

# Profile of an Artist

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by Timothy Burton

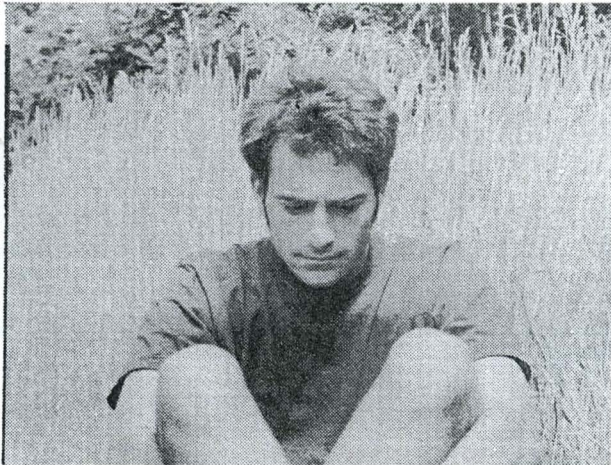
Jonathan Blum sits on a high wooden swivel chair, his back to his easel in his studio. One leg is crossed over the other, the foot bouncing back and forth every few seconds. He speaks not only with a distinct and resonant voice, but with parts of his body as well: his eyebrows raise and lower when he makes a point; his head tilts left, then right; his hands revolve before his face. Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue* spins on a turntable while the afternoon sun slides past the window.

"Painting is like a process," Blum says. "Painting is a really fun process. The outcome, in a way, is not really that important. In writing, the process is hell, but the outcome is much more tangible. I don't want to say painting's not important. I think it is. But painting is about the process that went into it. You can communicate with painting in ways you can't with writing."

When Blum speaks of the difference between writing and painting, he's speaking from experience. He received a B.F.A from Emerson College where his major in Visual Communications was coupled with a minor in Creative Writing. It was during his junior year, when he traveled to London on a study abroad experience, that his interest in the visual began to flourish.

"I had an art class in London where we basically did self portraits the whole time. Our teacher took a picture of us in our favorite spot in London and during the one-day-a-

week class that met Wednesday from nine to five, we had to use that picture all the time, but do it in a different way. Sometimes we had to make a collage, sometimes in pastels, then it would have to be huge," his arms spread open before him like the wings of bird, "then, he'd want us to make it small." Blum brings his hands together until his fingertips are a whisper from touching. "By this power of repetition, and I do believe there is a power in repetition, you can continue a theme. Style is fashion, but subject matter,



that's important."

Repetition is certainly apparent in the pieces that Blum has created. Not repetition which becomes boring and jaded, but repetition that achieves and maintains a theme. The theme that Blum has chosen for himself is a unique representation of a portrait. Instead of presenting the entire face of his subjects, he focuses on part of the face - his work represents a subject from the nose up. The mouth and chin are nowhere to be found. The bottom portion of the face doesn't exist on the canvas; the bottom portion of the face lives

only in the mind of the viewer.

"For me, by picking such a narrow subject matter, I've given myself a lot more freedom than many other artists. I feel that I can go all over the place and be very consistent. When you have a style people tend to get very behind your stuff. But when you go all over the place people write you off. They think you aren't professional yet, that you aren't ready yet. But me, I'm permitted by my audience to go all over the place. I give myself a lot of freedom.

"I feel that I capture people from the eyes up, I really do. I consider myself a portrait artist, which is more of a crafts thing than an artist thing. I like being a craftsman more than an artist. I think portraiture is such an important thing. I'm really into portraiture. My goal is to capture people from the eyes up. I used to do a lot of my work from photos, but I'm working from life now. There's just something about it. I real-

ize that when I'm painting I'm not always looking at the person all the time. I'm feeling the energy. A photograph is so flat. But with a person here, there's the energy and by doing a portrait from the nose up, I feel I capture the essence of that person."

Blum not only tries to capture the essence of people, but part of his current exhibit at Gallery Matrix will consist of a series of portraits of horses. These, too, are represented from the nose up in a palette of soothing colors, evoking childhood images of carousel horses traveling

# Jonathan Blum

in endless circles. But where the horses in an amusement park all contain dark brooding eyes, the equine figures in Blum's portraits all bear human eyes, filled with a wonderful sense of expression.

The fact that Blum has *limited* himself to such a narrow focus, allows him to produce portraits that many artists haven't attempted. A number of Blum's subjects are black, subjects, which for one reason or another, many other portrait painters have ignored. "Black people have great features," Blum says. "I love black people's features. They're great. That's one reason why I have a lot of black people represented. The other reason is I was in Washington,

D.C. and the city has a lot of black people and those are the people that lived near me, that were around me a lot of the time. There was this black woman who was living next door to me and she posed for me. I did her from life and she had her eyes open, but when she left, I kept working it. And, somehow, I made her eyes close. I totally changed the look of it. When she saw it, she said, 'That ain't me. You had it so good and now you've lost it.' She hated it. My best piece and she hated it." The piece, entitled "Nude Portrait," shows a beautiful black woman, eyes sweetly closed as if in prayer, in a striking combination of browns and yellows. It's a moving piece of art.

Blum grew up in the nation's capital and has lived there off and on since. It's a town where he can identify with both the environment and the people. "I grew up in Washing-

ton, D.C., right in the public schools. I really did it, right in the heart of the city. I liked it a lot. It's full of art. One job I got in D.C. was working with kids at the Kennedy Center working on a mural project. The actual mural was on Capitol Hill and it only went up for a week. It was for a Children's Festival and we had to use the word



'harmony.' So what I did was on every panel there was a letter, an 'H,' an 'A,' and so on and there would be a person holding a letter. I wanted to make it very integrated so we had a black kid, a white kid, a Chinese kid, a handicapped kid, so every letter was held by a different kid. We all learned a lot about harmony by doing something like that all together."

Blum's work has not only been featured in a Children's Festival on Capitol Hill, but he has also had several one man exhibitions in D.C., Prague, Berlin and Provincetown. This recent show at Gallery Matrix is a comforting place for him to exhibit. "I came to Provincetown on a father and son trip. My father picked me up after college and brought me here. I really liked the art community. We saw a great exhibition here eight years ago and we loved it. The next

year I came out here with a girlfriend and got a job teaching kids at the Art Association. So basically I just came here for a weekend, thought I could do well here, thought that I could learn from this place. I loved where Provincetown was located and the fact that it was a busy, small town. You can meet a lot of people here

and that's easier to do here than in a city. I like Provincetown. I mean, talk about a community." He nods his head several times. "When there's community feeling, when the community is strong, art thrives."

So now with his new show of extremely recent painting just about to open, Blum knows that people who are unfamiliar with his work will be wondering why it is he paints only part of the face in his portraits. He has an answer prepared. "I think it has to do with the subject's personality and how deep I can get into them, the aura around them. But you know, it's not about foreheads. It's not about that. I'm sure there are people who'll think it's some clever thing I'm trying to do. But it's deeper than that. It's deeper. It's portraiture in the big sense. That's what I'm trying to do."

Jonathan Blum's Extremely Recent Paintings are being shown at Gallery Matrix, 168 Commercial Street in Provincetown. The paintings will be shown from July 31 - August 6, 12 -4 and 7 -11 pm. Opening reception is Saturday, July 31, 7 until 9 pm.