

# Jeff Bliumis by Hope Gangloff

Born in Moldova and educated in the US, Jeff Bliumis has been painting for decades. In recent years he's trained his eyes on people who serve us—cab drivers, cooks, waiters, nurses, cleaning personnel, hair dressers. As paying clients we rarely give these individuals a second thought, assuming our monetary transactions suffice. Bliumis lingers with those who attend to us, his gaze one of curiosity and respect. Often unbeknownst to them, he sketches people from the back or from a distance, capturing their uniqueness in a few pencil lines. Later, imagined narrative is added in oil paint as Bliumis fills in the blanks—faces he couldn't see, conversations he didn't hear, messages people received on their smartphones. We might recognize ourselves in Bliumis's mundane glimpses at urban life—as often oblivious patrons, glued to our devices, barely aware of our surroundings, and our body language increasingly adapted to ever-present communication technology.

This conversation with fellow painter Hope Gangloff was recorded during their first meeting in Bliumis's small Soho studio where he pulled out canvases after canvases, introducing her to his practice.

i



HOPE GANGLOFF I feel like I know the guy in this painting. Is it at Veselka?

JEFF BLIUMIS No, it's at 12 Chairs Cafe on MacDougal Street, my occasional morning coffee hangout. My characters are usually anonymous to me. I don't know their names or have relationships with them. I carry a sketchbook with me most of the time, and when I

ii



see something I like, I make a quick drawing. Like this couple here, they're having a blind date.

HG Are you sure they were on a first date?

JB No, that's what I'm imagining. To me, drawing and painting mean creating a structure on which I can hang my own imagination. I like to combine different spaces, events, and people I've seen. I start with one element, like a figure, and then everything else grows around it. Often the painting tells me what it needs.

HG You're setting up situations like puzzles. I love how the biggest part of the painting is her arm with that red blemish on it.

iii



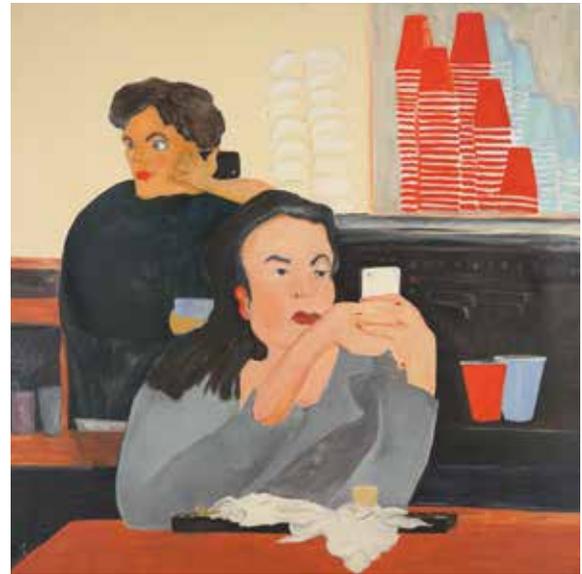
JB This one here is called *Blue Ribbon*, the sushi place. The chefs are like doctors operating on someone. I like exaggerating what I observe.

HG The bottles in the foreground look like they are dancing, and these Japanese tube lights coming down from the ceiling are great.

JB The idea behind these works is service—like in the Bob Dylan song “Gotta Serve Somebody.” I’m painting people who serve others. We all do it, whether it’s family, friends, clients, students. We serve each other; that’s how our world operates. Usually we ignore the people who help us, who do things for us in public. I want to pay attention to these individuals.

This I saw when I was waiting to get a haircut.

v



iv



of our bodies now. We’re always with our phones. And they’ve become our brains too. We don’t have to memorize anything anymore because the information is in these devices. They’re the common denominator of our era, and it doesn’t look like we’re going back to a life without them.

HG Is that a church-ladies meeting over there?

JB Exactly. People come and talk about their problems or dependencies. That’s the donation bucket where people put their dollars in.

HG Isn’t this stuff supposed to be anonymous?

JB It is. I don’t mention their names in the titles. Except now, if you use face recognition technology on the painting, they might not stay anonymous. (*laughter*)

HG She’s on her phone while getting her hair done. People’s hands look like little claws when they are holding a cellphone.

