

THE Uproar

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Verbatim: Getting to Know Bo Bartlett

The Uproar met with the artist to discuss his personal art journey and recent projects.
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Bartlett and Stringfellow meeting to discuss art and creativity.
Photography by Braxton Lee.

Bo Bartlett is a local realist American artist with a modern vision. He has more than fifty years of experience in the creative, storytelling, and visual world. He has showcased exhibits and galleries since the 1980s. Since 2012, Bo Bartlett has been showing with the Miles McEnery Gallery in New York and has worked on films such as *Microwave Bleed* (1987), *Snowhill* (1995), *Things Don't Stay Fixed* (2021), and more.

The Uproar sat down with Bo Bartlett to discuss aspects of his journey that have accumulated through his life experience, philosophy, love for art, childhood, and his most recent projects.

You and I are in Professor Temesge's "Intro to Screenwriting " class. On the first day of class, you mentioned having done film work before and wanting to take the course to work on screenwriting.

Yeah, that's right. I've made films like documentaries. I've never written a screenplay. I've always relied on other people to write the script. But, with my next project, I want to do it all myself. I want to have complete control over it. So, if it doesn't work out, I'm the one responsible. (laughing).

Is it too early to ask about your next film project?

It is a little early to ask, but I do have the title, and I have the scenes. It's about five guys accused of something they didn't do and will have to work out of it. It's a metaphor, an example, of how some people are perceived in society though they haven't done anything wrong. I'm thinking of whether or not to write it for Natalia's class.



Photography by Braxton Lee.

For art, do you find it a means to either explicitly or implicitly examine triggers that bother you?

I think so, but you don't want to use art as therapy. When you choose a subject, it has to not just didactically explain the process, it's more about working through that issue yourself. In that way, the process can invade your own emotions and go into the art. That way, the art has a genuine pack of emotional experiences. We all have our stories to tell, and everyone has a different, genuine, and valid experience. Therefore, the goal is to tell your story.

Do you feel that painting is the strongest medium for you to convey your story?

When I was a kid, I didn't speak well, I was a slow reader. It has to do with the brain. I grew up experiencing the world visually, and it's nice to know, as I've gotten older, to learn this about the brain and why. So, it's natural – biological – to express myself through my visual experience of the world around me. I naturally became a painter, and that was true since I was a tiny kid. Because of my visual life, I'm seriously considering filmmaking as a regular project. I'll keep painting, of course, but you have to keep a beginner's mind no matter what you do.

What is a “Beginner's Mind?”

You're young and learning things now. I was young at one point and was also learning things. When you're learning, you stay invigorated, and it's exciting. As long as you are learning something, you are happy. You'll get to a certain point in your work when you know how to do what you do. I know how to paint, and I'm happy to paint the way I paint. But you don't want to get bored. You don't want to become stagnant. So, you try new methods with new subjects, and that is how you keep learning and growing. You want to keep doing things you don't know how to do. That's how you keep yourself happy. That is one of the reasons I'm working on ArtHaus Radio with 88.5 FM WCUG.

Is trying new things one of the most rewarding aspects of being a creative artist?

The freedom to do whatever you want is one of the most rewarding things about being an artist. You don't have anyone telling you what to do. So, you have to be self-regulated and self-disciplined. Being free is the ultimate goal in many ways. Early on, as an artist, you have to accept that it might not be about wealth or success. It's about having the freedom to do what you want and search for the most rewarding things you can do. In that way, it can also help society at large. In an ideal world, we want our actions to be able to serve the whole. Art can focus on serving the whole. That's what artistic expression is about. Art acts as a guiding light, and that is very rewarding.

As a child, did you find that rewarding experience to be an inspiration to create art?

Early on, I had the urge to draw. I was always drawing and drawing; I couldn't stop. As artists, I think we are led to follow our urges to create art and trust ourselves. To trust the process. It's almost a religious experience to trust and follow that divine creativity to be fulfilled. That urge will lead you to study, which can lead you to school. Then you learn the craft of your art. You surround yourself with the craft and immerse yourself in the technique. At that point, you ask yourself the Joseph Campbell question: whom does the Grail serve? Am I doing this for myself? Am I doing this for fame and success? Am I doing this for money? You have to ask yourself these questions. You have to make those distinctions. Me, I love beautiful objects. I love creating them and seeing them in the canon of Western Art. You have to work towards creating the best possible work that you deem to be the best possible work. You make what you want to see in the world, which I think is true for any creative. So, I work towards creating and capturing beautiful objects and the emotional experiences that go with them.

