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PRESENCE AND ABSENCE: NEW WORKS BY BRUCE HERMAN LECTURE FINDING AID & TRANSCRIPT

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Video Description

The Cape Ann Museum is pleased to present a special talk with Gloucester-based artist Bruce Herman on Saturday, November 13 at 3:00 p.m. in the Folly Cove Auditorium. Herman will be discussing his special exhibition *Presence/Absence: New Work by Bruce Herman* which will be on display until December 12, 2010.

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In his 35 years on Cape Ann, Herman has observed and admired the raw beauty of the land, the sea and sky, and the ever-changing weather. The evidence of the glaciers surrounds his home, invoking a different time and inspiring his work. Like the poet T.S. Eliot, who spent summers on Cape Ann, Herman feels drawn to this area, not as one who simply records his surroundings, but as one who witnesses what is impossible to recreate. According to curator Kathrine Page, of Roberts Wesleyan College where Presence/Absence was on exhibition earlier this year, Herman’s art is “deeply rooted in an understanding of theology, philosophy and aesthetics—but it is also strongly physical. He investigates complex layers of texture, color, and form in a vigorous additive and subtractive process, actually employing an electric sander and scraper on his work.” Presence/Absence consists of a series of configurable wooden panels in mixed media, oils, silver and gold leaf; sizes vary from 28 inches to 72 inches.

Bruce Herman received his B.F.A. and M.F.A. from Boston University. He has been on the faculty at Gordon College in Wenham, MA since 1984. His primary focus as a teacher and artist is figurative painting. He received the Junior Distinguished Faculty Award in 1992 and was awarded the first fully-endowed Lothlórien Distinguished Chair at Gordon in 2006. His art has been exhibited internationally and is housed in museums such as the Vatican Museum in Rome, the Armand Hammer Collection in Los Angeles, and locally at the DeCordova Museum in Lincoln, MA

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Transcript

00:15

Courtney Richardson
Good afternoon.

00:18

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Welcome to the Cape Ann Museum. I want to thank you all for joining us on this absolutely beautiful, gorgeous day. Hopefully you're outside enjoying the landscape and nature and what more appropriate activity now is, you know, of course come in and hear Bruce talk about that. So, thanks for coming. My name is Courtney Richardson. I'm Director of Education and Public Programs here. We're very pleased to be Bruce's first exhibition space in his hometown of Gloucester. He's been here for 40 years. And this is his first local exhibit. So we're very happy about that. As most of you know, Bruce started the art program at Gordon College in 1984. He taught there for 23 years, and he is the director of Gordon's gallery at the Barrington Center for the Arts. And he's also painting full time now, which is nice.

01:20

We have a couple other programs I wanted to mention. Next weekend Bruce will be leading walking tours of the Great Ledge with Ed Becker from Essex County Greenbelt Association, and there'll be a tour at 1:00 ... a tour at 11:00 and *then* a tour at 1:00, and there will be cider and refreshments at Bruce's studio. And you can learn more about those programs by asking at the front desk or looking at our website. And then on December 10, join artist Bruce Herman for an evening of lively conversation about art, inspiration, and faith in an interview with Peabody Essex Museum's curator Paula Richter. The discussion will explore topics that span secular and sacred art traditions. Bruce will compare his 2009 painting series "Presence Absence", which is on display upstairs, with an earlier series "Portraits of Our Redemption" from 1996, large scale murals of biblical narratives that will be specially hung for this event. This program is free and open to the public and will be followed by a reception with the artist. And this will be held at the Lanesville Orthodox Congregational Church, which is on Washington Street. And that's on December 10 at 7:30. Thanks again for coming. And please join me in welcoming Bruce Herman.

02:59

Bruce Herman

Thanks for coming this afternoon. It's a real honor and a great pleasure for me to be here at the Cape Ann Museum. As Courtney said, I've lived here almost 40 years and shown all over the place but never in my hometown. And so it's really a happy day for me. So thanks for coming and celebrating with me. I'm really grateful to Courtney to Ronda Faloon, the director of the museum, Martha Oakes, the curator of the capable staff here; they're great people. And you ought to really, if you haven't been to this museum often, you ought to explore it. There's a lot of great objects in this museum, both paintings and sculpture and artifacts from Howard Blackburn, for example. So it's a really neat place. Finally, I'd just like to say that I'm, I'm also very grateful to Bill Cross a board member here, who supported me in the exploration of possibilities of showing here, and also Walter and Darlene Hansen, who funded the touring exhibit. This show has been in three other locations before Cape Ann Museum and has another venue after this, beginning in late January and going through February, in Grand Rapids at Calvin College.