JB Here’s another painting from last year. It’s called *In Touch*, a work I made after visiting Italy.

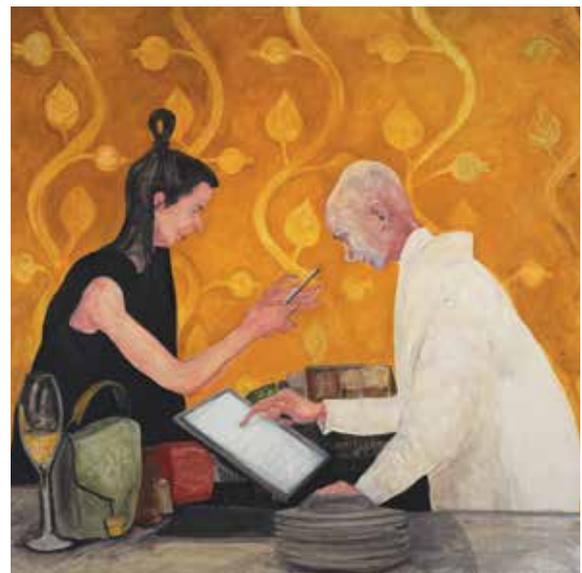
HG Oh, something has gone wrong. She’s staring at her phone. Maybe she’s getting a cypress tree delivered to her villa, and they can’t find her address. The delivery guys are texting her. (*laughter*)

Wow, and this one is beautiful! She looks positively piqued by whatever news she’s getting out of that smartphone. And these red cups have true celebrity. I’m really feeling this painting.

Also, you’re making me like cell phones. Seeing them in your paintings, they have a comic element.

JB It is a bit comical how our phones are almost extensions

vi



(i) *Serenity*, 2018, oil on canvas, 36 x 36 inches. (ii) *Blind Date*, 2018, oil on canvas, 24 x 20 inches. (iii) *Blue Ribbon*, 2018, oil on canvas, 51 x 51 inches. (iv) *Anonymous*, 2017, oil on canvas, 29 x 24 inches. (v) *Red, White and Blue*, 2017, oil on canvas, 51 x 51 inches. (vi) *In Touch*, 2018, oil on canvas, 49 x 49 inches. Images courtesy of the artist.



HG You have so many works in your small studio!

JB To me it feels empty because forty-four paintings are in Sweden right now, in a solo show curated by Irena Popiashvili at Galeri Astley.

HG Are the works I see here all finished?

JB Well, I feel as long as they're in my studio I have the right to touch them up. When I've signed a painting and it's out of my space, it's done. I like to paint a work in one or two sessions. I often use smaller sizes because I gauge how much time and energy I have today and tomorrow. This is a big size where I get all the shapes done in one day and in later rounds I fill in more detail. Imperfections are part of the work.

HG How do you know when a work is finished?

JB That's tricky. I see a painting more as completed, never really finished. Paintings tend to look completed to me at different stages, so it's a bit of an intuitive decision when to stop.

HG This turquoise is one of my favorite colors.

JB These works are from a series called *Pilgrim State*. Pilgrim State Hospital in Brentwood, New York, was the largest mental institution in this country, housing almost 14,000 people at its peak. It still operates in some form. For me the series connects to our times and how everybody is kind of crazed by and fed up with what's going on in politics.

HG Is it a straitjacket, that elegant outfit she's wearing? And everyone is gathered around her while she's getting a parrot tattoo.

JB The bird is a symbol of freedom but she's in a straitjacket. The painting is called *Parrot Inc*, suggesting some kind of corporate branding one gets free of charge in our age of total surveillance.

JB Here is another work from that series. Again, I was thinking about the general state of frustration, confusion, and alienation people feel living in these maddening times. We are fed culture to survive. When I painted this piece, the Andy Warhol retrospective was going on at the Whitney Museum and his *Flowers* seemed to be all over the city in advertisements and posters. So the ever-present Warhol found his way into my painting. I called it *Rec Room* because I thought of the characters as artists and critics. When Jerry Saltz saw the work at the Spring/Break Art Show this year, he suggested that I change the title to *Art Critics*. So I did.

