



JAMES STEPHENS
A MID-CAREER RETROSPECTIVE



cover: *Bluff*, 2005, oil on canvas, 43" x 36", Collection of Barbara Robins

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OAKLAND UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY

CURATED BY DICK GOODY

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Landscape, Utility and Psychology – Souvenirs of Consequence: THE PAINTINGS OF JAMES STEPHENS

The work of James Stephens throughout the eighties was that of an artist, a gay man existing (and painting about that existence) in the urban Midwest, specifically in Detroit, a divided city on the threshold of post-industrialization – in other words, the result of being a minority and living a hand-to-mouth existence in a declining city.

As an art student, in 1980 Stephens repeatedly attended the *Kick Out the Jams* exhibition at the Detroit Institute of Arts coming under the sway of such regional luminaries as Gordon Newton, Brenda Goodman, Michael Luchs and James Chatelain. Although mesmerized by these *Cass Corridor* figures, ultimately he was never much like them. For one thing he was a generation younger. More importantly, neither abstractionist nor constructivist at heart, as a young artist he painted narrative figurative scenes of a psychological rather than a metonymic nature. In part, however, he was making pictorial representations of the kind of objects that preoccupied the *Cass Corridor* artists; he was similarly drawn to their absorption in the physical materiality of urban breakdown – something they transformed into a celebration of bruised formalism and quirky neo-expressionist entropy. He also shared their fascination with puckered, rusty surfaces and the fatigued patina of arcane industrial machinery.

The dominant iconography in his work during the mid eighties, for example *Burdened Man*, 1985, involved drab landscape settings. The overall *mise en scène* in these early paintings was that of a severe premonition of what might come to pass. There did not seem much hope for the city in the late eighties; buildings were crumbling and post-capitalist, urban-industrial decay seemed inevitable. The artist conveyed a palpable sense of his own fascination with inner-city disintegration, depicting scenes of sinking ennui, scarification and scatology. When asked recently about the melancholic disposition of this work he replied that it was the result of what he called the “Detroit mood.”

The physical gravity of melancholy inflicted upon the men he painted was startlingly overt. In the painting *Man on the Ground*, 1985, the weight of the world bears down so heavily on the face-down figure that not even the suggestion of a beleaguered religious light can redeem him. Fossilized for eternity, he is as immovable as a frescoed



Burdened Man, 1985, oil on canvas, 65" x 52"
Collection of Hope Palmer and Dirk Bakker

Piero nobleman etched into the wall at Arezzo. However, Stephens' paintings were so beautifully crafted, so painstakingly worked, so Germanic in their ethical severity that they became very collectable. There were several Detroit artists working in this earnest allegorical vein back then. For example Ed Fraga pursued tortured religious themes and Tom Hume, the introverted alienation of solitude. Stephens knew these artists but was more comfortable with the irony and formalism of a painter like Peter Williams; for a time they had studios in the same building and were both infatuated with the thick physicality of paint.



Man on the Ground, 1985, oil on canvas, 26" x 34"

In the late eighties, Stephens was awarded a grant from the Michigan Council for the Arts which procured him a large supply of oil paint for more ardent research:

I experimented freely. I attacked the surface with knives, melted it with solvents, glazed, peeled, sanded and incised. The resulting effect was of images with a patina of age or decay, a visual delineation of time.

The pictorial space Stephens employed back then was one of savage compression. The men he painted occupied space like macabre figures in an allegorical wasteland. The paintings were worked rigorously (if ingeniously) and built up in layers for weeks on end. Stephens toiled relentlessly to get his solemn point across, which was to be polemic, oracular, and to bear witness to the misery of being human, or that of being a particular kind of human suffering in a particular milieu. This was his *raison d'être*; the leaden skies, crumbling factories, crepuscular figures, distended vessels, elegant orifices, and phallic protrusions resulted in a powerful sense of theatrical intensity. These works were a grand homage to the cult of youth rising from the ashes and dust of vanquished misery.

An important painting from this period is *Steady Work*, 1990. An allegory of powerlessness, entropy and languor, three figures are encased in the spherical fenestration of tree branches, existentially isolating them within a constraining circular composition. The two are as chrysalises, immobile and commemorative, like eroded funereal markers. A lone man stands as a bookend in a faux-ballet pose. A passive witness to the monotony of tedium, underscored so poignantly by a heavy industrial clock – Stephens has a penchant for circular motifs – the man holds a pair of handlebars, but he is going nowhere;

trapped in this mortal coil, he is forever fixed in his role and there is no place else he can possibly exist.

