

## *A Conversation With Jules de Balincourt*

**Bob Nickas**

BN: The first thing we should talk about with these five paintings is how they comprise a group, because even though there was no advance plan for them to be thematically related, we seem them very suggestively intertwined. Would you say that you are mostly working intuitively? Having an idea of a starting point, but really discovering the image—the scene, the character or characters—in the act of painting? And then, since you often work on more than one painting at a time, making connections between them as they are evolving in the studio?

JdB: It is a very intuitive process, and I very rarely have a plan, a sketch or an idea. There are simply existing paintings to respond to. Often I'm working on as many as ten paintings at once, ranging from very small to 8 by 10 feet. I see these paintings as separate pages from a book in which each new painting is a response or counterbalance to prior paintings. I'm creating a loose free-associative narrative of sorts. For me this also becomes a place of discovery. I like the idea of the "road trip" with painting, this notion of not knowing where you'll be, or what you'll see along the way. Painting for me is very similar in the sense that I don't want to be following a preconceived map. I want to be free and I want the process to be free.

BN: If we can place painters in one of two different camps, I suppose there are those who know their "destination" before they begin, and those who don't exactly know where the painting will take them. And it's clear how you prefer to proceed. That said, you're also well-known for paintings of maps, which have provided you with some of your most graphic and political work. You've made a new map painting for this show, even if it's a bit more abstract than those you have done before, which is a good development. When I first saw it in the studio you weren't really done, and that's an interesting parallel, between an unfinished painting and an unfinished map. Can you talk about how this came to you as an idea, and where the act of painting took you? Because at some point, you must have wondered: "After the others that I have done, how on earth can I make another map?"

JdB: Aside from being a political platform to vent on various issues of American dominance and decline, the map paintings are also a means for me to explore a more abstract approach to picture-making. These paintings are essentially my attempt at breaking away from a more figurative sensibility—representational painting and all of its history, baggage and limitations, capturing light and space. Suddenly, shapes and color choices were no longer bound by my subjective ideas, or bound to those painting conventions. With the maps, the painting was dictated by the statistics I had researched, such as who are the biggest corporate donors to the Republican Party, and the colors I chose represented a particular commercial brand or a political orientation. The map paintings are at the same time a paradox of freedom and constraints. Although they are always painted from my imagination, the maps have their own limitations, in the sense that California is a specific shape, that the Republican and Democratic states are different shapes and colors. Even though I'm freed from figuration, I delve into abstraction with these sort of guidelines or, literally, borders through which formal decisions are dictated by the geography, but also by its mutations.

BN: Right, because in earlier map paintings, you would scramble or overlap the information, "illegally" crossing borders to put forth a certain political statement. These new maps are really more like globes than an abstract map-making or, in some cases, un-making.

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JdB: Exactly. The new paintings have evolved into abstraction and are less specifically maps. They are globe paintings, and I'm zooming out of American politics or specifics into a more global scale ... attempting something that's as futile as "painting the world." My work has distanced itself from the specifically American map-scape to a more general space of anxiety and hope. Essentially the new globe paintings are not bound to any specific country's border. They are simplified icons, symbols of a map. On a process level, this is as "action painting" as I get, as I follow my quest to be free from figuration, from rational objective thinking. In a sense these globes become meditations or attempts at entering a sort of primitive state. There's something very primal and freeing in the process of having a larger-than-life panel, an eight foot diameter globe, and then activating that space. The funny thing is that we recognize it as a world or a map when it's just a bunch of random shapes and lines—no continents, no countries, no borders.

BN: The "explosions" are where we find the "action" in your painting—even if it represents a combustion or burst of energy, and it's also frozen in place—as we see in similar Pop imagery of Roy Lichtenstein. You have one "explosion" in this group of paintings. Can you talk about the all-over radiating image, and how it relates to the globe?