HG It's interesting that people can see themselves in your work.

ii



JB Usually, the people who inspire my paintings don't get to see them. You mostly draw and paint your friends and people close to you from life, right?

HG Yes, I love drawing from life. Sometimes I make color studies from life on postcard formats and then scale them up later. Other times I work at scale from a person standing or sitting directly in front of me. I paint in acrylics, but your paintings are all oils. What's your favorite paint?

JB My favorite paint is light yellow.

HG I was meaning the brand, but it's funny, you're in this room that doesn't have natural light and your favorite color is sunlight.

JB I think of paint as color. Look how on a white canvas this yellow becomes almost a white. My favorite brand for oil paints is Old Holland. They have the most intensity in color and a perfect consistency and limpidity.

HG They have a lot of pigments.

JB Yes. I don't lay the paint on thick and I don't create texture. I like to rub the pigment into the canvas so the surface stays flat. The paint layer is thin and translucent. I was able to bring so many works to Sweden because I could take them off the stretchers, roll them up, and bring them on the plane. I just re-stretched them when I arrived. If the surfaces were thicker, the paint would crack.

HG I'm with you on this completely. Mine are also very smooth. I use Guerra pigments—I buy them on Thirteenth Street between Avenues A and B. It's concentrated acrylic pigment, and when you add silica and medium you get this buttery substance that just shoots across the canvas and dries beautifully right on

the surface. It looks like ink wash, but it's a highly concentrated color. I love how it feels to the touch. Acrylic in a tube makes me very sad; I wouldn't use that. I like the acrylic to make oil-painterly, smeary, floating things.

JB I like oils because they give you more time before they dry. Oil paint stays wet between one and three days, so that's my window to work on a painting.

HG My husband paints in oil and we have similar conversations. What we do together on a day-to-day basis has to take into consideration the drying of his paint. He can do a few other things, but he must get back to the studio while the paintings are wet.

JB Yes, that's me.

HG I discover a lot of colors by accident while playing with paint, trying it out on different surfaces and splashing it down randomly. And suddenly I'm like, Whoa, I'm gonna use that, in that particular layering, with those brushes, to that effect. But then I forget how I did it and won't be able to do it again.

JB Yeah, it's important to experiment and to discover things again and again.

HG What's your favorite brush? I see some really worn-down guys here.

JB I prefer stiff bristle brushes of various sizes. This one is my kind of brush.

HG I see. Da Vinci No. 6, round.

JB I also like fan brushes. I often use oil sticks; they are my colored pencils. Usually I start my paintings with them, especially the big formats.

HG You touch the surface with that stuff and it just explodes with pigment, right?

JB Totally. You throw it on the canvas, and then you can push it around, or you can wipe it off.

HG You use fan brushes with these oil sticks? That's fascinating—it's like doing watercolors with oil paint. The airiness you're able to attain in oil is amazing.

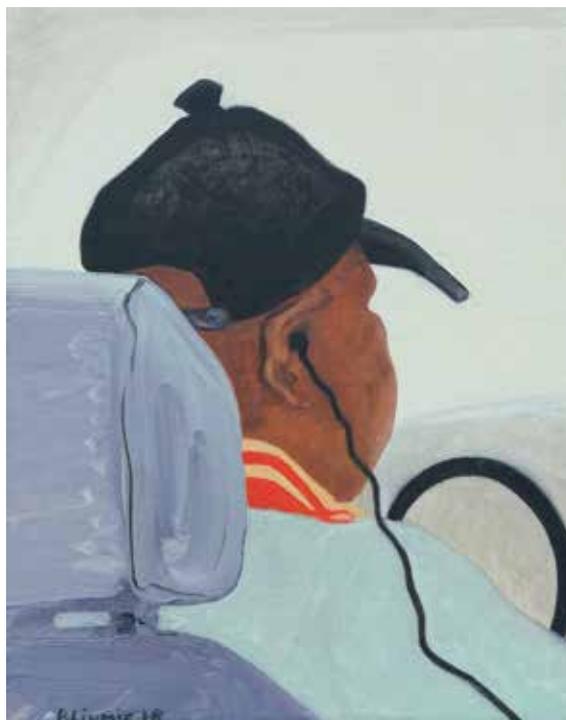
JB First it's very thick, and then I thin it out with solvent.