If his early work focused on misery and its antithesis, there were occasional bouts of homoerotic titillation tending invariably to be in the realm of irony and wit – the leering men in red pumps for example. Such glimpses of irony and humor were rare, but anticipated some of his more sardonic portraits to come later.



Steady Work, 1990, oil on canvas, 60" x 60"
Collection of Dan Gruschuck

In 1990 he moved to Chicago:

I found a new source of inspiration. Because I took the train to work daily, I looked at the landscape from one story up. On the roofs of all the buildings were air vents, water tanks, utility wires and signs. These objects informed a new group of abstracted landscapes and still life paintings (a la Sheeler, Demuth, Rivera). They had an ambiguity created by the scale and juxtaposition of the objects. The landscape became still life, the still life became landscape. I also shifted my figure painting to satires of historical and mythological figures. I painted Lincoln, Aphrodite, Ford, and re-imagined an Otto Dix watercolor.

During this time he also began making sculpture. These concretized the forms he employed in his paintings. A curious inversion of the maquette concept, they were actually three dimensional embodiments of the compacted iconography of his paintings. These structures, and his interest in the idea of constructing still lifes out of landscapes, led to paintings like *Winter Vista*, 1992. Architectonic forms and ominous vessels are tightly frontloaded into an industrialized setting, pressurized by a bilious sky. Stephens, like John Constable and El Greco, is an avid sky painter and master of light and stormy weather. Most of his paintings are intensified by the atmospheric brio of painterly cloud patterns. His compositions invariably brim with the atmospheric pressure – and the implied premonition intrinsic to leaden, sullen skies.

His work throughout the nineties continued to refine itself in a sequence of small, densely constructed still life paintings. His palette evolved becoming lighter, allowing him to tightly pack his pictures without making them feel overtly claustrophobic. In the painting *Self-Portrait with Snake*, 1993, Stephens' cropped head slides into the side of the picture plane, crowned by a serpent, but the whole composition is cleverly articulated using concentric circles: the squash in the foreground, the coiled snake whose epicenter lies directly in the middle of the painting creating a spherical fulcrum, and the apparent halo encircling the boa's head. A work of woven refinement, it shows his compositional mastery and capacity to merge his dramatic, psychological and formalist concerns.



Winter Vista, 1992, oil on canvas, 56" x 44"
Collection of Warren D. Shifferd, Jr.



Self-Portrait with Snake, 1993, oil on canvas, 16" x 13"
Collection of Mara Ignatius

The mid-nineties were highly productive and included several large figure paintings such as *Lincoln Portrait*, 1995, in which the President stands, sans trousers, in Caravaggesque light, donning a fatigued yellow life vest in a dilapidated Illinois junkyard. A defeated air of resignation infiltrates Lincoln's demeanor, as if he has come back down to earth only to find that everything he had worked so hard to accomplish has come to naught. It is yet another example of Stephens' recurring theme of the wronged figure in a fractured wasteland.



Lincoln Portrait, 1995 and 2007, oil on canvas, 70" x 31"



A Brief History (After Otto Dix), 1996, oil on canvas, 55" x 40"

A Brief History (After Otto Dix), 1996, is another important work, quite different from the parallel series of neatly dispatched still lifes he was producing. From the Cotopaxi Volcano on the horizon, to the Holbeinesque skull in the foreground, the unctuous, distorted male nude is surrounded by idiosyncratic signifiers of an exotic nature. Invariably these larger works embody a sort of worldly cynicism, but their smaller counterparts, the still lifes, have a much more earnest aspect. This posits that his still lifes were chiefly concerned with the hard work of perfecting his formalist process, whereas his large narrative portraits were altogether more liberal, expressive experiments unburdened by any particular aesthetic ideology.

A crisis of sorts caused a disruption between 1998 and 2001 and Stephens took a hiatus from painting. At the time, the break was serious enough to suggest that he might never paint again, but his circumstances eventually improved. When he began painting once more it was cautiously, or rather surreptitiously, executing modest works on paper. A promising new relationship with writer David Greene fostered a less severe approach to working. Reflecting on this period, he told me, without any angst, that he had wanted to have fun. There was a sense of reentering the world. Introversion was replaced by engagement. He took up gardening. The intention was to revisit painting, but not on the same dour terms where he had left off. The time prior to picking up the brush was spent reading contemporary fiction by American authors. It engendered a more broadened, less regional worldview and, contextually, he was able to adjust and refocus his critical agenda.



Campsite, 2005, oil on canvas, 16" x 20"

He started painting without the complex that the *only thing worth making was austere high art*. It did not last of course. Painting could never be merely fun. There was amusement in his early days of reengagement, but soon his commitment became more serious.

