



SADIE BENNING

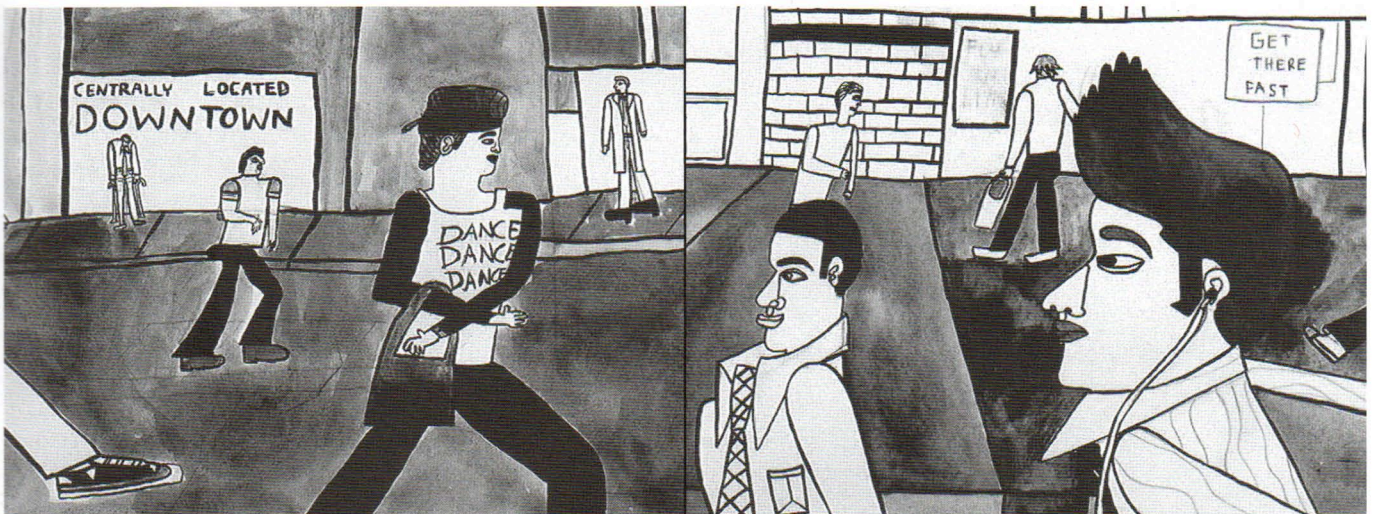
Sadie Benning/Amy Sillman:
A Conversation

AMY SILLMAN Do you see *Play Pause* as an installation, something people can walk into anywhere?

SADIE BENNING I think they will. I do see the video as having a linear order, even though it's fragmented and there is no main character. Maybe the viewer could partially be a character because I'm constructing it in a way where I want them to be witnessing all of these moments.

AS The first part of *Play Pause* seems to be about a citizen of a city walking through the streets, but it's also a very poetic space where people are all absorbed into their own thoughts. Maybe they're reading or waiting for the train or trying to get money out of the ATM, or watching other people do those things, but consciousness is all over the place. And later on the video becomes more subsumed with the spectacle of longing. It gets really flirtatious and sexy and actually becomes sex, but in a funny way that makes you drag yourself away from the private subjectivity that is the beginning.

SB I think maybe there is something intrinsic to being queer in the world where there's a kind of loneliness to some degree, in that you don't always have



things to identify with. You're looking for those things in signs and in more transitory glances.

AS Like wig stores that don't really capture your look (laughs)—

SB Or maybe they do (laughs).... I think that I'm always looking for things that are really different from myself when I'm out in the world. But I'm also looking for affirmation that my reality is not totally insane, particularly in the political environment right now.

AS Is *Play Pause* based on stuff that has happened to you?

SB (laughs) Well, definitely it's about observing the space around me. And the soundtrack was created from hours of ambient recordings I made in Chicago and Milwaukee. I started *Play Pause* soon after September 11th, and I was thinking a lot about cities and how I felt suspended in this moment where you're not exactly sure what's going to happen. So I wanted to aesthetically capture that feeling of being frozen rather than animating everything. The piece is constructed almost entirely out of still-frame imagery.

AS What's the reason?

