

THE SWORD *of* DAMOCLES

SELECTIONS FROM
THE FRANK MOORE ARCHIVE PROJECT

BRADFORD BRANCH

JERRY LEE FROST

MICHAEL GOLDEN

FRANK HOLLIDAY

MARTIN KLUG

JONATHAN LEITER

MICHAEL J LOWNIE

RICARDO MORIN

JOSEPH STABILITO

PATRICK WEBB

PETE WYMAN

LAURENCE YOUNG

curated by PATRICK WEBB
for VISUAL AIDS

THE SWORD *of* DAMOCLES
Selections from the Frank Moore Archive Project

NOVEMBER 29 *thru* DECEMBER 23, 2011

RECEPTION ● TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 29 *from* 6-8 PM

THE PAINTING CENTER
547 WEST 27TH STREET, SUITE 500
NEW YORK CITY
212-343-1060

GALLERY HOURS
TUESDAY *thru* SATURDAY 11-6 PM

The year 2011 marks the twentieth anniversary of the red ribbon, a collaborative project of the Visual AIDS Artists' Caucus created to show solidarity with people living with AIDS and their caregivers. More broadly this year marked the milestone of thirty years of AIDS. So it is fitting that Visual AIDS closes the year with a special exhibition, exclusively showcasing the work of member artists from our Archive Project, and specifically representing mid-career painters who are all long-term survivors, living and working with HIV. The twelve men of *Sword of Damocles* — Bradford Branch, Jerry Frost, Michael Golden, Frank Holliday, Martin Klug, Jonathan Leiter, Michael J Lownie, Ricardo Morin, Joseph Stabilito, Patrick Webb, Pete Wyman, and Lawrence Young — each have distinct and devoted artistic careers.

Patrick Webb conceived of the exhibition and selected these particular works to survey the longevity of the artists' practices. The comparison of "early" and "late" works honors their histories having lived through the advent of HIV and its tremendous toll. In its modest way, the survey attempts to celebrate the curve of their art's transformation. We are pleased to work with The Painting Center to present this selection of the painters' experience and invite you to view a wider selection of their work and the work of over 440 other artists in the Frank Moore Archive Project at Visual AIDS.

AMY SADAO & NELSON SANTOS
STAFF of VISUAL AIDS

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PATRICK WEBB

I started thinking about organizing this exhibition a few years ago. As I entered into later middle age and began selecting work for my own retrospective I found myself reflecting on my years of painting. I wondered what connections I could make to other artists who have survived the HIV epidemic. AIDS has been a central thread through my work and through my experience as an adult. The questions addressed in this essay and the exhibition include: What changes have occurred in the work of artists who have survived with this life threatening illness for so long? And can I find patterns and similarities among our work?

Like many, I first witnessed, then lived the epidemic: it started as a rumor, it then struck friends of friends of friends, then friends of friends, then friends and finally my boyfriend of 14 years, Chris. He died in 1992. As far as I was concerned I was living on borrowed time. But like others, I was spared. My work continued and developed. Initially I could only paint the story of the epidemic—life cut short with great suffering. Ultimately my paintings expanded to depict increasingly complex narratives—worlds of identity, desire, and foreboding.

My exploration for this exhibition began in the offices of Visual AIDS, reviewing the Frank Moore Archive Project's pages of slides and digital images. I sought paintings that interested me visually and thematically by artists whose history of living through the epidemic paralleled my own. I was looking for artists who had been painting for 20 or more years, in hopes of contrasting past work with more recent paintings. Would I find themes and patterns that emerged in the development of these artists' works? It is always dangerous to speculate as to the catalyst for the development or obsessions of any artist. And theorizing or curating that attempts a too neat, direct correlation between an artist's work and their biography should be held suspect. However, I suggest that in all of the work selected here, there are both changes in subject matter and formal concerns that relate to our experience as long-term survivors and as painters living and working with HIV.

