

ArtCritic

Emily Mason's Quest for Color and Truth

Bo Bartlett's monumental paintings are visual theaters where the grand drama of American life unfolds. When he paints a family by a pickup truck with a dead deer, it's not just a hunting scene, it's a powerful allegory of contemporary America.

29 December 2024 | By Hervé Lancelin



Halloween, 2016, Oil on linen, 82 x 100 inches.

Listen to me carefully, you bunch of snobs who think you know everything about American contemporary art. Today, I'm going to talk to you about Bo Bartlett, born in 1955 in Columbus, Georgia. Yes, Georgia, that Deep South state you so despise from your comfortable New York pied-à-terres.

This American realist painter with a modernist vision deserves attention, if only to shatter our self-righteous certainties about what contemporary art is or should be. Stop swooning over the latest trendy conceptual installations for a moment and open your eyes wide.

The first striking thing about Bartlett is his unique way of creating monumental paintings that are cinematic stagings of deep America. His canvases are not mere paintings but visual theaters where the grand drama of American life unfolds. As Roland Barthes might have said, it is precisely in this deliberate theatricality that the truth of his work lies. When he paints *Young Life* (1994), a family in front of a pickup truck with a dead deer on the roof, it's not just a hunting scene, it's a powerful allegory of contemporary America. The blood on the hunter's pants, the young boy mimicking the armed adult, all of this composes a visual choreography that speaks to us about transmission, ritualized violence, and American masculinity.

But be careful, Bartlett is not just a regionalist chronicler. His genius lies in transcending the local to reach the universal, much like William Faulkner did in literature with his imaginary Yoknapatawpha County. When he paints vast Southern landscapes, isolated houses bathed in an unreal light, or characters frozen in enigmatic poses, he creates what Walter Benjamin called "dialectical images," images that condense historical tensions and hidden truths of the present.

The second great strength of Bartlett is his ability to create what I would call an "uncanny familiarity." His paintings seem normal, almost banal at first glance, but there's always a disturbing element that destabilizes our perspective. Take *Halloween* (2016) with its costumed children crossing a deserted street. The scene appears ordinary until you notice the strange silence emanating from the composition, the total absence of joy or natural

movement in these little figures who resemble a funeral procession more than a joyful quest for candy. It's David Lynch in painting, my friends.

This tension between the familiar and the strange is pushed by Bartlett to the point of creating what philosopher Jacques Rancière would call a specific "aesthetic regime." His paintings function as visual traps, luring us with their apparent narrative simplicity only to confront us with something deeper and more unsettling. In *The American* (2016), a man in a suit aims a rifle at an invisible off-screen target. The image is terrifyingly banal, like a news photograph gone wrong.

In 1991, Roberta Smith of *The New York Times* called his work "idiotic." What irony when we now see the visionary power of his works! Bartlett had the courage to persevere despite New York critics who considered him a backward provincial. He continued to paint his grand narrative canvases when everyone told him it was outdated, passé, reactionary.

What's fascinating is his way of playing with the codes of American realism while subtly subverting them. He takes the legacy of Edward Hopper, Andrew Wyeth, and Thomas Eakins but derails it slightly, creating what Gilles Deleuze would call "crystal-images," images where real and virtual, actual and possible, constantly overlap and exchange places.

Look at how he uses light in his paintings. It's not the naturalistic light of a Wyeth or the dramatic light of a Caravaggio, but something else, an almost metaphysical light that transforms the most mundane scenes into moments of epiphany. Susan Sontag would probably have seen in this use of light a form of inadvertent "camp," an excessive theatricalization of the everyday that ultimately reveals profound truths about contemporary America.

His characters are often frozen in poses reminiscent of 19th-century tableaux vivants, but with a troubling psychological dimension that instead evokes the photographs of Gregory Crewdson. This tension between pictorial tradition and psychological modernity creates what Friedrich Nietzsche would have called an "Apollonian-Dionysian effect," a façade of order and harmony barely concealing an underlying chaos.



The American, 2016, Oil on linen, 82 x 100 inches.

Bartlett's genius is in understanding that to depict contemporary America, paradoxically, he had to move away from photographic realism. His paintings are hyperrealistic in technique but surreal in emotional impact. This is what Maurice Merleau-Ponty called "perceptual faith," the ability of painting to make us see the world differently, to make us doubt what we think we know.

Take his *Lacunae* series, which explores gaps between established religions and secular worlds. These paintings are not simple illustrations of theological concepts but visual explorations of what Giorgio Agamben would call the "sacred profane," those moments when the divine erupts into the

everyday in disturbing and inexplicable ways.

His technique is impeccable, sure, but it's his conceptual audacity that truly sets him apart. He dares to paint monumental scenes at a time when figurative painting is deemed outdated by the art establishment. He persists in believing in painting's ability to tell complex stories when the trend is toward minimalist installations and ephemeral performances.

What's remarkable about Bartlett is that he creates images that operate on multiple levels simultaneously. His paintings are accessible at first glance, you can simply appreciate their formal beauty and technical mastery. But they also contain deeper layers of meaning, historical and cultural references that enrich their interpretation without ever making them inaccessible.

His work poses a fundamental question: how to paint America today? How to represent a deeply divided nation without resorting to clichés or propaganda? His answer is to create what Jacques Derrida would call "specters," images that haunt our present by simultaneously invoking the past and the future.

Bartlett's strength is in creating a style that transcends easy oppositions between figuration and abstraction, tradition and modernity. He paints works that are both classical in form and profoundly contemporary in content. This is what Arthur Danto would call "post-historical art," art that freely draws on all traditions while remaining resolutely of its time.

His grand narrative compositions function as what Umberto Eco would term "open works," they suggest stories without imposing them, leaving the viewer free to imagine their own interpretations. This is especially evident in works like *Homeland*, where historical references blend with contemporary elements to create a complex and ambiguous temporality.

Bartlett dares to take his time, develop ideas over several years, and create works that demand slow, attentive contemplation. He rejects the ease of spectacular effects in favor of what Susan Sontag would call an "erotics of art," an approach that engages all our senses and intellect.

Bartlett's courage lies in persisting with his vision when everyone told him narrative painting was dead. He continued to believe in figurative art's ability to speak to our era, to create what Walter Benjamin called "dialectical images," images that condense the contradictions of our time.

His work reminds us that painting can still surprise, move, and make us think. So yes, laugh at his "provincialism," mock his attachment to figuration, but don't forget that art history is full of artists misunderstood in their lifetime because they refused to follow trends. Bo Bartlett may well be one of them, a painter who chose to stay true to his vision rather than court the art market's favor.

And if you still think figurative painting is dead, I suggest you visit one of his exhibitions. You might be surprised to discover it's very much alive and still has much to say about our time and ourselves. As Nietzsche said, "We have art in order not to die of the truth." Bartlett's paintings offer us just that: a truth that doesn't kill us but helps us better understand our world and our place within it.