JdB: The explosions or burst images serve as decimators of information, the birth or big bang of the show, encompassing everything from a life-affirming climax to hyper-galactic explosion. I like the duality and contradictions these paintings have, hovering between multiple realms of being cosmic, floral, explosive, climactic or destructive all at once. In addition to providing the initial energy which propagates and disperses all the other paintings, the burst also works as an anchor for the whole show. I suppose the globe and the explosion are most obviously connected in terms of the universe being a product of the Big Bang and simultaneously showing our potential to let loose our own man-made big bang right here on earth.

BN: So you represent creation and destruction in the same image, or at least leave the interpretation of it up to the viewer. An optimist will see one thing, and a pessimist will see another. While others may philosophically see both? How open do you want the readings of your work to be? Certainly in the abstraction there is an ambiguity, and greater room for the viewer.

JdB: I think a lot of my work hinges on a duality or polarity of sorts, this utopian/dystopian potential in all the images, as well as in us, in our ability to be swayed in either direction. Sometimes I think of my images as visions of what our current reality is, what it could be, and what it might become. Mixing abstract-based and representational work is another duality that I need to explore for my own curiosity. I think of the abstraction as coming from a primordial subconscious state, and the image and narrative paintings as coming from the more rational, conscious mind. These ways of being and seeing and interpreting interest me as well. So just as I try to be as open to transmitting images from both a conscious and subconscious state, I want viewers to approach the work as openly as possible. I'm not interested in funneling everyone down the same road of a single idea or interpretation that is presented to them as an absolute.

BN: There is a strong sense of the unconscious in two of the paintings in this group, both of which are, in fact, imagistic and narrative. The first is the tree painting, which actually sits on top of an earlier portrait, so it has the transparency of a ghost image. It's subtle, but once we make out the features of the head that's immersed in the branches of the tree, there is a sense that this person, or phantom, haunts the scene. Down below, there is a gathering, a party outside at night. The colors of the tree have a flickering, psychedelic feel,

so maybe what appears to be a naturalistic scene is actually something else. Hallucination may be too strong a term. And then this phantom may only be part of the picture by chance, and you simply accepted his absence/presence. What's going on here?

JdB: Often what helps me when I start a painting is knowing that the initial image can be changed, mutated or negated, and it simply becomes a foundation for something completely different. So I can dive into it without too much angst over what has been "deemed worthy" to paint or commit to in the first place. This is what happened with *Waiting Tree*. What was initially a mediocre hot pink painting inspired by people playing music at an Occupy protest was almost completely obliterated. The only remnant of the previous painting is the actual tree. Essentially I painted space around the tree in an effort to block out the awkward figurative painting that had been there before. So yes, I suppose a lot of my work really is unplanned or unconscious, and it can be a surprise for me.

BN: And what did you discover with this over-painted painting?

JdB: I can't say that I had a real motive in juxtaposing the barely visible but almost life-size head in the trees with the gathering below, but I am interested in the subconscious mind, and in how the viewers come in with their own emotional and psychological baggage. They get to decode whatever symbols, colors and shapes I present. To one person this is a party. That's what you saw. To someone else it's a kind of family tree. There could be as many interpretations as there are viewers. I think of this scene as picturing a place of transition, where one is waiting in anticipation, a sort of transient place loosely inspired from my travels in Central America. Sometimes a bus "station" is just a place under a 400-year-old tree where people wait, not really sure when the next bus will arrive.

BN: The other painting that I see as representational but otherworldly is the globe/face. There is a kind of bubble moon or reflecting pool with a face, and inside of it is a group of people who are possibly being transported somewhere. We can see a number of small ships, similar to those in the map/globe. Stylistically it reminds me of Francesco Clemente, who is certainly known for exploring images that appear to have emerged from a dream-state.

