

James Busby's paintings are immediately intriguing due to their simplicity of form and pristine surfaces. They take visual cues from early Robert Ryman "white paintings" and nod in the direction of Judd's minimalist forms. The conundrum, however, in his paintings is that Busby invests himself so heavily in the production of each piece that he violates the minimalist dictum of "removing the artists hand from production." In this interview I wanted to find out from James directly the processes and techniques that he employs to create these deceptively simple paintings and highlight their complex and rich gestation period.

Brett Littman: Looking at your work, I was reminded Ellen Lupton's catalog for Skin: Surface, Substance, Design, that was produced for her exhibition at the Cooper Hewitt Museum in 2002. I started thinking about that show when I first looked at your work because of the relationship between the base and surface of your work. Are you interested in the dialectic between the inner and outer layers of your painting surface?

James Busby: I think of the surfaces of my work more as a manifestation of both the inner and outer layers with the end result being somewhat ambiguous. I am very interested in the ritualistic process it takes to make these paintings.

Seemingly simple works take tremendous amounts of time, which may not be detectable as the work could just as easily be cast in plastic, or machine made. It takes months to prepare the surface by applying the gesso with a four-inch Japanese brush, one coat a day, then sanding and polishing the layers until I feel the surface is satisfactory. I then remove parts of the surface with various saws, routers, and drills. The finished surface is a result of this long process.

I am not sure that "skin" would be an appropriate description of the final paintings, since there is no protective coating of the surface; it is the actual surface of the gesso the viewer sees. I am interested in the tension the surface presents. It is vital to me in making this work.

BL: To clarify, I wasn't thinking of skin necessarily as a protective surface but more the way you describe the surface of your work – the meeting point of the inner and outer. To me skin is a very complex organism – one that mediates our experience with the world on a sensory and ontological level.

I do find it interesting to hear about how labor intensive your surface preparation is with the result being your desire for ambiguity. How do you reconcile in your mind the erasure of your labor by the clean smooth surface of the gesso?

JB: It interests me to make work that evades immediate conclusions. Employing the basic materials I once used to make traditional oil on canvas paintings, gesso, canvas and panels, and transforming them to an almost unrecognizable

state motivates me. I am attracted to the slowness of the work, both in the making and once the work is viewed. The erasure of my labor instills a greater sense of tension. It is a consuming process to arrive at these finished surfaces, both physically and mentally. It can be difficult to work on a painting for months and see very little progression. The surfaces go through countless revisions before they are considered complete.

BL: By slowing down the fabrication process of your work I would assume that midway into a piece you may find yourself questioning your original intention for the surface. Does your process allow for doubt? And a related question: Do you draw or sketch before you begin fabrication of individual works?

JB: I almost never make a painting that unfolds according to a preconceived idea. Conceptually my work is about questioning original intention for the surfaces. Doubt plays an instrumental role. It forces me make reductive decisions when considering what marks will be left on the surface. Finding my way out of that doubt is what I look for in a work. Essentially, I create problems for myself and see what solutions I can invent. The problems that arise can require a great deal of unforeseen time reworking the surface. Occasionally a work has to be sanded completely.

I make drawings that are an entity in themselves, never as a study for an actual painting. I have attempted to do this in the past and always end up destroying the work. It seems futile to make a painting that doesn't vary from an original idea. I actually resist the urge to record ideas about work. Only after a work is complete do I attempt to make sense of things. It would be like knowing the outcome of a story before reading the book. I prefer reacting to the painting as it progresses. It allows the work to move in directions I may not always anticipate. It opens new avenues to explore.

BL: Can you talk a bit about why you build the “suitcases” for the work? Several critics have likened this to Duchamps’ valises for his readymades. Is this a practical decision or do these “suitcases” have a deeper meaning? When someone buys the painting do they get the suitcase as well?

JB: Yes, the suitcases stay with paintings wherever they go. The crates began out of necessity. This is what separates my crates from Duchamps’ valises. His were conceived conceptually as opposed to mine that were purely practical and eventually evolved into a more integral part of the work. The fragility of the surfaces forced me to start making them as a means of protection. I needed a place to store the work. They began as rough crates. I have since refined them and they have become an interesting part of the work. Some paintings have been exhibited in the crates, and the crates have been shown stacked in the corner of the gallery as a sculptural object. The stack of crates functioned as a sort of chest of drawers for the paintings. I am interested in the complete statement the crates make with the work. They are a time-consuming part of my process since

each crate is custom to each work. I like that I have considered how the work is treated once it leaves the studio. I take the same care with how the work is handled that I do with how the work is made. Too much time is invested in the work to not consider the way it is handled. Gloves are provided to ensure the surfaces stay clean. The information for each piece is listed inside the crate so the handling of the work can be kept to a minimum. I also want to make clear that the crates are secondary to the work.

BL: What materials have you been using lately to sculpt the base layer from? Are there any particular qualities that you look for in materials?

JB: I am working with MDF, birch plywood, and most recently Polycast acrylic. The MDF has great qualities in that it is slightly easier to manipulate than the Birch panels. Since I spend significant amount of time shaping the panels with wood rasps and files this has been beneficial. I have also been laminating sheets of MDF together to build the thickness of the panels. Several of the paintings are built to sit off the wall approximately half an inch or so. This allows me to manipulate the space between the panel and the wall. Certain paintings have color on the reverse that is reflected onto the walls.

The Polycast work is very intriguing to me and presents an entirely new set of problems. For some time, I have wanted to know what my paintings would look like if I could see through them. I think this stems from working on the paintings in all different positions. I sand through some of the openings from the back of the panels. This seems to be a natural curiosity. The Polycast also creates interesting challenges when it comes to installation. For some of the work I have made shelves for supports and others are attached to the walls via keyholes cut into the Polycast. The transmission of light is a fascinating aspect of the Polycast. It allows for "free drawings" on the walls behind the work. In certain works, there are grids or lines incised into the surface of the Polycast. Once the piece is lit the lines are projected onto the walls behind the work. Instead of dealing with the once surface of the panels, I can now engage all six surfaces of the Plexiglas. When the work is viewed from different angles, certain marks interact with others that are on completely different planes.

The investigation of materials pushes each work in new directions. I am very curious and restless in my studio practice.

This interview was conducted by email between August 21 and August 31, 2007.