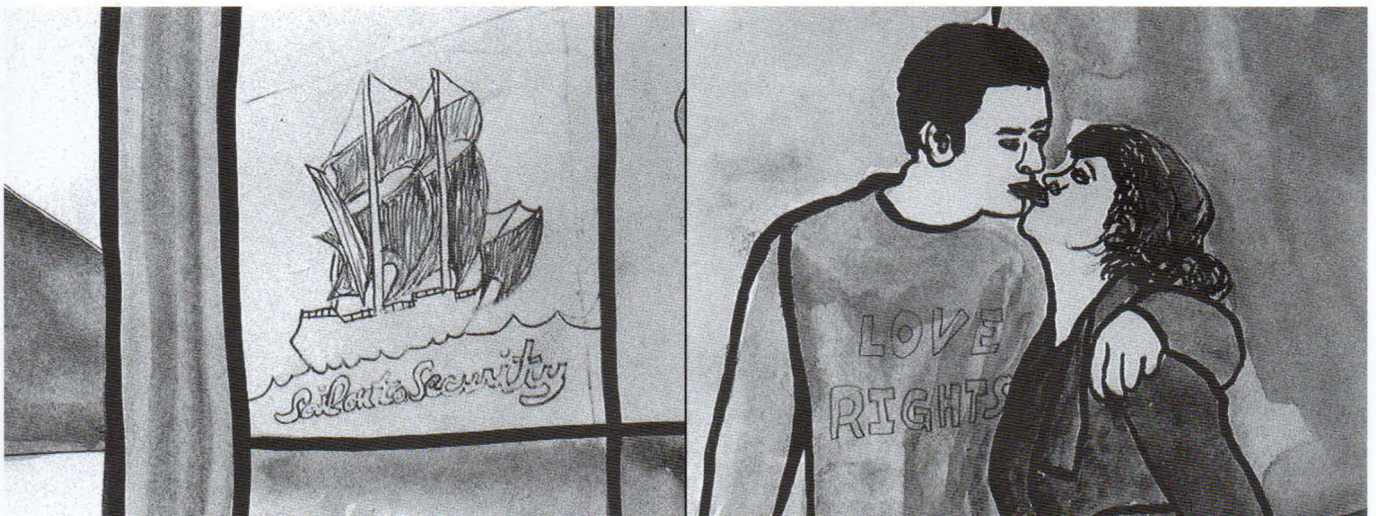
SB When something traumatic happens it's like being paused at that moment, so everything is kind of post-9/11 now. There's this marker in time.



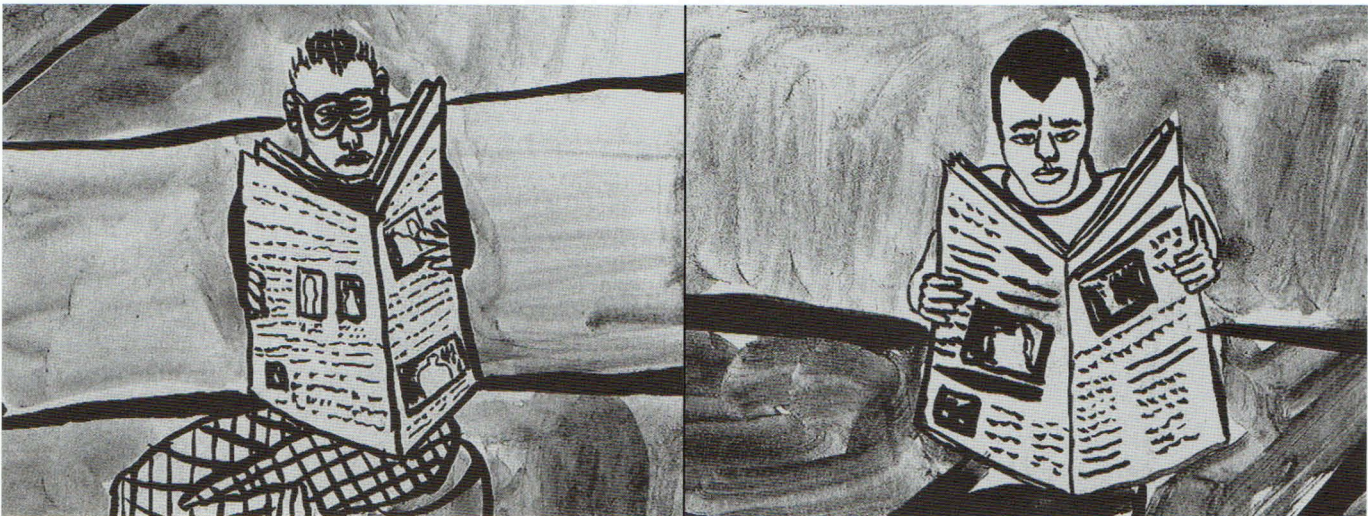
AS And trauma changes your notion of time. Trauma makes you feel that maybe there's a super consciousness, and in editing *Play Pause* as a double-screen projection where things are fading and splitting and never held to one consistent temporal reality, you're emphasizing the trauma of everyday life.