04:06

There was...I'll get this mike a little closer.

04:09

Though the purpose of my talk this afternoon is to share some of my thinking with you, what goes into making my art, some of the history behind my own process as an artist, including going back quite a ways to the early 1980s. I've been painting for almost 40 years. So most of the time I've been here in Gloucester as a matter of fact. So I'm going to show you some slides, early slides of the work from those days, and kind of walk through a progression. And hopefully it'll make some sense. You'll be able to see how I got to where I am in the paintings that are upstairs in case those paintings don't immediately make sense to you. Especially when you hear what I'm about to say. The easiest thing for me to say here is that that exhibition upstairs, "Presence Absence", and my talk this afternoon, is really a payment back of a debt to Gloucester, a debt of love to this place. I've been here all these years, and as my wife, Meg, will attest, there isn't a day that goes by that I don't say, "I love where we live." This is an amazing place. And the rest of you who may be Cape Ann residents or visitors to Cape Ann, you can see what I mean on a day like this. But you can also see on a stormy day why this place is so special, and Cape Ann is visited by storms. What I'm going to do is I'm going to begin by showing the early work from the early 1980s, and then I'll show some of the influences that I've had. And then I would like to kind of walk through three decades of work leading up -- just samples, trust me -- we're not going to be here for three hours. Just samples of three other decades from my work and hopefully, like I said, stitch it together a little bit for you so that it begins to make sense. Courtney, could we have the lights? And then I have to put on a little light here; I guess it doesn't distract too much.

06:27

Like a lot of modern artists, I haven't always been content to simply make pictures, scenes of the harbor, the boats, the beaches, etc. Life just seems too rich and complex, layered. And to make straightforward pictures which a camera can capture so much more efficiently seems to me, for my purposes, unnecessary. Mind you, I'm not saying that those artists who do choose to paint familiar marine subjects of Gloucester are somehow artistically deficient. Quite the contrary. In fact, I have deep respect for the Cape Ann School, artists like Lester Stevens, Frederick Mulhaupt, Aldro Hibbard, Emil Gruppe, and Gloucester's own Jeff Weaver, a marvelous painter who has a lovely painting in the permanent collection upstairs, as do all the others I just mentioned. But my own take on Gloucester has always been a bit at skew angles to this tradition of scenic art. The nominal subject of the "Presence Absence" exhibition is the same as that of the tradition, Cape Ann. But that place itself, to me, is so layered and complex that to simply paint the familiar scenery would not capture the qualities that I want to get at. The place is too full of paradoxes and mysteries, even in its everyday appearances. How, for example, could you paint the vast expanses of time that are etched in the granite ledges here? How express the feeling of the tide itself as it marks that time? How would you convey the interplay between ocean and sky, the weather, the seasons, and perhaps especially the relationship between a human sense of narrative time and that of nature, for which 1000 years is like a hiccup? Moreover, this beautiful peninsula has an unpredictable side to it, surrounded as it is by ocean and tidal marshes with its

own weather system, it seems, and the landscape itself echoes that weather. The surprising granite outcroppings, the boulders of Dogtown, the surf-pounded jagged rocks along Atlantic Avenue, and the sudden falling away of the ground along the Great Ledge in West Gloucester, nearly 100 feet above the Walker Creek tidal estuary. The powerful thrust of the stone shelf at Halibut Point that juts out into the ocean like an enormous sculpture. The quarries carved so deep that they give off the feel of excavated ruins filled with dark spring water like colossal wells.

08:57

Painting Cape Ann is not as clear cut for me as making pictures of the boats and docks in traditional scenes, important as all those things are to us. But what I'm after in the "Presence Absence" paintings is to distill some of the more difficult aspects of the cape, rather than simply depicting the scenery. I've taken elements from the landscape, from the sky, from the weather, and water, and I've zeroed in on the textures, the colors, the feel of these things at different seasons in various kinds of light and air. Instead of trying to create a convincing illusion of a three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional canvas, I've tried to reveal through the fundamental aspects of painting, texture, color, shape, composition, and the paint itself some of the mysteries of the elements of earth, air, fire, water in this particular place. In one sense, you could say that I'm bypassing the convention of detecting the look of Gloucester and instead trying to get at the feel of it through time. And for me, the feel of this place is related to the feel of larger things like the creation itself, from the microbiological to the cosmic, from weather systems to star systems. The metaphysical and the physical are a lot closer to each other than we often think. And a sense of place goes right to the heart of bigger questions we carry inside us about who we are and where we may end up. I've been continually moved by the feeling of ancientness here: the landmasses carved by the glaciers over 20,000 years ago, dramatic storm patterns that reshape everything in their wake, the sea and salt air, the feeling of immensity in both human and geological history; and by other art and literature, similarly, inspired by this place. T.S. Eliot's "The Four Quartets", a poetic meditation on mortality and transcendence was inspired in part by the poet's summers here on Cape Ann, and it captures in poetic form what I'm striving to articulate about this place in paint. Here is a brief reading from "The Four Quartets":

