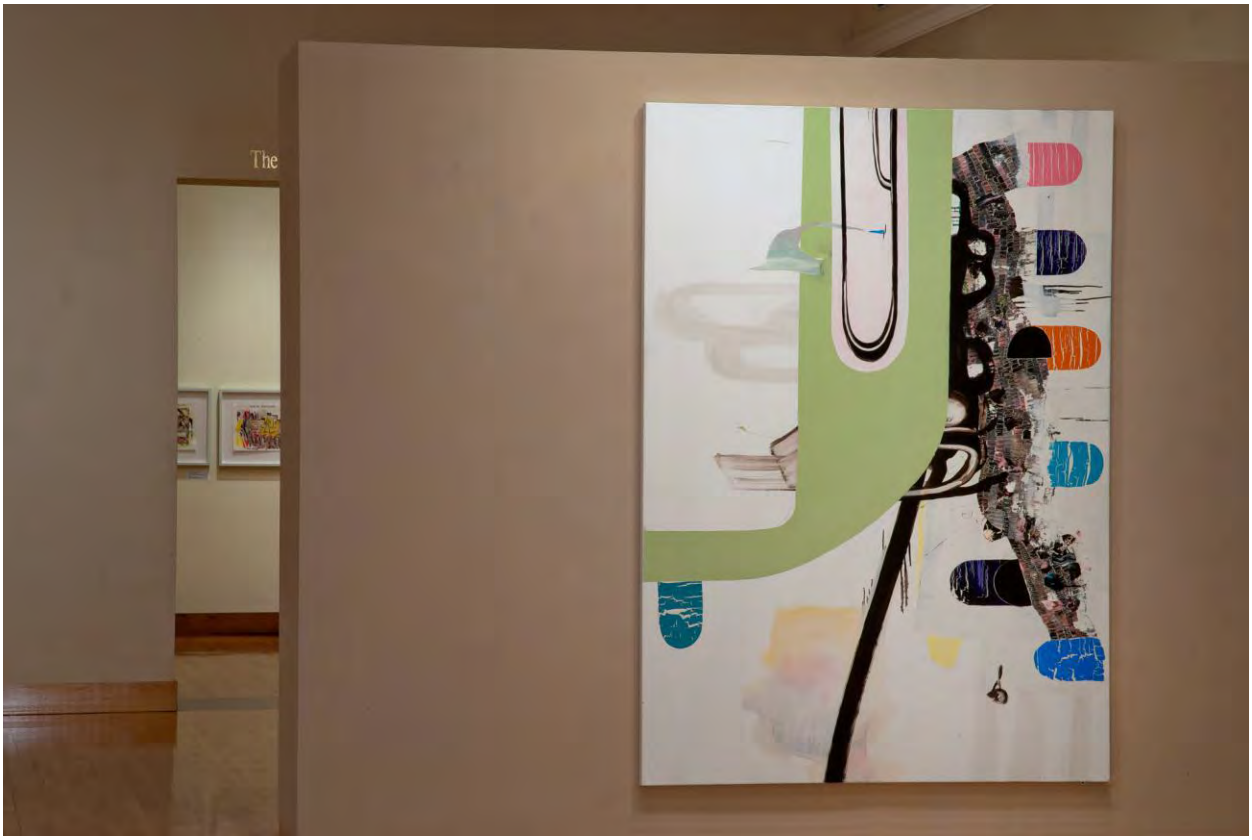
JB: Well, it is ironic, like asking, 'Is this good citizenship if I hate you for your difference?'