There is a tripartite interaction in paintings between space (void), shape (pattern), and form (volume). The dynamic of pictures emerges from the relationships within and between these elements. This idea can be found in treatises on pictorial structure from the Renaissance to the present. The painter Gretna Campbell spoke of space as *the* great metaphor in painting and ideas about space are central in Frank Stella's *Norton Lectures*. American painting of the late 20th and early 21st centuries emphasizes space and shape more than volume. Color is such a fundamental aspect to painting, particularly in the last 100 years, that an examination of it in the work is illuminating. With this in mind, the four ideas I explore with this essay and the selection of work are: (1) narrative and iconographic themes, (2) spatial changes, (3) palette shifts, and (4) how the language and quality of shape change in relation to the experiences of hopelessness and then hope. I chose examples of earlier and later works that coincide with our experiences of survival. The distinctions of "early" and "late" also limn 1996, marking the adoption of effective AIDS medications. As one artist stated, first he had to come to terms with dying and then he had to come to terms with living.

In most of the earlier works recognizable objects, figures, or symbols are present in the paintings. Laurence Young's, Jerry Lee Frost's and Pete Wyman's works present a pared-down symbolic representation. In his early work, painted in 1999 but related to his work of the early 1990s, Wyman paints the male figure in *Danseur*, transformed through geometry, with planar shards against heavy black slashes. There is an erotic

charge tethered to something dark and forbidding. In Young's *Mortal Thoughts*, a single figure sits in silent contemplation, the palette subdued and restricted to black and two colors, the space shallow. Both share a dominant black palette with Martin Klug's gestural abstraction, Jonathan Leiter's crosses, Joseph Stabilito's skull, and Frank Holliday's graphic shapes. All push the space to the front. Frost's black cat is thrust forward as a loopy figure reaches out towards it in *Anger Management*—is it a gesture of kindness or aggression? When juxtaposed with the iconography of death (skulls and crosses), black becomes a powerful signifier of loss and tragedy. In Stabilito's *Prayer for My Father* a skull floats on a dark black field, the excavated surface and delicate drawing implying decay and fragility. In Leiter's *AbPoz* paintings, ironically subtitled *Double Happiness*, *Purity* and *Golden Opportunity*, the severe minimalist simplification, with its implication of emotional reserve, is transformed by the plus sign or cross that becomes both a signifier of being positive but also a religious symbol of suffering and comfort—loading the abstraction with iconographic meaning and significance. Holliday is equally adept at reframing modernist tropes in *Skull and Bones* with his use of the grid, as formed by the crosses, and Warhol's cool silkscreen print technique. In Holliday's painting the spaces pop forward and then back in counterpoint to the grid, opening and closing, revealing representations of mystery (luminosity), terror (Caravaggio) and death (skulls and bones). Other earlier paintings may not be black but darkness descends into the world of the still life in both Michael Golden's *Infection* and Michael J Lownie's *Sleep*. Both painters employ a personal iconography with, respectively, a blind man's cane and the wishbone/dowsing rod—the former referring to AIDS-related blindness, a profound terror for an artist, and the latter conjuring both the decay of the body and the potential hope of divining a cure.

The other three artists' work de-emphasize iconography. Martin Klug's and Ricardo Morin's paintings are non-representational. These artists find purely plastic ways to create mood and meaning. In Klug's painting, *Nocturne*, the black paint gesture compresses the space, overwhelming the colorful and fleshy interstices—Eros held at bay. In Morin's *New York Series* the color is keyed to a single hue in each panel but the shards of geometry violently bite down, collapsing the space into an experience of figure/ground ambiguity. While in Bradford Branch's elegiac still life of vase and fruit, *Oranges and Glass Vase*, there seems little iconographic meaning to the objects, the palette whispers a dirge of quiet sadness, the space is shallow, everything is in flux, transformation and inversion everywhere—the ordinary made significant and sad. His aesthetic corrects the emotion but, like Braque, that correction makes, in contrast and in concert, for an even more intense experience of the elegy.

My own work, *Lamentation of Punchinello/By Punchinello's Bed* was painted in 1992 immediately following Chris's death. The artist-figure shifts from holding Punch to standing tensely in vigil by him—Punch's phallic nose an erotic beacon, the survivor caught between grief, desire and terror. The paintings share many of the formal concerns of the other artists in the exhibition: the shallow space; the somber palette (except that nose); black is present both as a color and as a modulator; and the grid, either diagonally (*Lamentation*) or vertically (*Bed*), organizes the compositions. And like some of the other artists, autobiography is implicitly present in the narrative.

