

Kayu – Lucie Fontaine’s branch in Bali, Indonesia – is pleased to present its fourth project, “*Forgotten Optical Satsuma Filters*,” a solo exhibition by British-born, Balibased artist Ashley Bickerton.

The exhibition will include new works to be displayed in Kayu’s space as well as outside in the garden surrounding the Rumah Topeng Dan Wayang Setiadarma compound. The exhibition is the culmination of a series of dialogues between the artist and Lucie Fontaine’s employees, who have been great admirers of his work since they have discovered it in art school and followed since then.

Celebrating Lucie Fontaine’s admiration for Ashley Bickerton is the following interview, which originally appeared in *Kaleidoscope* Asia Edition Issue #2 (Fall/Winter 2015) and reappears here in its integral version.

**Lucie Fontaine:** One of the most fascinating things about your work is its desire to be continuously misunderstood. Speaking of misunderstanding, I would like to ask you about the very beginning when, after studying at CalArts, you moved to New York and – together with artists Jeff Koons and Peter Halley – showed at Meyer Vaisman’s artist-run gallery International with Monument. After that you were labelled as ‘Neo Geo’ along with Koons, Halley and Vaisman and exhibited at Sonnabend Gallery. I remember you saying how distant you felt from them, both generationally and artistically, and how you felt closer to painters John Currin and Richard Phillips, whom you met when you were their very young teacher at Yale. In other words – can we speak about painting?

**Ashley Bickerton:** I am not quite sure I have ever had any direct desire to be misunderstood. Indeed I have always laboured under the belief that I am making my ideas as plain as possible. This probably speaks most loudly to the idiosyncratic nature of those ideas. Trying to be strange and far out for its own sake is always dull, but pushing your work hard, relentlessly building logic upon logic until you end up somewhere far away is something else entirely. My work always comes about organically, often out of some crush on another artist’s work. You set out to see if you can do something like that artist’s work, to see if you can create something that has a similar effect on you, but it usually ends up as something completely different.

As for my early generational roots, I think it was a result of perhaps being a bit too precocious and driven that I ended up being identified with a group of artists that were quite a bit older than myself. While I very much liked the work of some of these ‘contemporaries’ and there was certainly a very

healthy inter-artist dialogue in place, I never liked the way the media built a tight and restrictive little package where I was now supposed to stay and behave. Being both British and American, literally and culturally, and also hanging out with what amounted to a sort of British mafia living in New York, when the Young British Artists made their first forays into New York, I was one of the natural landing strips. For a great moment there was quite a scene, mostly centred on the loft of fellow Brit and curator Clarissa Dalrymple, as well as several favourite bars in south SoHo and the East Village. They were all there: Sarah Lucas, Gary Hume, Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin et al., and for some reason they held the work I was doing then in very high esteem, higher in fact than it was held by the establishment in New York at that time. It was also at this point that I came into contact with the Yale crowd. I had gone up there to give a lecture and studio critiques and was bowled over by the group that was then in the graduate program. This was a class that included Matthew Barney, Michael Joo, Michael Joaquim Grey, Sean Landers, John Currin, and Richard Phillips. Pretty soon these two groups, the Brits and the Americans, were mixing it up socially and artistically in a very vibrant and heady moment and I found myself right at the heart of it all. These are the artists I actually hung out with, discussed art with, and shared dreams with. The ‘Neo Geo’ package I always felt was more of a construction built for ease of public consumption.

**LF:** After leaving New York you lived in Brazil and finally established yourself in Bali. While many people see this as a Gauguin-like escape, I actually see it as a kind of return home, considering the fact that you were born in Barbados and spent your childhood in Hawaii (as Gauguin did in Peru). Can you describe the influence of these places and the people around you – your father is an anthropologist and linguist and your mother a writer – to your work?