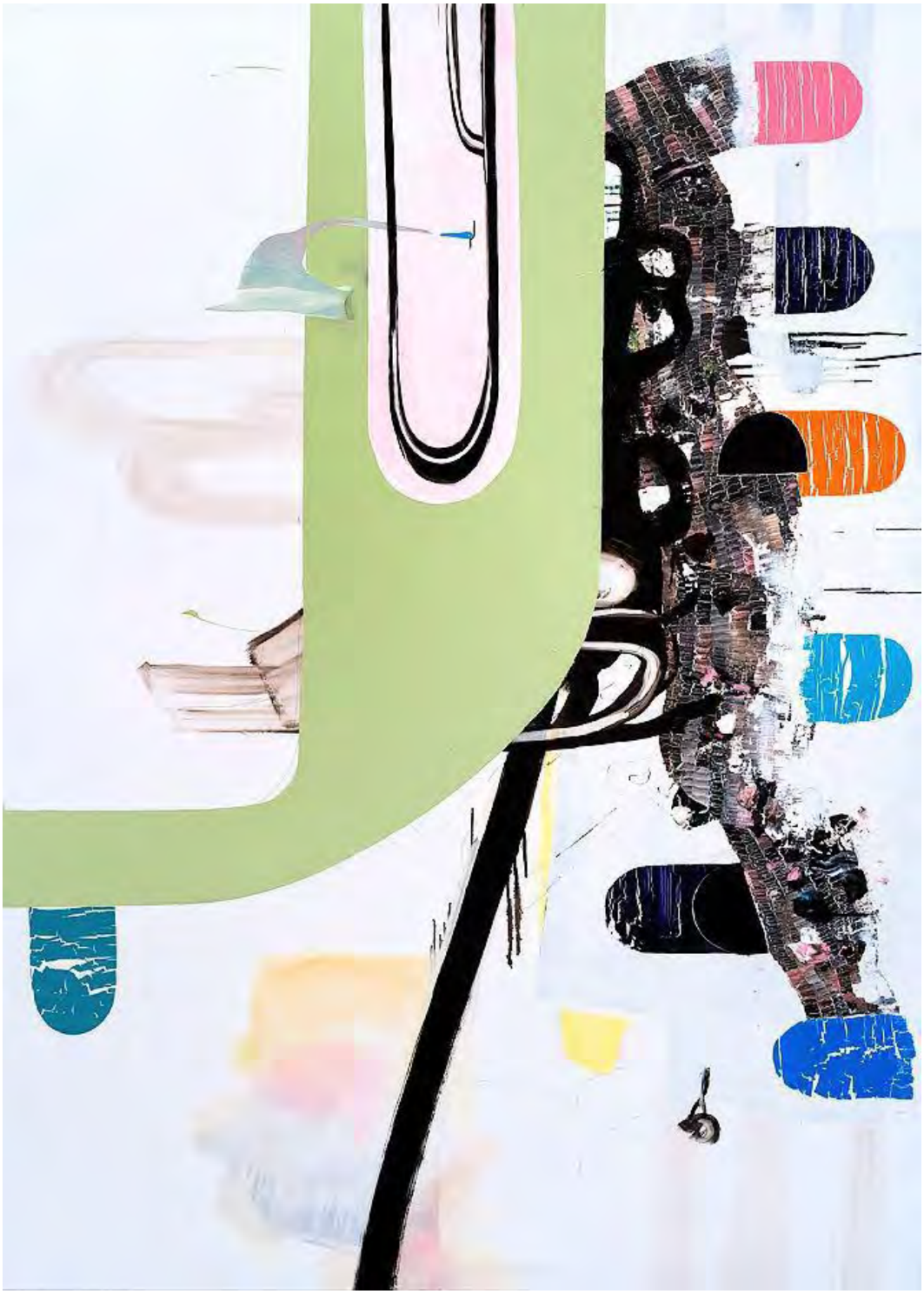
DC: And yet, one doesn't want this painting to be reduced to a political allegory.

JB: No, without a doubt. It's very visual and it works on a number of different levels. I've never explained the title before, and in the course of our talk I've probably said too much about what my methodology is. For example, once I spoke of Coca Cola and the Nike swoop; I mean, of course that's what it is – it's right in front of you. I think that often for someone trying to penetrate what the meanings of the paintings might be, the answer is there.

DC: Right, but I asked you earlier, how important is it that someone know your private motivations for laying down a particular motif, and in regards to your whole explanation of why you titled this *Good Citizenship*, it would be unfortunate if someone looked right past the painting and just focused on that political concern.