SB Right, and I think it's also connected to gender and sexuality. Somehow initially when I was figuring out my own sexuality, I didn't know any lesbians—I only knew gay men. My mom's best friend lived with us, and he became HIV positive around 1989. So as a child I identified with the idea that queer sexuality was connected to loss. *ACT UP* was a big part of my growing up. More recently when I first started thinking about making the video and wanting it to have a certain emotional quality, I was going through a period of personal grief. If somebody dies you have a heightened sense of your surroundings, or at least I did. It was like, oh, turn off the radio or whatever—you just think things are loud or everything seems brighter. You're more sensitive, and you're looking for signs of that person in all of these objects. There's a kind of otherness present if somebody dies.

AS I first saw *Play Pause* as realism in the city, and then as a kind of fantasy with sexuality. Now I'm seeing it more the way you're talking about it. You're bringing up two parallel traumas in America—the beginning of the AIDS crisis, when trauma became associated with sex, and 9/11, when trauma became associated with urban life. You're not saying that they're the same thing, but images of the city, images of gay bars, images that are generally in this film have double meanings.



- SB** I wanted to make something that was more about the ambient experience of loss rather than showing it literally. That's why there aren't any direct references to September 11th and it doesn't take place in New York. It's hard to know what city or time period it takes place in exactly. The video is based in the present, but it's about the way that you're constantly reminded of other places and times.
- AS** You said yesterday that *Play Pause* started as two separate projects?
- SB** I was working on drawings of sexual experiences that are more awkward or in-between than what I usually see represented—for example before or after somebody's had sex, or maybe there's another kind of connection happening. I had also been developing a more narrative work about a city, and those two projects merged together.
- AS** The piece seems to take place after something happened which is never specified, but which we all relate to in an "after" kind of way. The experience described in the beginning of *Play Pause* is that of coming back to life. You're not in bed totally depressed and grief-stricken. You're starting to look around, but with a sense of detachment.
- SB** I think that in those moments people want euphoria, and sex is often something that does that. The video is also about connecting