HG What do you use? Turpenoid?

JB I try to use very little thinner medium. Some thinners make the paint dry faster, some much slower, so the type I use depends on how much time I want to manipulate the paint. You don't have a lot of wiggle room with acrylic unless you use a retarder.

HG It works for me because I work on many paintings at the same time. It's just a different equation.

JB These days I'm working on a series of paintings of taxi drivers. Here are some sketches. Recently, a driver noticed me drawing and he asked to see it. When I showed the sketch to him, he was like, "Can I have it?" I said, "If you give me a free ride." So it was a good exchange. *(laughter)* I took a picture of the sketch on my phone so I could use it later for my painting.



HG What a great-shaped head on him. This is an exquisite profile.

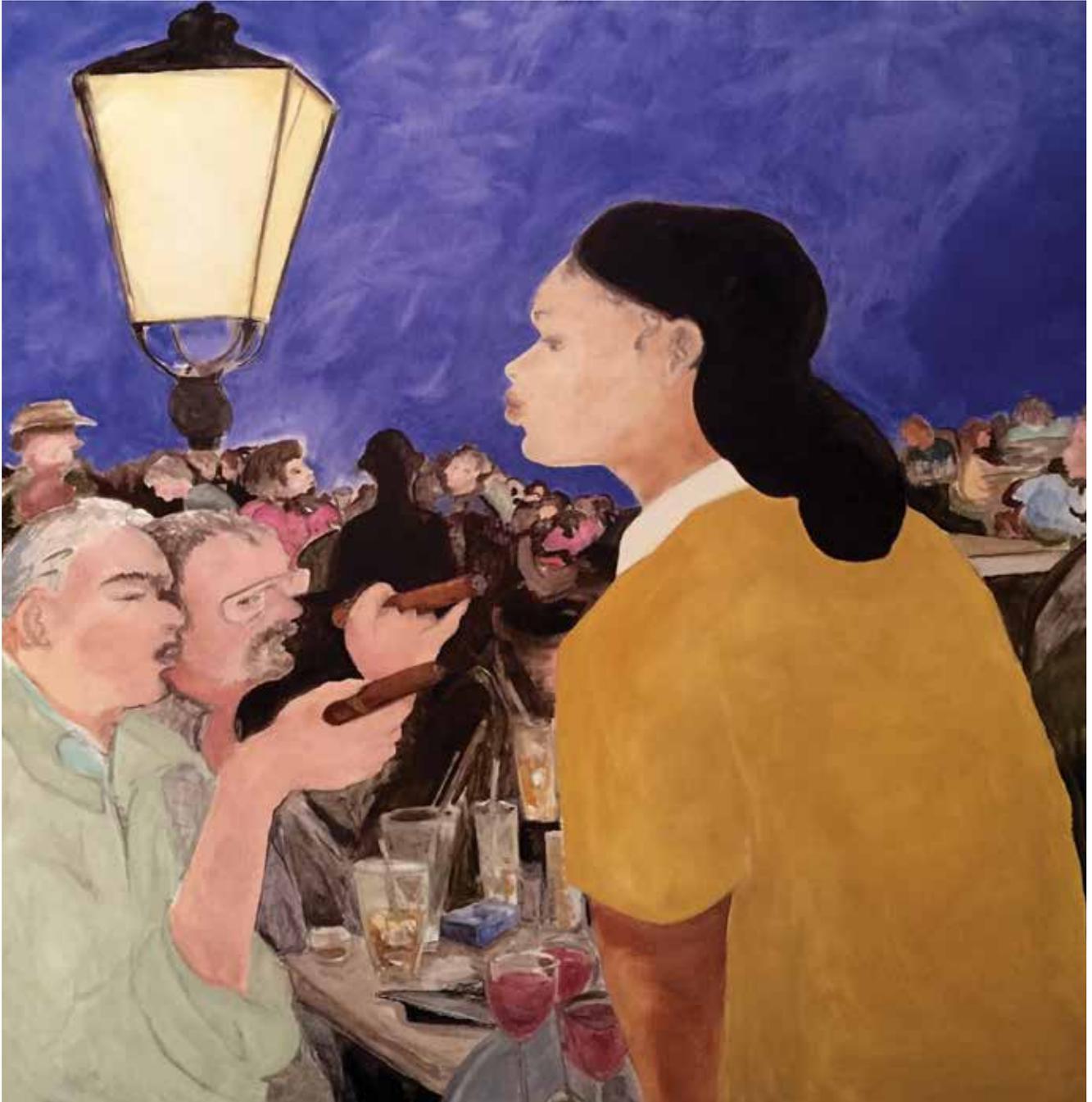
JB It's kind of a sculptural shape. I've done a lot of sculpture, and it informs my painting. I look at the forms—of people and the space around them—and then I paint them like 3-D phenomena that morph into a flat geometry of color and line. Also, painting for me is a very physical process of applying and pushing paint around, so in that sense it reminds me of sculpting.