JB: Yeah, I agree.





James Brinsfield, *Sky Way*, 2010. Oil and enamel on canvas, 84 x 60"
Collection of Bill and Hitomi Haw

DC: We turn next to the Sky Way paintings.

JB: Yes. With Sky Way, I wanted to put a tunnel in and I wanted it to be a very obvious depiction of something.

DC: So we're looking at *Sky Way* from 2010. We see some of the same motifs [as in the Slow Paintings]: we see the tabs, we see the tunnel, and is there a little photo in there?

JB: It's Ron Wood of The Rolling Stones – not that I'm a big fan of Ron Wood. I dig the necessary incidentals.

DC: So some of the motifs you have continued from the Slow Paintings, but what is remarkably new here is this kind of green tuning fork shape that dominates the upper center and curves over to the left. And this is a reference to the Chicago Skyway?

JB: Yes, it was. I did some research on the Internet and was looking at images of the Chicago Skyway and found an aerial photograph of a turn-off where you would get off the Skyway and park your vehicle. It didn't look exactly like this – it was actually quite different – but I started to think of it in terms of becoming a shape. I can't remember if I was first painting this as a horizontal painting or if it was a vertical painting.

DC: So you'll sometimes rotate the picture?

JB: Oh God – all the time. I'd forgotten that there are drawings on the painting. I can see how much I took out. By this time in 2010 and 2011 I'm leaving part of the canvas bare – just a couple coats of gesso.

DC: Yes, the upper left is just gessoed, with a bit of drawing on it and a bit of painting, so it moves from an open left side to the more dense right side.

JB: Right, and then I wanted to get this central black line coming in as gesture but also to anchor the painting, once I had made up my mind that it was going to be a vertical.

DC: You've talked about the Chicago Skyway as an icon of postwar modernity, and you've said that these paintings come "after modernity."

JB: Yes. But there's a nostalgia for modernity. I think with modernity, which I associate with Clement Greenberg and the decades of the '50s and '60s, everybody had an expectation of the new and that the new could be visualized, it could be objectified. And that the new was something that was a constant in American life – there would be a 1959 Chevrolet, and then there would be a 1960 Chevrolet that would look quite different from the 1959 Chevrolet. And that things were always changing and that America would always be a place of abundance and wealth and sharing. There is a sense of progress attached to modernity. The social structure of the country was changing towards a more democratic freedom for all. And now it feels as if perhaps we're in a postmodern end-game where it becomes harder to put your finger on things because they seem elusive and tougher to define.

DC: So there's a mixture of nostalgia and what other main element?

JB: Reality. (Laughs) I think we all occupy that place.

James Brinsfield, *Trouble at the Cup*, 2009. Oil and enamel on canvas, 60 x 82”

DC: Around the same time you’re working on the Sky Way paintings you are working on these gestural paintings where you’ve reduced the palette to black and brown.

JB: It’s a sepia wash. I mix up the wash differently for every painting, and in this one [*Trouble at the Cup*, 2009] I wanted to concentrate on a kind of gray wash and then if used at full strength it would be black.

DC: What I really like about this painting is the sense of layers, and the sense that we’re looking into a kind of dark space that has light or white over it.

JB: Right. It’s a very simple composition. Basically there are three parallel lines coming in from the right hand side of the painting and three parallel lines coming in from the left side of the painting and gestures coming out from these main trunks of black.

DC: Have you subtracted the paint to make the white lines?

JB: Yes, I’m soaking a rag in thinner and wrapping it around my hand and dragging the rag through the paint while it’s still wet and wiping it down to the white surface. The wash stays wet for a couple of hours.

DC: Is this is an oil paint?

JB: The wash is enamel and oil – it's a concoction that I come up with, and I store it in jars then I pour it out onto a Chinese butcher plate that's about eighteen by twenty-four and dip my brushes in there, add some thinner, add some other oil mediums in, to get a transparent effect.

DC: So far you've talked about how your paintings reference things outside the painting, be it the Nike swoosh or the Chicago Skyway. When I look at *Trouble at the Cup* I really read it as purely nonreferential.