What sort of artists were an inspiration for you growing up?

Growing up in Columbus, there weren't that many artists. So, I didn't have a way to know what art was. There were a few, Gerry Bosch and A. Henry Nordhausen, and I would come to visit them as a kid. I would knock on their door and ask if I could see what they do. When I got older, at eighteen, I went to Florence first. I started studying with Ben Long, a painter out of North Carolina. He sat me down and taught me how to draw. After that, I learned about the Pennsylvania Academy in Philadelphia and went there. One of the reasons for going was that I wanted to study privately with Andrew Wyeth. I like Norman Rockwell and Andrew Wyeth. Unfortunately, Andrew Wyeth wasn't taking any students at the time, so I went to study with Nelson Shanks, the greatest American portrait painter. I studied with him and learned how to paint. From there I got out of school and was ready to be on my own. I was lucky and sold out my first show in Philadelphia in 1981.

I started showing in New York in '88. I got a bad review in the New York Times by Roberta Smith. She still writes for the New York Times as the Senior Art Critic. Many of her friends gave me bad reviews, too. They all started piling on, and their reviews were harsh and scathing. It made me shrink away and made me think about giving up painting. What ended up happening was that Betsy Wyeth, Andrew Wyeth's wife, invited me out to their home and bought paintings from me. Betsy and Andrew encouraged me and told me they loved what I was doing. Betsy had seen I went to film school at NYU in '86. I started helping her make a film called "Snowhill". It took about six years. By the time I was finished making that, I was encouraged to start making art again. At that point, I wanted to paint. Andy had inspired me so much.

Where do you go when you learn your craft?

It's like driving. You learn how to drive, and you learn where the accelerator is, but where will you go? The reason for learning is so you can travel and go somewhere with your craft. That's true for any artistic learning. You don't want to stay where you are and drive around the block all the time. You can drive perfectly, but it won't do you any good unless you go somewhere with it. It's important to ask yourself that question about yourself and your craft, "Where are you going to go with it?" With your direction and skills, you learn to serve the whole system, if possible.

Do you believe the main point of art is to serve the whole system?

Yeah, I do. I believe in the power of art to transform our lives. It's more than an aesthetic vision. Art is alive, it's energy. Creating art is about sharing that energy. The energy we receive is like water flowing over a mountain, it goes in all directions. How we are affects everything, and this is true for each individual person. So, depending how we are will influence the direction that energy flows.

Does the energy present to you a clear image of what you want to create?

You're open, it's about being open. You go into it, you go into the possibilities, and you find what wants to become manifest. You learn what it means to be open. We have some ego shell, a protective covering, but we don't want it to get in the way. You have to have just enough ego to protect yourself. Everything is relevant. There's always a bigger fish. You have to realize that and keep as open as possible. You have to know the difference between aesthetic goodness and moral goodness. In aesthetic goodness, your stasis is always crumbling. Things have to become more unsettled so that the viewer will watch it. Andrew Wyeth said that Art has to have an edge. Garrison Keillor said, no one wants to hear about the perfect day. If the sky is blue and the flowers smell nice, and everyone is happy, then that's the end of the story. You have to have something come in to disrupt that stasis so you can make it right again. That disruption helps to make the story you are telling in your art. Moral goodness is not being the disruptor. To not be the one who creates the trouble. You have to hold both aesthetic and moral goodness. In the book *The Mind of the Maker* by Dorothy L. Sayer, she talks about how we channel creativity. Like the Holy Trinity, she breaks it up into ideas, energy, and power. She said you have to have a strong idea, and the energy that goes into it has to be equally strong and as powerful as the relationship between the art and the audience. An imbalance of these three things won't work well. Yeats put it best, "the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity." In the end, keep your life as simple and clean as possible so you can tap into all the drama in your work. That way, it won't throw you off.

As a last and perhaps silly question, what does Bo Bartlett like to do when he is not working on a project?

I am always working on a project. But I sleep. I sleep and dream. I eat a good meal, and I love baths.