(In Chicago) I was drawn by the architecture, the lake, the culture. I explored a new found interest in nature. The plants and animals incorporated into the work demarcated the beginning of a new chapter in my life. I have recently expanded this new chapter by painting images of construction sites. Their forms, similar to those in my earlier work, symbolize rebirth, a renewal built upon my earlier interests.

Significantly, Stephens' interest in construction sites is the antithesis of his earlier fascination with detritus and architecture in decline – or demolition sites.

If his painting between 1982 and 1997 dealt with the physicality of the figure and to a lesser extent autobiography, it is less clear that this remains the case with his work since 2002 (in fact, Stephens makes strenuous claims that his work was never autobiographical, but it is hard to deny that his work before 1997, if not a kind of mirror on his life history, was a physical embodiment of certain psychological preoccupations). Regardless, the figure was banished in the initial return to painting – that is unless you believe the animals he continues to paint are anthropomorphic devices.

The fixated process in his new paintings is as laborious and sedimentary as ever, albeit with a new lightness in color. This *lightness* conceives a pictorial space illuminated with a celestial light not unlike the invented

luminosity in certain paintings by Jan van Eyck – the all-seeing amber radiance in the *Madonna with Chancellor Rolin* for example. Also, in terms of process, the way he lights and shades his forms shows the influence of Leonardo, both in terms of sfumato modeling and, more idiosyncratically, in the way foliage is painted. However, such a formal, art historical reading of Stephens' work will not help to place it contextually; the work may be empirically historicist, but it isn't historical. His old work bore the mark of the canon. Germanic in its orientation, it took its cues from painters like Grünewald, Cranach and Dürer, but the recent paintings do not bear the same scarification.

His new work exudes contemporaneous influences like that of Gilbert and George, which is evident in *Campsite*, 2005. With its graphic clarity and woozy synthetic palette – toxic yellow sunset, fire engine red tent, and dizzyingly blue skies – it has a new directness and apparent purposefulness. The homoerotic content of Gilbert and George may have held some allure for Stephens, but it does not manifest itself in his work. The cues he takes from them reference their use of color and political thrust. His recent paintings have a similar strident clarity and are equally accessible. At the Tate Modern's retrospective of G & G (Spring 2007) a huge wall-text articulated their manifesto: *What Our Art Means*:

'We want our art to speak across the barriers of knowledge directly to People about their Life and not about their knowledge of art. The 20th century has been cursed with an art that cannot be understood. The decadent artists stand for themselves and their chosen few, laughing at and dismissing the normal outsider. We say that puzzling, obscure and form-obsessed art is decadent and a cruel denial of the Life of People.'



Marry Me, 2007, oil on canvas, 50" x 60"

Certainly, Stephens might embrace such a statement. His work is neither obscure nor Modernist, exuding an openness and lucidity not conceivable in his earlier pictures. They are concerned with the anxiety of *now* amid the ghosts of the past and the specter of the future. *Bog*, 2005, ominously depicts a beleaguered, almost barren landscape at dusk, with the sun in the dead center of the painting. A loud speaker mockingly protrudes into the picture plane, as to engage us. These days, the objects he renders are connected not merely through compositional means; they have psychological associations too. For example, the topiary at the bottom of the painting appears to have some sort of bond with the speaker hanging above as if it had spat them forth. The ominous chevron cloud form in the background, an



Bog, 2005, oil on canvas, 32" x 45"
Collection of Charles Dunlap and Lee Hart

inversion of the conical shape of the speaker, enhances this figurative connectedness. His new paintings are ironic political statements – and with a sense of uneasiness, we decipher the signifiers – all the while bathed in the reassuring, although possibly treacherous sweet-light of the sinking sun.

During his hiatus from painting, Stephens conducted some psychological stock-taking which allowed him to prioritize his present and retool his future. His downtime and consequent reassessment lies at the root of his facility to change and mature. His break from painting made him more capable, alert and active. Similarly, his current paintings are not merely about endings; more significantly, they are rehabilitative. Paradoxically and metaphorically, like the Tarot Death card, they suggest desolation and cessation, but the card is also indicative of the premonition of incipient rebirth and all it guarantees.

The polemic tone of this new body of work, in a sense, is addressing broader, more general issues pertaining to the human condition rather than specific problems of human suffering. Also, his recent work has shed its earlier autobiographical concerns. Rather these paintings explore the detrimental effect of people in general. Stephens feels the effect is accidental rather than willful because these days he is an optimist. People may be gluttonous as they trample the earth in search of satiation, but he wishes to remain an objective observer:

I am interested in the consequences of human industry on the landscape. Humanity is transforming the natural world. This has visual consequences.