In the more recent work, (1999-2011), several of the artists shed representation and turn either to abstraction or the less iconographic experience of landscape. In Holliday's *Out There* the world of paint, surface, and light emerges in the action and smear of paint, introducing a proprioceptive life to the work. Elsewhere a new or expanded sense of

paint or surface can be found, as in Stabalito's *Blood Flowers*, Young's landscapes *New Equation* and *Thinly Veiled*, and Wyman's *Bayside*. However, for this essay, it is the opening of pictorial space that I find significant. Landscape space emerges explicitly in Lownie's *Daydream* and Young's recent paintings, and implicitly in Stabilito's and Wyman's work. There is atmospheric space in Frost's *My Casa*, Morin's *Scroll Silence Four* and Holliday's *Out There*. Klug's *Étude* opens up into an implied landscape with its repeated horizons of sun yellow and sky blue stripes, a counterpoint to the rhythm of the grass green brushstroke grid. The American landscape tradition from which so much abstract painting emerges is a tradition born out of grandness—adventure and limitless possibility are its hallmarks. So it is fitting that an opening of space occurs and a presence of nature emerges, as hope enters into our lives.

Leiter, Golden and Branch explore a different kind of space, formed through the overlap of shape. In his *In The Bedroom* series, Leiter takes a modernist trope, the collage, and transforms it into a witty play on sex and childhood—wonderfully, polymorphically perverse dreams of our childhood. These are carefully composed images of narrative wit and subversion as well as formal balance and tension. There is toughness to their whimsical erotic play. Golden overlaps images of nature and abstraction in *Blessing*, presenting a personal iconography of meditation and hope. In Branch's painting *Still Life with Orchids* the intense color and rhythmically shaped objects and table joyfully dance—lively minuets and mazurkas contrasting with the elegy of the early work. Iconography is retained in Lownie's *Daydream*, which presents the character “without interruption” held between two planes that open out into an arabesque of landscape space through which we move without interruption. In my recent painting *House of Cards* (2004-6) I still employ abstract forms to anchor the composition (this time the pyramid and grid); but the space opens up, the color warms, the shapes and rhythms become more organic, and the narrative is filled with possibility, however precarious. All of these works shed the grimness of the early 1990s. The palettes explode with variation and atmosphere. Spaces open. Play and possibility emerge as we begin to face our futures.

All the work of the artists in this exhibition changed over time. The question, I suppose, is whether these changes were a direct result of the experience of survival. I cannot imagine how the sadness and anger that was so central to the experience of both the epidemic at its most brutal and sero-conversion, followed by the surprise, hope, and even guilt of living, could not affect studio practice. There is the active metaphorical world of pictorial structure at play in all the work. In some of it the effect of so much death and then survival is obvious. In other paintings, the ambiguities of the endeavor make the change subtler but no less profound. We see in this exhibition similar metamorphoses: the spaces opening; the color range expanding; the shapes taking on an organic rhythm; Eros and nature becoming central; and the narratives and symbols leading to possibility and even hope.

NEW YORK NY 2011



Oranges and Glass Vase, 1994
mono print, 30 x 22 inches



Still life with Orchids, 1999
acrylic on canvas, 36 x 30 inches

Bradford Branch
B 1952 ● BROOKLYN NY
LIVES AND WORKS IN NEW YORK NY
brad4dbranch.webstarts.com



Anger Management, 2003
oil on canvas, 36x 48 inches



My Casa, 2010
oil on canvas, 48 x 36 inches

Jerry Lee Frost
B 1950 ● LOUISVILLE KY
LIVE AND WORKS IN SAN FRANCISCO CA
JerryFrost.com



Infection, 1995
oil, acrylic and snakeskin on canvas, 60 x 36 inches



Blessing, 2008
acrylic on canvas, 30 x 30 inches

Michael Golden
B 1959 ● FAYETTEVILLE NC
LIVES AND WORKS IN HOUSTON TX
MichaelGoldenStudio.com



Skull and Bones, 1993
oil silkscreen on canvas, 32 x 28 inches



Out There, 2011
oil on canvas, 22 x 28 inches

Frank Holliday
B 1957 ● GREENSBORO NC
LIVES AND WORKS IN BROOKLYN NY
FrankHolliday.net

