

Cherry and Martin

Cheh, Carol. "Profile: Brian Bress," *Art Ltd.*, September, 2015

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An early video work by Brian Bress titled *Rock Your Body* (2006) finds the artist in a makeshift space suit dancing to Justin Timberlake's eponymous song. In front of a carefully engineered homemade set composed of two French doors, two columns, and several sculptural objects, Bress dances while pulling objects out of his front-zippered suit. A large blue vase comes first, followed by several sticks, which he wields like batons during his jerky dance. By the end of the song, the sticks have been neatly put away inside the vase, which is sitting perfectly at the center of the tableau. After the music ends, Bress shimmies off the stage.

The appearance of this LA-based artist's work has evolved considerably since then. His 2014 solo exhibition at his Los Angeles gallery, Cherry and Martin, included several two-dimensional objects that resembled slick, highly polished, abstract and figural paintings, but were in fact high-definition, flat-screen video animations that featured varying degrees of movement. In the *Clayhands* series (2014), colored circles embedded within the canvas compositions act as stages for video footage of hands at work molding clay pieces. With the videos playing on loops, these animated paintings turn into abstract theaters where sculptures are made over and over again.

Bress' practice has evolved organically, through trial and error, to encompass the peculiar mix of drawing, painting, performance, and video that it is today. While his aesthetic sensibilities and technical execution have become much more sophisticated in recent years, his essential strategy remains the same: take a formal structure and burrow into it, exploring and animating it from within to create new ways of seeing and experiencing the scene.

The artist's first love was drawing; he attended the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) as an undergraduate with the intention of majoring in illustration. Driven by curiosity to learn new skills however, he ended up graduating as a film and video animation major. Following a failed attempt to develop a cartoon series for MTV, Bress decided to enroll in the graduate painting program at UCLA.

A studio visit with faculty member Lari Pittman turned out to be pivotal. "There I was, making bad paintings in the studio and trying to make them better by attaching things I found in thrift stores and photographing myself inside of them," Bress recounts. He was trying to make good paintings but was still interested in employing movement and time. Feeling like he was floundering, he asked Pittman why he had been accepted into the highly competitive program. Pittman replied that the school was not interested in the best painters, rather they were interested in the best students—people who were doing something intriguing but still needed help working out their direction. This freed Bress up to go with his instincts and experiment more freely.

Bress' earlier works, as exemplified by *Rock Your Body*, were playful and childlike in their willingness to be utterly silly within a serious fine art context. Over time, he learned to dial down his enthusiasm and make works that were quieter and perhaps more capable of letting the viewer in. He also gravitated away from collaging found objects, and toward creating imagined environments of his own.

Bress is a visual formalist at heart; by his own admission, he begins each work with visual motifs that he likes and lets them guide his decisions. He is also consistently attracted to physical movement and the lessons that it can yield. "I do more pieces now where you watch something evolve over a period of time," the artist says. "If you've ever watched somebody drawing, it's a really fascinating process—you're always wondering what's going to come next. It's an awesome insight into the way someone is thinking that doesn't involve language."

Currently, Bress is working toward his first solo museum show, which opens at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts this fall. The exhibition is primarily a 10-year retrospective of Bress' videos, sculptures, and works on paper to date, but will also include some new work. At his large, airy, and cluttered studio in Glassell Park, Bress shared an ambitious new piece he is working on—a stacked, multi-channel Rubik's Cube-style video installation that mixes the movements of various figures wearing full-body collage suits. It's a jazzy idea that is once again grounded in formal structure—the brightly colored suits, each a different color and plastered with magazine cutouts, were inspired by the classic Josef Albers book "Interaction of Color."

Equally attracted to structure and unpredictability, Bress strategically employs both to create his unique works, which are at once strangely off-kilter and genially appealing. "Being in the studio is so much fun," he reflects. "Not because there are no rules, but because you make them and stick to them and then when you do break them, everyone knows. I guess that's how comedy works—with a rupture of expectations. A pattern was set up and then it was broken."