JB: Absolutely.

DC: So you do make paintings that are really about the painting as its own reality?

JB: Absolutely, and this for me was a real breakthrough painting – I loved doing it and I still have a big fondness for this particular one.

DC: Why was this a breakthrough?

JB: It felt as if all I really needed in this one was a very simple compositional idea – that I knew it wouldn't be a conventionally nice painting, a pretty painting, and that it would appear to be an emotional work. There's still a graceful line here at the bottom center – a sort of loopy S-shape – and some parts begin to look sort of calligraphic. But as I was making it I thought, 'That's the solution for this particular painting' – I didn't try to put any limitations on what I wanted to do: It would be simply done and I would go on with it and I would be able to stop it – stop this particular painting and accept what it turned out to be.

DC: I think in a lot of your work there's this kind of mixture of elegance and awkwardness.

JB: I'm glad you see that, because I think that's what I do. And it's not elegantly awkward or awkwardly elegant – it's both.

DC: They coexist – they cohabit in the same pictorial space. Your work is constantly changing, but I can always detect that kind of sensibility, trying to maintain the awkward and the elegant in a kind of dialogue or relationship.

JB: Yes.

James Brinsfield, *Sugar Shock*, 2010. Oil and enamel on canvas, 58 x 78"

DC: Let's look at *Sugar Shock* from 2010. You use the same black and sepia wash as the dominant colors but there's some yellow in a few places and a solid gray vertical band at the left, which looks like it came in fairly late in the game.

JB: It did, yeah.

DC: So did you start with a similar sort of simple compositional idea here?

JB: Yes, very similar. On this one I was very workmanlike – I worked left to right, I knew that I would have a central spine and that most of the gestures would be vertical. Oh, and I start to introduce pencil as a medium for gesture and pattern.

DC: Yes, there's a little passage of pencil about two and a half feet in from the lower left side, and again at the upper left, where it's almost like a little wing.

JB: Yes, a little bit of a swoop in there.

DC: So you're working from left to right with this black band that sprouts these vertical legs and then it ends about two and a half feet in from the right.

JB: Exactly, and I wanted something like a column or a modern-like totem along the right hand side.

DC: It's interesting, Jim, because when I look at these pictures I don't really see that compositional structure – I'm drawn into the details.

JB: Exactly. This work is moving into a realm of over-all composition and the eye lands on a place that seems non-specific.

DC: I'm drawn into the relationship of darker and thinner and more atmospheric versus more opaque and robust paint. I'm drawn into the way you move the paint around, the way the lines intersect and overlap. So it seems like you maybe lay down the compositional structure but then you become involved in that more detailed manipulation.

JB: Yes. But remember we were talking about how I go about it, and for me, it's such a simple thing. For this one, I didn't want to be thinking about tunnels and caves, I simply wanted to do gesture and that it would traverse the picture plane. That's the bare bones idea of it. This one looks a little more modernist, more '50s to me than *Trouble at the Cup*. There's a slight difference here of the lines meeting at forty-five degree angles and then linking up to another set of lines that get repeated in a slightly different thickness.

DC: In *Sugar Shock* the motifs seem to rest on the ground in a more settled way.

JB: I think you're right, I never noticed that.

DC: Whereas in *Trouble at the Cup* there's a greater sense of motion across and up and down rather than a kind of planted composition.

JB: Almost like a floating thing. And it's funny, the attachment that abstraction has to landscape – it's not always in my thoughts but I do know that when I'm doing something I might think, 'Oh God, I don't

want that to look like a hillside or a mountain range or a skyline or something like that.' I think for many abstractionists, working with gesture it's so easy to think that you're just drawing something out.

DC: Right, and I never really sense that in your work either.

JB: No, but it's something that I have to watch out for.

DC: Right, and it's interesting that you do want people to see in those other paintings the Nike swoosh or the Coca Cola flourish or the Skyway, but you don't want people to see mountains and hills, so it dawns on me that your references are coming out of culture, not nature – they're coming out of the manufactured or the symbolic.

