

Bradley Hart
Artist Statement

My work is an album of memories made by injecting bubble wrap with paint to create pixilated photorealistic pictures. The pictures are copies of both snap shots of important people captured by me or given to me and maintained as a part of my own personal photograph collection, as well as powerful images obtained from other sources.

To create the Bubble Wrap pieces I inject each bubble individually with acrylic paint, acutely aware of the exchange between paint and the air inside as one of those two elements displaces the other. As the paint is injected into a bubble the excess drips down the back of the piece. Upon completion of the injected work, the drippings are removed surgically from the backside of the plastic to reveal an impression of the work -- a derivative work with its own meaning and story. Viewed together, the pieces each seem to engage the other and the viewer becomes an observer of a relationship created between the two.

At every level of my studio practice I recycle as a function of the work. I recycle the syringes; the dried paint in the mixing jar and collect the drips of paint on the bubble wrap and the drop sheet. I then make derivative works, which repurpose the waste. Bubble Wrap evokes the plastic nature of our society. 99% of everything we use is made out of plastic... a substance derived from crude oil. Most consumer goods are molded plastic and are made through mass manufacturing. The injection process is complex and time consuming, which highlights the irony of applying such delicate physical artistry to a mass-produced material and the indestructible nature of plastic versus the fragility of bubble wrap.

The idea of using bubble wrap came from a few experiences where overzealous museum security guards instructed patrons not to touch works of art and a left over roll of bubble from wrapping my first solo show in NYC. After researching the material, I found that bubble wrap was originally invented in 1957 as a modern form of wall covering; an experiment or product that failed. My first piece in the series (not shown) " Fulfilling My Creator's Intended Purpose" is bubble wrap stretched over a stretcher and signed, paying homage to its original use and at the same time flipping its usage as protective covering for art into art itself.

The bare bubbles in the bubble wrap reference dots or pixels, echoing various movements in art history and other media, including pointillism, screen-printing, TVs and LCD monitors. In today's world people do not print their pictures for an album. Their albums are on Facebook, Flickr and Instagram, all exotic rote, yet combinations of 1's and 0's. The process of injecting paint into bubble wrap directly references pixilation (and those 1's and 0's) and at the same time harkens back to the time of family portrait painting, when a family's personal "photo" album consisted of paintings hanging on its walls.

Photography helps us to consolidate our memories, i.e. to keep stable, constructed memories that cannot be undone. However, memory is somewhat plastic in nature. We essentially reconstruct our memories with every recall of a person, place or thing, and reconstruct them differently each additional time they enter our minds .

The act of constructing an album is a deliberate act in time and place, devised of a specific set of memories that evoke a tailored narrative. Each of my series is comprised of my personal choice of memories of people at particular places and times. Many of the portraits are of artist friends. The cityscapes are of distinct places and experiences that for reason indescribable became imbedded in my mind.

In viewing the series, I hope the viewer will contemplate what a personal album means as a work of art. Typically, albums are meant to be shared with family and friends as a way of creating and strengthening interpersonal connections. These albums, devoid of personal context for the viewer, will require something antithetical to the usual purpose of an album. In other words – what meaning can be derived from someone else's album? Is it just a conglomeration of images that will produce individual reactions, or will the viewer strive to find meaning in the collection of images that are strung together for reasons unknown.

THE MADNESS TO BRADLEY HART'S METHOD: TECHNIQUE BECOMES TECHNOLOGY AND ART SPAWNS ART

By Deborah Zafman, Ph.D.

Bradley Hart's artistic process is a conceptually complex and elaborate system that includes the perpetual invention of mechanized methods allowing for his art to spawn more art. I use the term 'mechanized', because, once he sets his system into motion, it continues to produce further generations of artwork or further material for creating future artwork. Each body of work stems from its predecessor as a natural byproduct of the prior process. His procedural methods seem nearly capable of being automated (though they're actually not), due to the deliberate and meticulous manner in which Hart conceives systems capable of replication by trained studio assistants.

An overarching tension between concept and form is held in tight balance in Hart's oeuvre. He is as much a conceptualist as he is a materialist – in fact, he's extremely both. To write about his work is to write two papers – one about the complex conceptual construct behind his oeuvre, the other to delve into the visual and material forms of his aesthetic objects.

Another overarching tension between two seemingly contradictory modes operate in this art: (i) the artist as God, completely controlling and determining outcome through a rigorous and calculated process and (ii) the components of a future artwork being created of their own accord, in spite of the artist, as a natural byproduct of the initial process. This leads to a constant shifting between control and surrender.

Hart's move toward what seems like a potentially automated art-making process raises challenging questions about the nature of art. For example, what about the possibility of "robot artists" capable of executing the work? This radically subverts the very idea we have about what an artist does. Yet in today's art world, where 'artist' has become 'art director' – here I'm thinking of Hirst, Murakami and Koons – successful contemporary artists no longer need lay a hand on their work. The actual physical artwork, though conceived in the imagination of the "art director", is nevertheless realized by a team or staff or even "outsourced" abroad. Hart partakes in this current trend, training studio assistants in how to execute his method, much like assembly line workers in a factory. But Hart pushes this entire trend a step beyond by utilizing a mechanized process to make art that spawns more artwork and material for future artwork. His is a move from technique to technology.

