

Baang & Burne Contemporary presents: An interview with artist Jane Zweibel.

Where are you from? How did you get started making art? Have you always been a painter or have you worked in different mediums?

I was born in Brooklyn, New York and grew up in New Rochelle. I have made art for as long as I can remember. I never made a choice to be an artist – it was what I always did and wanted to do. I have always been a painter first. But I have also consistently made drawing and collages. In college and graduate school I learned printmaking and began investigating sculpture as a medium. That foray into the language of sculpture has informed my work today. For six years I have been creating what I call “stuffed paintings”: sewn and cotton stuffed canvas forms with paintings on the facades. I see them primarily as three-dimensional paintings. I love the idea of merging painting and sculpture, and fusing them into a new, hybrid medium and mode for self-expression.

Did you go to art school? If so, are you satisfied with the experience?

I went to a small liberal arts college with a strong art department. After I earned my B.A. in visual art, I attended graduate school at a large university, where I received an M.F.A degree in painting. Overall, I feel that my art education was invaluable. I was allowed time to creatively experiment in my work, develop and hone my identity as an artist, interact with peers, and professional artists, and to experience on-going feedback and critique. (Sometimes too much!) The two ingredients that were missing from my art education were learning actual technique in painting, and career advice and development. I really had to teach myself how to paint because the emphasis in the teaching of painting was on self-expression, content, etc.

I have a theory that all artists are multi-talented. Have you studied or do you have expertise in other fields? How does that background influence your studio work and vice versa?

Creative writing is my second passion. I mainly write poems, and upon occasion, short stories. However, my writing never developed into a career like visual art did. I only write when intermittently inspired, unlike making art, in which I work in my studio consistently, whether inspired or not. Another field I have worked in professionally is teaching. Originally, I didn't think I would like or be good at teaching art. However, once I began teaching art, I found that I actually loved it. Teaching art always fed into my art making. A major watershed moment in the influence of teaching upon studio work took

place during the course of teaching my fifth graders to create hybrid sewn and stuffed creatures. I decided to make one with them. I worked with canvas, thread, stuffing, and paint in my studio – and my first “stuffed painting” was made. What began as a student project transformed into a new, exciting, and on-going body of work! A year ago, I earned my second master’s degree in art therapy. Now, in addition to my studio practice, I work professionally as a creative arts therapist. The materials and concepts I develop in my studio transforms into what I do with my clients as an art therapist. Conversely, my creative process is strongly influenced by my work as a mental health professional. Currently, I am developing my most ambitious project to date, which will integrate painting, sculpture, and installation. The whole concept is inspired by my art therapy sessions.

Describe yourself using ONE word. How does this characteristic manifest itself in your work?

The one word I would use to describe myself would be “intense”. By “intense”, I primarily mean, “deeply felt”. People, places, things, situations, memories, and dreams, often have a strong affect upon me. This gamut of deeply felt and intense experience manifests itself through the imagery and content in my work. Self-portraiture, for example, is a central, recurring theme in my work through which I can explore larger, broader definitions and concepts of identity. I appear in my pieces in multiple guises and states of being, and my self-portraits inhabit surreal, dream-like environments. People often find my work unnerving, dark, and edgy – albeit often tempered by humor.

Do you keep a journal or a sketchbook? How do you keep track of all the ideas you come up with? What’s your first step?

I have kept sketchbooks for many years. Over the course of time, as my life has evolved, I have utilized my sketchbooks intermittently. I attribute this to the increased demands upon my time and energy, balancing studio work, jobs, and family. I now find that I am so eager to get started, that once I am in the studio, I dive directly into the work. However, I always begin with very specific ideas and images. I also work in series and distinct but interconnected bodies of work. I now “maintain” my proliferation of ideas in both my mind, and in files and folders where I collect visual material for my work. I am never lacking in ideas; some ideas inevitably get discarded or lost in the mental shuffle, and others take form and become realized. I usually begin with a collage. The collage becomes a springboard for each piece, which transforms and evolves as I work, while also remaining true to the original idea.

