



Granary Books, Inc.
168 Mercer Street, Ste 2

TELEPHONE: 212.337.9979
FACSIMILE: 212.337.9774
New York, NY 10012

sclay@granarybooks.com
www.granarybooks.com

REVIEWS & PRESS

Constance M. Lewallen, John Ashbery, & Carter Ratcliff. *Joe Brainard: A Retrospective*. Granary Books & Berkeley Art Museum with Mandeville Special Collections Library, 2001.

•

Mlinko, Ange. "Review of *Joe Brainard: A Retrospective*." *Shark 4* (Summer 2002).

"There is an artistic theory of knowledge different from a scientific or philosophical one." -
Fairfield Porter

When James Schuyler, a great aficionado of flowers, wrote about them in "Salute," he thought of them species by species, "Like that gathering of one of each I planned, to gather one of each kind of clover, daisy, paintbrush that grew in that field the cabin stood in and study them one afternoon before they wilted. Past is past. I salute that various field." One might say that Joe Brainard takes the study even further in his *Garden* series, seeking the differentio specifica beyond even species. In these collage works, he individually painted and cut each blossom, pasting them on medium-sized rectangular canvases in a dense "seed-packet look" as John Ashbery notes in the catalog. Schuyler, writing in *Art News* in 1967, remarked: "the scale is the size of a petal, or its color... Nor is scale realistic. A white Oriental poppy is smaller than a morning glory. Johnny-jump-ups are huge because life-size. Parts of this fiction are nearer than others, although distance has been suppressed, or rather, not called into being." These nonhierarchical flowers—always individual even when identical with their species, each species scaled to its neighbor—are not Linnaean flowers, organized within the usual taxonomy or nomenclature. They are, however, a figure for Brainard's creativity both in its fecundity and in its resistance to categorization.

In the catalog accompanying Brainard's first full retrospective, much is made of his preternatural output in the sixties and seventies. The word "proliferation" pops up throughout Carter Ratcliff's essay, Joe Brainard's "Quiet Dazzle": "Their larger subject is imagery itself, its tireless proliferation over the centuries, its manic proliferation now, and its vulnerability to style... For nothing in their proliferation establishes a principle of containment." Brainard's last solo show, at Fischbach in 1975, contained 1500 small mixed media collages; his mini-assemblages number about 3,000. And there's more: book and magazine covers, comics, flyers,

altarpieces, and of course drawings and paintings. Schuyler called Brainard a "painting ecologist"; Ratcliff sees "a kind of charting of evolution of society through its throwaway materials." He might also have invoked the word "hybridization" in addition to "proliferation": the collagist as part naturalist, part demiurge. Some of my favorite works are his paper-cutouts-and-Plexiglas, wherein he painstakingly painted and cut out tracteries of grass, layering them between clear plexiglass, creating a simultaneous mouse—and god's-eye view of a summer meadow.

Brainard was a New York artist. The city's impact on his work was as clear as on Frank O'Hara's (with whom he collaborated): the quickness and crowdedness, the variety of materials and styles, the fecund vulgarity. His radical particularity problematizes attempts to categorize him art-historically. "Stylistic diversity did not serve his career," Lewallen observes. He was "anti-theoretical and neo-Hedonistic," as John Perreault put it. Brainard worked for pleasure (and some say he stopped working, in the last decade of his life, when it stopped feeling pleasurable). "People of the World, Relax," his comics recommended. A series of magazine cutouts, each with a surprise substitution of blue sky and fluffy clouds somewhere in the image, becomes an emblem of the optimism, the Oklahoman sky in Brainard's soul, that is also somewhat insouciant. That his painted pansies are truly pensive, or that his altarpieces are truly devotional, rather than balancing this insouciance, reinforces his naïf persona. "I'm not really flying I'm thinking," wrote O'Hara in the thought-bubble of a Brainard butterfly. Yeah, right, goes our thought-bubble. In our more anxious era, Joe Brainard seems not prolific but prolix and profligate—in its dual meanings of licentious and extravagant. Hence also frivolous.

Unlike butterflies and flowers, however, the organ of Brainard's prolificity is the mind, and if there really is a "drive" to create, it doesn't come free of the assumptions and knowledges that comprise a mind. So then one may ask what it is that the artist knows, and since this is art and not something else, how does the artist know what he knows such that he ends up an artist and not a scientist or philosopher?

One answer is that the artist knows his materials, and everything he knows he learned from physical processes pertaining to those materials. Brainard doesn't rely solely on the eye, the measuring, distancing organ; he relies too on haptic knowledge. For Aristotle, touch is the lowest of the senses but also the most exact; in *De Anima*, seeing is classified as a kind of touch. Brainard wrote, "I remember one of the very few times I ever got in trouble at school. I got caught doing drawings all over my hand with a ball point pen in music class" (*I Remember*). This image, of one hand drawing on the other, stands in for the reciprocity of form and material, lines and nerves. The artist's eye and hand typically work in tandem, but how much more so for a collagist and assemblagist, whose fingers handle the work of cutting, gluing, arranging. Eye and hand become synaesthetic.

Touch is never more than an extension of sentience; sentience is the most basic property of life; therefore Life itself becomes the *raison d'être* of art: Life over death, Life over abstract categories. Brainard's hedonism, insouciance, and proliferation/profligacy beam a vitalistic force at odds with a systematizer's *reductio*. Brainard the collagist and assemblagist is

grounded in the belief that he can touch it. Brainard the ecologist, his collages accreting on the floor of his apartment like cultures, affirms the basic truth of the (inter)relational. And Brainard the maker of flowers without "principle of containment" is no more clothed in anxiety than the Biblical lilies of the field: he proposes natural abundance as a metaphysical comfort. The basic Eleusinian and Orphic mystery of flowers and their cyclical resurrection—a very old knowledge specific to the poetic tradition—is exactly the knowledge he reproduces.