You said you also did some sculpture?

HG Yes, I've worked in bronze foundries. I'm adept at working on people's sculptures. I also made a couple of my own sculptures at the foundry but then went back to drawing and painting because there's a lower chance of injury.

JB I built my own foundry in the Catskills where my larger studio is. Now I work mostly on other artists' sculptures. A few years ago, I had a serious accident in the foundry, which resulted in a whole painting series, called *View from Below*.

ii



HG Can I ask what happened to you?

JB A sculpture fell on me. The sculpture was called *Tree of Life*. It would have been a great newspaper headline: Artist Killed by Tree of Life. *(laughter)*

HG When I worked in a foundry in Brooklyn, a colleague's partner was killed by a falling wall of clay, a giant clay relief.

JB That's tragic. I'm prone to accidents. I can bike through Central Park and fall for no reason. I'm very absentminded. I look at things while driving—

HG The things that benefit you as an artist are also your downfall.

JB *(laughter)* Yeah. I often forget to put my glasses on.

HG You should wear something on your face while painting with oil!

JB I like not having clear vision when I paint. I prefer being in a bit of a haze.

HG My painting teacher used to say, "Look through your lashes."

JB Yes, stand back and squint. You can make out the main structure and the color, which are the most meaningful parts. When you open your eyes wide, you start seeing too much detail and get distracted.

HG Looking through my lashes also makes me see what's not coming together in a composition. Have you ever turned paintings upside down? Or looked at your painting in the mirror?

JB Yes, I do it all the time to get a fresh view, like the way others would look at the painting. I used to do a lot of etchings, which means working directly with the mirror image.

HG Etchings are so intimidating to me!

JB It took me years to get used to drawing in the mirror image.

HG In your sketchbooks, I see your hand working out the volume of something in drawing.

JB Yeah, when I sketch, my goal is to get my hand moving, and then it subconsciously creates shapes. I don't look at my drawing, only at my subject. Sometimes I add color later from memory or rework the lines and forms. My sketchbooks are like a depository or archive of my observations, some of which turn into paintings.

HG What's going on with this painting here? It's really glowing. This looks like a beaker. A mixologist. He has an exquisite man bun.

JB Yeah, a waiter and a customer in need of his attention. I was interested in the yellow color of her body and hair. It's an almost abstract shape, although you can still see some of her face. I like to catch the personality of someone by showing only little, just a bit of a cheek or an ear. The position or bend of a shoulder or knee conveys so much that it's almost enough in order to imagine the rest.

HG You do that very well in many of your paintings.

JB It's kind of my trick.

HG I wouldn't call it a trick.

JB I guess it's more my particular way of observing because I'm not looking at people directly. I often see them only from the back, and I imagine what's on the other side.

This painting is from a café in upstate New York, in Delhi. This couple was having breakfast and he looked at her in such a subservient way. I only saw her from the back. She was looming over him like a red mountain.

i



HG *(laughter)* That's a funny painting. It looks as if it was painted really fast.

JB I think people smile at my paintings because they recognize their own behavior. These two here are talking with their hands. It's a very gestural conversation, called *Iced Tea*.

HG I've heard that people can remember stuff better when they talk with their hands.

JB That makes a lot of sense. Let me show you some of the works I made after visiting Jamaica.

HG How long were you there for?