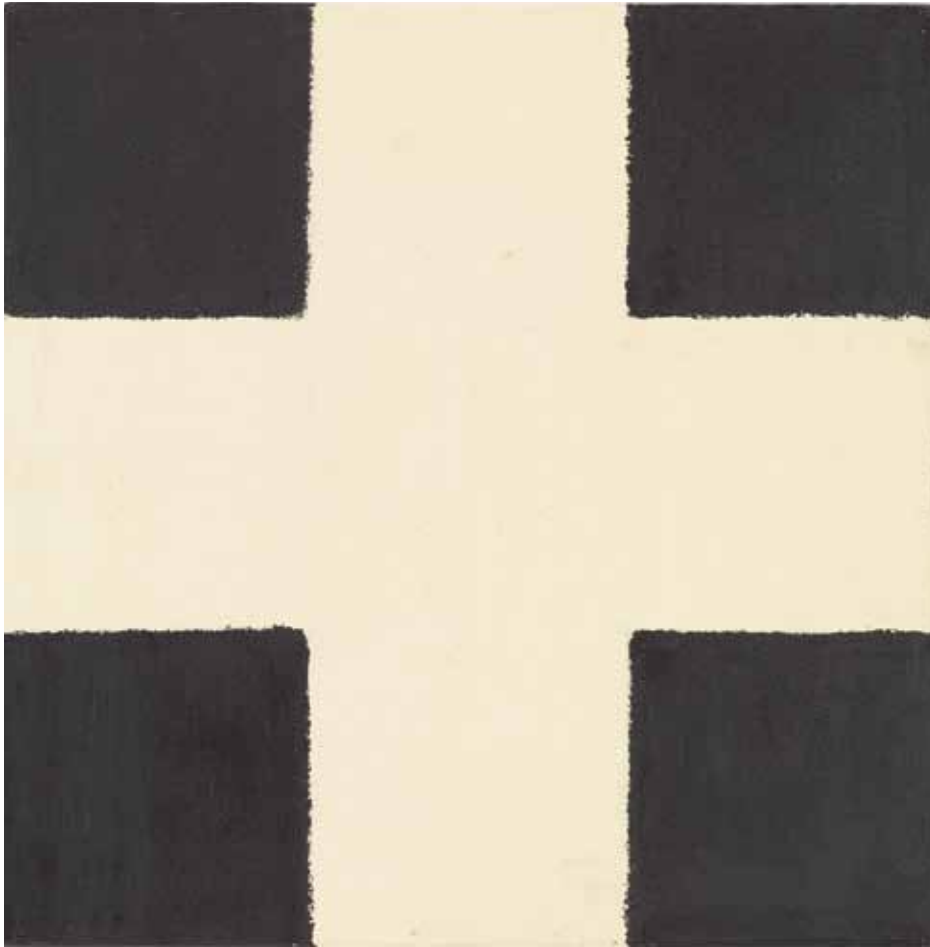


Nocturne, 1995
acrylic on canvas, 24 x 18 inches

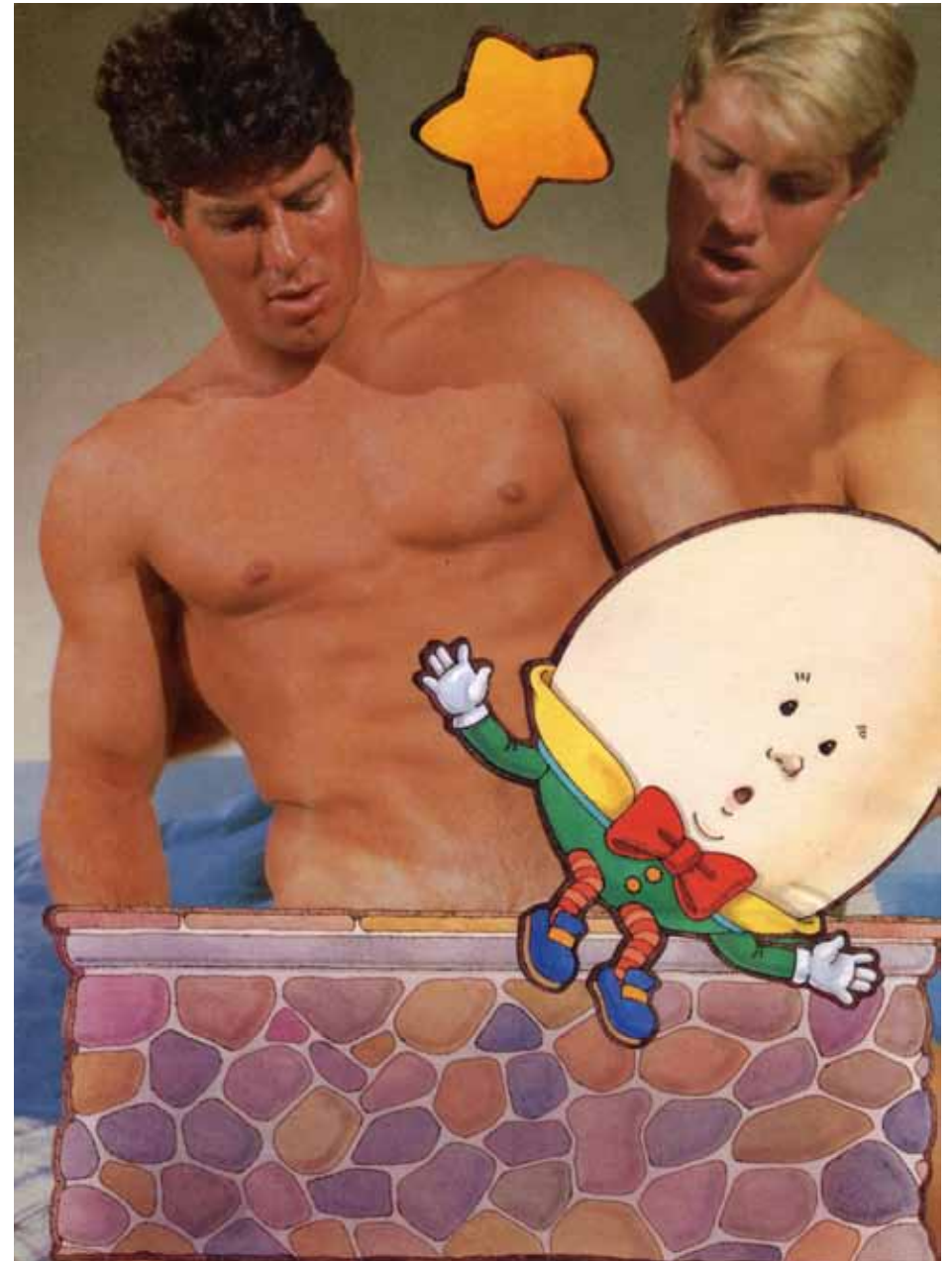


Étude, 2010
acrylic on canvas, 14 x 10 inches

Martin Klug
B 1957 ● ST PAUL MN