Black, Noel. "The Art of Memory." *San Francisco Bay Guardian Literary Supplement*. February 2001.

There's something pornographic about a list—about a naked catalog of facts, details, or observations. *The Guinness Book of World Records*, *Harper's Index*, Letterman's Top 10, Billboard charts, Top 40 radio, MTV's "Top 100 Pop Songs," etc. Whether hierarchical or arbitrary, the list as literary form has been particularly suited to the particularly American mixture of ideological materialism and egalitarianism ("democracy" being the practical reality). For Walt Whitman the list was both neobiblical and Democratic. "Leaves of Grass," his lyrical catalog of the people, places, ideas, and textures of American life, was meant to set all things down as equal parts of an idealized poetic nation. For Gertrude Stein the list served as a playground for words and sentences and parts of sentences and their rearrangements: the listing of language's possibilities. For Diane di Prima, Amiri Baraka, Allen Ginsberg, Bob Kaufman, Anne Waldman, and other writers and poets of the postatomic age, the list became a form of indictment and a prophetic dirge meant to bring about consciousness and change. For the poet Ted Berrigan, famous for his "Things to Do" poems, the list became a location, a place to put words and experience in the same way one makes a shopping list—to organize and order the act of living. And for Joe Brainard, the artist and author of the recently republished cult favorite *I Remember*, the list became a vehicle for pure memory, a document of generalized American and American queer culture. As a list, *I Remember* brings the form to its apex as it finds its home in the ultimate pop aesthetic of absolute surface while somehow managing to consistently reveal and expose a personal honesty that makes artifice irrelevant. And, like porn, Brainard's writing is irresistible to the eye—the memory's eye.

You can't rightly call *I Remember* a book of poetry, though it does have some of those qualities. The fact that every entry begins with "I remember" might make it a memoir, except that it isn't. So it's just a list—a list that manages to mimic memory in the way that one actually remembers: by a strange chain of association that is the simultaneity of the past. Anything one might say about this book overcomplicates the beauty of its inherent simplicity. For example (at random):

I remember my father scratched his balls a lot.

I remember cheating at Solitaire.

I remember early fragments of daydreams of being a girl. Mostly I remember fabric. Satins and taffetas against flesh...

I remember "Double Bubble" gum comics, and licking off the sweet "powder."

I remember wondering about the shit (?) (ugh) in fucking up the butt.

What still amazes me about this 167-page book, republished by Granary Books after many small-press publications and one major run by Penguin in 1995, is that it doesn't bore. Even when I find my attention fading from the particulars, I'm still captivated by the repetitive incantation of the list in the same way that I'm charmed by the rapid-fire orations of the auctioneers in Werner Herzog's documentary *How Much Wood Would a Woodchuck Chuck*. Brainard's speech, like the pure capitalism in the auctioneer's, is practical, grotesque, and dazzling. Each detail seduces and reveals while remaining entirely true to the unsentimental demands of the form itself. That rare ability to evoke feeling without choking the reader becomes one of the book's greatest virtues, as it allows the leader to free up his or her own "I remembers."

The republication of *I Remember* coincides with the opening of the first major retrospective of Joe Brainard's artwork, at the Berkeley Art Museum from February 7 to May 27. (Brainard died in 1993 of AIDS-related causes.) The catalogue to the exhibition, "Joe Brainard: A Retrospective", curated by Constance M. Lewallen, has also been issued by Granary Books. Like *I Remember*, Brainard's drawings, paintings, and collages turn the surfaces of American pop and queer culture into fetish objects. Unlike so many other pop artists who used surface only to create implied ironies, Brainard revered and embraced the iconography of pop, and used it to almost religious ends. "Good 'n Fruity Madonna," for example, a 1968 collage that assigns equal surface value to repeated images of a high Catholic Madonna and Child and a torn package of Good 'n Fruity Candy, employs Kurt Schwitter's garbage pastiche aesthetic, Warhol's repetition, and Brainard's own kitsch sensibility to create a bright and campy nod to the mama's boy. Aside from the obvious critique, the Good 'n Fruity package provides the exclamation point to what is a deceptively simple pun. Irony, for Brainard, was both a means to amusement and a form of social discourse.

Similarly, in his "Nancy" paintings, Brainard uses Ernie Bushmiller's cartoon character Nancy as a persona—what Constance Lewallen calls his "mischievous alter ego"—to reevaluate assumed perceptions. In "If Nancy Was a Boy," Nancy holds up her skirt to show her penis. The familiarity of Nancy's image, the pun inherent in her name, and the jokey gender-fuck leave the viewer to think about what lies beneath the skirts of American appearances. While he is patently revealing himself as well, Brainard refrains from making an issue of his homosexuality, preferring instead to elaborate on his own symbols and make them, as his many paintings of pansies also show, as approachable as possible.

Also included in the second half of the catalog are selections of Brainard's writings about art, culled from his journals and prose; an interview with him by his friends poet Ron Padgett and Pat Padgett, and another by Anne Waldman; and a selection of letters to his poet and painter friends. All of these documents flesh out the life of an artist who was incapable of murk, being always too clear to get caught in the trappings of theory. His works aren't naïve, and they aren't simple; they're direct.

Both the catalog and the new edition of *I Remember* bring light to the career of an artist and

writer who has been overlooked by the larger art and literary establishment. Brainard was, as John Ashbery says in his brief introduction to the catalog, "nice as a person and nice as an artist." This quality seldom does anything for one's career in a sensationalist culture, but time has proved his worth. And in the waning days of the urban gender wars, Brainard's matter-of-fact, noncontentious honesty about himself and the way he saw the world are more relevant than ever.

Noel Black is a San Francisco writer.

Martin, Christopher. "Review of Joe Brainard: A Retrospective." *Rain Taxi* 6.2 (Summer 2001): 12.

