

Gary Brewer

Beautiful Ramifications

November 19th, 2005 - December 24th, 2005

Essay by Robert McDonald



L2kontemporary

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Gary Brewer - Recent Paintings

Gary Brewer paints to celebrate the beauty that he sees in the world. He takes the organic natural forms from which his images germinate and alters them, guided by his imagination and the formal demands of his compositions. Though his lush environments are related to the world as it is both commonly and scientifically perceived, they are, in the tradition of surrealism and its antecedents, the products of his unique vision.

In all his paintings, Brewer boldly synthesizes tradition, both ancient and modern, with attention to the present to serve the full expression of that vision. For him, tradition is not a treasure house from which it is a crime to borrow or a sacred text whose established truths may not be questioned. Brewer uses tradition, innovating as he goes, to release new revelations.

Primary among the principles that inform Brewer's work is his determination to create beauty. Asked for a definition of that elusive quality, he equivocates—not surprisingly. Beauty must be a mystery, he says, or at least an enigma, ever evolving. But beyond beauty, Brewer also judges a work of art by its effectiveness as a means of communicating, evoking, instructing, and giving pleasure; his paintings must be appreciated as objects holding meaning in themselves.

The artist's belief in the viability of the tradition of painting as a means of expression extends to his use of materials current since the Italian Renaissance: that is, oil pigments on canvas prepared with sizing. Why oil pigments? Because Brewer finds in them a richness and depth of color that he does not see in acrylic paints. Additionally, the sizing applied to the canvas helps give the artist control over the paint: when dry, the sizing creates a plane for drawing on, and it forms a barrier that inhibits wet pigments from penetrating the canvas.

Also on the side of tradition, Brewer executes preparatory drawings that he transfers onto his canvases. His technical skills are formidable. He is a master draftsman: his hand is guided by his openness to sensual experience, his intelligence, his intuition, and his respect for the objectness of his subjects. A disciplined painter, he invests hundreds of hours in each canvas to bring it as close as possible to the imagined perfection that challenges him. As he proceeds, he remains open to the possibilities of change: he is not timid about using what his hand and eye discover as he works.

"Each painting is an experiment," Brewer says, "or a personal journey."

"I'm sweating blood!"

"I wish they didn't take so long!" he laughs ironically. In fact, he averages only six completed paintings during a year.

The paints Brewer uses seem to undergo an alteration of their nature—without an alteration of their physical characteristics—in a kind of alchemical shift or artistic transubstantiation. Using compulsively applied staccato strokes and occasional lyrical gestures, Brewer paints subtly modulated fields—or skins—beneath which viewers sense a unique muscularity. These fields, glowing around the images and asserting equal interest, exemplify the modernist desideratum of the flatness of the picture plane.

Time in Amber: The Biomorph Series

Time—expressed as both concept and phenomenon—has been a continuing motif in Brewer's paintings. The works in his Amber series, painted at the beginning of this century, exemplify that interest. Luminous fields that shift subtly from gold to ruby red seem to hold the energy of the insects trapped in them. The artist has drawn and painted these insects with scientifically meticulous accuracy, but on a vastly enlarged scale. The surface glazes enhance the paintings' resemblance to amber, a substance greatly valued by humans since prehistory.

In the newer works in his Biomorph series, Brewer fuses earth-time, organic life-time, and human-time. Studying his subjects under a magnifying glass, he paints bits of primitive organic life such as lichens, sponges, and corals. It intrigues him that

these simple organisms are the matrices from which all other forms of life, including human life, have evolved.

"Primordial World" (2004) is the work that most strikingly articulates what Brewer wants viewers to discover in this series. He began with the simplest of forms, a sphere. To it, he added a variety of organic shapes, both natural and imagined—twisting around one another, striving to escape, reaching for the light. Viewers may discover in them whatever their experience suggests. In contrast to earlier works, in which he incorporated color intensity, for this painting Brewer borrowed a subdued organic palette from nature. Not coincidentally, the midsection of the sphere refers to his earlier Amber series, while the other areas of its surface refer to his creative future. Suspended in space, this primordial world epitomizes universal creative activity and approaches the perfection of expression that Brewer strives for.