11:08

The river is within us, the sea is all about us;
The sea is the land's edge also, the granite
Into which it reaches, the beaches where it tosses
Its hints of earlier and other creation:
The starfish, the horseshoe crab, the whale's backbone;
The pools where it offers to our curiosity
The more delicate algae and the sea anemone.
It tosses up our losses, the torn seine,
The shattered lobsterpot, the broken oar
And the gear of foreign dead men. The sea has many voices,
Many gods and many voices.

The salt is on the briar rose,
The fog is in the fir trees.

The sea howl
And the sea yelp, are different voices
Often together heard: the whine in the rigging,
The menace and caress of wave that breaks on water,
The distant rote in the granite teeth,
And the wailing warning from the approaching headland
Are all sea voices, and the heaving groaner
Rounded homewards,

12:12

We all know what the groaner is, those of us who live here in Gloucester. It's the -- that wonderful sound that we hear in the sea swells, that hummmm out there in the harbor, especially in the fog. It's really amazing. What resonates for me in this four-part poem by Eliot is its evocation of passage of time, and the mystery of his sense of place. He says in another place, "If you came this way, taking any route, starting from anywhere, at any time or any season, it would be always the same. You would have to put off sense and notion. You're not here to verify, instruct yourself or perform curiosity or carry report; you are here to kneel where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more than an order of words, the conscious occupation of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying." So what Eliot is saying is he's connecting this place, and the experience of weather and time and tide; he's connecting that with those times and those tides inside us. The sea, the river is within us. He says the sea is all about us. So he's trying to make the connection between the tide and time of our lives and that of the seasons and this place. How, for instance, "Could we return to the place we began and see it for the first time", another line from Eliot's same poem. Yet we all have paradoxical experiences like this, at certain stages of our lives, particularly when we age and sense the brevity of life. We often sense our smallness in the face of such ancient rocks as those scattered by the glacier here on Cape Ann, and we feel the quality of transcendence in the perpetual return of the seasons and tides. And we know that words and logic are powerless to articulate this. Eliot has, I feel, captured this ambiguity in his words, pointing beyond words, and his influence on my "Presence Absence" paintings is powerful, hence, my use of direct quotes from the poem in many of the titles of the exhibit.

14:20

I've always admired paintings by great Gloucester artists like Fitz Henry Lane, formerly known as Fitz Hugh Lane. And Winslow Homer; Edward Hopper, who spent many, many times here painting the streets of Gloucester; Marsden Hartley, a more modern painter who has two paintings in the permanent collection display upstairs. These are all painters who have had a heavy influence on me, and I've drawn from them. I've drawn inspiration from them, as you'll see this next series of slides in these early paintings of Gloucester. All these paintings are right around 1984. I'll go through them fairly quickly. That was the Gloucester light. This is -- this was Sam's barbershop, now housing some fine art galleries right down the street from here. Some

rooftops including City Hall; you can see the influence of Hopper and others there. Most of these paintings were destroyed in a fire that burned our house down about 13 years ago. Some of them still exist, ones that were sold or in other collections, but this is Collins Square, which is right off of School Street looking toward City Hall in the fog; off our former back porch on School Street looking down Mason Court also towards City Hall. These paintings are quite large; this one's about six feet by six feet. Or they *were*, I should say, since they no longer exist. Our back porch. This one does exist because it was on loan when our house burned down.

16:03

Another version of the same. Rooftops from Centennial Park looking out over the harbor and above Hovey School. Drawing of the same. Right around this time in the mid '80s, I showed this set of paintings to a group of my students. And I had showed them some of my earlier expressionistic figurative work. And one of the students during the question and answer period said, "Professor Herman, I don't mean to sound disrespectful, but these paintings of Gloucester, they're okay, but they're not nearly as interesting as the more psychological things you've done." And it sort of threw me for a loop. So I thought, you know what, I've got to reinvestigate some deeper layers here. And as I was saying earlier as I began my talk, Gloucester does have that other side to it. It has this beautiful side to it, but it also has a darker side to it and possibly a more mysterious side. I began doing a series of imaginary cityscapes. And oftentimes you'll see in these paintings (this one also was destroyed in the fire), but you'll see in a number of them waterfalls coming off the top of buildings, or looking like water is rising in the city. Here's another version of it. The title of these paintings was "From the Dream of Wet Pavements." This painting is actually in the collection of Tom and Susan Brooks in New Hampshire. Again, a very large painting. And also at the same time, I was doing a series of imaginary factories. Again, this factory probably produces nothing but steam and light, I don't think it actually could produce anything. But, in fact, that was the title, "Steam and Light." At the same time that I was doing the imaginary cityscapes, again, kind of trying to correct an aspect of what I had been doing in the earlier Gloucester paintings, I was looking and thinking about a theme, man and machine. So I did a series of prints of monotypes of human figures wrapped up in machine-like forms. This one was entitled "Crucifixion". And this is called "The Man and the Machine". Some of these are in private collections. This one was destroyed.