Joe Brainard writes that art is "a way of pleasing other people." With the opening of a retrospective exhibit of his work, and the release of its accompanying catalog, the occasions for pleasure have improved enormously. In the catalog, essays by John Ashbery, Carter Ratcliff, and Constance Lewallen, the exhibit's curator, are bolstered by select interviews, published and unpublished writing, and a series of letters, all of which seldom fail to simultaneously enlighten and delight. For what could be more pleasing than to revisit an artist and writer of such irreplaceable talent, humor, and humility.

Brainard, who died in 1993 of AIDS-related causes, was a champion of generosity. To view his work is tantamount to receiving a gift. It is, in his own words, "a present of which I need very much to give." This seems to leave both friends and fans unable to separate the art from the artist. Nowhere is this more evident than in Ashbery's elegiac essay, which begins: "Joe Brainard was one of the nicest artists I have ever known. Nice as a person and nice as an artist." Not a very sound critical approach, but that, perhaps, is the point; Brainard eluded the kind of hard-edged Greenbergian theory so prevalent around the time he began work in New York in 1962, and his style was—like many of the poets (including Ashbery) who were his friends—anti-serious, non-hierarchical, and deliciously ironic. His technique was mainly self-taught. His real schooling began and ended with an appreciation for, and a fraternity with, other artists and writers, starting in Tulsa in 1958 when he became art editor for the *White Dove Review* conceived and edited by then fledgling poets Ron Padgett and Dick Gallup. Through *White Dove*, Brainard came to know the work and person of poet Ted Berrigan. In an interview with Ron and Pat Padgett found in the catalog, Brainard cites Berrigan as "the single biggest influence" during his first years of creative effort. In other interviews, writing and letters collected here, the influence of various additional figures—Fairfield Porter, de Kooning, Warhol, Hans Hoffman, Goya, Alex Katz, etc.—announces itself through his very personal consideration of their work.

Constance Lewallen at once seems to understand this relationship and to confuse it with a more sinister, Bloomian idea of influence, going to some critical length to decode the many art historical references to be found in Brainard's work. In "Acts of Generosity," Lewallen thus misses some of the more delicate aspects of Brainard's association with and appreciation for other artists, though readers may glean this subtlety for themselves through the later, more

direct material. The essay, in full, is nonetheless concise and articulate, providing a well-wrought frame through which to view Brainard's total output. Its clear and comprehensive nature allows the reader to approach the remainder of the catalog with no small degree of excitement and understanding; also serving as apt preparation for Ratcliff's more pointed and lyrical investigation of what he terms "Joe Brainard's Quiet Dazzle."

Speaking with especial verve on Brainard's collages and assemblages, Ratcliff notes: "To his eye, nothing looks less than splendid." This attention to visual prospect, which Ratcliff terms "egalitarian," is another way to understand Brainard's sense of appreciation: his generosity was not limited to acts of friendship, but extended itself just as brilliantly to junk store Madonnas, wayward postcards, pansies, Prell, and anything else that happened to catch his inclusive yet distinguishing eye. It is Brainard's way to celebrate, congratulate, and integrate. The luscious density of his work, most pointedly his assemblages and gardens, always invites the viewer, as if somehow he has turned the sparkle of his material inward and created a vacuum of color that sucks one in. In fact, when asked whether the homosexual "sensibility" played a role in Brainard's art, he answered: "Most artists are very straight, I mean straight in their seriousness and in what they're trying to do. I think I'm a lot more sensual." It is this sensual quality that proliferates in his best work.

My only complaint is that of the many spectacular reproductions included here, only a few highlight Brainard's substantial collaboration with some of the best poets of the latter half of last century. Even Lewallen seems to admit, though it smacks more of concession than commemoration, that "as accomplished as Brainard became as a realist painter, his real genius and originality lay in illustration and collage." I could not agree more. Brainard's singular ability to create illustrations that consistently astound with their inventive juxtaposition has rarely, if ever, been mastered so thoroughly. The most disappointing absences are *Life with Chris* with Ted Berrigan and *Sufferin' Succotash* with Ron Padgett. And I'd be remiss if I failed to observe that, after seeing any of Brainard's matchless "Nancy" pieces, one is immediately overcome with a compulsion to see them all. Nevertheless, if you cannot see the actual exhibition, this uniquely enjoyable catalog is an excellent stand-in. Joe Brainard has a gift for you; please take this opportunity to receive it.

Tysh, George. "Stuff it and groove." *Metrotimes* [New York, NY] (December 12- 18, 2001): 26.

Whenever I hear the words "New York School," I reach for my funny bone, my thinking cap, and my johnson all at the same time. Since I've only got two hands, this becomes a Three Stooges imitation of a Hindu deity, a blur of imaginary arms grasping at the rays of poetic enlightenment emanating from a spot somewhere between the eyes of Daffy Duck in Statue-of-Liberty drag. Well, that's the effect on an otherwise reasonable person of reading the inspired madness known as New York School Poetry. And 2001, aside from being one of the strangest years on record, has brought to bookstores some excellent adventures in publishing that recall the glory days of said movement in American writing.

Ushering in the second half of the '60s with a rush of poetic chutzpah was *Angel Hair* magazine,

which turned out six issues from 1966 to 1969 and continued with books, pamphlets, and broadsides until 1978. Edited jointly by poets Anne Waldman and Lewis Warsh, who devoured literary and art connections with the endless energy of youth, the project brought together work by New York School ur-poets John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, Barbara Guest et al and their second- and third-generation successors—among them, Ted Berrigan, Bernadette Mayer, Ron Padgett, Clark Coolidge, Lorenzo Thomas, and dozens of aesthetically whacko others—with art by the likes of Joe Brainard, Philip Guston, and George Schneeman. As Padgett and Tom Clark wrote in their collaborative poem sequence, *Bun*, published by Angel Hair Books:

Will we, in twenty years,
Look down at these pages
And ejaculate?
ADVERTISEMENT

Well, *The Angel Hair Anthology* might just inspire such a reaction, if you're poetically inclined and get turned on by verbal genius. This huge selection is chock-full of same, along with lyrical wildness, crazy humor, syntactical audacity, and other unexpected pleasures.