JdB: I have to say that out of all the 1980s painting guys—Schnabel, Salle, Fischl, and Clemente—Clemente is the one who still resonates with me the most. At least some of the work he was doing in the late 1970s and in the 1980s had a certain spiritual surreality, delving into mysticism. Fischl had his gaze on suburban America, and Salle had his hyper-cool, hyper-removed pop cultural juxtapositions. But Clemente was mining for something much more personal. He was on a sort of vision quest, seeking to explore his own psyche, working from an internal gaze. It seems like a lot of work these days is so removed from anything expressive or personal or spiritual. So much of the art world renounces these things and gravitates either to hyper-conceptual/political work or to a super formal "slacker minimalism." Meanwhile, anything that's overtly surreal, subconscious or mystical is shunned as self-indulgent, navelgazing or just too damn hippie for the art world. But then again it makes sense that this is the state of things today. Look at how the culture, the media and the society is such a spiritually starved soulless playground right now! The irony of the art world is that much of the premise of what's being shown claims to have a social/political agenda, striving for a more communal, righteous, egalitarian world, and yet this work has little visual tenacity. With its art theory discourse, it leaves a lot of the general public out, and ends up being a little enclosed circle claiming to be a voice of democracy.

BN: I have a complaint of my own, even if we might not be saying the same thing. There's a tremendous amount of art being made and shown today, but very little that you can describe in terms of being visually satisfying. I always seem to be asking, "Where are the esthetics?" Much of the sociopolitical, theory-based, and so-called conceptual art that we've seen since the 1990s is basically anti-painting, but you believe in both social engagement and in painting, in its ability to legitimately address what goes on in the larger world. Where and how do you see yourself in the flow of image-making today? Who are some of the artists that you admire?

JdB: You ask, "Where are the esthetics?" What I'd like to know is, what about personal expression and consciousness? Where's that? I have a hard time with art that is either pure formal fluff or too heavily theory-based. There is a lot of post-conceptual/post-studio work that is so buried in text and art jargon that there's no entry point, just semantics and pseudo philosophy interpreted by artists. Have we forgotten that art is still about a visual experience? At the same time there must be something to believe in or fight for. It can't just be a visual experience. When I was at school at Hunter in 2001, right after 9/11, I started making work that definitely had political undertones, a repressed anger at the state of things, America's brutal foreign policy and the whole Iraq debacle. It's not that I was some revolutionary radical preaching the writings of Che, and storming the G-8 meetings. I was simply hyper-conscious and sensitive to what was happening. It was unavoidable for it not to permeate my work. With a lot of the artists that I love and admire—Raymond Pettibon, Franz West, Huma Bhabha, Thomas Hirschhorn, Gelitin—there is an almost manic energy, a need for a physical expulsion of sorts, and one can feel that struggle and compassion, that conviction and absurdity of these parallel universes. Most of all you can feel them provoking, pushing, instigating and agitating. I respond to that, and I think human consciousness needs it... and we need it today.

BN: Since you are in a sense both European and American, you have a double identity. It's an interesting way of being culturally conflicted, because not only were you born in Paris and raised in Southern California, but you live and work in New York. How would you say that this now triangulated point-of-view has informed your paintings?

JdB: It's funny how that has become part of my "branding" or identity in the art world. But it is a vital part of my artistic and social/cultural makeup. As a child I experienced a very transient life, traveling and never staying for more than one year or two in the same place. By the time I was eight or nine years old I had lived in Zurich, Ibiza, Paris, and finally Los Angeles. When my family settled there in 1980 I definitely had a difficult time transitioning from Europe to a suburban American setting in which the images of Rambo and Reagan ruled the times. In school, I would be heckled as being a "commie" for wearing sandals and corduroy shorts, while the other kids were wearing Vans, tube socks and Iron Maiden T-shirts. I went from well-behaved Parisian parks to the Venice Beach board walk, where surfers, hippies, dropouts, gangsters, and skaters all collided in one place. It was freeing for me, and fascinating to experience this at such a young age. And somehow I still feel a little bit like an outsider in both cultures ... since I was never fully immersed in either.