with a more intuitive space, one that's more abstract and about just looking—

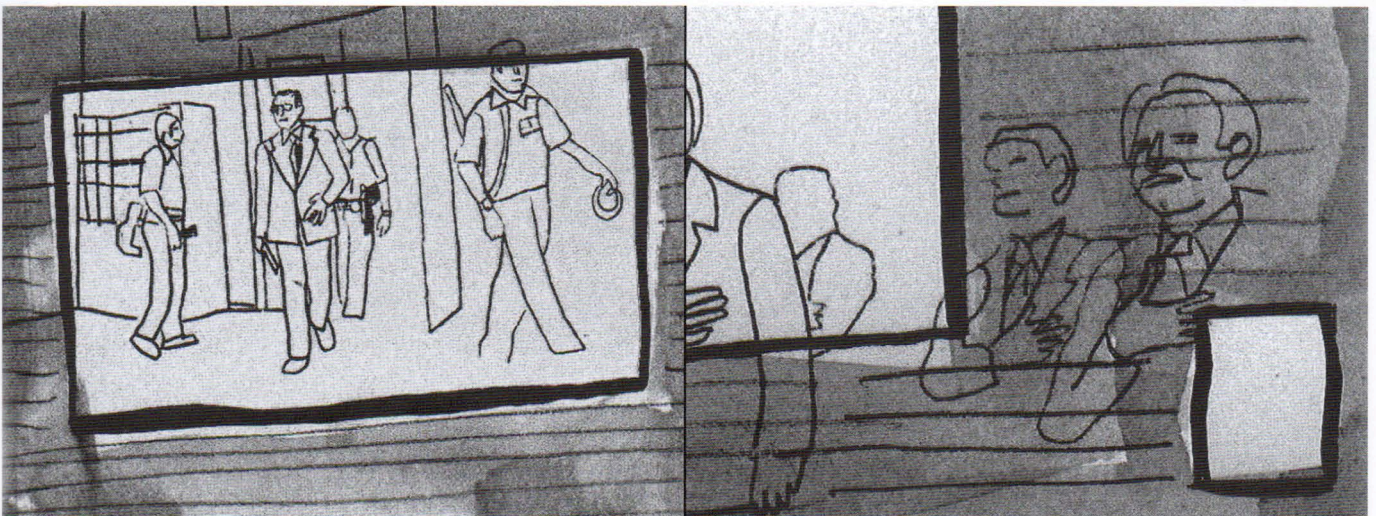
AS Or even patterns—

SB Yeah, the pattern of the leaves or whatever. There's something really important about that kind of abstraction. For example, I think that even when I draw characters who are having sex, I don't know exactly what gender they are or how they identify. I mean, it's a drawing (laughs). Which is I think why portraits or heads are interesting to me, because it's a part of the body that is so detached. Like it's the face and it's narrative, but it's not necessarily male or female; it's more a space of expressions that's not so specific to gender.

AS One thing that's interesting is that the drawing changes as you draw it, so the person could be a female when you draw their hair, and a male by the time you draw their feet. So if the whole video is built on a series of drawings that themselves are uncertain about their outcome, it's recording aspects of something that didn't know what it was.

SB Right, which is a form of animation even though it ends up as a still drawing. It's coming out of this imagined space that's moving as you're making it.

AS And furthermore, the cutting and the detailing and the fragmenting of the video make it even more unclear, or rest strongly on the more



ambiguous parts of the original drawings; because if you have a close-up of two policemen's crotches, we still don't know whether they have wigs on.

SB Right (laughs). I mean some of the drawings in *Play Pause* use a technique of blowing up and tracing photographs that comes from having visited Henry Darger's apartment and looking closely at his process.

AS There's a scene of mannequin heads that has a very Henry Darger feeling to it—

SB It's more about pencil. The line has a more tentative quality.

AS Those parts are really important formally because they interweave with the way that the outline that you do is often very heavy. It reminds me of Saul Steinberg, or you've talked about the influence of the *Plains Indians Drawings* exhibition at the Drawing Center. But in all pictographic drawing, the outline is the crucial thing.

SB I think that partially comes from having used the Pixelvision camera for such a long time. The contrast in Pixel is so extreme it makes things seem as if they're outlined; if you have your hand up, it's going to silhouette everything. And because of the blockiness of Pixel and how much less information there is, the image becomes more abstracted somehow. The thing with Pixel is you can't use that camera forever because it's a toy, and it's going to die. One of the reasons I started drawing was out of a complete frustration with technology. My equipment kept breaking, and the thing that made me feel