One of the more consistently great figures in the New York pantheon was the late Joe Brainard, an artist who never met a visual style he wouldn't appropriate for his own amazing combines, collages, comic reimaginings, and floods of luscious color. But he was also a touchingly funny poet, the creator of the *I Remember* series in which he turned his memoirs into liberating takes on nostalgia, e.g.:

I remember "God is Love is Art is Life." I think I made that up in high school. Or else Ron Padgett did. At any rate I remember thinking it terribly profound. (I recently asked Ron about this and he said that neither one of us made it up. That it came from an article in *Life* magazine about beatniks.)

Brainard collaborated with other New York poets on "poetry comics," produced countless hilarious variations on the "Nancy" comic strip and generally stood nose-to-nose with the art world, staring it down over the issue of "identifiable style," choosing instead to follow the path of attitude, concept, and spontaneity. All of this is made amply clear in *Joe Brainard: A Retrospective*, a catalog of his art and writing that's also graced with essays by Ashbery, Constance M. Lewallen, and Carter Ratcliff. It's the kind of coffee-table book that won't just lie there looking cool, because folks will constantly be devouring its radiant innards.

Actually, when it comes to Ron Padgett's book of writings on poetry, I lied—it was published in 2000, but no matter. *The Straight Line* will have you laughing all the way to enlightenment, with poems about poetry, prose works, and essays on teaching writing. From his long association with the Teachers & Writers Collaborative in New York and as editor of the Teachers & Writers Handbook of Poetic Forms, Padgett has made the education of young creative writers one of his top priorities. But *The Straight Line* is pedagogical in the friendliest of ways, like an invitation to sit, think, chuckle, and sip some joy juice while you realize the most wonderful things about

writing, e.g.:

"Poetic License"

This license certifies
That Ron Padgett may
tell whatever lies
His heart desires
Until it expires

In luminous essays on French authors Blaise Cendrars and Pierre Reverdy, New York poet-dance critic Edwin Denby, and "The Care and Feeding of a Child's Imagination," Padgett reveals himself to be that rarest of individuals, a brilliant writer whose compassion far outshines his sense of self-importance. This is perhaps the most generous, most entertaining tour that anyone will ever offer through the poetry landscape, with a guide who keeps handing out one after another pair of insight-binoculars: the crazy pair, the weird pair, the horselaugh pair, the tender pair, the pair shining with delicate realization.

Since Padgett so often believes in leaving 'em laughing, it's appropriate to close with his minireview of fellow New York poet Joseph Ceravolo's "Wild Flowers Out of Gas":

Joe Ceravolo's poems are like the old lady who helps a Boy Scout across the busy street. They are also like the truck driver who stops his truck to let them cross safely, toots his horn, and waves. They are also like the nickel in the Boy Scout's pocket that was not bent by being run over by the truck.

The New York Poets are in love with life and its words. Like Walt Whitman, their illustrious progenitor, and the city they call home, those impetuous wordiacs embrace it all.

George Tysh is Metro Times arts editor. E-mail him at gysh@metrotimes.com.

Original URL:

<http://www.metrotimes.com/editorial/review.asp?id=58980>

Caples, Garrett. "Review of Joe Brainard, A Retrospective." Berkeley Art Museum (February 2001).

About a year ago, poet Jeff Clark showed me a work by Joe Brainard, which was subsequently included in the catalogue of the current retrospective of Brainard's work at the Berkeley Art Museum, although it is absent from the exhibition itself. *ARTnews* Annual 34, 1968, consists of about 17 overlapping reproductions of well-known paintings—mostly avant-garde but including some "classics" like the Mona Lisa —each transformed by the insertion of Ernie Bushmiller's comic strip creation, *Nancy*, which seemingly wraps around an actual issue of the 1968 *ARTnews* Annual.

I was familiar with Brainard's penchant for appropriating Bushmiller's *Nancy* in his works, but I had never seen such a dazzling example. It's one thing to give Nancy the Afro her hair anachronistically begs for, or to imagine her as if de Kooning had drawn her, but to place the visage of Nancy over the head of *Woman 1*—a then-recently determined "masterpiece" thus handled by its partisans (still defensive of their judgment) with the most solemn forms of approbation—might seem the act of some sneering charlatan floating a career on negative critiques of success. Yet there's little trace of venom in Brainard's admittedly "comic" deflation of "high art" solemnity. Rather *ARTnews Annual* successfully embodies the oft-asserted but seldom achieved post-modern notion of leveling cultural hierarchies, approaching all their products as at least potentially of equal interest. Indeed, the collage offers us a variety of a ways in which to think such a proposition through.

For the cover of an annual whose thematic title is *The Avant-Garde*, Brainard chose both traditional and avant-garde paintings as backgrounds for Nancy's antics.

The *ARTnews Annual* collage suggests a certain continuity between the two concepts, insofar as the techniques of the latter are almost always absorbed by the former. In 1919, Marcel Duchamp produced *L.H.O.O.Q.*, an "assisted readymade," by taking a cheap reproduction of the Mona Lisa and drawing a mustache on her face. Brainard here pays homage to this gesture of irreverence by collaging Nancy's head onto the same painting, replacing *La Gioconda's* ambiguity with Nancy's unabashedness.