LIVES AND WORKS IN NEW YORK NY



AbPoz (Purity), 1994
oil crayon on canvas, 12 x 12 inches



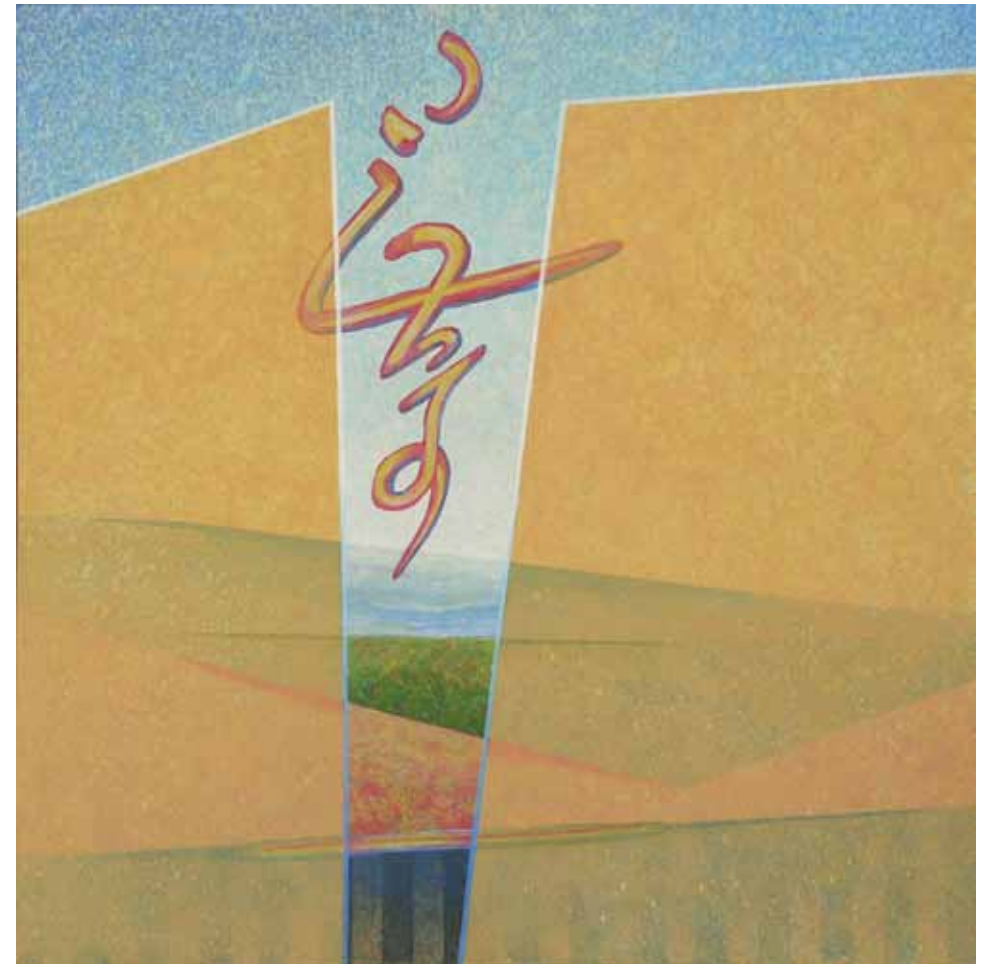
In The Bedroom #2 (Humpty Dumpty), 2002-5
collage, 10 ³/₄ x 8 inches