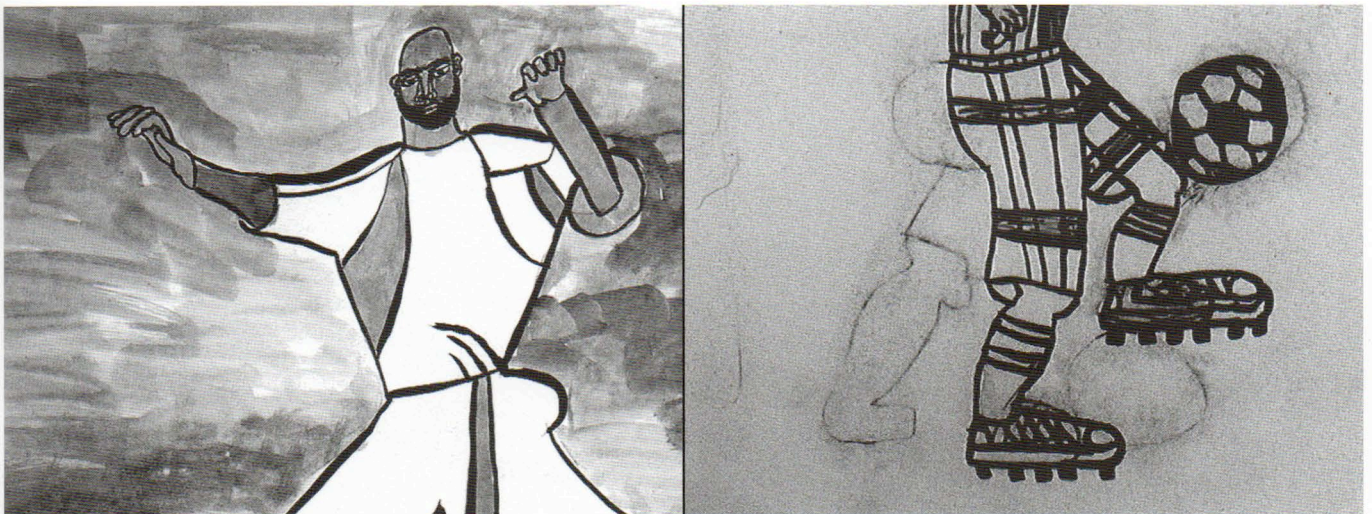
better was I could go and paint or draw something. Then also with drawing I wanted to emulate things I liked about the xeroxed, dreamlike quality of Pixelvision. Shooting the drawings on video is the closest I can come to that reality.

AS I think this is important because drawing as a medium asserts the primacy of a very malleable, imagination-driven version of reality. Because drawing is like transcribing a combination of realities, from what is imagined to what is seen. And there's this thing about flatness, too. Your work resolutely holds to a flat space and then does everything it can to take that flat space and temporalize it rather than spatialize it. *Play Pause* is very much about before and after and building moments.

SB It's also like vision, the way that you blink and you look and you turn. It has this shuttered on and off rhythm.

AS The piece is kind of a record of both looking and not looking. It feels like one has one's eyes closed half the time. And sometimes it especially flips into that because on one screen it looks like the retinal pattern if you shut your eyes—or just cloudy dreams or sunspots.

SB I think partially there's something about having your eyes closed versus having them open that creates this other space. If you lie in bed at night and close your eyes, you can see abstract patterns of color and have an out of body spatial relation to the room because you're not seeing yourself



in perspective to anything. You're just in this patterned abyss, and it's only through sound that you understand your size.

AS But I think that's interesting because that's the borderline experience between conscious and unconscious. In classical perspective, the draftsman has rendered the comparable scale relations between objects. But in this work, you have not calibrated those relationships, so scale becomes exhilarating in the same way that gender change becomes exhilarating. It confuses the viewer a little bit to confront this monumental image that questions what's inside and what's outside, what's subjective and what's objective, and what's clearly different between us and the art object. The sense of dislocation is even more extreme because the video is so resolutely located. We're in the store, we're at the mall, we go to the bar, we're at the airport, we're on the airplane, and yet we still don't know where we are because none of the scale relations have been actually mapped out for the viewer.

SB There's something really musical about shifts in perspective and scale, the way music can suddenly erupt into something but then become totally silent. I think a lot of what I do is influenced by listening to music. When I was in the band *Le Tigre*, prior to starting *Play Pause*, I made drawings that were projected from slides during live performances. From that process I could tell that using drawings that illustrated something without plot or dialogue would work. Being in a band also influenced the way I thought about narrative structures. Creating beats and actually making music helped me to think about having two channels and multiple things happening at one time in a way that is different from my single-channel work. I can see now that editing