Nancy Diptych, 1974

Performing a similar operation a few inches away on the successive heads of *Nude Descending a Staircase*, Brainard effectively acknowledges Duchamp by extending him the same courtesy of deflation. Or inflation, as the case may be, for the effect is less a satire and more an invitation, to experience art as a visceral, sensuous pleasure instead of an exclusively cerebral burden. No doubt more people in this country have experienced such pleasure with comics; Brainard's adoption of Nancy proposes we feel this pleasure with "serious" art too. And Nancy, waving from a Johns target, or drowning in a turbulent Pollock, or popping out and shouting BOO! from a door no one suspected in Mondrian, makes such a proposal difficult to turn down.

Perhaps more importantly, Brainard also sidesteps Clement Greenberg's conception (then influential but now dated) of modern painting as a struggle to determine its essential path of development by mixing figurative and non-figurative avant-gardists. Greenberg's insistence on the necessity of non-figurative abstraction is countered by Brainard's placing it side-by-side with figurative art. For both simply exist in the same artworld, and Brainard shows no impulse to take sides. In a previously unpublished essay, printed for the first time in the catalogue for Brainard's retrospective, Brainard expresses his admiration for—among others—Pollock, Warhol, de Kooning, Dali, Hans Hoffmann, and Johns, with no false innocence or air of willful perversity. Likewise, the astonishing variety of his output doesn't come across as "pointlessly eclectic," a buzz-worry of the current poetic avant-garde at least, indicating Greenberg's lingering influence.

One of the many eye-opening aspects of Brainard's first museum retrospective—despite the cramped quarters apportioned by Berkeley—is the sort of consistent sensibility emanating from his wide-ranging media. As he once told Anne Waldman, "I don't ever have an idea. The material does it all." This modest submission to the materials—even styles—at hand is quite palpable in a room of his works. His comic collaborations with New York School poets, for example, are executed in distinct styles reflecting the types of newspaper strips he derives them from. A 1964 collaboration with Barbara Guest, for example, juxtaposes a panel-violating fantasia (Thinking, complete with title framed in the old Batman silhouette) with Joan and Ken, an on-going soap opera in the vein of Mary Worth, whose individual strips remain stridently incomprehensible to all but devoted fans. Later, in a more abstract comic universe co-authored by John Ashbery (*The Great Explosion Mystery*, 1966), meticulously rendered baseball-team logos (Yankees, Dodgers, etc.) speak alongside numbers and the shapes of various states such as one might find in textbook or atlas. Suddenly we see hints of Brainard's collage-techniques in these free-hand pen and ink drawings, finding a mutual and entertaining context for disparate "images," in their way as oddly engaging as any anthropomorphized animal.

As exhibition curator Constance Lewallen notes, Brainard seemed quite aware "that his stylistic diversity did not serve his career." He lacked, as he put it, "a definite commodity," a signature style available for reference as he himself on the *ARTnews* cover refers to Warhol via a "characteristic" example, his famous Campbell Soup cans. Yet this difference doesn't imply disagreement, at least on Brainard's end, insofar as Brainard wrote on Warhol with sincere appreciation on more than one occasion.

Brainard's own lack of a particular product to sell to the artworld sits comfortably alongside his own fascination with products, be they mass-produced or one-of-a-kind. Again he proposes no hierarchy and allows that a good piece of commercial design could furnish as much visual luxury as a masterpiece of high art. Much pop art acknowledges this insight, and indeed participates in it, but usually by way of arousing shame at our own vacuity. Brainard's use of the mass-produced is not so repressed, though it does imply discernment. Leveling here does not necessarily mean the equality of all cultural products so much as a lack of automatic bias against a given example simply on the basis of its production or reproduction.

7 Up, 1962

One of the earliest works included in the retrospective, *7 Up*, 1962 is from a series executed before Brainard was aware of Pop Art. The title gives us a sufficient sense of its principle content, the 7 Up label. But soda is not the subject matter, or it would be hard to read this painting as commentary on the nature of the product or our relationship to it, the way John Yau convincingly writes of Warhol's *Brillo Box*. Brainard rather emphasizes the 7 Up logo in terms of its sensuousness, particularly its curving 7. To estrange us from its customary role as product identification, to get us to view the logo as visual product itself, Brainard paints it large, in a dirty but peculiarly attractive sky blue. Moreover, *7 Up* is less literal, more mysterious than simple Pop reproduction. The sky-blue color of the brand name also occupies roughly half of

the background; in both cases, the blue leaks, through the boundary (sometimes drawn, sometimes merely indicated) of the 7 Up digits or from the background over other defined boundaries. Behind the digits we see three more letters (STO) painted in red—on a blue background that slightly drips over them—and obscured by the blue 7 Up itself. Similarly other colors show through the black paint that inconsistently transforms the logo into block letters. About half the background is dirty white, and it too penetrates boundaries. Within the red O of STO is a white patch that could seem like an unfinished portion of the clearly outlined letter. However, the possibility that this patch covers the red is also live.

While executing a Pop "subject," Brainard thus investigates abstract expressionism's obsession with eliminating foreground/background distinctions. (Later he will develop his own all-over technique through his garden collages of the late '60s, in which flowers of various sorts crowd each other, becoming both figure and ground.) Blurring this distinction beyond arbitration here are the small bubbles which accompany the digits of brand-name as part of the 7 Up logo. In Brainard's rendering, some are white, some blue, and each is bordered at least in part by both colors.

7 Up thus provokes more questions than otherwise analogous pop appropriations. The collapse of the foreground/background distinction is itself questioned by other unaccountable fragments which seem to well-up from behind; below the "p" of "7 Up" we glimpse further possible signs, perhaps a red "A" over the numerals 7 and 3. And we haven't yet taken the STO into account. If it latches on to the "p" in 7 Up, again combining two layers of the painting into one, it says "STOP," an impression reinforced by the word "GO" traced in but not differentiated from the blue of the sensuous 7. Perhaps the letters are a fragment of "STORE" or even "GROCERY STORE," a plausible enough place to encounter the product.