JB: For certain. And I think it's so strong in me just because it was part of my education and one of the strongest feelings you can get is to have something to rebel against. And for me part of that is the image, and not tying it to the figure or to landscape.

DC: I have to ask you about the titles, *Trouble at the Cup*, and *Sugar Shock*.

JB: *Trouble at the Cup* is a title from a Washington, D.C., rap band called Trouble Funk and they did "Trouble at the Cup." [And it's the title of a song by the Los Angeles punk band Black Randy and the Metrosquad.] *Sugar Shock* is just me; my invention. I thought about *Sugar Shack*, then I thought, 'There's no shack – I don't want people to look for a shack' and so the idea of shock, I like that, it's a good title. For a while the working title was *Passion Pit* and I decided to save that for another work.

James Brinsfield, *Untitled*, 2011. Pencil, oil, and enamel on canvas, 82 x 60"

JB: This one, it's my only untitled painting probably for the last four or five years. I would come up with a title and think, 'No, that's not quite it.' I couldn't think of a title that fit the painting.

James Brinsfield, *Nik-Nik*, 2011. Pencil, oil and enamel on canvas, 82 x 60”

DC: What about *Nik-Nik*?

JB: You don't know this. Okay, I guess I'm going to date myself. Nik Nik was from the 1970s and when you went out dancing at a club, you had to have an Italian Nik Nik shirt. They were floral prints, graphic prints, they were skintight, à la John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever*. It's such a great name for a shirt. And you can find them being resold for quite a lot of money if they're in good shape.

DC: So you talk about '70s shirts and I'm wondering if that connects to the meandering pencil pattern at the lower center.

JB: Yes, that's where the title came from. I thought, 'Where have I seen something like this?' and I thought, 'Oh, those Nik Nik shirts, of course.'

DC: How would describe these drawings – like multilane roads?

JB: They're like little tectonic things, little layers of strata underneath things. The underpinnings.

DC: And at what point in the process did the pencil drawings come in?

JB: At the end. I had started in and I might have had just one row, and thought, 'Oh well, that'll do,' and then I realized that I simply wanted to draw with pencil, and kept on going and going. And I guess I could have filled the whole thing out.

DC: Well, you left breathing space at the bottom and at the top.

