

Life (Pre)veils: Bryan Corley at Cass Cafe

Bryan Corley in conversation with Ashley Cook

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The relationships between the natural world and the concept of “human society” present themselves as problematic yet ultimately inseparable. When faced with an inevitable collapse projected for some time in the foreseeable future, generations of young people perhaps are dealing with this unending feeling of impending doom with a rather dry and dark humor that comes with a sense of acceptance. What is the role that image making plays during this process of grievance, catharsis and even in the production of acceptance or new hope? This question seems to be something that is emerging when viewing the work of Bryan Corley in the exhibition *Life (Pre)veils* at Cass Cafe. On view are 19 works that seem to be on some kind of dissected journey through different histories from art to mythology to meme culture, combining them all into an amalgamation that mirrors the contemporary “melting” pot of meaning that is this internet saturated world of symbols.

In viewing the work, the individual paintings almost seem to function as scenes in the screenplay of a dark fantasy, which all come together to illustrate a narrative that draws from the contemporary state of things, and its many poetic, beautiful, passionate, sad, lonely, irritating, mysterious and downright horrifying facets.



Shapes for Imaginary Flowers was a sweet piece for me to do in this series. It was never a painting I felt turmoil over, it always kind of developed in the right way over time. It has that ‘flowers of evil’ kind of presence, but the lighter warm pink really takes the edge off and makes it kind of a nice composition. I think I’d like to keep coming up with shapes for imaginary flowers throughout my whole career as an artist, it’s a lot of fun and I think bringing a sort of naturalism into the realm of abstract expressionism through a symbolic token such as the flower allows for a lot of experimentation while keeping the boundlessness of experimental mark making in a tight package. For a long time I was really looking at this Richard Diebenkorn painting ‘Landscape with Figure’ 1956, he stuck this very flat spade icon in the middle of an abstract landscape. I really wanted to take that into my own art, the symbol and the natural.

Ashley Cook: I was reading the texts that you wrote for some of the individual works in your exhibition at Cass Cafe, and I think it is interesting that you chose to write about the individual pieces as opposed to writing about the show overall. Was that a conscious decision?

Bryan Corley: You know, I wish the answer was a little more profound, but I had some writing I had just done for Kresge while I was summing up some of these pieces, and I guess in that time that is just what I had in the moment to use as reflections on the work. And it is interesting because

in looking back, I do wish that I had written a bit about the show because I do see some salient pieces that tie it all together and bring everything into that name “*Life (Pre)veils*”.



Inter-dimensional Tree

AC: Yes, as I was reading through the excerpts you provided at the show, I noticed some common threads and reemerging themes throughout the series; particularly references to various kinds of mythology.

BC: Yeah, I would say so. Ever since I was really young, you know, I really liked the Hercules movie when I was a kid, and I think that I have always been interested in monsters, or anthropomorphized or therianthropic characters taking up space in narratives and I have always gravitated towards those beings and how they interact with humans in their environment and how they change in order to affect the world that they’re in. You know, because usually when they are

around, they are kind of the impetus for some kind of dispute to happen. Mythology, I think, is still one of the greatest tools we have to understand our inner psychology. I think if you look at old mythology of different cultures you will see this; for instance, the story of Oedipus is still so prevalent in Western narratives or Western philosophy and psychology.



Untitled Landscape



Lavender, Airplane Overhead

AC: It seems that you are also aware of the use of metaphor as an important aspect of mythology. In your work and the writing you provided, I am seeing this sort of pendulum swinging between themes of fictional mythology and the non-fictional reality of climate change and the anxieties that come with that. I am wondering if you are imagining that we are sort of living in some kind of myth of our own...as if our contemporary human experience could be translated into the realm of mythology...becoming its own mythological story...

BC: I think it is funny that you said that because the other day, my friend, whom I indulge more of my crazier ideas with, sent me a meme where it was some kind of epic painting of Christ and it's a kind of Pirates of the Caribbean thing where it's like "ya' best start believing in Biblical prophecies because you're in one!" and I think with what you are saying, the essence kind of sticks. I think that if you look at things from a religious lens or from a historical/political perspective, individually and collectively we are always living out stories or different mythologies. I think that something that is really interesting in Hindu mythology is the concept that we are the dreams of the gods...I personally see a lot of stories that get played out in our society through groups of people that I interact with, and it seems like those stories have mythical components to them. You know, it seems mundane, because it's our lives in our modern time, and it is not as flowery or as epic as these stories we're being told about, but I think if you break down the stories, you can see a lot of parallel between the ways humans interact with each other all the time. If you take that into a magical mindset, you know, you can start seeing the gods that are dreaming through the people. For me I think it is very interesting to look at our contemporary world and see where people are playing out the cycles in a repetitive way and where people are actually able to break the loops of those stories that way the characters of the gods actually go through to another narrative. I think there does need to be mythologizing at this point in order to have some kind of sanity, you know? That may be the best that we can have, is a comfortable acceptance...