JB Just for a few vacations. I always make sketches while I travel to bring back ideas for paintings. I made a whole series called *Jamaican Dining*, and this painting is titled *Cotton Candy*. It's this circle of missed gazes—the two servers behind the vitrine look away from the woman who's waiting, and the man in the front is gazing at her while his nose is in the chocolates in the display case.

ii



HG That's a great composition. I love painting pastries too. There are so many of them in here, and they look so delicious and fun.

JB Here's another one, called *Cappuccino*—the people are like flowers, their legs and arms are all over the place. Implicit in the tension between people's bodies, of course, is the recent colonial past. In the resort bars you see wall decorations depicting sugar cane plantations and grand manors, and behind the bar, the Jamaicans who may be descendants of plantation workers render services to oblivious American and European tourists.

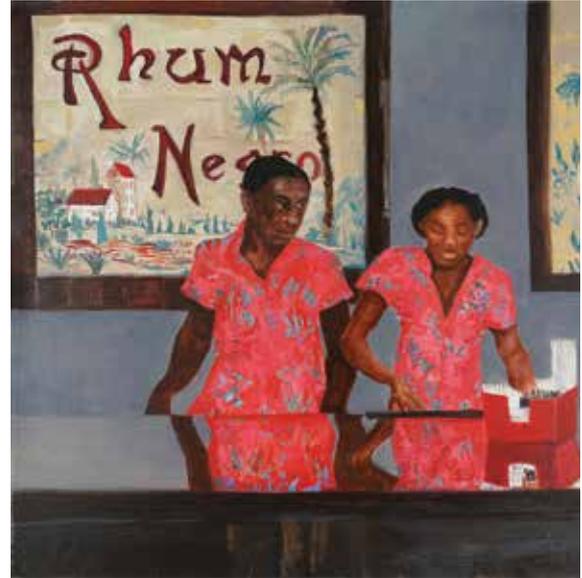
HG Do you find you get more work done in your city studio or upstate?

JB Here in the city I'm totally insulated. I close my door and have no distractions. I can spend the whole day here, sit and read a book. I don't work all the time. It usually takes me a while to get going. I like to sit and think, day dream, space out.

HG It's underrated and it's totally necessary.

JB Totally. I believe in it so strongly. I spend a lot of time switching myself off in a way, letting my thoughts wander. And when I do that in the studio, I see my work from the corner of my eye, and then I get ideas about what to do next. Instead of coming here and squeezing out paint right away, I sometimes spend five hours doing nothing, and then I paint for two hours. But these two hours are very productive.

iii



iv



HG People have a hard time understanding that kind of rhythm of an artist.

Do you ever listen to the radio or the news while painting?

JB Never. I learned that when working in the studio, quiet is best for me.

HG I'm totally with you. You don't want to be taken out of your space. My motto is: don't let anything into your painting space when you're working toward reaching emotions and yourself.

JB Sometimes I listen to audio books. Literature, fiction.

But I still prefer quiet, especially upstate where you open the door and hear birds sing and water run. The sounds of nature can put me in a trance.

HG Because our peripheral vision is approximately square?

HG I moved my studio upstate for that reason. Instead of the drilling and honking noises in the city, I now hear crickets and frogs, dogs barking, someone's wind chime. Good stuff.

JB Yes. The square loses its actual size, I can make a big or small square, it doesn't matter.

JB Sounds like music to me.

HG What was your first camera?

HG What time of day do you like to paint?

JB It was a Kiev, a Russian camera I was given as a little kid.

JB Upstate I like the afternoon. My windows face east, and I have a more dispersed light in the afternoon. Sunlight changes every half a minute. When I'm in my city studio, I just switch my lights on, and nothing changes for as long as I want.

HG Was it a horizontal format?

JB Yes. But later I graduated to a manual Hasselblad. I loved shooting in square format.

HG I did the MacDowell residency over the winter, and I recommend the awesome winter light there. It's very diffused, and because it's New Hampshire, there's a lot of snow and the light gets reflected by it. It's mind-bending.

The canvas size I like most is not a standard square, like four by four feet, but rather some odd number. I build my own square frames of different sizes depending on the project.