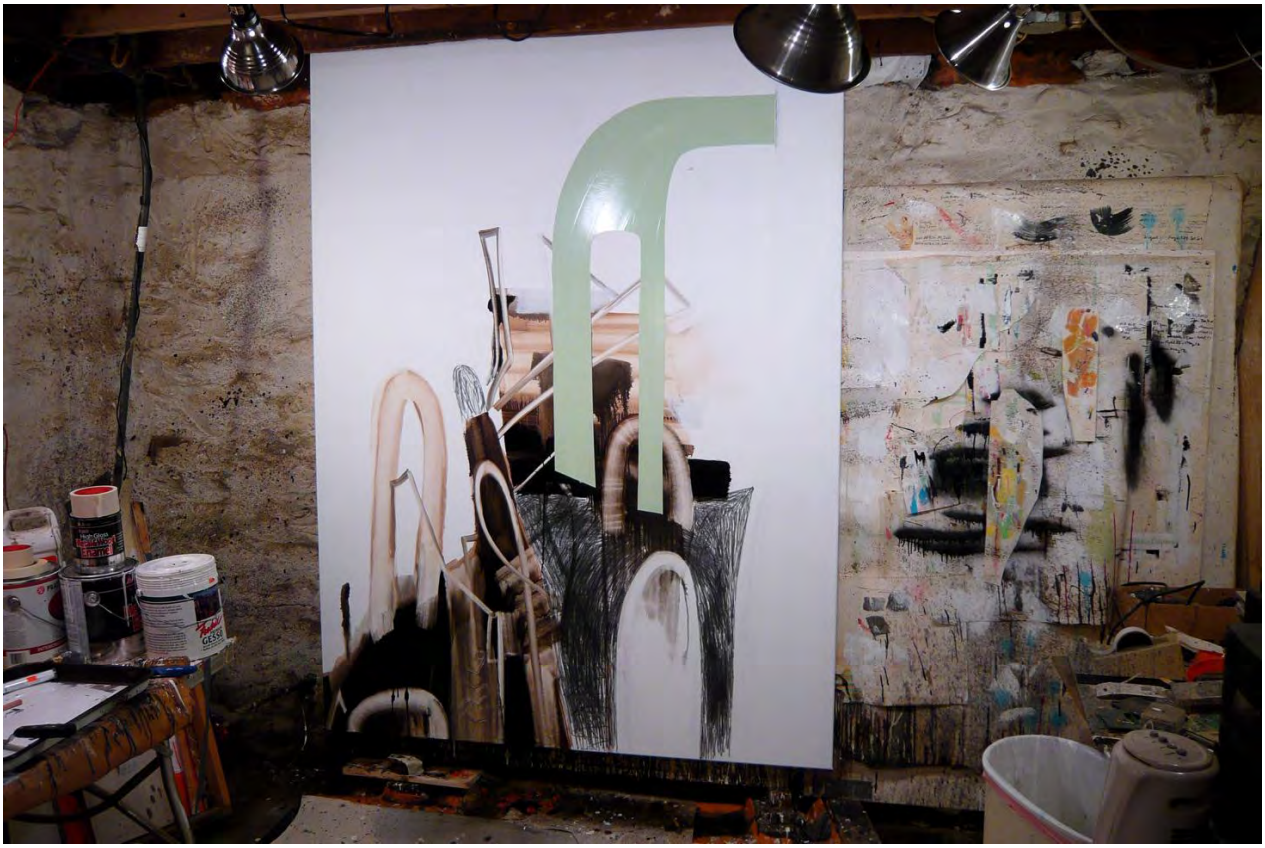
JB: Absolutely. I wanted it to be minimal and yet maximal at the same time.

DC: With *Nik-Nik*, it seems that you maybe began with the black wash which then becomes more dilute in the center, and then you have some curving wiped lines and then what I like to call the tuning fork, the Skyway motif, that enters from the right and drops down. So that's the sort of center and upper zone of the picture. And then the counterpoint are what you call these tectonic drawn pencil lines, that dangle and lead the eye down to the lower right corner. And I'm seeing how the lower right corner has these more pointed, geometric motifs that play off the curving line at the upper left. And the curving loop at the upper left is the kind of counterpoint to the Skyway motif.

JB: That's exactly it, right.

DC: Now I'm looking at it more from the overall compositional dynamic rather than getting lost in the details.

JB: Right. When I look at this painting the feeling I was getting at the time was that I wanted the painting to be almost half white. I wanted the bottom to be almost entirely white and the pencil seemed like such a perfect solution when seen at a distance and I was very happy that I had grabbed pencil by this time and I had gone out and bought different pencils and I ended up using what I call a carpenter's pencil – it's long and the lead is shaped in an oval and you can't really get a point on it, you just carefully cut the wood away from the lead. And you can begin to hold the pencil in the same manner you would a brush. And I've grown accustomed to using pencil in that manner. It gives me a more forceful stroke – there's more pressure going onto the surface and the gestural control is somewhat different – a little like driving fast on ice. There's direction but not nuance.



Untitled in James Brinsfield's studio, 2011.

DC: And the untitled one has a very different kind of drawing, almost like it's scribbled.

JB: Yes. By this time I'm very comfortable with the mark that pencil can make, and I wanted it to be about pencil mark, as well as the wash. The composition is based on a diagonal line – that I would fill up one half of the painting underneath the diagonal line, and the other half of the painting would be almost empty.

DC: So the diagonal leads from the lower left to the upper right, and again you have that correspondence between the kind of sepia loop and the Skyway motif. And then at the upper left, rather than leaving it entirely blank, you have these kind of faint pod outlines in pencil that are like a stack that lead the eye to the upper left.