Park Authority

AC: Do you find the use of mythology and the subject of climate change, which you also reference in your texts for the show, to be prevalent amongst the work of any other contemporary painters?

BC: Yeah, yeah. There are a couple of painters that I really like, that I take inspiration from, for instance with my painting Secret Beach, I was really inspired by these painters Bill Saylor and Kim Dorland; I feel like in a more abstract way, they're dealing with anxieties around climate change and using these kind of tropical symbols and archetypes to convey the foreboding that we are in with our environment. There is this other artist who uses a lot of flags, some of their paintings can be a little too neo-expressionist commercialized LA kinda feel, but um, they name all their shows like Emo-something, like "Emo-Jungle" or something like that. Their stuff is cool, they do a lot of grim reapers, you know. I see that in painting right now, there is the anachronistic idea that all space and time, all painting is up for grabs and we can play with it. There are people who are focusing on very specific symbols and sort of isolating the symbols into their work, and then there are painters who are documenting through portraiture and things like that. And if I can't really think of specific contemporary painters off hand, I

do look at Edvard Munch and some of the Modernist painters who were painting anxiety in a world where the Anthropocene was still unidentified. It is interesting to compare that to our contemporary more heightened awareness, with the psychedelic landscape, the news, the actual climate changing...



Death and Taxes

AC: When I was looking at your work, I was reminded of artists like Werner Buttner, Jonathan Meese, Daniel Richter, Martin Kippenberger, Albert Ohelen, Jana Euler, Jutta Koether, Cecily Brown. I was really interested in these links, because I feel like in Detroit, I don't really see that many abstract expressionist painters too much anymore. It is refreshing to see the paintings and be able to locate a broader scope of relevance and not only relate them to the history of Detroit art; although, it would feel natural to because Detroit did have a renaissance of abstract and expressionist painting in the 1970's which was recognized nationally and even internationally with some artist's work...

BC: Yeah, my aunt was actually a part of that movement; my aunt was actually one of the Cass Corridor artists.

AC: Really? What is your aunt's name?

BC: Denise Corley. She is still making work. She moved down to New York in that time period, along with a crew of Wayne State painters who thought that was the right move. Um, I dunno, I feel like a lot of those artists kind of got forgotten.

AC: I think one of the hardest things about Detroit is that there is so much initiative to produce, but there is not really the infrastructure there to keep the artists here once they have reached a certain level of success. And, I am not really judging anybody who chooses to leave, but it just feels like kind of a shame because there were so many great Detroit based artists that are not here anymore, and if they were still here, the scene would be so much more active and maybe there would be a stronger infrastructure in place to support local artists.

BC: I agree and I sympathize. I feel like it can be really hard to get to a certain level here, but I do feel like it is up to the people who get to a certain place to start building infrastructures in some ways, but some people just aren't into that, or just don't have the awareness or capability, they might have these opportunities somewhere else. You know, I feel like a painter/storyteller like Dabls is a really influential for me. To look at his early work, when I saw that, I feel like when people see the African Bead Museum, they don't really see his early work. His trajectory of art, he literally is a master painter. He started off with the foundation, doing historical portraiture, cut ups...he was doing things that were on the level of a Monet...and a lot of his work got destroyed because the infrastructure of the city isn't there to the level that could have propped it up or protected it.

The Dabls murals around the city have such a different energy to them than many of the flat mural paintings. It makes me think of abstract painting in relation to more illustrative conceptual works and a friend of mine said it so perfectly; they said "everything around right now is so shiny, very buttoned up, very Tik Tok", and that is a very alienating feeling for me as a painter because I've always seen painting as kind of the opposite of that. It is difficult when we are in a world where whatever you present needs to be very neatly packaged to compete with the mass information market. I keep swaying between wanting to achieve that buttoned-up shiny thing and to reject it wholeheartedly.