**AB:** New York was a necessity and the connections and networks I built up in my 12 years there are still the primary ones that serve me to this day, almost a quarter of a century later and all the way on the other side of the world. I love New York madly but I always knew I was not made of the stuff to survive northeastern winters and great shrieking metropolises. Indeed, as the child of an anthropological linguist, I had lived most of my peripatetic childhood on a series of tropical islands. I knew one day I would have to move to a climate and circumstance that better suited the tropical creature that I always was. Well in 1993, with a market crash, a divorce, and my career suddenly floundering, I thought the time was right. My original plan was to travel with no particular destination, carrying two suitcases – one for personal items, and the other for art supplies. I was going full vagabond, living in hotel rooms and rented villas, and just making drawings and small paintings for the foreseeable future. I ended up down on a beach in the jungles of Bahia, Brazil. It worked for a while but there were some logistical problems with communications, obtaining art supplies, and shipping work out. There was also another small matter of a local Bahiana girl and her

angry gangster boyfriend. I decided I better make tracks, with the girl in tow, to the other side of the world. I knew Bali well, and knew that getting art supplies was not a problem, and that the export business was flourishing there so shipping work out would not be a problem either. My original idea was to keep it all dead simple, just paint and surf every day. I was embarking on a new body of work, trying to get away from all the complicated relationships I had had with New York art fabricators, and just make all my own paintings, by hand, alone.

**LF:** Once you said: “When I lived in New York I used Canal Street and its Chinese vendors as an extension of my studio; now I use Balinese gift shops the same way”; can you explain your relationship to what is vernacular, kitsch and decorative?

**AB:** It wasn't so much the Chinese vendors as it was the various distinctly non-artistic utility and hardware shops that flourished there on the edge of Chinatown. Very much influenced by the likes of Donald Judd and the California plastic artists like John McCracken and DeWain Valentine, I was looking for anything that was not the traditional paint and canvas. Canal Street was like a big candy store, with all manner of fasteners, spray guns, industrial paints, laminates, and hardware on offer. All these stores were clustered around the famous Peal Paint, at the time the largest art supply store in the world. It was at this ground zero, just south of SoHo, that so many of the ideas and the physicality of the new work took its shape. Years later when I had been in Bali quite some time, I started using the same sort of thinking again in the fabrication of new work. The difference now was that they did not have the industrial-style hardware so readily available on Canal Street; here they had a veritable explosion of handicraft items made for the tourist and export markets. I just applied the particular postmodern language of contextualization to a new set of objects. It would be a mistake to say I had abandoned old practices because this newer work looked so wildly different. It was more akin to Paul Gauguin's Oceanic work looking wildly different only because he had wildly different subjects to work with.

**LF:** Your work is deeply connected to the medium of painting and yet there has always been a strong interest in its three-dimensionality: the frame, the impasto, the texture, the existence in space, the use of sculpture in its making, and so on. Can you articulate the relationship between your artworks and notions of representation and display, especially since you moved to Indonesia?

**AB:** There has always been a very strong desire to describe commonly understood things in completely unexpected terms. I suppose this is a surrealist idea, but it is most probably much older. While much of my work over the years has been seen as sculpture, the truth is I have made very, very few pieces of real sculpture. Most works have been asking the same questions again and again:

‘what is a painting?’ and ‘what is painting?’ I try to approach this relentlessly from as many angles as possible, one of them obviously being the space a painting takes up in three dimensions. As I stated earlier, I often develop crushes on certain artists I love and want to make work like them, but in some completely different way. My earliest boxes came out of Judd, and then I turned those same boxes into a self-portrait based on the self-portraits of Vincent Van Gogh. Later I wanted to do landscapes like Kiefer, and more recently I was obsessed with de Kooning’s Woman series. If my work often ends up, as you stated earlier, misunderstood, it has very little to do with any desire on my part to muddy my tracks, and everything to do with the desire to twist known tropes inside out. This is a reflex that I am hardwired with; it is unlikely to ever change.

**LF:** Since your arrival in Bali in 1993 your relationship with the local scene has changed. If the beginning was characterized by isolation I see that now you have a strong presence and you nurture the dialogue with the leading artists in the country, such as our mutual friend Entang Wiharso. How do you see yourself in the Indonesian art scene? Will you ever move from Bali to, let’s say, Jogjakarta, where most of the artists live and work?

