

CRITTER

RALPH PUGAY



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A CONVERSATION BETWEEN PAINTERS: RALPH PUGAY AND AMY BERNSTEIN

At once humorous and unsettling, Ralph Pugay's paintings depict absurd narratives in which the mundane and fantastic converge. Incongruous symbols, ideas and cultural norms collide unexpectedly, resulting in perverse situations or outright catastrophe. For Pugay, the work celebrates odd thoughts and fleeting phenomena that are normally disregarded as incidental, like daydreams. Recently, writer and fellow painter Amy Bernstein put a series of questions to Ralph Pugay.

AMY BERNSTEIN: Maybe you can begin by telling me what you are thinking about when you are painting.

RALPH PUGAY: When I am actually painting, finally putting the brush to the surface, I feel a sense of relief. Before that point, I experience a certain amount of anxiety about my ideas, my intentions, my audience, etc. I can feel overwhelmed with theory and tradition until that point. But when I can finally just sit, with nothing but the surface and my colors, I can focus on the base elements of my practice. And then the choices are much simpler. What emotional resonance do these colors produce? How does this composition inform the subject matter? I can narrow my focus into

a precision that transports me into a meditative state. Time flies by, and my anxieties dissipate. Or at least I am able to better recognize my anxiety about working, and that informs what I make, because it is loaded with so many questions about why, as human beings, we do the things that we do. I move from the intellectual into the visceral. It starts from an idea, and then transforms into an experience that moves around unexpectedly and organically. Dona Nelson talks about painting as a form of traveling. I feel the same way in that, despite having a starting-off point for an idea or preconceived expectations of how a painting is going to turn out, it still has the capability to surprise me.

AB: What determines what stays in an image and what must be edited out?

RP: For me painting is such an experiential process and my experience in the studio varies from day to day depending on what I encounter. When I build work for an exhibition, I don't necessarily think of work in terms of "sets," though certain elements do recur, depending on what I am obsessing about or thinking about. When I committed to painting in graduate school,

I sort of learned to have a fascination with learning not to edit, to find braveness in letting accidents be potential places for problem solving, and to see painting as documentation of an activity, as opposed to an activity that primarily intends to provide the viewer with a predetermined aesthetic experience. I try to be efficient with what I put in, giving priority to balancing compositions intuitively.

AB: In the end, how do you hope the painting will exist and function in the world?

RP: The great thing about painting is that it is capable of giving the artist agency with limited means. The best thing I get from painting is that I develop insight into my intuitive capacity by reflecting on how I function in front of a surface, doing the work. I can also reflect it back to the things that are going on in my life, which then bring me insight into the general nature of the human experience that feeds my work. It feels like an ongoing feedback loop of looking, making, and reflecting for the sake of de-internalizing. It is a zany, organic process that I think reflects how chaotic life is. I know I've made a painting to my satisfaction if I am able to look at it and consider it for a long time without the internal verbalization of thoughts. The suspension I would say is very physiological for me; I am not even looking at the logical structure of the work, but rather engaging with

how the totality of the experience of looking makes me feel. If a work I've made can grasp me, then I make the assumption that it might have a similar effect on my audience.

AB: Who do you imagine your audience to be and what do you want for them?

RP: I want my audience to have an experience where they get instantaneous sensations that linger for their consideration over time. Despite using present-day, easily recognizable motifs, I recognize that these motifs have properties that go beyond the surface based on their history and how they have been represented in culture. I believe my work is best when the pieces are able to compel viewers to recognize that, in their nature, these common-day scenarios, despite their familiarity, are part of a larger systemic codex that we participate in everyday, and just by shifting their arrangements, new experiences can be extrapolated from them.

AB: How do you think painting functions right now, in general?

RP: Painting is so pluralistic in serving different intentions, yet it is still tied to a long historical line. This can at times feel like it implies certain conventions from some authoritative art figure, depending on which

school of thought you are approaching painting from.