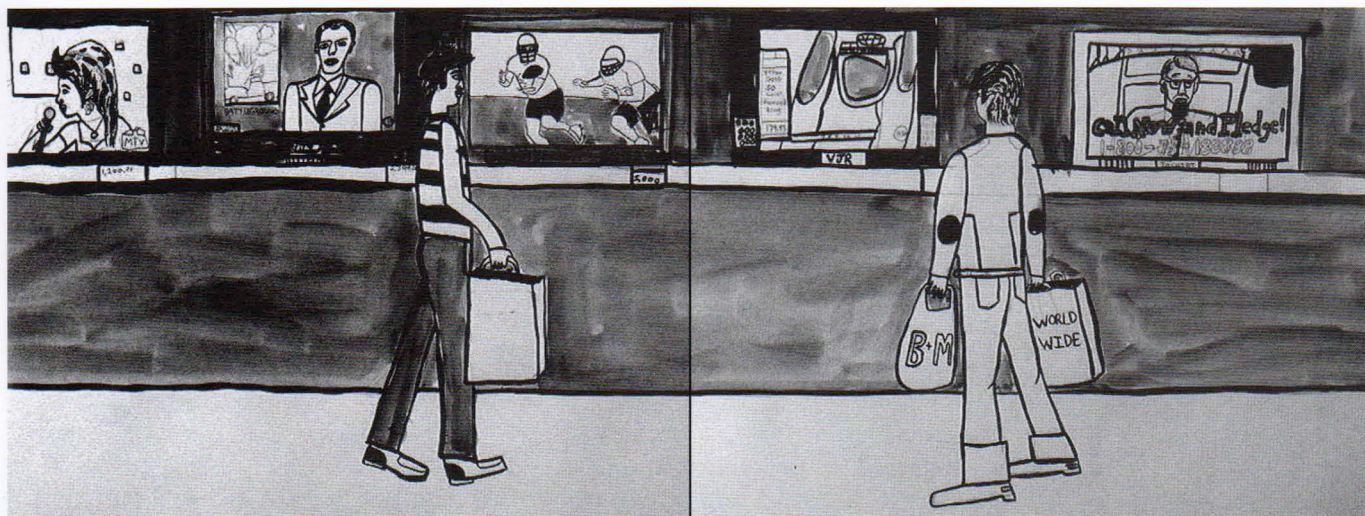


a video based on drawings has a language that is helping me think about painting and going back to music. So all of these things start to form these weird spider webs with each other.

AS It seems that a zine culture is in there somewhere—like this do-it-yourself world that's involved in a kind of expressive function.

SB I think the do-it-yourself thing comes from a much earlier place for me. My dad's dad was an architect, but he taught himself. He designed buildings and then sold the blueprints to people who had credentials. My mom is what I consider a folk artist. When I was a kid she created these pop art soft sculptures of objects like garbage cans and record players, and she designed costumes for theater companies. For most of my childhood she worked as a house painter, and then later she became a massage therapist. So I have this really creative family where everyone was always making things, but in their homes or on top of having other jobs. I think my dad was more of a professional artist, and so I saw things that were good about that because he was able to make art full-time. Whereas my mom was probably often seen as the person who massaged you when you had a bad day at work or whatever. There's just a different class structure behind those kinds of roles in the world.

AS Are you thinking of a drawing video as addressing some of these things? I mean I think it's important that in *Play Pause* there's a complete refusal of a slick method of representation. You can call it outsider, you can call it low-budget, lo-fi, punk, or whatever you want, but it's clear that you're not doing



Flash animation (both laugh). And there's obviously a reason for that in this time when all the methods of computer animation and of even the news and stuff are so whipped up into a gleaming frenzy.

SB With still imagery, the audience can project their own experience onto that in a way that they couldn't if the character was all digital and running around and telling them how to feel. *Play Pause* partly comes out of a frustration with how fast and how much talking there is in conventional Hollywood animation. There's a desire to kind of flatten all that out because to me the 3-D stuff is trying to emulate real space in a way that's annoying. The quality of things being handmade is an important aspect of what I make, but also just in terms of balancing out life.

AS The root of what makes people feel modern right now is the ultimate technological speed of things. And *Play Pause* is just not going that fast. Everything's happening at the speed of the way people walk, eat, sleep, read—it's completely orientated toward lived, experiential time systems. I think *Play Pause* is about a phenomenology of being, the way glancing and glimpsing works, detail, repetition, things that are organized in the sensate body.... I wanted to ask you about the head paintings as a body of work. Why aren't they called drawings?

SB I definitely think of the heads more as drawings than paintings. They're bold outlined faces, so they have this cartoon graphics quality to them. However, if you're close up, there's a lot going on underneath before you see the last layer. There's something fragile about the heads even though they're so huge.