Jonathan Leiter

B 1959 ● UNIONTOWN PA
LIVES AND WORKS IN STATEN ISLAND NY



Sleep, 1994
acrylic on illustration board, 18 x 24 inches



Daydream, 2007
acrylic on canvas, 24 x 24 inches

Michael J Lownie
B 1952 ● BUFFALO NY
LIVES AND WORKS IN SAN FRANCISCO CA
MLownie.com



Triptych: New York Series, N°11, N°12, N°13, 1988
oil on linen, 18 x 16 inches each



Scroll Silence Four, 2010
acrylic on canvas, 74 x 45 x 3/4 inches

Ricardo Morin

B 1954 ● VALENCIA VENEZUELA

LIVES IN NEW YORK NY & WORKS IN JERSEY CITY NJ

RicardoMorin.com



Prayer For My Father, 1992
drawing on paper with acrylic, cardboard and glitter, 38 x 30 inches

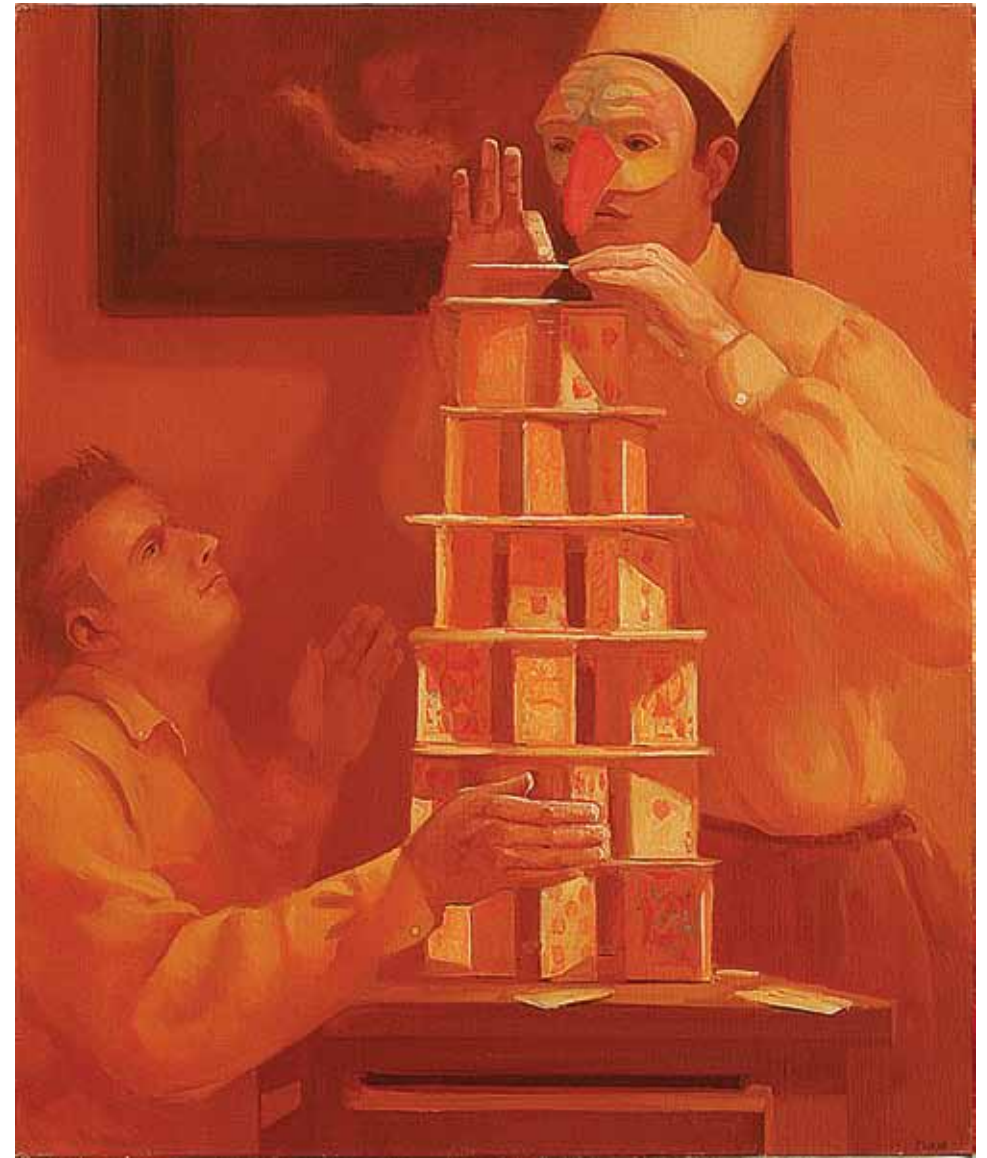


Blood Flowers, 2010
acrylic on canvas, 74 x 48 inches

Joseph Stabilito
B 1955 ● PHILADELPHIA PA
LIVES AND WORKS IN NEW YORK NY
JosephStabilitoPaintings.com



Lamentation of Punchinello/By Punchinello's Bed, 1992
oil on linen, 76 x 116 inches



House of Cards, 2004-6
oil on linen, 36 x 30 inches

Patrick Webb
B 1955 ● NEW YORK NY
LIVES AND WORKS IN NEW YORK NY
Patrick-Webb.com



Dansuer, 1999
acrylic on paper, 30 x 22 inches



Bayside, 2010
acrylic on canvas, 40 x 48 inches

Pete Wyman
B 1958 ● PROVIDENCE RI
LIVES AND WORKS IN DURHAM NC
PeteWyman.com



Mortal Thoughts, 1992
oil on canvas, 30 x 37 inches



Thinly Veiled, 2010
oil/wax on canvas, 18 x 24 inches



New Equation, 2010
oil/wax on canvas, 18 x 24 inches

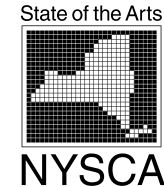