Working alone in the studio and be a lonesome endeavor. How do you keep yourself motivated and on track? When you lose momentum or focus, how do you to return to your core motivation?

I have maintained studios in a variety of contexts. I have worked in rented studios in buildings with other artists' studios. This kind of studio situation has afforded me the space to focus upon my work, as well as the possibility of interacting with other artists. This has always worked as an excellent balance for me. Even more ideal has been artist residencies, where I have been granted the time and space to develop a body of work, and to develop creative relationships with other artists. I have fine-tuned the ability to work independently in a dedicated way. Working towards a specific goal, such as a show, definitely fuels my motivation. But if there is no upcoming exhibition or other opportunity, I just keep working, and the sheer excitement of seeing new work unfold is where the motivation and inspiration lies. Of course, there have been many times when I have experienced a lack of motivation. During those periods I sit tight, and so far my "mojo" has never failed to return. Travel and multiple cups of coffee help!

If you could dispel one myth about being an artist, what myth would you banish forever?

The myth I would like to dispel is that of the "starving artist" I believe that truly serious artists, on some level, want their work to ultimately be seen and experienced by others. I also think that most artists really do want to ideally make a living from their work. Many of us take day jobs, such as teaching, to support our work and ourselves as artists. Maybe I should only speak for myself, but I know I am not alone in this: when a collector acquires my work, I am quite happy to send it out into the world. Most significantly, I gain such gratification in being paid for what I most love to do!

If you could set up shop and have a studio anywhere in the world where would you choose?

That's a tough one – there are so many places to choose from to have a studio that I'm hard-pressed to choose one! I think I would choose to be in New York, but with an ideal studio in Chelsea, near the galleries. A second choice would be Italy, a country I have a special love for. I would love to have a studio in Rome, which is one of my favorite cities, and chock full of Caravaggio paintings.

Is there a separation between your "real" life and your work life? Do you think it's necessary to keep each distinctly separate?

There is certainly a separation between my "real" life and work life, in the sense that I need defined boundaries that keep my everyday life distinct from my creative work life. This provides a balance and a crucial degree of sanity. On the other hand, my lived experience in the "real" world has always given me direct inspiration and material for my work. In this sense, there is a strong connection between the two, and they are inextricably linked. So I guess the answer is that they are both separate and not separate at the same time, if that makes sense.

What's the best & worst piece of career advice you've ever received?

Perhaps the best career advice I have received is that no matter what, it is the creative work that takes place in the studio, developing over time, that is the most important and driving force of an artist's life. Without the work, there is no career. The career components --- shows, grants, reviews, etc. -- are essential to being and developing as a professional artist, but none of that can happen without a strong commitment to one's artistic vision, the realization of that vision, and conviction in what you are accomplishing in your work. Stick with what is true to you – that has always worked for me – and career triumphs, interspersed with disappointments and rejections, have been my rewards. In terms of the worst piece of career advice offered to me, I can't think of anything specific. However, I have had some disturbing and discouraging experiences in terms of reactions to my work. If I had allowed these incidents to take hold of me, they would have adversely affected my career as an artist.

What advice would you give to an artist who is just starting out?

A young artist should have time and space to develop a serious body of work true to the artist's vision and creative instinct. He/she should also have time to experiment and take risks in their work. I don't believe that a beginning artist should rush into the business of being an artist – which is not to say that they should not take the right opportunity if they arises and feel right. When it feels like the right time to put the work out there, do it! But the work should always come first.

How do you define success in terms of your career? Do you have specific goals you want to reach in 5 years? 10 years?

I have worked long and hard on my career. I have experience both “success” and “failure” throughout. Success for me, in my career, is defined as having the opportunity to exhibit my best work that I feel most strongly about, in both national and international venues. When my work is out in the world, being seen and experienced by a diverse audience, I feel that my career is thriving. Yes, I do have specific goals that I want to reach. In 5 years: I would first like to have secured representation by an established, commercial New York gallery, with a gallerist who feels strongly about my work, and works hard to promote and sell it. In 10 years, I will be at a stage in my career where I would like to be a well-respected and recognized artist. I would like my work to be in at least one museum collection. I will have built a good relationship with my gallery, and will be able to earn a steady income from the sales of my work.