7 Up ultimately keeps the foreground/ background question a question rather than denying the distinction altogether. Perhaps this is the best response, for the elimination of background, in the sense of context, is never complete. Few people would lean against a Pollock, mistaking it for part of the wall. In this sense, products retain their objecthood. Brainard's remark in a letter to poet James Schuyler, "Sometimes what I do is purify objects," isn't vapidly idealistic even as it acknowledges the possibility of at least an individual openness to visual experience. The controversy Pop Art initially provoked more or less reaffirmed the context of high art even as Pop forced an expansion of that context. *A Campbell's Soup Can* was not previously considered a work of art, though Warhol's versions now are.

If this retrospective is an accurate picture of Brainard's development, it would appear that he increasingly incorporates actual objects from popular culture instead of reproducing them. His "purification" of objects becomes more literal, not in the representational sense of Brillo Box, but through the genuine presence of products in his work. The undated White Owl assemblage is a case in point, insofar as the inclusion of an actual cigar box cover underscores the wonderful surreality of the image of said owl perching on a giant, magically-suspended, and definitely lit cigar. The purification of the object here consists not simply in Brainard's recontextualizing it, from functional to visual, but also in his wry attempt to strip the cigar of its

customarily masculine signification. The legend WHITE OWL BRAND is slightly cut short by an image of the moon (a feminine principle in alchemy and mythology), reducing the phrase to WHITE OWL BRA.

Perhaps the biggest revelation in the exhibition—both figuratively and literally—is *Prell*, 1965, one of the "madonna assemblages" which command their own alcove off the main room. If I say that these works seem reminiscent of some of Bruce Conner's nylon assemblages, like *Son of the Sheik*, 1963, it is also by way of acknowledging their differences. Conner's "tone" is much darker than Brainard's; Brainard's works more frankly recall a shrine than Conner's. Both series draw on some of the same junk store materials (yarn, costume jewelry, broken dolls) though Brainard incorporates more specific and recognizable commercial products and uses increasingly vibrant colors. *Prell* is perhaps the most fully realized of these works. In it, a blue and green pieta-style Madonna (Mary holding the dead Christ in her lap) is surrounded by green beads, brooches, and faux gemstones. Brainard further frames the statue with ten travel-size bottles of *Prell* shampoo, with an additional two flanking a hand emerging from the top of the piece in a tangle of beads.

It is difficult to characterize *Prell* green, save by anecdote. When director Richard Lester needed an "otherworldly" color to represent the power source of Superman's Fortress of Solitude in *Superman II*, he finally settled on a clear, slender tube filled with *Prell*. The color both allures and repulses; Superman is playing with fire here. *Prell* green in Brainard's assemblage likewise conjures paradoxical associations, lending itself equally to emeralds, natural but rare, and to our imaginative pictures of toxic sludge, unnatural and all too common. These rows of tiny bottles also exude an air of preciousness, like brandy-filled chocolates or perfume bottles. After gazing at *Prell* for some time, I noticed that the last bottle of shampoo in the upper row of five is almost empty. I found this viscerally unnerving, unable to lose the impression that liquid had escaped, that the long beads hanging from the bottom of the piece were strands of *Prell* or that the edibility of the dull green rubber grapes immediately below the row was somehow compromised. *Prell* ran through the fingers of the hand atop the work. I'm perhaps a trifle more squeamish than average, but I imagine the idea of loose *Prell* flowing near a work of art would be disconcerting to most of its appreciators. Again Brainard evinces a complex engagement with the very notion of context; what cleans in one context might soil in another. If we can be disturbed by the *Prell* happily violating context, we haven't fully accepted the challenge Brainard offers us. We retain a sense of hierarchies—however attenuated—rather than adopting a visual sense unbiased by institutional standards. Brainard presents *Prell* as an object of beauty (a sort of fantasia on the extremes of green, from leaves to chemicals) but whether or not we can accept the work as such, clean or soiled, remains, again, an open question.

The effect of this retrospective on Brainard's reputation as an artist will be interesting to gauge. As it stands now, Brainard himself occupies a paradoxical position. In the artworld, he is nowhere near the top of the established list of twentieth-century masters. Yet in the poetry world, he is something of a giant, associated with the New York School, who are today acknowledged as one of the most important groups in recent poetry. Too, his seemingly off-hand writings, especially his series of *I Remember* works (1970- 73 and subsequently collected

in one volume in 1975), have exerted tremendous influence among the current generation of young avant-garde poets.

Untitled (Queen for a Day), 1975

A great deal, if not most, of his pre-retrospective following has been composed of poets. Perhaps Brainard found more affinity among the small press avant-garde, whose products very often can't achieve the status of commodities as their consumer audience is mostly composed of fellow practitioners. Poets tend to generate little money from poetry itself, save in comparatively rare cases. Much small press poetry is given away for free, or exchanged for other poetry. And though Brainard appears to have made a "decent living" as an artist, he was also known for giving away work. Moreover, his artwork for numerous poetry books—e.g. John Ashbery's *The Vermont Notebook* (Black Sparrow, 1975) or Ted Berrigan's *Train Ride* (Vehicle Editions, 1971)—constitutes something like a gift. A poet might acquire such volumes for pleasure, inspiration, or any of the other reasons poets read poetry. But the book's inclusion of a Joe Brainard cover or drawing is a bonus, like receiving a work of visual art for free.

The commercial valuelessness of poetry is endowed with value, proof of which are the extraordinary prices such volumes, their scarcity abetted by the passage of time, now demand. There is always a market for visual art. These books can eventually become commodities, but seldom for the artists involved. Even work in the spirit of Brainard can't transcend this situation. But his practice itself indicates a way out of the dilemma, insofar as we may see through Brainard's art the conditions of affordable beauty, and learn to practice it on our own.