Sometimes because of the chalkiness, it looks like you could just blow on them and the paint would scatter. With the heads specifically I've tended to paint the background out a solid color, so the color is a little bit simplified. The skin and hair is where the detail is, whereas the clothing and background is painted in a rougher, less-layered way—almost as if with a crayon.

AS In a sense it's a very sculptural way to build a painting.

SB Yeah, it's more like cutting things out—

AS Cutting and pasting and building.

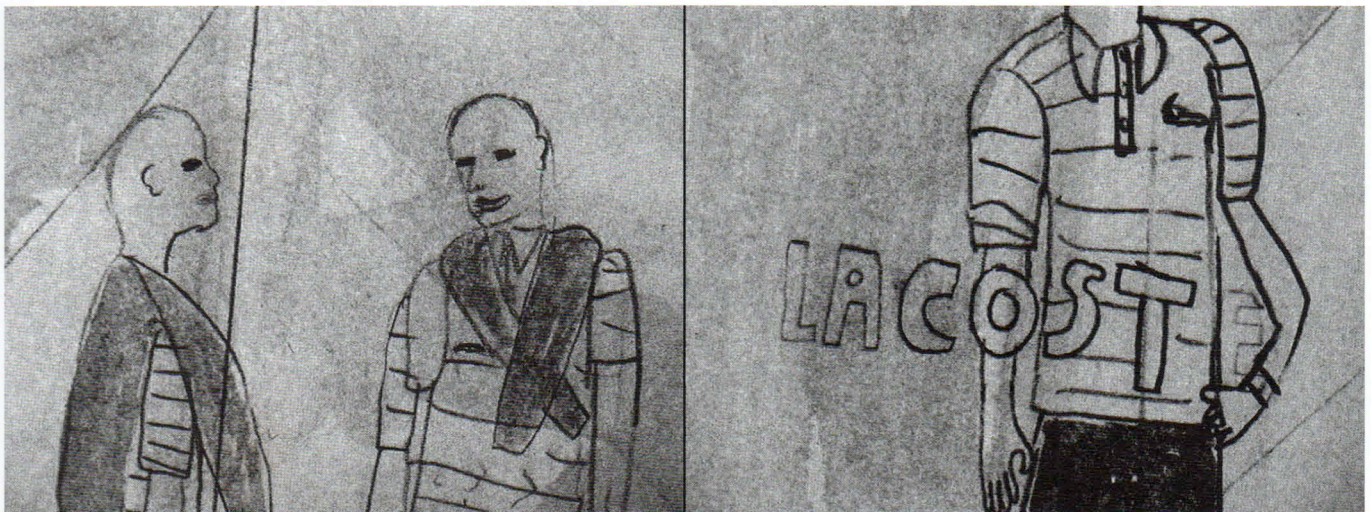
SB I've always liked things that are layered where you can see forms and colors from underneath. You have this sense that somebody spent all of this time moving things around in various orders and then coming up with an end result. It reminds me of Oskar Fischinger's *Motion Painting* animation.

AS Do you have a studio where all these giant heads can be looking at you and you looking at them simultaneously?

SB Yeah, they're up on the wall. And I live with them.

AS Oh, wow.