Laurence Young
B 1952 ● BROOKLINE MA
LIVES AND WORKS IN BROOKLINE MA
LaurenceYoung.com

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The Painting Center is a non-profit organization dedicated to the exploration of painting in all its possibility. Founded and managed by artists, the Center hosts approximately twelve exhibitions per year—programming that celebrates the high standards of excellence to be found among both emerging and established artists. Rather than champion one school or tradition, The Painting Center welcomes and encourages diverse viewpoints regardless of their market appeal or eccentricity. The Painting Center is a gathering place for painters and others who love painting—a democratic arena that fosters dialogue, experimentation, and community among artists.

THE PAINTING CENTER

547 W 27th Street, Suite 500
New York NY 10001
212-343-1060 thepaintingcenter.org

Visual AIDS utilizes art to fight AIDS by provoking dialogue, supporting HIV+ artists, and preserving a legacy, because AIDS is not over.

Visual AIDS is the only contemporary arts organization fully committed to HIV prevention and AIDS awareness through producing and presenting visual art projects, while assisting artists living with HIV/AIDS. We are committed to preserving and honoring the work of artists with HIV/AIDS and the artistic contributions of the AIDS movement.



VISUAL AIDS
526 W 26th Street Suite 510
New York NY 10001
212-627-9855 visualAIDS.org