18:20

Right around the early 1990s, I made a major shift. And I actually began looking at sacred art, with the idea that I might actually be able to do some kind of contemporary painting that would delve into and relate to the tradition of sacred art. In this case, the "Crowning of Thorns". Large pastel paintings, these are about 60 inches tall, and almost all of them are in private collections. This is called "The Flogging". "The Coronation". Mid '90s just before our house fire, I did a series of imaginary figure paintings that had to do with conflict and war, and it was during the Sarajevo crisis. And I call this "Lovers in a Dangerous Time", borrowed from a song by the Canadian songwriter Bruce Cockburn. This is called "Prisoner". So you can see a major change in color, a major change in palette, different change of imagery.

19:29

Mid to late '90s our house burned, and after that I began doing a series of paintings that I entitled -- the whole series was called "Building in Ruins". And I used that title both as a noun, a building that is in ruins, but also as a verb, that there's a hopeful aspect to these paintings, I think. This one's called "Against Chaos". Maybe back up for a second to say this figure appeared in a lot of those paintings. And he is an anonymous figure. He could be you. He could be me. He could be an architect, a survivor of some kind of collapse of civilization, but he's always surrounded by scaffolding. And for me, the scaffolding was -- became a kind of an intuitive symbol for that verb of building in ruins, of making something new out of the wreckage. This one is called "Rome: A Vision". A number of these pieces had the title of cities to them, but also kind of a spirit of a particular city, as it were. This one is called "Meditation". I began using gold leaf, you can see at the very topmost part of that painting. I apologize for the quality of this slide; it's a little -- the color is way off. But you can see some of the gold leaf there. This one's called "Transfiguration". And the figures become, as in the last one, the figures become partially destroyed, like the buildings around them. But they're not destroyed.

21:03

Background was lifted from a famous fresco by Fra Angelico by the same title, "The Transfiguration". Here's the actual painting; it's in Florence, Italy, in the Piazza San Marco in the monastery there. And you can see how it is incorporated. A lot of the things they did during this time have walls, parts of buildings that were shattered, and frescoes from art history, and you will see vestiges of those former old pieces. Here's another one, called "The Descent". And you probably can't make it out; it looks almost entirely abstract. But I'll give you a close up here. You can begin to make out figures. And here you'll see what it's taken from; it's taken from this "The Descent from the Cross" by Fra Angelico, which is also at Monastery San Marco. So if you look carefully, you can see the figure of the Christ and Nicodemus and some of the other apostles letting him down from the cross. But he's surrounded by these shreds or broken pieces of civilization, of buildings, of machines -- who knows what they are -- and the gold leaf over on the side. Recently, one of the docents here at the museum asked me what the gold leaf is about (if you've been up to see the show), and why there are some panels that are solid color. And for me it's kind of visual silence, because these paintings are so intense -- the brushwork, the color, and so forth. And there's a need for an area of rest, of visual rest.

22:31

This comes from a new body of work that came after "Building in Ruins". It was called "The Body Broken". So I'd gone from the broken buildings to the broken figures. And I actually was doing paintings of saints and martyrs. This was dedicated to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian, who was captured by the Nazis. Because he was part of a plot to assassinate Hitler, he was incarcerated. And even though the war had been won by the Allied forces and the Germans had surrendered, two days later he was executed and martyred. And he's written a number of books if you're interested -- "The Cost of Discipleship", "Life Together", "Letters from Prison". They're wonderful, incredible books. He was an amazing man, incredibly courageous. But I have him

symbolically suspended upside down, like St. Peter who was crucified upside down and, and instead of rising up into the gold leaf, he's descending into a pool of gold leaf or of gold. Usually we see these icons in traditional saint paintings, and the gold is above and behind. I reversed that. And you can see probably bits of the broken building behind him with swastikas that are dissolving. That's quite intentional.