BN: I've been following your work for ten years now. As I look back on some of your themes, considering them in relation to what you're saying here, it's clear to me that you look at the world in terms of being either in or out of touch with nature, being free or under surveillance, with people needing to escape from the constraints of society and re-connect with one another. The types you mention—surfers, hippies, dropouts, gangsters, and skaters—are all representative of being in and outside of society.

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You could add artists to that group, in the sense that they observe the world from a certain remove, but participate by giving an image to what they see, and by choosing how it should be represented. You mention Rambo and Reagan, but you never painted them. Instead, you chose a hero who is an anti-hero, and one shared by Europeans and Americans—Clint Eastwood from the Sergio Leone movie *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*. All this leads me to one painting in the show that we haven't talked about yet, the portrait of the soldier. Where did he come from?

JdB: The “psychedelic soldier” portrait was loosely inspired by a google search I did by looking for “camouflaged soldier.” I rarely work from actual photos or images but occasionally I will troll the internet for visual references. That's what I did in 2007 when I made the painting, *Holy Arab*, in which the covered head of an Arab blends into a landscape, but with blocks of color instead of camouflage. Both the face and the landscape appear as if they're seen from a plane. The irony of the camouflage is that there is no uniform that everyone blends into. How can you win a war when your enemy has no recognizable identity aside from stereotypes and clichés of the “Arab” or the other?

BN: And the sort of aerial photography view, which is the abstraction in the painting, also refers to how abstract modern warfare has become, often fought from above, with planes and drones—and rendering opponents as essentially faceless.

JdB: Right. So the psychedelic soldier becomes a metaphor for the absurdity of war in general, and camouflage in particular. It doesn't really serve the purpose of blending in. On the contrary, the GIs become these obvious targets, proving that all the hi-tech gear and tons of money and grandness are not sufficient to win a war. So I made him into this day-glo psychedelic soldier as a protest to war in its futility. Also since we've been talking about the con- scious and unconscious mind, I would say on a subconscious level that this might be a self-portrait of sorts. A few people have mentioned how it looks like me. I haven't done a self-portrait since early college days, but maybe they are all self-portraits, and I'm still trying to figure this one out.

BN: It's interesting that you would consider the possibility of this being somehow your own portrait, because even if I don't see it really resembling you, that's what I thought as well. The Clint Eastwood painting resembles you more, physically of course, tall and skinny, with a gaunt face, and even the hippie poncho. But this psychedelic portrait mostly reminded of the soldier painting that Wayne Gonzales made a few years ago, where he inserted his own younger face over a photo of Lee Harvey Oswald when he was in the Marines. That was a very intense identification on his part!

JdB: Funny that you mention this painting of Wayne's, because when I worked as an art handler I actually packed and picked up that painting of his. And I love that painting, but I was not consciously thinking about it. I do see a connection there, but Wayne has a much more idea- or researchbased approach to painting, much cooler, more distant psychologically, though equally potent and visually stunning.

BN: Seeing the psychedelic soldier alongside the moon face, and also the tree, it's uncanny just how much they have in common—these various applications of camouflage. It's as if you take a motif that is meant to conceal something, and you use it to reveal, complicate, and comment on the image. This is true for the map as well. In fact, all of these images might be seen to emerge from the explosion ... once the dust settles. We can imagine each painting as being laid one on top of another—transparencies that are pieces of a larger, vertically integrated puzzle.

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JdB: I like the idea of composite transparency in my work, and the idea of history as layers. I'm glad you see these visual similarities because I always worry that in combining disparate images they may end up appearing schizophrenic. It makes sense to me that there are common elements linking them together, but I don't know if others will make these connections. Since I was working on all five paintings at once, I wanted to at least tie them together formally. Although there are times when an idea or a title for a painting comes to me before I even get to the studio, very often the image unfolds in the process. I like that all these paintings are orbiting around each other, and while they are linked in this sort of symbiotic relationship, they are still independent from one another. Each painting informs the bigger picture.

BN: The five paintings in this show can almost be seen as different versions of a single image, or stills from a movie, and this idea of transparency is a metaphor for how one image lives "inside" another, and advances the story.