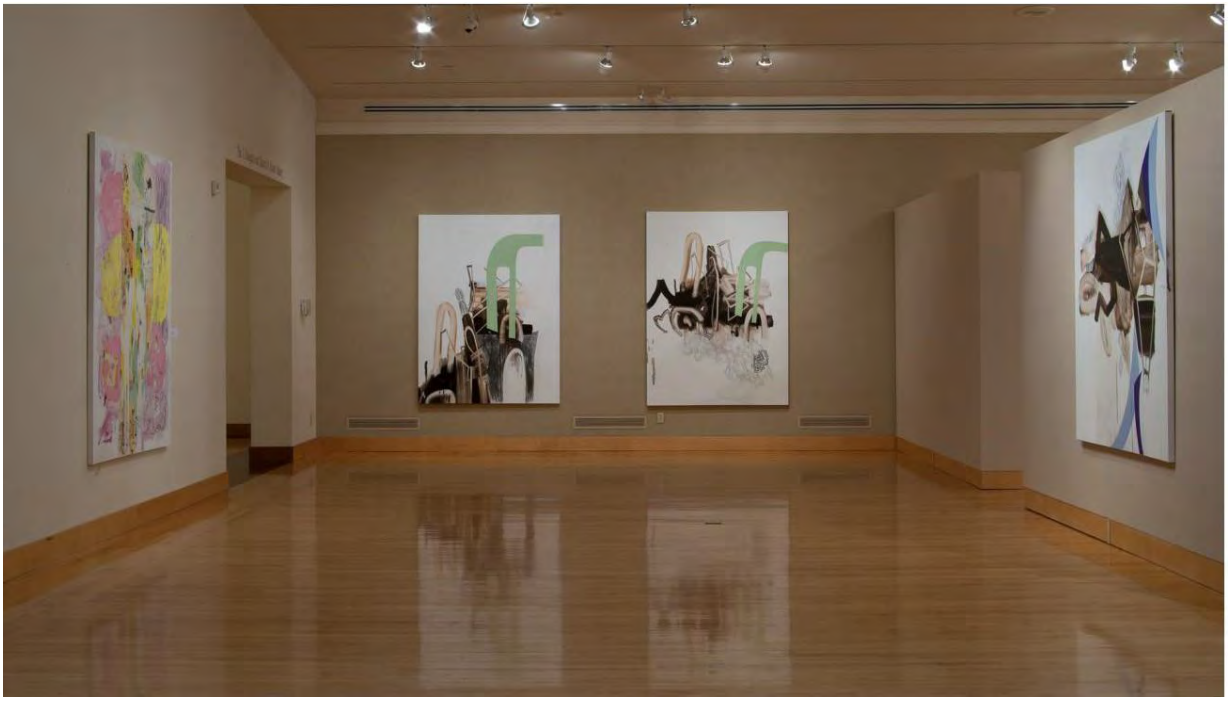
JB: Right, kind of a totem.

DC: It makes me think of cacti, actually.

JB: Yeah, the way things grow, segment by segment. And I decided to leave it undone because otherwise it would be too concise, too perfect.

DC: But you needed to have something there; you didn't want it to be completely empty.

JB: No. And one of the joys of seeing the work in this setting is that I can get some distance on these things. This [about ten feet] is about as far back in my studio as I can possibly get. So I love being able to hang both of these *[Untitled* and *Trouble at the Cup]* together and see both simultaneously from a distance.



James Brinsfield, *The Most Important Thing that Doesn't Matter*, 2011. Pencil, oil, and enamel on canvas, 74 x 60"

DC: So is this the third painting in the series, *The Most Important Thing that Doesn't Matter*?

JB: Yes.

DC: That's a paradoxical title.

JB: Right. I can't remember how I thought of this title or if I even did think it up or didn't see it someplace and think, 'Oh that's great,' and filed it and pulled it out later on.

DC: There are some new colors entering here.

JB: Yeah, I wanted to get back to a sense of the way color and design are used in signage and things like that or even in decoration and how I could put those together with something that was really very loose in regards to the way I applied the wash, the gesture, like in the zig-zag motif near the center, the loops at the left. I wanted this one to be as loose as I possibly could make it, almost like bad work – bad composition or no composition, maybe. And then strengthen it with something that was very deliberate, very graphic.