23:22

This one's called "Annunciation", also based on a traditional image of Mary seated and receiving the message from the angel Gabriel. But in this case, angel Gabriel is really that abstract panel on the left. There is no angel; the angel's like a "Presence Absence". And the figure of Mary is a wounded woman from some wartorn country, maybe in a ruined church or it's not clear where she is. This is "Elegy for St. Catherine", another martyr, in which her body almost becomes part of the architecture, part of the shards and the brokenness. So you get the idea. And all that was leading to something like this. So if you look at the backgrounds of these paintings and then follow the progression, this painting was done right around, I'd say, probably those were mostly early 2000. This is right around 2005. And the title is "Palimpsest". And I don't know if you know what a palimpsest is, but it's a text that was written on sheepskin a couple thousand years ago, scraped out and rewritten. And what happens is over time the original text that was scraped out, off of the parchment, begins to reemerge 500 years later. So you'll see these emerging texts that are ghosts of former texts. I like that idea. It's sort of related to the process that I was trying to achieve in these paintings, because I was sanding them down and reworking them, and vestiges of underlayers would come up from the painting process. So this one is entitled "Called". This is from a series I did after the broken body series on the lifecycle of a woman. And this is meant to be a woman who's probably in her 30s, having had children, maybe a Mary, Virgin Mary kind of figure. She was actually this -- this woman, this Italian woman, who was the model. Eliza Lardonne was the model for a series of paintings I'll show you in a moment that were, in fact, about the Virgin Mary, commissioned work for a monastery in Italy. This one was entitled "Betrothed", again about a young woman about to be married. And the model for this was my daughter the day before she was married. So I got to see her in her wedding dress, which is illegal, but I'm an artist. I get away with stuff.

26:06

This is the painting I was referring to, a large triptych. Well, large altarpiece, I should say. It's about 12 feet long and about 11 feet tall, loaded with gold leaf and silver leaf and lots of figures, obviously, and I won't spend the time to unpack the symbolism, but I wanted to show you the surface of the painting. This is a close up of the surface. And this relates to the show upstairs, I think, just as that palimpsest does. So my paintings were very heavily worked and reworked and sanded and scraped and repainted. And sometimes they're virtually destroyed in the process. (I'm going to turn off this light for a second. A little better. These slides are a bit dark; I'm sorry about that.) But that's a close up of the Christ figure in that large painting. This is a close up of an older Virgin Mary, long after the crucifixion, in a state of contemplation. And then, of course, on the left-hand side was the younger. This is the other altarpiece, done around the same time, which reads from right to left as the Annunciation of the Angel Gabriel appearing to Mary. Then

she's overcome and overwhelmed and overshadowed by the Holy Spirit in the central panel. And on the left, she's pregnant, and she's meeting with her cousin, Elizabeth. Maybe you know the story from the New Testament.

27:29

So now we're up more or less to the present here. And I guess what I want to say about the show upstairs -- we're almost done here, believe it or not -- would like to say about the show upstairs is that you ought to really view it as one work, rather than just a bunch of separate paintings. See it as one work of art with the figure being a central element and then, as a horizon, as it were, of an abstracted landscape that surrounds him and out of which he emerges.

28:01

What I'd like to do now is I'd like to just read for you a brief statement. And then I'd like to conclude with a video and then open up for questions and discussion. I believe, as T.S. Eliot says in "The Four Quartets" that as an artist, I am not here to inform curiosity or make report, as he says, but rather to bear witness to the beauty and sublimity of Earth's form, in a kind of prayer, through paint. And we are the Earth as the Hebrew name for the first human, "Adamah", or "Adam" as it's translated in English. The literal translation of "adamah" is "dust" or "dirt" or "earth"; for dust thou art and onto dust shalt thou return. At the level of atoms and molecules, we are pulsing the same motion and energy as everything else in the cosmos. You might even say that we are nature, as Jackson Pollock once memorably quipped. That's why the central and only figure in the exhibit, witness Adamah, is a man of earth and is painted in the same color chords as the abstracted images of earth and sky and sea that surround him. He's also a man of the stars, however. As important as the psalmist says, quote: "What is man that thou art mindful of him? Yet, you have made him just a little lower than the heavenly beings." By the way, those words are inscribed in stone on one of the major buildings at Harvard University, if you're ever walking through Harvard Yard, you'll see that. "What is man that thou art mindful of him?"

29:45

Okay, now I'd like to conclude with a brief video. This is some of the lichens surrounding the cape and fragments of paintings and stones. Surfaces of the paintings. Above the Great Ledge. And now the video.

