

THE EVOLUTION OF ART
ISSUE N° 7 – THE NATURE ISSUE – APRIL 2017

embos

M A G A Z I N E



JEAN JACQUES BASTARACHE

“When I was young I really enjoyed the dream-like, surreal representations portrayed in the films of Spanish director Luis Buñuel, as well as the unseen worlds of Salvador Dali. Early Jon Gnagy drawing books, as simple as they seem, also revealed a kind of out-of-this-world quality that I gravitated toward. Learning step-by-step how to draw, or paint shadowy trees floating across a snowy road affected me on a deeply personal, subconscious level, and I wanted to recreate that feeling in my own way. I’ve always been fascinated by what goes on if you look closely, and I am moved by how profound it is to create tension by putting an object or person out of their familiar context. My fascination with altered states of reality continues to inform and inspire my work.”



Jean Jacques Bastarache
Santa Barbara, USA

Website

juliericogallery.com/
[jeanjacquesbastarache](http://jeanjacquesbastarache.com)

Biography

A well-known art historian, Ernst Gombrich stated; “There is no such thing as art. There are only artists.” This statement may well-suit the work of Jean Jacques Bastarache, for when he appeared on the art scene in the late 1980’s, his style of painting perplexed the mainstream art world. At the time there was no category for his style of work, yet he kept painting and selling-out his well-received solo shows at the Julie Rico Gallery in Los Angeles and Santa Monica, California. Jean also showed works in the Lollapalooza tour’s “Mean Art Tent” exhibition organized by Julie Rico in 1995.

Jean’s careers included working on the Ford Motor Company Assembly Line in Wayne, Michigan, and as a scenic artist for popular television shows in Hollywood. Jean also worked for the inimitable Ed “Big Daddy” Roth. You can see a photo of Jean and one of the paintings he did for Ed in the book titled “Rat Fink: The Art of Ed ‘Big Daddy’ Roth” by Greg Escalante and Douglas Nason.

Jean was at the forefront of creating work that marks the significant transition from Low Brow to work that shines as important and collectible in its own right. His paintings were featured in Juxtapoz Magazine, Fall 1997, Art Alternatives, Issue #6, and the CD cover and interior imagery for the rap group P.O.D.

How did you get your start?

As a child I drew a lot. I used to watch my Uncle Harvey paint hand lettering. It really impressed me; it looked easy and yes, I could do it too. He took me to a hobby store and bought me my first oil painting set; I still have it tucked away. I was around 11 or 12 years old. I remember I loved the smell of the linseed oil. It introduced me to another world, almost like a drug. My Mom would doodle a lot. I think that’s how I picked up doodling. My Dad was a metal and woodworker, he used to make Viola de Gambas. Eventually, I went to college for fine art and attended the Center for Creative Studies in Detroit, Michigan.



How would you describe your style? How has it evolved during your career?

In the beginning my art was more colourful and it was more surreal. Now there is a level of realism to the paintings.

It is getting to the point where there are so many details in my paintings. I use a very tiny brush when I finish each piece because that's when I obsess the most. Perhaps my work will morph again into an entirely different style. I never really know how things will unfold.

Can you talk about your unique approach to the creative process?

Usually an idea comes to me and I visualize a basic layout in my mind's eye. The paintings evolve as I go along. A lot of time I have no idea what to put in some parts of the painting, then by the time I am finished these may be the parts of the work I like the best.

What themes occur/reoccur in your work?

Most of my paintings are interior scenes; people, animals, and objects inhabit these rooms. There is a surreal element, but it's no longer as prominent as when I started creating. There is usually a sub-story going. I use miniature people and symbolic objects to tell the story surrounding the larger subject. It might be a history of the person in the painting; it might be a dream.

You've mentioned earlier that most of your paintings are interior scenes. Is there a specific reason for this? Do you think interiors relate better to a sense of the surreal?

Surrealism can be expressed in all kinds of environments. It is a way of looking at the entire world.

Rooms are easy metaphors for intimate states of mind. The psyche is a room of memory, joy, terror, and beyond. The viewer can step into the staged environment to experience the surreal, the bizarre and themselves.

The issue of melting polar ice caps is obviously on your mind in "Bear Necessities". Do you think it's important for artists to address environmental issues in their work?

I think it makes no real sense to isolate environmental issues from every other kind of human experience. We live in the world inside and outside of our heads. I think artists need to address big issues a lot of the time, but of course art can be playful too.

Nature makes a tremendous contribution to the surreal elements in your work. How does nature inspire feelings of the sublime or surreal in you?

It makes sense to me that nature inspires surreal concepts and ideas. It's the basis of being alive; humans have evolved with it and in it.

What has been your biggest art faux-pas?

As a painter I really do not recall any faux-pas. But once when I was a scenic artist working for television, I was on a stage painting the floor and I knocked over a 5-gallon paint bucket with my foot. The paint went all over the executive producer; all the way up to his waist! It poured all over his expensive Italian shoes. Then there was an announcement that I was parked in the wrong place and I had to run outside to move my car. I came back to wash the producer's shoes off. That was probably the most embarrassing thing that has ever happened to me.

Have you ever experienced a creative rut? If so, how did you overcome it?

I have never had a long term creative block. A lot of times I won't know what I am going to paint next, but I pull out a sketch pad and doodle for a while and see where it takes me. I trust the process.





Above: Untitled, 10" x 10", oil on canvas.

Left: Bear Necessities 12" x 16", oil on canvas.

What risks have you taken with your work or for your work?

I worked at Ford Motor Company for 14 years as a spray painter. I also worked on the production line, installing parts, drilling holes; working quickly. Julie Rico, my ex-wife, had moved to L.A. and was working at the LA Times. Julie wanted to start an art gallery and she found a 12,000 square foot space. I came out to help her set it up and then I flew back to Michigan to work on the assembly line. I quit my steady job at Ford to move to L.A. to be an artist. I didn't have a job lined up, but I found one as a scenic artist, which helped me continue with my painting practice. Then I quit that job because Ed Roth hired me to paint his Rat Fink series. Everything is a risk when you are an artist.

Are you involved in any upcoming events/shows?

I am preparing for an exhibition now called "Spotlight". It is my view on current events.

Is there something you are currently working on that you can share with us?

I am working on a painting featuring birds in a taxidermist shop. I am putting in animals that are either extinct or approaching extinction. I have a passenger pigeon, a dodo bird, and owls. The only live thing in the room is a mouse in the room full of stuffed predators. There is one live owl peeking through the skylight at a pretty dismal future. Although the image is rather dark, there is

a kind of subliminal hopefulness because of the lighting from the skylight, a lovely dusk peach and purple. My work holds some sense of possibility and humour, no matter how grim.

Tell us your best joke.

The monk goes to a sanctuary where he takes an oath of silence, then the abbot says, "you can say two words." The monk says "home food." Then the abbot comes back and says, "what other two words?" The Monk says, "hard bed." Then the abbot says, "ok you can say two words." The monk says, "I quit." The abbot says, "it's about time! All you have done since you got here was complain."

What song is your current obsession or what music do you listen to when you're creating your art?

I listen to KXLU, or music that I grew up with. Mahavishnu Orchestra, Jeff Beck, Miles Davis, Jazz, Rock, and Blues.

Do you have a favourite quote?

I have a favourite caption from an old New Yorker cartoon. It features a man sitting in the back of a cab behind the partition. There is a sign on the partition that says "Thank you for not killing me." This always makes me laugh, because it is true.