Brainard's genius is ultimately his daring to rescue what's considered the junk of our culture, be it popular comics, product labels, indeed even the practice of traditional oil painting, relegated to the trash-heap since the dawn of modernism. At least one of his small body of oil paintings *Untitled, 1973/ 74*—a depiction of Whippoorwill, the pet of the poet Kenward Elmslie, Brainard's lover and frequent collaborator, folded into itself as though asleep, yet with its one visible eye wide-open and alert—seems to me as wonderful as any of the works executed in the several genres with which the artist is more usually associated.

I began with an unfinished anecdote, of the poet Jeff Clark showing me *ARTnews Annual 34* for the first time. He had just acquired the volume, not as a rare or even used book, but as a piece of random junk on sale at San Francisco's Community Thrift, for the princely sum of one dollar. The books that make it to a thrift shop are generally the junkiest items in the shop, volumes the meanest bookstore would sniff at, like an ancient pile of *Reader's Digest* condensed novels. I thought Brainard, if alive, might have been amused at this turn of events, the rescuer of junk himself rescued from a junk heap. For Clark, a Brainard fan of long-standing, knew that liberating this book for a nominal fee was quite different than purchasing some outdated annual. It was like getting a free work of art.

Berkeley Art Museum
2625 Durant Street

Berkeley CA 94720

Original URL:

<http://www.stereorrific.com/siteGarrettCaples/topBottomFrameset.asp?http://www.stereorrific.com/siteGarrettCaples/infoDetail.asp?ilD=285&iCatID=171>

Gooch, Brad. "Nancy Ideas: Joe Brainard Exhibition at University of California, Berkeley Art Museum." *Artforum* (February 2001): 124- 128.

Joe Brainard wasn't a legend in his own time. Well, actually, he started out as one. His send-ups of Ernie Bushmiller's comic-strip goof-fatale Nancy, the frizzy-haired figure sticking her menacing smiley face into such masterpieces as Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase" and de Kooning's "Woman I," were collaged on the front and back covers of *Art News Annual* in 1968. He was then twenty-six: tall, wiry, curly-headed, peering through oversize nerdy glasses, wearing black Keds. In 1975, *People* magazine ran a feature with the corny title "Think Tiny" on his Guinness Book of Records—esque Fischbach Gallery show of bits and pieces of imagery culled as a series of 1,500 miniatures. And then Brainard simply erased himself, rarely showing his work in public after 1979.

What's clear now about Brainard, who died of AIDS in 1994, from the 164-work retrospective opening this month at the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum, is how searing and retinal he was, the nimbus effect of his accumulated work shorthanded by Carter Ratcliff in the exhibition catalogue as "quiet dazzle." From as early as 1962, fresh off the road from Tulsa, and before Brainard had ever seen a Warhol soup can, comes a bright 7 Up logo, painted on canvas in sloppy sky blue enamel. From the deep space of his cut-ups of the early '70s, layers of Plexiglas segregate tracteries of meticulously hand-cut leaves, grasses, and amber straw in a kind of manic pastoral. Most alluring and vertically showy of all are the Madonna collages of the late '60s and early '70s, especially "Untitled (Good 'n Fruity Madonna)," 1968. Sexiest, the drawings of Hockney-limned tan boys in white briefs seemingly woven of photons.

I first learned about this busy eye of Brainard's the hard way. In 1974, as a broke young poet, I worked for him unsuccessfully for a few weeks. As a collaborator with poets in his *C Comics*, a designer of chapbook covers for the likes of Ted Berrigan, Kenneth Koch, and John Ashbery, and a poet himself—his book-length catalogue poem "I Remember" (1970) is arguably one of the most original works of the last three decades—he took pity on me. But when I arrived at his loft on Greene Street in SoHo, which felt like the inside of a cedar trunk, I found the floor covered with ziggurats of piles of playing cards, scraps and colored paper, ripped cardboard, gnarly flattened metal coffee cans. A "recycle bin" of urban detritus. My job was to pick through all these square feet of scraps and retrieve any that contained a certain shade of robin's breast red. After a few hours of (to borrow Frank O'Hara's phrase) "practically going to sleep with quandariness," I gave up.

Of a similar encounter with Brainard's magpie routine, the poet Anne Waldman wrote in the *Saint Marks Poetry Project* newsletter: "Once at the beach in Westhampton, Long Island, he

was spotting, bending over and collecting 'anything blue' at an alarming rate—used flash cubes, ancient seaworn Bromo Seltzer bottles, a frayed plastic cord, and broken light bulbs. Later, these items appeared in some striking "sand" collages, literally embedded in sand (cemented so they stuck fast)." Among these "sand" assemblages is an untitled 1970 mounted quilt of weathered wood scraps that might well have been named "Sunday at the Beach with Kurt Schwitters." It was this method of working that led Robert Rosenblum to describe Brainard's 1967- 69 *Gardens* series—dozens of tight rows of mechanically embroidered fabric flowers, or a combination of appliqué and paper—as "wondrous excavations from another century's yard sale."

I suppose we thought of Brainard then from within the "system" of poetry. He wasn't a painter's painter; he was a poet's painter. Like the mimeographed magazines and diaristic, offhand, funny, blindingly stylish, word-crunching poems of the downtown poets, his witty sparks of art seemed a sidebar to the short menu of "big statement" styles available to the era: Abstract Expressionist, Pop, Conceptual, Minimal. As Brainard told the poet Tim Dlugos in a 1980 interview in Dennis Cooper's LA poetry 'zine, *Little Caesar*: "Most artists are very straight, I mean straight in their seriousness and in what they're trying to do. I think I'm a lot more sensual, I mean I'm a lot more gaga than that—but on purpose. No, not on purpose." Besides the poets, whatever semblance of an artistic posse he had included only other idiosyncratics—Alex Katz, Fairfield Porter, and, from afar, Joseph Cornell of the shadow boxes.