HG If you buy large stretched canvases, they're often a lot deeper and heavier than yours. You have a nice compromise here, a lot of square footage on a very thin structure.

JB How do you feel about titles? I sometimes have a hard time with them.

HG Titles are important. You need to guide people. I've regretted naming things arbitrarily.

JB Yes, it's good to give people a little context of your own mood.

HG Do you have any that you called Untitled?

JB Anonymous. I have a bunch of those. I find Untitled a bit cold. Most of my paintings are of anonymous people. I don't like to think that I'm painting someone's portrait. It's more of a poetic concept; it's like I'm translating my memory of their time in a certain space into a painting.

HG You are painting people's essence as you see it in a particular moment. How do you decide on your canvas size?

JB Smaller paintings for me are often sketches for larger ones. The size of a painting is so relative, if you come close to a small work it appears huge and if you're far away from a big one it can seem very small. A painting is its own world. It doesn't stick to a particular dimension.

HG But what about the format?

JB The square is the ideal format for me, because it's the largest universe I can create in a painting.

i



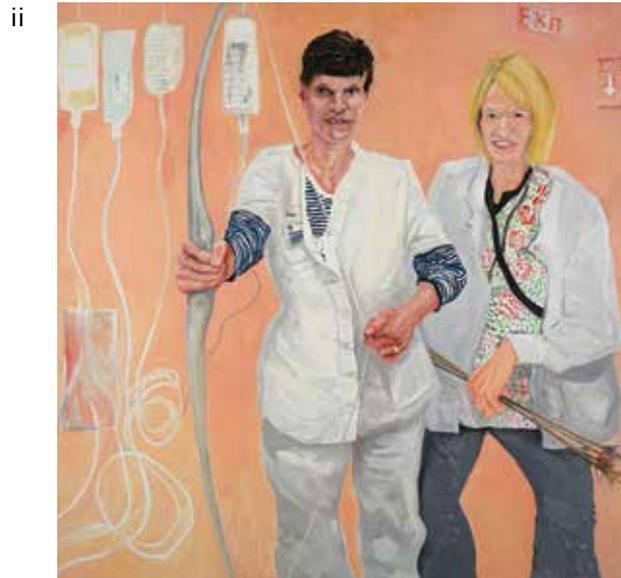
JB Here's another large painting, it's called *4AM*.

HG That's so trippy. I'm getting the read of somebody being in a hospital room going out with drugs, imagining they're outside. "Count backward from ten—"

JB Exactly. It's four AM and the clock on the wall says square root of sixteen and it turns into a tag on your toe.

HG Someone comes and takes your blood while you're hallucinating poisonous mushrooms in the grass. So this is you in the hospital after you were squashed by a sculpture? Oh brother.

JB For once, I used myself as a subject. I wanted to tell the story of my experience and what I felt being given all these drugs. But I'm not good with words, so I painted it. This whole series is titled *View from Below*. It's a very different perspective from a bed, seeing everything from below and being totally dependent on others.



Here's a painting called *Amazons*. Two nurses bring in a gurney with drips hanging down, some of which, for me, morphed into a bow and arrow. Obviously, they are coming to kill me.

HG The mind is playing all kinds of tricks on you.

JB Your mind is not the same as before you entered the hospital. Your life depends on your attitude—you have to trust the people who are trying to help you. But you're not thinking clearly.

This one is another hallucination. The cleaning woman comes to clean your room and it's like she's wiping the paint out of the painting.

HG Did you draw from your hospital bed?

JB Yes, I had my sketchbook. Everybody liked to see me drawing. The nurses would come to my room and stay a bit longer than usual.

I also wanted to express the constrictive feel of a hospital room, where you have very little space around you and the walls are always painted in hideous colors.

HG But aren't these hideous colors determined to be good for you?

JB I guess. But this pink—



HG It's a torture for the artist. These hospital walls don't have the psychological effect they are supposed to have. (*laughter*) But as a painter you understand how to create certain color environments that adjust your mood. You can paint yourself into a better situation.

JB Paint, for me, is a substance you can create poetry with. You spread it out and move it around. There's no rule as to how to do it. It's a lot about letting yourself be free, right? And at the same time allowing yourself to not be totally in control but rather to listen and let the painting guide you.