How important do you think it is for artists to know about art history, and why?

I think it is extremely important for artists to know about art history. Art history is a continuum. As artists, we are all an integral part of that continuum. I think that being well versed in the history of art presents artists with a wealth of information to draw upon. I have learned so many invaluable lessons from artists who came before me, and this has profoundly enriched my own development as an artist. Artists don't work in a vacuum; we all have influences, which are key to our finding our own artistic identities. For example, I wouldn't be the same artist I am today without looking at, learning from, and being affected by, the self-portraits of Frida Kahlo. Although I consider my own self-portraits uniquely my own, I know and appreciate that Frida Kahlo's indelible images have influenced my images.

In a hi-tech global society that is saturated by visual images that are being exchanged with amazing speed, how does two dimensional art such as painting remain relevant?

Yes, we live in a rapidly growing hi-tech global society. It changes faster than we do. Digitally based art forms are now commonplace and high profile throughout the art world. Yet, despite all of it, I maintain with utter conviction that painting is not “dead”, has never been, and never will be! I think it is a great thing for artists to have access to all of the electronic, information age innovations. However, I believe that painting remains totally relevant, and will continue to be so. I think that hi-tech innovations can exist alongside of painting. I find the Internet, with its vast treasure trove of visual imagery, has become a major resource for my work. Yet, painting itself, the intimate relationship between hand, tangible medium, and subject matter, is and will always be relevant.

Do you find yourself more attracted to work that is not like your own, or work that has similarities to yours?

Both! I would say that I lean more towards work that has similarities to mine. For instance, I am naturally drawn to work that is surreal, personal, narrative, and figurative. On the other hand, I am totally open to all kinds of work, and work that is very different than mine often excites me. I find that life as an artist is less rich when closed off to different mediums, modes and ideas in art. I must remain wide open – how else can I truly grow artistically? I make it a habit to see a wide variety of shows, so as to seek inspiration in both expected and unexpected contexts and venues. Just as I continue to be open to other cultures and societies, so it is with art and its multitude of forms and concepts.

**Can you describe your most recent exhilarating visual experience?
Describe the last time you stood before a work of art and were genuinely moved by it.**

Recently, I saw an exhibition of Kiki Smith's new work at Pace Gallery in Chelsea, NYC. I have always admired her work. But I was unprepared for the powerful experience of seeing this show. I was tremendously moved by it, so much so that I felt that it would have a deep impact upon my own work. The overall theme of the show was the life and death cycle of a particular woman, and women in general. The women could be perceived of as both personal self-portraits, and "everywoman" portraits. The dying women could be perceived as references to Kiki Smith's sister, who had died of AIDS. The larger than life portraits and self-portraits were extremely eloquent, evocative, moving and haunting for me.

Do you believe artistic creativity is an innate human quality? What natural talent would you like to be gifted with?

I do believe that artistic creativity is an innate human quality. I think that all people are born with the potential for creative self-expression. However, unfortunately, because of the poor level of art education in most public schools, and the lack of support for art education in general by the government (at least in the United States), most people's innate creative potential is neglected and un-nurtured. This is a profound shame. On the other hand, I don't think that everyone is "born" with natural talent for art. But certainly, everyone has within them the capacity to express him or herself artistically and creatively. It is indeed a human quality. Besides visual art, I would like to be naturally gifted in one of the other art forms, such as dance or music. Especially music: my mother was a gifted musician. I wish I could have inherited some of her talent...but maybe it is there, and just needs to be unlocked.

Who are your art heroes? Who are your “real life” heroes ?