[Video shown]

36:41

That was a collaborative video, amateur because I made it. But the music was written by Jeff Thompson and sung by Marie Chvatal, and it was taken from an ancient Latin text from the prophet Isaiah. And let's see if I can read that for you. Okay, here it is: "Drop down, do, ye Heavens, and let the clouds rain down the just one." And also part of the text is taken from Psalm 19. Like the Isaiah verse, it speaks of the heavens declaring the glory of God. Jeff and Marie felt that that music seemed to fit with the scenes of the nature shots that I'd taken, nature photos that I'd taken. All those photographs were taken one day, walking around Cape Ann, the

Great Ledge, and Good Harbor Beach. Those of you who live around here or have visited know that this place is just full of daily miracles.

37:59

Thanks for listening, and happy to take questions and comments. Yes?

38:22

Audience Member #1:

How much of your work is intuitive versus -- no I -- well, for instance, on the big painting with the green, you know, when you have a thing there, is that because you don't know why, but you just have to have it there or is there an intellectual construct? Or some sort of construct, whatever it is that is operating? And you're aware of it? And that's why that just has to be there?

38:49

Bruce Herman

Because I don't know if everyone heard the question, maybe I can summarize it. She was asking how much of the process is intuitive and how much of it has some kind of intellectual content that's being communicated? Is that a fair statement?

39:01

Audience Member #1

Yeah.

39:03

Bruce Herman

I would say it's kind of a mixture of both at all times. I mean, I don't know what my painting's gonna look like when I begin.

39:09

Audience Member #1

Right.

39:10

Bruce Herman

So there's a lot of intuition that goes in and a lot of losing and finding of the form in the process of making the painting. Each one of those paintings probably has 20 layers. And, as Meg will say, my wife will say, I ruin as many paintings as I actually paint. And otop of those ruined paintings, often I find, you know, the bits that are the palimpsests that are going to be -- that reemerge and then can actually be useful in the process of making a painting. So that's very intuitive. But I do think a lot about my work. I read a lot. I, you know, I'm steeped in art history and art theory, and it's all there. But I don't consciously set about to illustrate ideas in my work, and there are no messages in my work. I actually would never want to make message paintings. I

just -- for me paintings are -- I mean, visual art is an attempt to get at things that can't be put into words. Other questions or comments?

40:06

Audience Member #2

You suggested that we look at the paintings as a whole, not as individual paintings. Did you?

40:11

Bruce Herman

Or both, at least. Yeah.

40:13

Audience Member #2

Oh, okay. Well, I was gonna ask if you started out having a vision for it as a whole or did it start...

40:21

Bruce Herman

Great question. The question is, was this exhibit conceived from the beginning as an installation piece? No, there's roughly 34-35 pieces in the show. And I understand all as one piece, and yet as individual pieces. And someone asked, one of the docents, asked when I was here a couple weeks ago said, "What would happen if you sold one of these paintings?" And I said, "Nothing spectacular." I mean, what happens to you when one day goes by? You can't get that day back. For me, those paintings, that whole installation, is about the passage of time. It's about the seasons of our lives, the seasons of the year, very much like Eliot's "Four Quartets". (Actually, by the way, there are four sets of fours in that exhibit up there. There's "The Four Quartets", the four seasons, and of course, the four seasons of our lives. The four elements, which are supposed to symbolize all elements, earth, air, fire, and water, and the four decades that I've lived here in Gloucester. That's just a little piece of inside information. You don't need it to look at the show.) But I don't know if I've answered your question. My feeling is it can be -- individual pieces can be experienced by themselves, but actually the best way to experience that show is as one work, and I think it makes more sense for people that are looking for -- when they -- I mean, the immediate question I always get from people when they're seeing this exhibit is why is there this naturalistically painted human figure (which by the way, is made of strange colors) and then these abstract paintings? And the simple answer is that he is the same thing as those things. But he's formed more particular -- he's more particularized. And in a way, I think of the first human being being, you know, from dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return. You know, of course, he emerged, the figure emerges out of the welter of marks and the mud of creation. Actually, we're told scientifically, the first humans, you know, the first life forms (I shouldn't say first humans emerge out of mud), but the first life forms emerged out of the mud. I probably over answered your question. Any other questions or comments? Yeah?

42:30

Audience Member #3 (William Cross)

Bruce, maybe you could just amplify that comment by talking a bit about your view of the figure in the landscape and your sense of the relationship between those two, which has been such a theme in in your work, particularly in the context of Cape Ann art, where many of the great paintings are completely bereft of figures. They're all about the landscape, both made by God and made by man, but with no figures present. And yet for you, the figure and the landscape are very complimentary.