**AB:** It is true that when I first moved to Bali I was determined not to go down the road of what I saw as so many wispy expatriate Gauguin-wannabes. They painted schmaltzy ‘Balinesia’ and quaint local ‘folklorica’ with globules of impressionistic pastels. It made me ill. As far as I was concerned I was going to build a white-walled block of a studio with shut doors and no windows, that could be anywhere in the world. After all, so many of my compatriots had moved out of the city to farms in upstate New York and rural Pennsylvania, so what difference would a few thousand miles make? This was a strange time, and I had zero intellectual world and had to import a suitcase full of books every time I went back to the West. There were no computers, no internet, and phone service was so prohibitively expensive that one had to save it for only the most important and perfunctory needs. I was working on very elaborate paintings in that period and could only produce about five per year, so that when I did ship off all the work for an exhibition I was left with an empty studio and nothing to remind me of who I was or what I actually did. I started putting blown-up photos of my work around the house just to avoid losing my sense of identity. Now you might be wondering, ‘isn’t Bali supposed to be a hotbed of thriving artistic community?’ Well, this is just another one of the silly fictions of tourist brochures. There are about five serious artists on the whole island; all the rest who have any real drive or ambition have hightailed it for Jogjakarta or Bandung on Java, or even further afield. What Bali has is a thriving handicrafts community, an industry catering to the throngs of tourists that wash up on these shores by the millions each year – hardly a desirable source of nutrients for the serious contemporary artist.

That was then, and a hell of a lot has changed in the 22 years that I have called Bali home. The single biggest change is of course the Internet. One can now have a serious four-continent dialogue with big-name players on a work by, say, Sarah Lucas on display at the latest Art Basel, in real time as it happens. The international art world has also spread out in a big way. No longer is New York the be-all and end-all; there are now many paths. With Hong Kong and Singapore becoming important hubs, one realizes that one could actually have a long and successful career without ever having to include New York City in the mix. With the Internet and the new energy in Asia, I began to break out of my self-imposed isolation and started making regular forays to Jogjakarta and the other centres. Jogjakarta was a revelation, a real pulsating metropolis that hosted a truly vibrant and surprisingly bohemian art scene.

This was the time that a whole generation of Indonesian artists was beginning to make a strong international name for themselves. Like New York all those years ago with the British invasion, artists are just drawn to one another like magnets. It was not long before I felt as much a part of this world as I had felt in the others before.

**LF:** I always felt that your work, just like you, comes with a confusing aura of irony and cynicism in order to reveal itself as committed, serious and ultimately full of generosity, kindness and curiosity. Despite the lack of direct autobiographical references, I cannot think of an artist who exposes his true self through his work more than you do. What is the place of artists today? Where do you stand and what for?

**AB:** That is a very nicely constructed question and I am touched by the observations therein. As to the ‘generosity’, I do feel an incredibly strong urge to both share and entertain. I suppose a lot more artists than one might imagine are performers at heart – we just happen to be somewhat of a contradiction in that we are equal parts misanthrope and sensual lovers of our species. I have always felt that edges are everything in art; they are what you look for to ride. Nothing ever is anything; everything is always contextual and relative. Meanings regularly slip and slide. We hide away in our studios shunning the world so that ultimately we can make something to share with that world. It was quite a while ago as a young artist that I realized the extant languages of the minimalists, the pop artists, or the abstract expressionists were not equipped to let me discuss the world as I wanted to. I was jealous of writers who could embrace any number of subjects from fiction, to travelogue, to hard-boiled reporting. Why was art so limited in its discourse and its ability to discourse? It was with this idea that I first started trying to make minimalist boxes capable of dialogue beyond the self-proclamatory and the self-referential, and later, in one of my only forays into pure sculpture, I believed I might be breaking ground as the first visual artist to attempt a fictitious travelogue using

purely sculptural objects.

As to what artists stand for today, I have two views: one zoomed way in microcosmically, and the other zoomed way out macrocosmically. In the first, we just do what we do – we are like plants with a certain genetic coding. We try to place ourselves in the most fertile environment possible and then try to bloom as prolifically and colourfully as possible. In doing so we attempt to engage and colour the dialogue of our time and place, to mark it in some indelible way. In the second view, the zoomed-out one, I don't think it means anything at all. Our entire glorious anthroposphere is a minute blip in eternity and infinity. There are no 400-year canons and incandescent flights of genius, there is only the sum total of human involvement and impact on this planet. This view does not hold much hope for a long-term human tenure on the planet and as such, it is actually this latter view that allows me to drop all pretensions and just have fun with it all.

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