DOOM 4: Chase The Devil: So this painting's conception ultimately came down to the fusion of Chase the Devil by Max Romeo being stuck in my head and DOOM 4 being advertised on my Instagram. I started this painting in 2019 before the George Floyd incident that inspired major protests across the world. It had been on my mind, the idea of militant protest in America for some time. I've heard and read things surrounding the issue and this song by Max Romeo which I heard while driving through the Redwoods in California really stuck with me. It wasn't until I drew the flak jackets on the characters that "put on your iron shirt" popped into my head. A line that is so much in line with the radical militancy that some argue is necessary for people's liberation in Amerikkka. I added a burning 'thin blue line' flag in the background on a bent flagpole. In the smoke you can read "Jah is righteous" the word 'good' crossed out due to the much contested and gray nature radical protest is viewed in our country in favor of the word righteous.

AC: Do you feel that there is a relevant place for that approach right now? To reject the shiny well packaged approach in contemporary times?

BC: For me, what works when my paintings are working is when I can feel like I am part of the cannon of painters, part of the narrative of that form of creating. I have always wanted that in my life, and when I got into painting, that seemed like the goal. To make paintings that could exist within the narrative and cannon of painting. And I don't see that as a Western pursuit, I think that all cultures have had practices develop around the application of

pigment, and I think that painting is a human endeavor and pursuit and technology. And I very much want to be a part of that and in my own way, add or turn the wheel. I think that you can do that in the shiny way and I think that you can do that in the skuzzy way, but I think that the danger is becoming an outsider artist, because I feel like once you get that label, there is a bit of a dismissal for the canon by the art world, or what is 'proper' 'high' art. I do think that it is naive to assume that because someone is making work outside of the art world, that they are unaware of art history or are not making a point, or not at the real depth of their creative practice. But you can tell, or at least I can tell, or recognize that certain touch that instantly tells me that that painter belongs to, or could belong to, the cannon of painting.



Masked Gathering

AC: I wonder if it is a level of awareness or questioning that takes place to cause that touch. Like, a painter who entertains the history of that cannon and works to contribute to the further development of the conversation of painting throughout history, through being aware of and adopting or rejecting rules that have been in place through mark making, use of color, composition, subject, etc.

BC: Yes, I think so. I think in a lot of ways, it is an ancestral tradition. I did not learn to paint from a teacher. The first thing I did when I was trying to understand painting, I looked at the people who came before me and really looked at their mark making. In my head, I would often try to deconstruct how they did the painting from start to finish and what that mark making process looked like. And I think if you get into a certain headspace, you can kind of see that coming through the paintings. By looking at a painting like that, the painting begins to teach you about the history of painting and why the person did it. I think that that ancestral engagement as a human practice is really important to that continuation; I feel like anyone who engages in painting and is mindful of that can get there, but I think it is a tight rope to cross because you can work your whole life and never feel like you got there...like Mondrian who worked and was focused on bringing his painting to a place where he wanted to be but he never really felt like he was able to achieve what he was setting out to do stylistically. It is interesting to me, the drive to want to push painting somewhere, and the awareness that would be required for that.



Osirian Mysteries: I love this painting so much, but it's kind of a hot mess for me at the same time. The character in the foreground reminds me of when you are hungover from a night of party, you wake up, your make up is still on your face, and you have to walk to the bathroom with memories of last night still hanging in the air. I was really unsure of this painting and it's meaning before I gave it the Osirian context. It let's the painting be about the death of Patriarch and the renewal women bring to ward life. I suppose the large cat person holding the knife is Set while the woman bleeding from her wrist Isis, with Osiris under the tarp. This painting

also makes me think of interpersonal familial therapy which focuses on the drama's played out by the 'family' or alternate identities we have inside us. Some of these protect traumas while others hide, some relate to society at large and some to our personal families. I think it is extremely useful to look at Mythology through this lens.

AC: Yes, I am thinking about how every movement in the history of painting, the cannon of painting, has had a relevance applied to it, and we relate that to Pluralism now, and how almost any style is accepted as relevant in contemporary art...

BC: Well, you would think that, but I actually think that painting is still a space where that hasn't been pushed as much. I think that in certain art forms or mediums, it is allowable or okay, like I think of Takashi Murakami's early sculptures, you know...the ejaculations and such, and those are okay for sculptures, but sometimes I don't know...for instance, I think about a space that I would like to explore through painting that is very sexual or vulgar to some people...there is something insufferable about vulgarity in painting that I feel cannot really be translated by other mediums. For that reason, I feel like there is still so much to explore with painting, but I also am interested in continuing to hone the focus and stay in my lane of what I have been developing in my practice until now...