"Journeywork of the Stars" (2002) and "Beautiful Ramifications" (2003) are unutterably ravishing works of art. The first pays homage to Walt Whitman ("I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars," from "Song of Myself" in *Leaves of Grass*, 1855), the second to Charles Darwin ("so . . . it has been with the great Tree of Life, which fills with its dead and broken branches the crust of the earth, and covers the surface with its ever-branching and beautiful ramifications," from *The Origin of Species*, 1859). "Beautiful Ramifications" resembles a sea anemone, both seductive and malevolent. Like other works in this series, it tempts viewers to find erogenous references.

Consummate Seduction: The Orchid Series

Consummate visual seduction is the effect of Brewer's most recent paintings—images of orchids, traditional emblems of beauty that have appealed to connoisseurs for millennia as the ultimate in floral perfection.

However, numbering as many as 30,000 species and 100,000 hybrids, orchids may ironically throw into question any assumptions one might harbor about the uniqueness of perfection: can perfect beauty be represented so abundantly? As models, orchids offer enough varieties of form and color to occupy numerous artistic lifetimes.

At the same time, these paintings also follow Brewer's interest in the history and development of European scientific thought. The notion that a plant's form was a sign of God's intent for its human use became popularly known as the "doctrine of signatures" during the seventeenth century. The notion's origins, however, are ancient. The third-century B.C.E. philosopher Theophrastus, the "father of botany," wrote two works—*Inquiry into Plants* and *On the Causes of Plants*—in which he identified certain orchids by the name already in vernacular usage, *orkis*, meaning testicle, and endorsed the belief that the suggestive form of these plants' blooms indicated their utility as an aphrodisiac and promoter of fertility. The idea was further advanced by the first-century Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History*.

In "The Doctrine of Signatures" (2005), two orchids—a green lady's slipper on the left and a purple lady's slipper on the right, decorated with fancifully colored lichen and sponge forms—float like celestial bodies in a large (36 x 48 inches) blue-violet field. In this reference to the ancient belief, Brewer seduces us into a dialogue on the idiosyncratic nature of the relationship between history and knowledge.

In other works, Brewer transports us beyond limits both physical and metaphysical. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Johannes Kepler in Germany and Galileo Galilei in Italy contributed to improvements in the telescope that helped astronomers verify the Copernican theory. Both imagined mapping the universe for space travel. In the painting "Two Worlds" (2004–2005), Brewer plays off of the continual schism and reconciliation between religion and science: between the worlds of absolute truth, as found in scripture, faith, and dogma, and of relative truth as discovered through scientific method. In a surreal juxtaposition, three orchids in complementary hues of violet and yellow and a gray sponge form float in an exceptionally large field (36 x 60 inches); for the field the artist blended yellow with purple to achieve a pale bronze tone that suggests attenuated matter prior to its coalescence into our planet.

“Starry Messenger” (2005) refers to the book by that name, in which Galileo documented discoveries he made during two weeks of observing planets and stars through a telescope he had built. In the painting, two ocean coral forms that look as if they might have arrived from another world float in a modulated turquoise field. Spindly, spidery clusters of purple lichen augment the composition.

In “Beauty of Another Order” (2005), Brewer approaches expression of a mystical experience of a high degree. A large, vertical canvas, the composition is reminiscent of a baroque Assumption. Rising from a violet light into an evanescent glow, two elaborate orchids cling to a pale blue lichen in a symphonic orchestration of forms. Of this work in particular Brewer comments, “I had the feeling that I was readdressing the whole mystery of beauty.”

In all these works, Brewer revels in the possibilities of paint, bringing them to bear on the paradox of a flat picture plane and the illusion of infinite space. The communication that takes place is not solely visual. Each work conveys a temperature, a mood, a spirit, a presence. What he seeks is “total communication between two living entities—the work of art and the viewer.”

Whether working directly from living models or from photographs of them, Brewer creates images that are both uniquely his and possessed of their own life. Viewers may speculate that these subjects have chosen him to represent them as much as he has chosen them to represent him.

Brewer masterfully engages viewers in interior dialogues with his art. He opens viewers’ eyes and exposes their feelings and minds to worlds they have not yet experienced. His distinct revelatory vision and its evolution as expressed in his paintings identify him as a mature artist whose efforts provide his signature.

—Robert McDonald, 2005

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