The language I was developing for art in graduate school at Portland State was so rooted in social and behavioral subject matter because it was an interdisciplinary program that often converged with the Art & Social Practice Program Harrell Fletcher was developing. So as opposed to talking about material, pictorial, and academic concerns, I really mostly accessed my work in terms of the allegories they were trying to project. Graduate students did twenty-minute Powerpoint presentations about their work almost every quarter, and eventually it felt as if I was making paintings for the sake of being able to tell tangential commentary through slides of what I had made in the studio. It became a really engaging game for me.

Of course, I am not living out those parameters anymore, but certain aspects still remain. As a painter, I can project certain things onto images that I feel I am not capable of putting into words. I think this is important for me since English is not my first language. To try and make something compelling for a wide audience in one shot I think is what is most challenging and exciting about it.

AB: How do you think the bilingual nature of your experience as a human influences you pictorially? Do

you think it affects the way you make pictures?

RP: Tagalog embodies a lyrical quality that is phonetically simple, yet also includes a lot of syllabic repetition and ambiguous tonal sounds. Syntactically it is also different from English and Romantic languages but includes English and Spanish words from the country's colonial history. I am really interested in how something like language can contain traces of political history in its everyday use. When I look at my work, I think it embodies a lot of the qualities I associate with Tagalog, in terms of repeating motifs and the transparency of the visual vocabulary that I use, yet has moments that provide opportunities for enigmatic interpretation.

AB: How did the intermingling of the Social Practice program influence your ideas of discourse surrounding your work? Where do you think discourse in general functions in terms of your process, if it does at all?

RP: I think it influenced me because I am innately interested in the social and the behavioral aspects of the human experience. Even though I studied in the Studio Program, it was exciting for me to see how Social Practice began from the ground up. At the time when it started, the program had a lot of momentum and was framing itself as excitingly unconventional, compared

to most MFA programs. It had an attitude of paving its own way and making its own rules. For someone who did not go into art until much later, this building of a new practice was really attractive. Because of its momentum, and the crossovers with the program I was in, I think a lot of concerns surrounding concepts of human agency, gift economies, participation, the discursive, and community politics became serious points of conversation for us graduate students.

It all seemed very utopian, from an outside perspective. What made it really interesting for me, personally, was seeing the politics involved in starting a program like that, which at times did not seem so utopian. I think it made me more aware of the messy process that goes into establishing institutions whether that be a graduate program or a common language. This is so different from the language that is already established in painting which is based on pictorial and historical concerns. I am interested in how painting might embody ideas that are still socially relevant. I think this is why some of my work reads as political commentary. I think I have a tendency towards reaction over mastery, which in itself I think is pretty loaded.

AB: Who are some of your favorite painters?

RP: Dan Attoe, who is a long time mentor, has been a

real inspiration for me through the years. I love his work! Early on I was highly influenced by Dan Reeder and Chris Johanson. Seeing the Robert Colescott painting at the Portland Art Museum, now that I think about it, has been super influential for me. His work balances out the funny with the sad so well. Edward Hopper, George Tooker, Paul Cadmus, Nicole Eisenman, Pieter Bruegel, Jim Nutt, J.F. Willumsen, Sarah McEneaney, and Eric Fischl are some painters I continue to go back to through the years.

AB: What does a great painting do?

RP: I think a great painting moves you.

AB: How does color function in your work?

RP: I was a graphic and web designer before I was a painter, so I often treat paint the way I would treat color in an image editing application like Photoshop, where you try something out and go over it with another color if it doesn't turn out to your liking. I feel like I've been talking about an intuitive process this whole time, but there's also a lot of editing and reconfiguring that happens.

There are certain colors that resonate more seriously for me – like cerulean blue just adds a certain electricity.

So do most reds. I feel like they imbue an intensity that is hard to confront. But I feel really confident with the flesh tones that I've been using because they seem so synthetic and lackadaisical. I make heavy use of my ochres and umbers and grays and from there I just keep adding combinations into the mix. Yellows, particularly Naples yellow, imbues a lot of feelings of warmth and empathy, and so I use them a lot. I think a lot of what I paint is still overall about my own perceptions and experiences, which are then dosed with momentary feelings of realness and artificiality. I try to imbue that type of experience.