This is antithetical to the strict classical art training he received and against what he ultimately values about art. Yet to a large extent, Hart rejects his classical training, with its obsessive concern with precise technique; and seems to transpose the same rigor and discipline into an obsessive concern with developing his own laborious technologies.

His artistic method could be likened to a form of creative mechanical engineering. He's ultimately a builder of systems so elaborate, cleverly creative and original, that the outcomes are more akin to "paint structures" capable of generating more and different paint structures. Hart seems invested in figuring out ways to set his systems into motion so that his hands are not required, though, like Hitchcock, he always makes an appearance. His craft is more conceptual than manual, though this does not mean that his "conceptual craft" does not result in colorful, tactile material objects of visual splendor. Hart is an eccentric inventor of artistic technologies. He enjoys maintaining a tension between "high tech" and "low tech" in his art as we shall later see.

Hart's work uses paint yet he's not a painter. He injects it, peels it and assembles it, but he never actually paints. Although on a material level paint is his medium most of the time, his conceptual methods are as much his medium as the paint object. Hart may be best understood as a conceptual materialist as distinct from how conceptual artists tend to lack concern with the formal aspects of an art object. Anyone seeing Hart's work would no doubt consider them paintings. But in reality, they

are something entirely different, something deeper and more difficult to define. The originality of the object stems from the method which brought the visual objects into being. This is not to suggest that the aesthetic and formal qualities of his output are not able to stand on their own. It would not be difficult to simply appreciate Hart's art objects for what they are, i.e. on a formal level, without any knowledge of how they were made. But since the method is as rich as the works themselves, it merits description and provides a deeper understanding of his visual art.

The different bodies of Hart's work move from the figurative "injections" to the abstract "wasted paint" and "created waste" series with the "impression" series and "destruction print" series falling in between figuration and abstraction. The system creates a cycle of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction. Understanding Hart's ever-evolving system requires a global overview of the very distinct bodies of work he creates and their ultimate connection to each other. The "injection paintings" spawn wasted paint which are pieces utilized in subsequent assemblage paintings. This authentic wasted paint led to "created waste" and morphed to become the "impressions" which still ended up producing wasted paint. The "injections" also spawn the "destruction prints". As we will later see, every method and series Hart creates winds up producing wasted paint.

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In order for a contemporary artist to be art historically relevant, two criteria must be met: (i) the work must reflect in a pertinent manner, the contemporary era in which the artist finds himself and (ii) the work must reveal a lineage or connection to the past so that the art can be understood in relation to how it builds upon or responds to its predecessors in an ongoing evolutionary or revolutionary effort.

Hart's work successfully meets both criteria. Besides the discussion above about how relevant his process is to our technological times, the art reflects central aspects of contemporary culture. To begin with, bubble wrap, his "canvas" in the 'Injection' series, is a material invented in 1957. It was originally intended as three-dimensional wallpaper, before becoming protective wrapping material. Hart, in a smart conceptual move, transforms the plastic traditionally used to wrap, protect and cover artworks into the material surface of his paintings. It's as though he were transcribing and surpassing the French 'Support/ Surface' movement of the 60's where the artists chose to reveal canvas and stretchers as legitimate material of their work; Hart takes this a step beyond by exposing and rendering legitimate the protective wrapping material in such a way that it transcends the usual 'surface' of the picture plane and serves as a surface that is both three dimensional and transparent!

The bubble wrap-as-canvas proposition seems to poke fun at the modernist grid which has been the emblem of modernity. While the modernist grid traditionally implies flatness, Hart subverts this through his use of a three- dimensional grid...bubble wrap! But it is more serious than a subversive joke.

The round bubbles represent "pixels" and this relates directly to our age of digital photography. Hart draws on digital photos for subject matter, usually portraits reminiscent of works by Andy Warhol and Chuck Close. While the bubbles symbolize pixels in our contemporary minds, the paint-filled bubbles also harken back to Seurat and display an unusual and unique form of post-modern pointillism.

The multiple meanings of bubble wrap in Hart's oeuvre are extensive: it can allude to the plastic nature of our society and it is an exemplary product of modern mass manufacturing.

Hart numbers with ink the back of the bubble wrap to correspond with the numbered paint-filled syringes. There is also a precise and meticulous manner in which the liquid paint must enter the air-filled bubble through the injection. A hole is made in the back of the bubble in preparation for the injection by syringe. The liquid paint carefully replaces the air that had been in the bubble. There's a subtle yet dramatic "changing of the guards" in that moment when transparent air (which makes a bubble a bubble) is replaced by liquid color.

Hart determines the exact amount of paint needed in each syringe to ensure spillage out the back of the bubble wrap in order to produce the "Impression" works. Initially, only wasted paint was derived from the paint that dripped out the back and ended up on the floor. But Hart conceived the method of injecting from the bottom up in order to generate, as a byproduct of the injections, the "Impression" series.