43:06

Bruce Herman

Yeah, I mean, you said it! I mean, someone pointed out to me, another friend of mine was in the studio long before the show was finished, and pointed out to me that the color chords in the human figure there, that Adam figure, the witness figure, are very similar to, specifically similar to the two anchor pieces that are on that same wall, the "Prospero's Tempest", this big stormy looking thing that might be star systems, might be weather systems. And in the far right as you're facing the main wall upstairs on the far right, there's one called "Prospero's Staff". And he said, "Boy, the color chords in the figure are identical to those two paintings. Why is that?" And that's when I first began to sort of say to myself, "Well, because we're made of the same stuff." So I mean, the human and the natural are continuous. We think of culture and nature as being so separate. I don't think they are actually. I think culture emerges out of nature the same way the beehive emerges out of the activity of bees. It's just what humans do. We make those sorts of things; we make art; we make buildings. Anyway. Profound, right? Yes?

44:26

Audience Member #4

So Bruce, what I really appreciated was seeing your journey through the slides that you chose, you chose for us. So my question is, what's next? Where are you going?

44:41

Bruce Herman

Humm...Where am I going? Meg, where am I going?

[Audience Laughter]

41:46

Bruce Herman

Sorry. I'm not really asking her because...

44:50

Meg Herman

You're going *with* me.

[Audience Laughter]

44:52

Bruce Herman

That's true! And it's a good thing, too.

44:57

I don't know. I don't know what I'll do next. I actually just ... My parents both passed away this past year. We all go through this when you're in your late 50s, like I am. And I loved my parents dearly and grieved deeply over them for a long time over the past year. But one of the great things that I was able to do, by God's grace, is to do really carefully made portraits of each of them. And those portraits are the most recent work that I have completed. And they're very naturalistically painted. I mean, they look and feel like my parents, but they have some of the energy of the abstract paintings in them. And so you can see from other work that I've done with a figure and abstraction that those things are always in a kind of a contest in my work. And I like that contest. I like the fact that no one wins out, that the human figure and the narrative on the one hand, and the more abstract. We call it abstract, but I think all art is abstract. I mean, even illusionistic art that looks like something is abstract. It's not really that thing; it's paint on a surface made to look like something. But, for lack of a better way of talking about it, the abstract elements in my work are always going to be there. And for me, the most exciting and most fun thing is to push paint around and explore color and shape relationships. And so in some ways that show upstairs is a little bit self-indulgent. But it was... it came right on the heels of that big commission of the Mary paintings, the altarpieces which were very demanding. And it took all my energy, all my thought, all of my care. And so the "Presence Absence" paintings, by comparison, were like playing in a sandbox. I think some element of that maybe gets into the work; it looks like I had fun, right?

46:42

Audience

Yeah.

46:44

Bruce Herman

I did.

46:47

Audience Member #5

You have some very unique colors in your paintings. They seem to appear in a lot of them. That sort of soft, bluish green. I don't know how to describe it even. Can you talk to us about your color?

47:02

Bruce Herman

About color?

47:03

Audience Member #5

Yeah, about your color and....

47:06

Bruce Herman

How many hours have you got? Color to me is like air. It's like sleep. It's a necessity. I don't really talk about it very much. Because honestly, I think it's... I painted that. But I will say I will say a couple things about color. I mean, as a college professor, I've had to slow my brain down enough to communicate to other people verbally what I'm thinking visually. And one of the things that I loved to do in the years when I taught basic design was to talk about the primary colors. Do you know that there are only three colors in the universe? I mean, does that not astonish you?

47:46

Audience Member #5

Well, then you get what you get out of it.

47:48

Bruce Herman

Right, and you can take those three colors and you can mix every -- in the millions of colors that are out there. So to me, that's just... But why are there three: red, blue, and yellow? And white contains all color. White light contains all color and it can be broken up into the spectrum. And black, we're told pure black, theoretically, would have no color. So for me, both the black, the black and the white, and all the spectrum of color in between is the language that I feel most comfortable in. I mean, this verbalizing that I'm doing right now, to me, is something I've studied very hard to be able to do and try to make sense. Most of my colleagues who are painters will say, "Look at my work. That's what I have to say." End of talk, you know? So I didn't really say much about color, did I? Except that I love it! Actually I will say something about that show upstairs that you might find interesting. You know, artists colors come in hundreds of different colors in tubes, right? I chose three colors and kind of a black and white. And that's all that I used up there. I'll tell you what they were. I didn't actually use a black; I used a color called Payne's gray, which can get very, very dark. It's almost black, but it's a bluish tinged color. I used Payne's gray; white; Naples yellow, which is a warm, earthy yellow, not quite as warm as ochre, but it's a warm yellow. And for my red I used...I didn't use a red at all. I used this thing called Caput mortuum, which is Mars violet. It's kind of a brown/purple. And if you squeeze it out of the tube, it's this incredible, rich purplely brown, and then if you mix it with white, it becomes this incredible violet. You see all the violet tones up there? They're all made from that Caput mortuum. So that's it. I mean, Naples yellow, Caput mortuum, white, and Payne's gray. And then I used a little bit of the cobalt turquoise here and there. Yeah, which I mixed down with the yellow. All that technical talk, but there it is. Other questions? Yes?