I have many art heroes. In terms of contemporary artists, I love the surreal, figurative paintings of Julie Heffernan. Other artists whose work I love and admire are: Philip Guston, Susan Rothenberg, Elizabeth Murray, Elizabeth Layton, Max Beckmann, Frida Kahlo, Francis Bacon, Van Gogh, Caravaggio, Mantegna, and Rembrandt. My “real life” heroes are: my deceased grandmother Ruth, my son Nicolas, the writers and therapists Lauren Slater and Irvin Yalom, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Barack Obama, Hillary Rodham Clinton – and I know there are others, but these are the ones that come to me off the top of my head. The common denominator, I think, is that these individuals have all in one way or another overcome difficulties and odds to triumph in their lives.

You’ve been granted the opportunity to have an all-expense paid lavish dinner party anywhere in the world. In addition to your best buddies, you are allowed to invite 3 historical figures. Who will you invite? Where will you be? What will you eat?

Oh wow! I simply love the idea of an all-expense paid lavish dinner party anywhere in the world – though who wouldn’t! My best buddies will be thrilled, of course! I had a hard time coming up with 3 historical figures to invite. I would really want to have present Frida Kahlo. She was a great painter, but also a social activist, a survivor of trauma, and a person who led a fascinating life. Second would be Simone de Beauvoir, whose writings I greatly admire, and who was a groundbreaking feminist... and I must have a famous feminist present! Third would have to be Obama, who made incredible history as the first African-American president of the United States, whose politics I generally admire (though I don’t agree with everything, so we have room to debate issues), and, as an added perk, is a very good-looking man! Where in the world would I like to have this spectacular dinner party? I would have to say in Bali, Indonesia, which I visited last year – it is a truly wonderful and beautiful place. What will I eat? I think the menu would consist of all the foods I love the most. I would have a sampling of foods from throughout Southeast Asia, China, and Japan. Sushi and sashimi are absolute musts: lots of it. Middle Eastern food platters chock full of hummus, stuffed grape leaves, and kebabs; and of course Italian food...pasta, galore.

Complete this phrase: “In my next life if I can’t come back as an artist I’d prefer to be ...”

In my next life if I can’t come back as an artist I’d prefer to be a writer and novelist. As I mentioned before, writing is my second passion, and in my next life I would like to fulfill that parallel destiny. I would like to write powerful, beautifully written novels that are published in 40 languages and read worldwide!

Over the years you’ve worked with many different galleries internationally, but Baang & Burne Contemporary functions in a really different way from the traditional white cube gallery structure. Why did the idea of B&B appeal to you? How did this project come about? What made you think it might be a good fit for your work?

In addition to typical white cube galleries, I have also shown in a variety of alternative spaces and venues. I believe firmly that there are so many ways and places to exhibit art that exist off the beaten path. I love innovation, and that includes the arena of gallery models. These new and exciting venues increase the possibilities for artists to have their work seen. When I was presented with the opportunity to show my work with Baang & Burne Contemporary I gladly accepted. I think that offering the art world, and others, the opportunity to view my work in an intimate context, and to have the chance to meet and talk with me, and vice versa, is a creative and wonderful alternative to the conventional gallery opening and exhibition. It promises to be more relaxed, friendly, and conducive to conversation and getting to know the artist and artwork in a more up close and personal way. I immediately felt it would be a good fit for my work, in that it breaks the mold in exhibition models, and my own ideas resonate with the vision of Baang & Burne’s creators/directors. I admire what they are setting out to accomplish, I like the work of the other artists represented, and they believe in my work. The latter is something you don’t always clearly get from gallerists-at-large.

So what’s next on your agenda after your first event with Baang & Burne?

Well, my agenda after this first event includes future events and exhibitions with Baang & Burne Contemporary. I would love to participate in their upcoming European events. I’ll also continue to show my work in group and solo shows here in the US. I want to present my body of work “Midlife Mermaids”, which has already been presented in solo shows in Europe and New Zealand, in an appropriate venue in the U.S. In addition, I’d like to receive a grant to complete my new body of work “Asylum”, and find an exhibition space for my ambitious new installation project “Open Studio” [working title]. Finally, I have a forthcoming solo show, next July 2011, in Manila, the Philippines, and I will be spending the year preparing for this show.