The subject matter of Hart's injections is drawn from his personal photo album, his collection of memories: photos of people in his life, or famous people (like Steve Jobs), places he has been, etc. He is essentially preserving his memories, protecting them in bubble wrap. And just as the bubble wrap serves as a symbol of our contemporary society, in many respects, so does injection: Hart seems to refer to the injected reality in which we live, whether referring literally to injections intended to administer medicine, injections by drug abusers, botox injections in plastic surgery, or even tattoos that inject dye into the skin, etc.

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The Impressions are the natural byproduct of the Injection series. After Hart has made sure all the injected bubbles will shed paint and overflow out the back and once the paint has dried, he peels off a single sheet covering the back of the bubble wrap. The result is another artwork: a negative image of the injection painting but slightly blurry and Richter-esque. Instead of a photorealistic image which results from the injection series, we get an impressionistic version of the same image only backward. The Impressions are flat unlike their three-dimensional injection counterparts. Moreover, the traces of the numbers assigned to each bubble are pressed onto this sheet of paint, only backwards. (This reminds me of pressing silly putty into newspapers as a kid) These tiny backward numbers layered on top of the impressionistic image lends an interesting insight into how calculated Hart's process is. Nevertheless, Hart can't actually control how the impressions will turn out. He controls the entire conception but at the moment when he peels off the painting, the outcome is a surprise. One detects the original image or subject but it has been morphed into an imprecise counterpart of its parent injection. It is by no means aesthetically inferior and it stands strongly on its own as a separate body or series of work.

Yet another separate body of work generated from the Injections is the 'Destruction Print' series. These are monoprints on canvas whose creation can be executed as performance art (either by Hart himself or others). This is a variation on printmaking: A completed injection painting is "sacrificed" and laid face up on the floor on top of which is laid a blank piece of canvas. The canvas is stepped on, essentially bursting the bubbles and releasing traces of paint on the canvas. A total of between eight and twelve monoprints can be realized (each unique) before the former injection painting becomes a dead screen. And keep in mind, that the dead screen bubble wrap painting holds its own as yet another series of aesthetically valid work, independent from the Injection series and Impression series.

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The 'Wasted Paint' is, as Hart puts it, "authentic", by which he means it is a naturally generated byproduct of all his processes. It is literally the paint that spills over from the injections and drippings from the created waste that end up on the drop sheet. Hart peels these pieces off the drop sheet and considers each piece as precious visual material for use in subsequent three-dimensional assemblages, which, like Rauschenberg, question the very nature of what a painting or sculpture is. Sometimes even just a single large piece of wasted paint stands on its own as an artwork. This harkens back to Duchamp's ready-mades.

The 'Created Waste' series is a way Hart takes control of waste production, by "inauthentically" (i.e. deliberately) dripping paint in order to produce the droppings on the floor for his abstract sculptural "paintings". Hart mimics and exaggerates what happens naturally and accidentally into a deliberate,

calculated process of waste creation. Although a viewer's eyes would not be able to distinguish between a wasted paint and a created waste painting, the extent to which Hart is truly a conceptual artist lies in the importance he gives to the fundamental difference in method, regardless that the outcomes appear the same. The processes are diametrically opposed, one the result of control, the other the product of surrender. Wasted paint is the accidental creation of material as a byproduct of a previous process while the created waste is the deliberate, controlling creation of paint material.

The union of these opposing processes lies in the moment of assemblage of these random pieces of "paint waste". Hart will utilize pieces from both sources and here is where Hart's compositional skills are demanded and where there's a manual aspect to his art-making.

Still Hart is an artist for whom process is of equal importance as product. His pleasure lies in devising a self-contained sustainable system capable of producing a multitude of different aesthetic objects. Hart is a sculptor of systems. He's a conceptual artist because his inventiveness and ideas are where he expresses himself artistically. He's much like a sculptor with a talent for mechanical engineering, who artistically builds his ideas in such a way that he devises rather complex processes and methods that lead to the creation of an open-ended cycle of art-making.

The 'Wasted Paint' and 'Created Waste' series visually remind one of cross between Chamberlain and Pollock. They are colorful abstract constructs, assembled by Hart in a variety of sizes like sculptural paint on the picture plane. They don't bear any resemblance to the photorealist injection paintings or the Richteresque impressions, These are rather in line with the tradition of abstract expressionism and action painting. While assembling these pieces of 'waste', Hart is impulsively responding to the material on an emotional level rather than controlling their creation with a logical or calculated plan.

Wasted paint is where all roads lead. In every series produced by Hart, wasted paint is an inevitable byproduct. And no matter how much art he manages to create out of his seemingly self-contained sustainable system, there will always be waste to be recycled into evermore art.

Hart doesn't believe in waste because every paint piece once peeled off the studio floor is valuable material for more art. He'll always find new use for it because he recognizes an aesthetic value in each piece, And just as his studio floor is a treasure chest providing useful material that he preserves yet transforms in his abstract paint assemblages, so is the history of art another rich treasure chest providing him with valuable predecessors that he draws from yet transforms in innovative and interesting ways.

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