50:00

Audience Member #6

I have one!

50:01

Bruce Herman

Yes?

50:01

Audience Member #6

[unintelligible]

You seem like such an intuitive painter, and I was wondering what it's like for you to do a commission. Like, how do you shift from sort of not knowing what's going to be on the canvas to being asked to do something in particular? As a painter – I feel kind of dumb calling myself a painter next to your art right now, but, you know, I simply hate commissions.

50:38

Bruce Herman

Probably, if you read a lot of artists' diaries, you get the same word.

50:42

Audience Member #6

How do you get through that? What is that experience like?

50:45

Bruce Herman

Well, I'm actually starting a new commission (I started it this past week), a portrait of the retiring president of Gordon College, and I'm having the time of my life. I love... I actually, in the Mary commission it was sort of half commission/half initiated by me, because I actually was able to do the subject the way I wanted to do it; no one really told me what to do. But I knew what the stories were, and so I had to answer to those stories about the Virgin Mary and try to figure out how do I interpret this. Or how do I make it contemporary and not just look like some traditional painting that someone took out of the moth balls? To respond to your question, though, about commissions, I am finding, as I get older, that I find them liberating rather than confining. When I was younger, when I was in my 20s, if someone told me what to do as an artist, I would have said, "Yeah, right." You know, I wouldn't have been interested in commissions. But as I get older, I'm actually finding that it's actually a lot of fun to have limitations. You know, using those five colors I was talking about was a tremendous liberation, not to have to choose between 30 colors on my palette, but just, you know, try to get everything I could out of a couple things. So the limit, you know, in the limitation is actually great freedom. I mean that that's the easiest way to answer that. Other questions or comments?

52:05

Audience Member #7

I'm just curious about the music that you listen to to inspire you in your work?

52:13

Bruce Herman

Yeah, the question is: What kind of music do I listen to? What sort of sounds inspire me as an artist? I've been listening for about 10 years, maybe 15 years now, to a lot of contemporary sacred music. Believe it or not, there is incredible sacred music being written today. In fact, one of the great composers Henryk Górecki, the Polish composer, just died yesterday. He wrote amazing, his Third Symphony, the "Sorrowful Song", is just an incredible piece of music. And it comes out of his experience of, you know, growing up in Soviet-dominated Poland. But Arvo Pärt, an Estonian composer -- (A lot of them come out of the Eastern bloc nations.) Arvo Pärt is an amazing composer. He's still living, still producing, still very vital. John Tavener. I've listened to quite a bit of Philip Glass lately, minimalist composer. But music has been a very important part of my work as an artist. I also listen to rock and roll; I used to play rock and roll. Other questions? Comments?

53:18

Well, thanks for coming and enjoy the show upstairs. I'm gonna hang out there a little bit if anyone wants to interact upstairs in the gallery but I appreciate your patience. Thanks.

Subject List

Artists:

William Lester Stevens
Frederick Mulhaupt
Aldro Thompson Hibbard
Emile Gruppe
Jeff Weaver
Fitz Henry Lane
Winslow Homer
Edward Hopper
Marsden Hartley
Fra Angelico
Jackson Pollock

Authors/Composers & their works:

T. S. Eliot *Four Quartets*
Bruce Cockburn, composer "Lovers in a Dangerous Time"

Dietrich Bonhoeffer *The Cost of Discipleship; Life Together; Letters and Papers from Prison*

Psalm 8:5-6

*Jeff Thompson, composer

Janet Marie Chvatal, soprano

Isaiah 45:8

Psalm 19:2

Henryk Gorecki, composer *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs*

Arvo Part, composer

John Tavener, composer

Philip Glass, composer

***PRESENCE ABSENCE soundtrack music Info ~**

PLACE OF RESURRECTION / DEEP WITHIN

Music written, produced & recorded by Jeff Johnson

Keys & percussion: Jeff Johnson

Vocalist: Janet Marie Chvatal

Violins: John Fitzpatrick

Guitars: Tim Ellis

Latin text from *Rorate Coeli* based on *Psalm 19*

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Places on Cape Ann:

Walker Creek tidal estuary

Dogtown

Atlantic Ave.

Great Ledge

Halibut Point

Good Harbor Beach