Ever since Brainard stopped making work for exhibition, though, the art world has been making a place for him, without even realizing it. Brainard was so into style that he could never pick a style. For several years he even took up oil painting, accomplishing several portraits of poet Kenward Elmslie's whippet, Whippoorwill, lounging as a sumptuous white odalisque on a putrid green velvet sofa in Vermont. This fitful promiscuity of styles we now glumly think of as "postmodern." Brainard's innocent cutouts don't look so out there after the many homages to the scissors of childhood by Donald Baechler. Keith Haring's radioactive stick men were as ubiquitous and somehow free of attitude as Brainard's Nancy. Damien Hirst's display of cigarette butts like mounted butterflies in glass cases brings back Brainard's "Untitled (Big Chesterfield)" of 1961-62, or his framing, as a sort of relic, of an actual cigarette butt squashed out by Willem de Kooning. Certainly no one needs to be convinced there is now a guilt-free audience for Brainard's boy drawings—Aubrey Beardsley meets pornographer William Higgins. (Of a possible gay slant to his work, Brainard once wrote, "Actually—I can't see that being a gay painter makes any difference whatsoever, except that every now and then my work seems shockingly 'sissy' to me.")

What might not seem so obvious is how conceptual Brainard was. Not, of course, in the sense of the blackboard didacticism of Joseph Kosuth or Lawrence Weiner. First off, Brainard was a writer, one of the rare examples of someone who could zigzag with equal expertise between painting and poetry. Without any labored manifestos, he devised an entire series of "Ten Imaginary Still Lifes," including "Imaginary Still Life No. 2": "I close my eyes. I see white. Lots of white. And gray. Cool gray. Cool gray fabric shadows. (It is a painting!) With no yellow. By a very old man." Somehow these slight-seeming knockoffs got to the nub of any debates about mind,

perception, process, and product as insouciantly as his *I Remember* poems—"I remember the sound of the ice cream man coming"—put to rest the pretension that had accrued to the mini-epics of memory of the romantics, while refreshing the formula. (*I Remember* has recently been rereleased in an expanded edition by Granary Books.)

Saying that Brainard was conceptual partly just means that he knew what he was up to, even if he didn't always let on. And what he was up to, artwise, was keeping his look fresh, his vision uncorrected. If you walk briskly through a room of Vermeers in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam without even staring at them, you still catch flashes of luminescence peripherally. A walk through a roomful of Brainards has the same all-over halo effect. He did let on once, in that same *Little Caesar* interview, when he said, "People want to buy a Warhol or a person instead of a work. My work's never become 'a Brainard.'" He'd wriggled free, whether on purpose or not, from being branded, and so dulled.

When Brainard took down his shingle, no longer participating in the elite cottage industry of high art, he also gave up the Methedrine that had fueled many of his funniest, most beautiful visual riddles of the mid-'70s, little rebuses like the collage he made in 1977 of penguins on ice floes staring up at marbled beach balls bouncing like a galaxy of suns in a white sky. He swept the floor of his loft clean and took to reading nineteenth-century novels. A pretty accurate picture of his existence from then on shows up in "A Few Days," by James Schuyler, the poet closest to him in sensibility, in imbuing the everyday with unpretentious luminescence (like Hitchcock's glass of milk lit from within in *Notorious*): "Joe decides what he's going to do, then he does it./ This summer it's/ been sunbathing and reading Dickens and Henry James."

Yet I remember endless conversations among us young poets about what Brainard was up to. ("I don't believe in things I want, like being famous and making money," he told Dlugos. "All that stuff is—I'd like to do it, but I don't believe in it as much as I used to.") Especially as his hair turned silver gray, there were all sorts of suspicions that his early retirement was somehow touched by saintliness. That he was teaching us a lesson. That he was a bodhisattva, not just burned-out. It was just such an unusual thing to do. Behind this talk was the felt conviction that Brainard as an artist was going to add up to more than the sum of the hundreds of thousands of pieces he produced before he quit the business. "Joe Brainard: A Retrospective" proves that our hunch was indubitably true.

The thought balloon of a cartoon work from *C Comics 2*, done way back in 1966, might well be the thought balloon for the entire show, emitting across time from Brainard's cat's eye of a stuttering brain. In all caps in an ink cloud above the head of a fox-trotting couple, perhaps on shipboard, he'd written: "PEOPLE OF THE WORLD: RELAX!!!"

Original URL: http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_6_39/ai_75577298

"Review of Joe Brainard: A Retrospective." *Art on Paper* 5.4 (March/ April 2001).

An eclectic body of work can often be disadvantageous to an artist, as Joe Brainard noted in an

interview: "I don't have a definite commodity... People want to buy a Warhol or a person instead of a work. My work's never become 'a Brainard' "—but he didn't mind. Brainard, who died in 1994, is the subject of a traveling retrospective that was organized by the Berkeley Art Museum. This is an important exhibition that will no doubt revive interest in a prolific artist whose work, widely known by the late 70s, sadly faded from view until receiving a degree of posthumous recognition in the past few years (see, for example, *On Paper 1/4*, pp. 36- 40). Difficult to categorize, Brainard was fairly uninterested in the art world, and boasted an easy versatility in many media, from three-dimensional assemblages to veristically modeled graphite drawings, traditionally painted still lifes, and vibrant mixed-media collages of madonnas and flowers. With charming tributes-as-essays by John Ashbery and Carter Ratcliff, an equally devoted biographical overview by Constance Lewallen, interviews, selections from Brainard's own writing, and two bibliographies, this slim yet comprehensive catalogue affords readers a chance to enjoy the scope of Brainard's imagination—smart, irreverent, and sensitive by turn.