Secret Beach originally had far fewer people in the image, but it came off as a rather lonely picture, so I added more commotion on the beach, and I think what it's turned into is something rather pleasant. The people here, made-up and inspired by

persons I've met, have congregated to witness this Sun starfish-like creature erupting out of the ocean serve as a metaphor (much in the way Godzilla was allegory for nuclear power) for the ever-encroaching effects of ecological disaster. So many of us are worried for good reason about this. Global warming stresses us all out. I wanted to make a painting where at least for a moment some people could gather and feel a sense of acceptance and face the Sun who is slowly cooking us from heaven. I wanted the people to feel like they were coming to peace with the crisis we are in at least for a moment while they sit and watch the coming waves. I think it is a powerful thing when humans can come together and feel at peace with nature for a moment.

AC: Do you identify as an expressionist?

BC: I like expressionism. I like the root of the movement. I think expressionism is so great because it has deconstructive elements, it has historical elements, I think that it is tied to a visual language that is more universally accessible for even people who don't know the history of art and I think it is the language of emotion. I think when emotion is the prime consideration in art, that is when I really like it. I do like art that is intellectual, but I do think that we can easily enter an intellectual mindset as a society and because of the atrocity that we see everyday, it is easy to dissociate from the emotional space and that is why I feel like expressionism can still be powerful for people to be able to have an emotional experience with a visual image.



Springfield

AC: You recently had an exhibition of your previous paintings at Granny' Chandelier in Hamtramck. How would you relate that work to the work on exhibition at Cass Cafe?

BC: How it relates is definitely an evolution. The work that I was showing at Granny's Chandelier had work ranging from the past three years and while installing that show, it made me really want to re-explore the concepts that I was working on. The ones that I have up at Cass I have been working on for a whole year and to me that's a lot of time to look at the same work. I knew that I wanted to play with landscape and narrative in this show, but I also really want to get back to bigger bodies and interactions between those bodies.



Palimpsest Daytrip was the first piece in this series and while *Archon over Eden* was a measure, this was more of a roadmap. I feel like a lot of the content in this piece has the makings for the rest of this series. As to what it's about, the Daytrip part of *Palimpsest Daytrip* refers to the practice of taking psychedelics during the day often to spice up enjoyment of an outdoorsy space on your day off. The palimpsest part refers to the technique of wiping away or the near erasure of drawing, which occurs in this piece, but also how the myriad of various visuals and thoughts that come to one's mind on psychedelics often are remembered as obscured or half memories from those experiences much like a blurry dream. In this piece the person lying on his side seems to be having a lot of stimulus from his trip and is probably going through quite a bit from the looks of it!

AC: Do you mean bodies of work or sizes of paintings?

BC: I mean like people, like figurative bodies. And nudity a lot and more like sexual themes in paintings. I really like erotic art and I think that there is a lot of nuance in sexual encounters that doesn't get described. Maybe in literature and certain other spaces, but I haven't seen it so much in paintings.



'In pieces, the serpent finds a grave among those flowers': The eyeball flowers, a motif I picked up from a Japanese manga called 'Aku no Hana' or 'flowers of evil' a reference to Baudelaire. In the comic these eyeball flowers cast a kind of judgment and anxiety on the main character and that imagery really stuck with me in our world of disembodied eyes peering into our private lives all the time. There is also a dual meaning for me in that I personally believe nature itself and the world around us has an animistic quality. That we are watched or at least noticed in a way by the green and everything in between. I feel these eyes on me, a very different kind of eye than technology has given us. A gaze that is aware of our impacts upon it. This yellow snake, cut up, and slithering into a jumble of weeds reminds me of the 'don't tread on me' flag a bit, it reminds me of the giant military that extends globally around our world and the dichotomy between this militancy and the conservation of our natural world.

AC: Do you think that living in Detroit has any kind of influence on your work?

