

Erin Allen and James Bradley: *New World Boredom*

by Carol Anne McChrystal

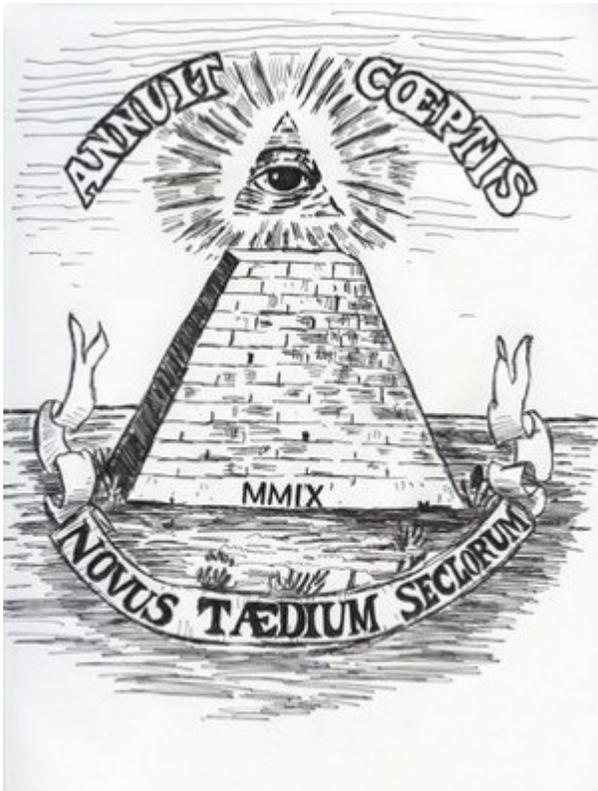
http://www.artpractical.com/shotgun_review_past/erin_allen_and_james_bradley_new_world_boredom/

A potent ambivalence drips from the walls of Erin Allen and James Bradley's exhibition of new paintings at MANIAC. *New World Boredom* is a headstrong and defiant statement against those social and political structures that limit the potential for the way the world can work, not unlike so many overbearing parents ruining what otherwise would have been a hella fun adolescence.



New World Boredom, 2009; installation view.

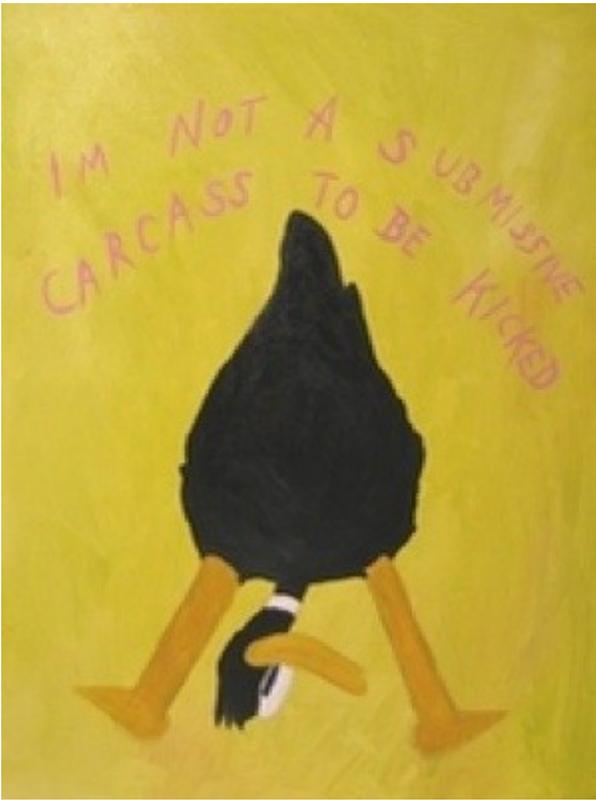
Installed halfheartedly salon style, a mish-mash of acrylic and oil paintings are scattered from floor to ceiling with a little consideration for the architectural quirks of the space. Authorship of the individual artists is sidestepped in favor of a jumble of paintings that allows the works to accrue substance through proximity. A collaborative endeavor occupies the center of the room: a pile of burned young adult novels and easy histories of once avant-garde movements. Cordoned off by four lengths of twine hung from the ceiling, each tied off and anchored by a golden brick on the floor, this Eye of Providence scribbles a sort of weary line drawing in the center of the room.



E. Allen and J. Bradley. *Novus Taedium Seclorum*, 2009 (detail); mixed media Installation.

Allen and Bradley's paintings are an inscription of tropes, references and quotes, one on top of the other. Mid-Century abstraction meets images culled from the vaults of popular culture. Curlicues and hash marks—mark making for the sake of mark making—creep out from beneath diary scrawlings reminiscent of one's most angst-ridden days. These painterly paintings are akin to juvenile delinquent mechanisms for coping with an establishment that one has rallied against with unparalleled vigor but to no avail, having already done what one can in the extremely limited space of protest made available by the self-same system.