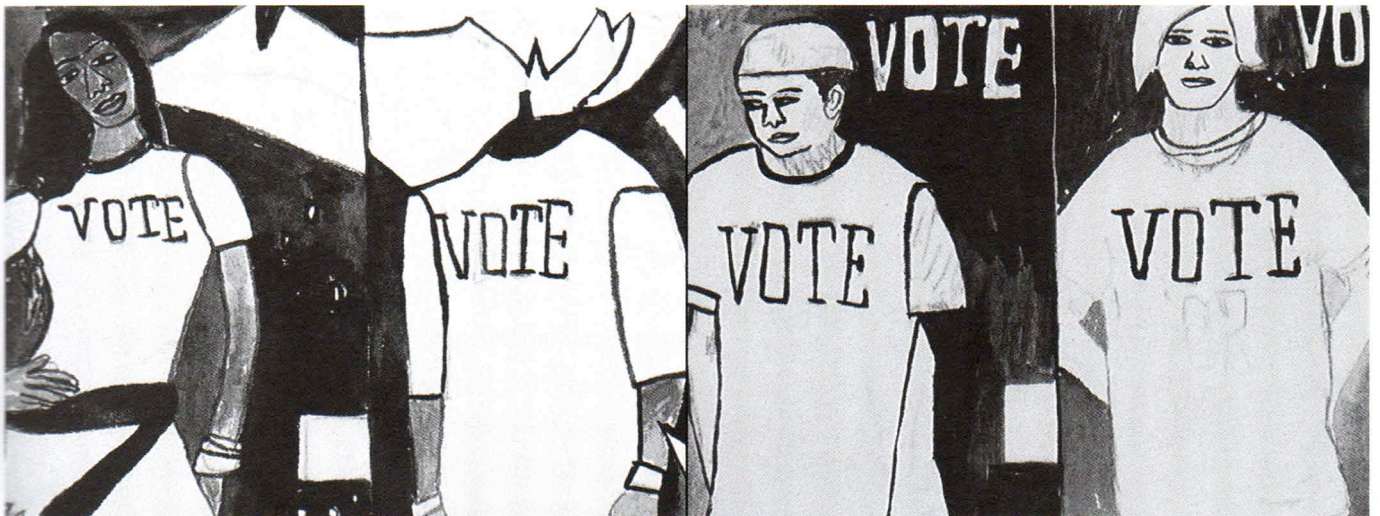
SB They look at me when I'm sleeping.... To me some of them have a somewhat godlike relation. They're so big, they feel like they're above you.



- AS** They're kind of like Egyptian or early Roman funerary paintings, but those aren't so big. So there's this strange aspect of the scale becoming other. They're not quite portraits of humans because they're not in our frame.
- SB** One thing I was trying to capture in the head paintings is this question of "How does one pose for something?"
- AS** There's a lot of that in your early Pixel work, you putting on a wig, an outfit, facial hair, you putting yourself in a posed situation for a camera. It seems like that's been a lifelong habit of yours, to use portraiture fluidly as a costume. Or in *A Place Called Lovely*, you showed people's school pictures, panning across them.
- SB** I think I was influenced by Warhol and by seeing Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* a few years before I started making videos. There was something liberating to me about the idea of creating your own portraits, or your own representations.... When I started *Play Pause*, I had already made the heads, so I was trying to make something that complicated—
- AS** Oh, the video is what they are seeing.
- SB** Yeah, I think of them as the witnesses.
- AS** I noticed that a lot of the heads are looking down and over even though they're confronting you. A lot of them seem to be looking away a little bit.



- SB** Right, they're slightly crooked. I think it's because I imagine them after a while as interacting with each other versus just interacting with the viewer.
- AS** I'm curious what your painting references are.
- SB** I'd say initially it was folk artists. And a big part of my painting references come from art that's more anonymous or public such as signage or graffiti and murals. In terms of people that are known as painters, most of my experience with that has been in museums. So it tends to be very male. But I like Alex Katz, Jacob Lawrence's work in particular, and Kazimir Malevich.... There's something about gender and painting where I want to be able to be physical. I think that the heads are big partly because I want to take up a little space.
- AS** Taking over painting and making painting into something that's not burdened with this very exclusive history seems to be a project for a lot of people I know. It's basically just saying, wait a minute, how can this be a male language, it's just painting, like with a paintbrush. There's nothing inherently male about it, unless you think that the paintbrush is a phallus. But then what's a mop? (both laugh).
- SB** One thing I was going to say is that with all of this—drawing, painting, video—it's performative. When I'm drawing, I feel like I'm kind of coming up with a running soundtrack of characters and voices and jokes and wisecrack things to say. I'm absorbing all of this language and images from the world



and then acting that out onto a piece of paper. Once the finished piece is on the wall, there are remnants of that.

AS So that means that the head paintings are similar because they're derived from those voracious moments of drawing as filtering. And I think a lot of your earlier video work plays with a classic postmodern definition of the self as a projection made out of images and fragments from the world. But what about abstract paintings, are they filtering things in the same way? When one paints in one's studio alone, making formal decisions about color and texture—is that performative?

SB I think there's an improvisational quality to painting where you're making things up as you go along and it's this form that is free to become something. That's what I love about painting and what I think is related to performance. It's the improv of making the space that's not otherwise there.

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