DC: Right. The motif at the upper right makes me think of a sail, it makes me think of a fish, it makes me think of Kenneth Noland.

JB: You're absolutely right. I put that up not even thinking of any of those associations and then I thought, 'Oh my God, I've just made an angel fish.'

DC: Right.

JB: And that's the moment when you think, 'Oh God, am I going to take it out, or is it just good enough, or is it too corny?' And I thought it belonged and I thought it succeeded and failed in a number of different ways so I decided to keep it in. It fit the nature of the painting – of what the painting was about – and that might be the most important thing that doesn't matter: the little fish.

DC: I find that always with your work that the longer you look at it the more you see. And it's almost criminal the way people will just glance at a painting and walk on. How long would it take you to make a big painting like this?

JB: Two weeks to a month.

DC: So for someone to look at it for fifteen seconds is totally out of proportion.

JB: Yeah, but I don't think of it that way because when I go into museums myself I might barely glance at ninety-five percent of the work and just be utterly lost in front of five percent of it.

DC: And you can't look at everything with that kind of intensity or you'd just exhaust yourself and collapse.

JB: Yes, and truthfully, I think that's part of what's wrong with museums and the guided tours and the docents. I think you might ask people, 'Why don't you stand in front of something you think is really nice and we can talk about that instead of us talking about everything in the gallery?'

James Brinsfield, *Tiergarten*, 2011. Pencil, oil and enamel on paper and canvas, 82 x 60”

DC: This painting, *Tiergarten*, is very different from everything else in the show.

JB: Right, and it’s the newest work.

DC: And the title refers to a park in Berlin?

JB: That’s right.

DC: Is this someplace you went as a child?

JB: No, we were going to go and then the Berlin Wall went up and Checkpoint Charlie, Kennedy flying in – the whole thing. Typically the Frankfurt American High School senior class trip would be to Berlin and you would go crazy in Berlin, just have a grand old time. But actually we had left Germany by that time, we left, I believe, in '62 or '63. But *Tiergarten* – I like the sound of it, and it sounds like tear garden.

DC: Well it literally means animal garden.

JB: Yes.

DC: The colors here are really bright and cheery – the pinks and yellows, particularly – they're confectionery colors.

JB: Yeah, I felt that I had been doing some dark work, that these feel like very dark times, and I wanted to do something that felt like fun. And that was just about it.

DC: Now it looks like the colors are largely placed over this very loose gestural drawing that loops around both sides. But the center of the painting has a different character.

JB: Absolutely, and it's paper – around part of my studio walls I have this crummy paper, paper that I normally wouldn't paint on, it's like a background paper. But I started looking at it and thinking, 'Gosh, there's so many things on this paper now that's it's become a kind of record of the years that I've been in the studio,' and I just started cutting it up and pasting it down.

DC: So this is paper that was on the walls to protect them?

JB: Yeah.

DC: I see, so these paint splatters might just be accidental marks?

JB: Most of them are and then I would go back in at the end and put some more down, just because it needed it.

DC: You described this as a happy painting.

JB: Oh, it's very happy. It's like the garden outside in June and July.

DC: Do you think this is going to lead to a new direction?

JB: Partly. I think I'll use paper again. I like the splatters – that worked for me. My gesture is starting to get closer to what I want it to be, especially at the upper right. But then you do something like this and you think, 'Uh oh, Cy Twombly!' So you have to watch the whole thing. So I did the marks on the right side first and on the left we're kind of post-Cy – beyond Twombly's curlicues.

DC: Right, it's not as dense.

JB: And I wasn't necessarily happy with the centrality of the image. So often my compositions are, I think, very simple. I'm torn, right now, about which way to go. I think I finished this one up in October. Now I feel like I have distance on this and I'm not quite sure what I'll do next. I've stretched a couple of canvases, they're in the studio, they're ready to go but I couldn't tell you how I feel about what I'll really be doing next.