AB: How is art different from religion?

RP: Whoa, this is heavy! Growing up Catholic, I feel like I should readily know the answer to this question. I think art is heavily centered on thinking and purging, whereas with religion it's more thinking and binging. I feel like I am putting the baggage of my formative years into this.

AB: Is identity something that you think is infused in your work or something that you feel the need to address?

RP: Identity politics in art was so influential in my formative years as an artist. There was a period during my schooling when it felt like thinking about identity

seemed outmoded, and this perception became a frame that seemed important to react to. It led to so many questions about how those frames are established and why. When you ask those questions, it eventually leads you to more questions about the mechanisms of human desire, cognition, and language. Identity and identification are so interesting to see from a behavioral angle because you can bring about ideas that are specific and still touch on a wide spectrum of culture.

This is where humor in my work figures in: feeling marginalized from being a queer Filipino immigrant, I do end up feeling absurd and neurotic! I guess I am interested in how we might re-define the politics of difference in a world where everybody is progressively feeling like they don't belong.

Amy Bernstein is a writer and artist based in Portland, Oregon. She has won various grants and awards for her paintings and makes a habit of writing about and interviewing her creative peers. Originally from Atlanta, Georgia, Bernstein received her BFA at the Rhode Island School of Design in 2004. In addition, she has lived in various locales such as Austin, Texas and Berlin, Germany – but Bernstein feels most at home in the Pacific Northwest.