BC: Yeah, totally, I think there is a lot to consider in the landscapes

of Detroit when putting out work, considering who your audience is, and why you're submitting something to the creative spaces of the city. Sometimes I struggle with that because I am not sure Detroit always needs everything in some ways. Whereas New York is kind like a take all. There are really amazing artists here in the city of Detroit, but in Michigan I wish there was a stronger community or a greater awareness of art and art history. Because of the lack of that, there is also a lot of work that is made and exhibited here that I feel can be pretty predictable. It can also feel like it's difficult to have an opinion or critical conversation around art. Sometimes I wonder if I need to leave the state? But then there is something about Detroit that feels very real. And maybe people don't engage in that kind of stuff because of the depravity of the realities here. The class struggles, the racial struggles, the history...I feel like there is kind of a sacredness in that and it's hard to make space for other things sometimes. It can be hard to feel like making art is the most relevant thing for me to do here, but I go back and forth with that.



Archon over Eden: I really like this one for how simple it is, I worry a lot of my work can come off as overcrowded, but here I felt very successful in pulling off a minimal quality while still providing some really dense imagery. This painting was done relatively quickly compared to my other pieces and it was often used as a measure to tune in other paintings. So as far as the symbolism, in the corner I tried to depict a sort of biblical angel type of form floating overhead. A seraphim is an angel warrior so imbued with the fire of love for God that it covers its own body with four wings

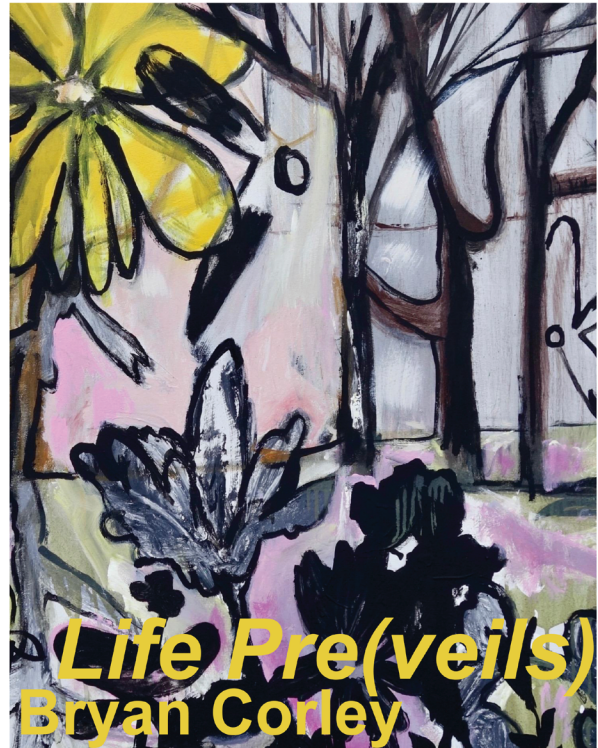
to hide it's burning passion. I sort of thought this angel made sense in the corner above these two people walking away from the car. An Archon, I believe was some kind of Greek judge and it has ties to angelic beings in the Gnostic bible. I wonder if this angel who covers it's own body to hide it's love for God casts a judgmental eye on the people trying to return to Eden.

AC: Yes, it is a relevant question to ask why would an artist want to live and make work in Detroit?

BC: Well, I think that if you are kind of like anti-capitalist as a person...I think that there are other reasons why the landscape of Detroit is interesting to be an artist in and I think that if you don't necessarily crave the social aspects that the art world brings, and you're able to still make work, that it can be a very good space to focus. I like the temperament of people here in that way...it's like as a society we stepped into a place where our youth culture has been so usurped by exactly the way the machine wants us to be, that we can't make our own rebellion or even see that what we covet as our own culture is so much a result of the manipulation. I think that if you need to get away from that aspect of being a current human, than Detroit is a good place because you can either be A. left the fuck alone or B. be around other people who are kind of also going against that grain. For me, I think that's really the heart of why I stay.

AC: Is there anything else you want to say about the exhibition or your thoughts behind your work in general?

BC: I guess the last thing I could say is that I chose the name *Life (Pre)veils* for the exhibition at Cass Cafe because I wanted to make a series of paintings that deals with the internal worlds that we are experiencing with the climate crisis that uses mythology and metaphor to kind of push that narrative. I feel like a lot of the paintings are very tense but also have a quality of resurgence of life in them and I think that that is a really important theme. I think that especially coming out of Covid, especially going into the spring, being in the era that we're in, I think that some form of life will happen and that our human lives don't necessarily need to be centered in that story of life. I think that it is incredibly hopeful to believe that life will prevail and that some forms of life will propagate and the Earth will recycle no matter what.



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