The ambivalence that runs throughout *New World Boredom* has everything to do with finding oneself locked into a totalizing system with nothing to do. ("Hi, Children of the Revolution," they sigh at the TV from their bedrooms—not even the sidelines—too cynical and jaded to bother reiterating the same empty rally cry over and over again; the same call for change, the same cry for power.) The paintings attest to a desperate desire not to look back, but have no idea where to go. But where would one go? Why would one care, when the only options are Whole Foods or YouTube or the polling station or some shit? Whatever it is and wherever it is, it's simply another cog in Adorno & Horkheimer's all-encompassing culture industry. [1]



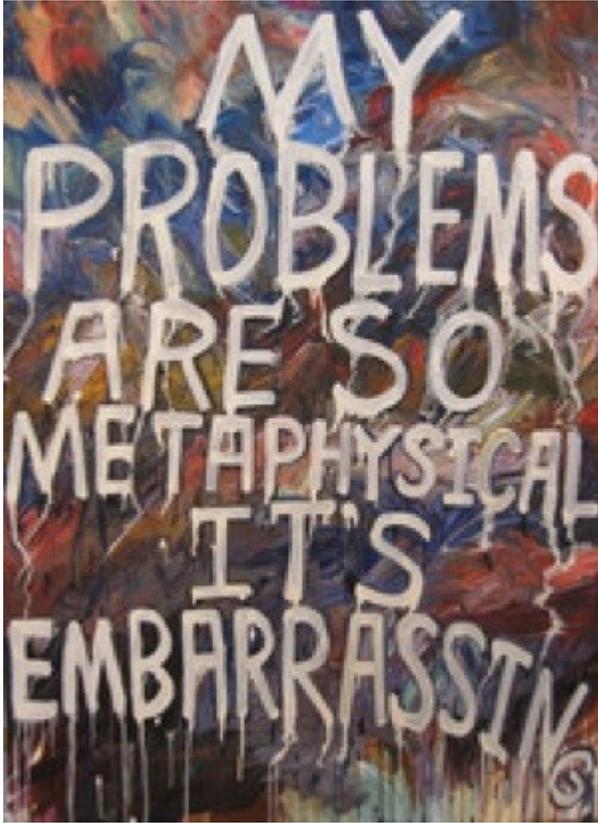
Erin Allen. *I'm Not A Submissive Carcass to be Kicked*, 2008; oil on canvas.

In this cul-de-sac of ontology, we find kids symbolically burning books because they can't burn down the Internet. We find the reiteration of a frame from "Beavis and Butthead," in which our beloved yellow-headed slacker confronts the end-all-be-all, passionate, soul-spilling expressionist painting. Allen squeezes out an entire tube of paint on top his own attempt at landscape painting. Bradley effaces his own portrait of Melvil Dewey, that great categorizer of knowledge. They make paintings because they can't not make paintings. The Eye of Providence smiles down on their eff-you-dad graffiti because here, in this space, one has NO. FUCKING. POWER.

With such a defeatist attitude, it becomes important then to wonder why they even bother. It may be in the aggressive desire not to look back—but not yet knowing how to look to the future—that these works open up new spaces of critical play through accretion. As Žižek and Butler both propose, it may be the not knowing where you're going that's important [2,3]. For Allen and Bradley, rather than choose between two fundamental choices—between Beavis or AbEx painting—they hint at some other space that is not a compromise, comparison, or resolution between two totalizing categories. Well aware of their own impotence in the face of these absolute structures, their installation of paintings offers up that brief moment in which we can glimpse the potential for real change; change that calls for examination and inquiry, rather than taking action simply because it is "progressive" in label and stands in ideological opposition to a perceived wrong. Allen and Bradley's imposition of flat binary relationships, apparent even in the non-labored but labored execution, is a careful rethinking of listless and futile gestures made out of boredom. Theirs is an impetus to inquiry [4].

No single work in this show obtains the potency of the overall installation. Each painting tends to make an obvious statement instead of asking interesting questions. However, the individual paintings still proffer unresolved struggle with the relationship between the individual and the limitations of ideology. be it Melvil Dewey's system of categorizing knowledge, art historical narratives, sustainable greening

action, or multinational capitalism. After all is said and done, these paintings are still paintings, and Allen and Bradley know it. In the same manner in which they topically convey their understanding of ineffectual action, they know the limitations of painting.



James Bradley. *My Problems are So Metaphysical It's Embarrassing*, 2008; oil on canvas.

New World Boredom is a representational vehicle made for the purpose of both proving the exhaustion of painting, and resuscitating the ghost of its relevance. [5] Allen and Bradley utilize quintessential painting as a staple in their works. Landscapes, portraiture, abstraction, et al. are resurrected and simultaneously negated with acts of mark making or text in each of the works in the show. Bradley's *The Likelihood Of A Terrorist Strike In My Bedroom* (2009), in which the phrase "My problems are so metaphysical, it's embarrassing," is emblazoned on top of a drippy expressionistic underpainting, nods to the problem that painting originates and resides in the theoretical realm, separate from the physical world.

The subject matter of the works decries the damage done by the ongoing politico-economic regime, but all the while participates in and reinforces that same institution. These paintings might be haggard in appearance, but they betray themselves in the sanctioned space of art as precious objects for sale. When it comes down to brass tacks, the paintings of *New World Boredom* are insistently conflicted. At the same time that Allen and Bradley question how much critical power an individual can have in the face of totalizing global systems, they are also carefully suspicious of how much critical power a painting actually has within the art institution. Means and ends are far from disconnected here, and the works become skeptical stylistic variations of one another, as well as of the tradition of painting. And all the while the institutional Eye of Providence graces them with smiling approval.

New World Boredom runs through July 31, 2009 at [Maniac](#) in Downtown Oakland.

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[1]. Horkheimer, M. & Adorno, T, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1972 [1944]).

[2]. Butler, R. & Stephens, S. “Slavoj Zizek’s ‘Third Way,’” in *The Universal Exception* (New York: Continuum, 2006).

[3]. Butler, J. “Preface,” in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990 [1999]).

[4]. Debord, Guy, *The Society of the Spectacle*. (Detroit: Black and Red Press, 1983 [1967])

[5]. Foster, Hal, “What’s Neo About the Neo-Avant-Garde?” in *October 70* (Fall 1994).

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