facing page:
Summer Genes, 2014
acrylic on panel
11 x 14 inches

United in Hunger, 2014
acrylic on panel
12 x 9 inches





Spiders Eating Popcorn, 2014
acrylic on panel
16 x 20.25 inches





Mergers, 2014
acrylic on canvas
24 x 18 inches





Projected Relief, 2014
acrylic on panel
10 x 8 inches



Ghostly Memory, 2014
acrylic on panel
16 x 12 inches



facing page:
Infrared Bulls, 2014
acrylic on panel
9 x 12 inches

Scanner, 2014
acrylic on panel
16 x 12 inches





Violent Reaction, 2014
acrylic on canvas
30 x 40 inches





Foreigner, 2014
acrylic on panel, 12 x 16 inches

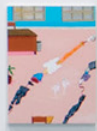


A Snake Also Has Muscle Memory, 2014
acrylic on panel, 12 x 16 inches

Double Happiness, 2014
acrylic on panel
9 x 12 inches

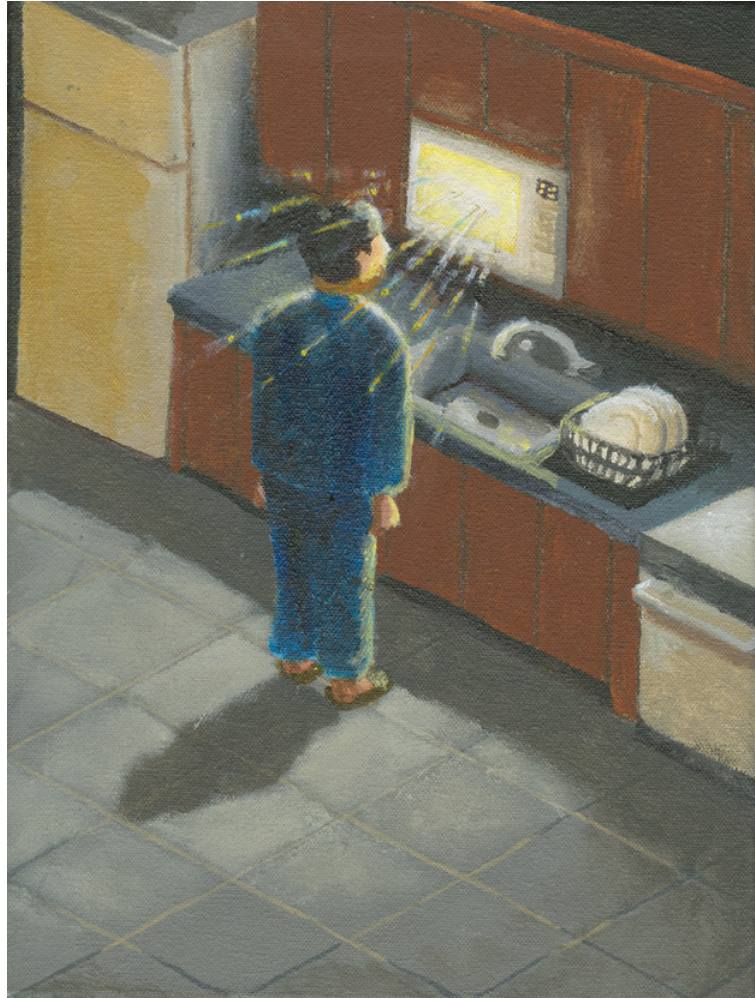








One Swooping Motion, 2013
acrylic on canvas, 16 x 20 inches



Spiritual Microwave, 2012
acrylic on canvas
12 x 9 inches

All The Poor, All in the Same Place, 2012
acrylic on canvas
16 x 20 inches





Freebies, 2013
acrylic on canvas
18 x 18 inches

facing page:
Double Negative, 2013
acrylic on canvas
45 x 45 inches





People Thinker, 2013
acrylic on panel
12 x 16 inches

Flea, 2014
acrylic on panel
10 x 8 inches



Extra Lucky, 2010
acrylic on panel
16 x 20 inches



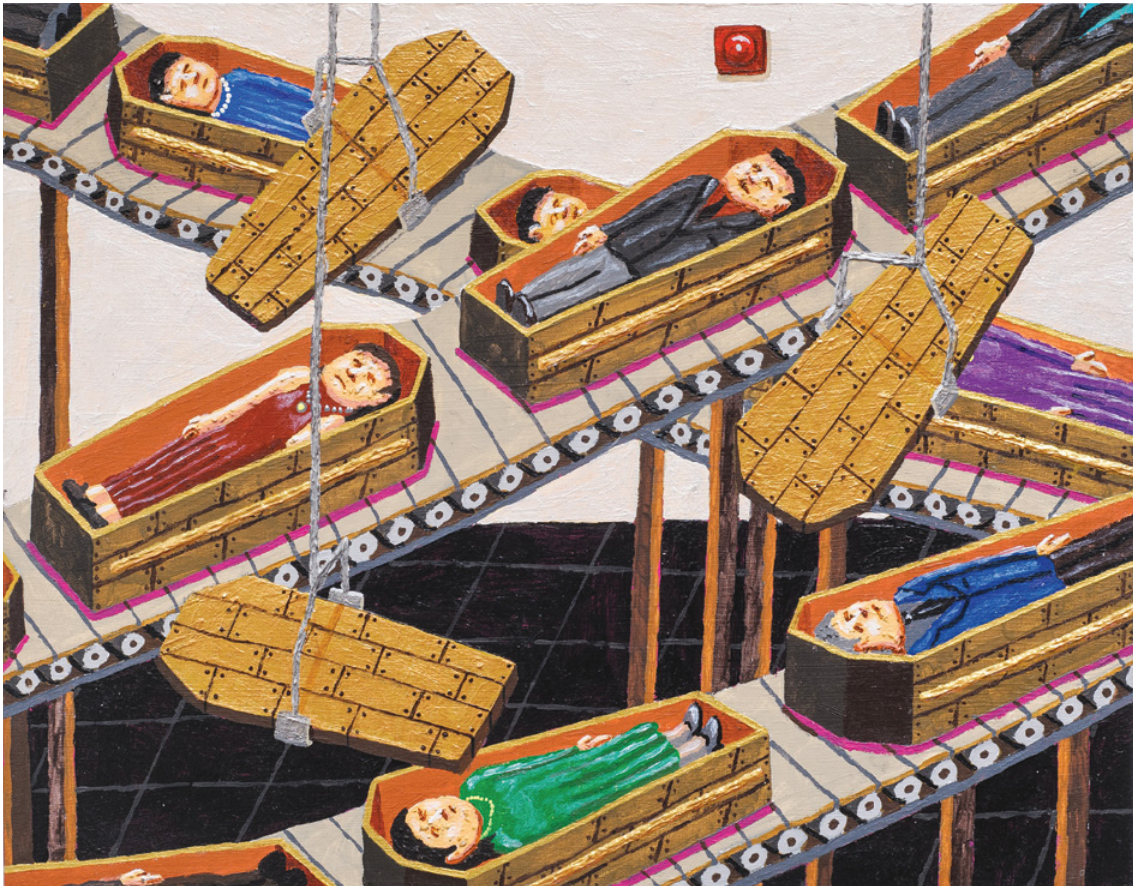
facing page:
Sad Shelf Items, 2012
acrylic on panel
14 x 18 inches

Night Fall, 2013
acrylic on panel
20 x 16 inches





Gymnastics Bull Attack, 2013
acrylic on canvas
18 x 24 inches



Ouroboros (Poop or Food?), 2015
acrylic on panel
11 x 14 inches

Rothkos in Space, 2013
acrylic on canvas
24 x 24 inches





facing page:
Pit Stop, 2015
acrylic on canvas
26 x 36 inches

following spread:
Waterpark Second Thoughts, 2015
acrylic on canvas
26 x 36 inches

Endless Samples, 2015
acrylic on canvas
26 x 36 inches





Summer Genes, 2014
acrylic on panel
11 x 14 inches

United in Hunger, 2014
acrylic on panel
12 x 9 inches

Wake Up Baby, 2014
acrylic on canvas
20 x 16 inches

Frying Butterflies, 2014
acrylic on panel
12 x 16 inches

Spiders Eating Popcorn, 2014
acrylic on panel
16 x 20.25 inches

Mergers, 2014
acrylic on canvas
24 x 18 inches

Projected Relief, 2014
acrylic on panel
10 x 8 inches

Ghostly Memory, 2014
acrylic on panel
16 x 12 inches

Infrared Bulls, 2014
acrylic on panel
9 x 12 inches

Scanner, 2014
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acrylic on canvas
30 x 40 inches

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acrylic on canvas
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Endless Samples, 2015
acrylic on canvas
26 x 36 inches

Lobster Parade, 2013
acrylic on canvas
18.5 x 24.5 x 2 inches (framed)

Pugay (b. 1983 in Cavite, Philippines) holds an MFA in Contemporary Art Practice from Portland State University and is a 2013 residency graduate of the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. His work has exhibited throughout the United States and in South Korea. Solo exhibitions include the Seattle Art Museum (WA), *Crowdsurfer* at Vox Populi (Philadelphia, PA) and FAB Gallery at Virginia Commonwealth University (Richmond, VA). Notable group exhibitions include Disjecta Contemporary Art Center's *Portland2014: A Biennial of Contemporary Art, A Light Spray* at the Portland Museum of Modern Art and the 2012 CoCA exhibition (Seattle, WA). Pugay is the recipient of several grants, including an Individual Artist Fellowship from the Oregon Arts Commission (2014) and the Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters and Sculptors Award (2012). Pugay was a visiting faculty member at Virginia Commonwealth University (2014-2015) and won the Seattle Art Museum's Betty Bowen Award (2014).

Lobster Parade, 2013

acrylic on canvas

19.5 x 25.5 x 2 inches (framed)



This catalog was created for the exhibition *Critter* by Ralph Pugay, on view at Upfor in Portland, Oregon from October 2, 2014 through November 1, 2014. This, the second edition, includes new works from 2015.

Photographs of artwork by Evan La Londe (Worksighted) or courtesy of the artist.

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The logo for UPFOR, featuring the word "UPFOR" in a bold, white, sans-serif font. The text is centered within a black, parallelogram-shaped background that is wider than it is tall, with the top and bottom edges slightly slanted.

October 2, 2014/

/November 1, 2014