At the same time, contextually, the work pays homage to his sense of place, the Midwest in his case: clapboard houses, low-rise architecture,



Hammond Spring, 2005, acrylic gouache on panel, 16" x 20", Collection of Giorgio and Cathy Gikas

railroad tracks, lakes, swamps, and farmland. This is the context, but what is actually being conveyed along the furrows and tracks is Stephens' vision of the struggle between man and nature. Who will win; what will the Darwinian end-game look like?

The end of humanity has been *treated*. Movies tell us it will be epic and operatic, but the artist reduces and condenses the theme into a personalized satire. The settings *are* cinematic, employing nostalgic filmic panoramas recalling John Ford and the music of Aaron Copland. *Marry Me*, painted in 2007, hilariously parodies this sentimental vein. Paradoxically, it is essentially faux and idealistic rather than realistic. Stephens is spinning myths of mood, constructing a simulacrum from a time in American history that never really existed except on television and in the movies. The message of mass media during Stephens' formative years was nothing if not upright, earnest and unswervingly homogenized – a straight world which devoured any anomalies, devoid of neurosis or moral ambiguity. This is a far cry from TV and cinema of today, with its dearth of ethical accountability, total absence of ideology and utter reliance on the confessional "legitimacy" of reality shows. Stephens places his idiosyncratic motifs in the reassuringly "normal" setting of a traditional landscape making the action all the more compelling and bizarre. For example, *Hammond Spring*, 2005, with its barbed rose stems, black incised lines, ominous yellow canary, technological mechanical footing and receding pylons resembles a scene from a 1950s Sci-Fi movie.

Many of his paintings, with their landscape format, read like mordant fifties Technicolor postcards. In contemporary culture the postcard is all but anachronistic. Hardly anyone sends them anymore; e-mail and jpegs are much faster, more personalized and less kitschy. Being

obsessed with our own individualism is a problem – it is so much about My Space, and not *our*-space. The postcard is a useful metaphor because it conveys everything in one democratized thrust. Postcards are iconic and intrinsic, sentimental rather than confidentially unique. Today everyone wants their own authenticity and postcards are too monolithic for that; simply put, our meditative greediness as tourists/consumers can no longer be abridged into a single image.

When, as is often the case, Stephens uses the monolithic postcard format, like in the painting *Campsite*, 2005, it invariably comes down to this: exotic sun setting on an ironic, cheerful-lit post-apocalyptic landscape. However, he front-loads the foreground with ambiguous, idiosyncratic objects which call attention to their displacement. In terms of semiotics, the rude economy of Stephens' signifiers enforces a constricted narrative, making the paintings symptomatic rather than pathological. They do not show the cause, they only expose the pain. They do not show the action either; all we see is the dissolute forensic evidence. If you do not include the landscape settings, there are only two or three things (forms/nouns) in each painting. They are relics of decline and fall, souvenirs of consequence with a mocking signature cynicism, a pseudo-victorious silver lining light.

Where is the victory? Stephens has advanced from his early monochromatic melancholy to a highly energized chemo-colored worldview that is arch, ironic, and ultimately sinister, but his paintings are not gloomy. Good painting has *everything*, but it also encompasses social change. Stephens' new work improves on everything he has done before. This is his middle-period reaching forward beyond the endgame.

Dick Goody, August 2007

PLATES

Yellow River, 1986, oil on canvas, 70" x 60", Collection of Dan Grashuck



Book Building, 1988, oil on canvas, 72 " x 36", Collection of Gayle and Andrew Camden





Figure 8, 1995, oil on canvas, 28" x 24", Collection of Sharon Que and Tom Phardel

Incinerator, 1996, oil on mixed media, 24" x 28" x 24", Collection of Barbara and Ross Bunting



Calumet, 1995, oil on canvas, 40" x 36", Collection of Douglas Bulka and Laura Ann Salter-Bulka



Zug Twins, 1996, oil on canvas, 60" x 40", Collection of William and Patsy Porter





Study for You are Here, 1997, oil on wood, 9 1/2" x 13 1/2" x 13 3/4"

Yellow Still Life, 1998, oil on canvas, 24" x 37 3/4"





Blue Turkey, 1994, oil on canvas, 30 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 24"
Collection of Thomas Stephens

Pooch, 2005 and 2007, oil on canvas, 27 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 39"



Topsy Turvy, 2005, oil on canvas, 49" x 37", Collection of Thomas Gervasi



East of Hobart, 2006, oil on canvas, 31 " x 40 "





Most Important Painter, 2007, acrylic gouache on panel, 17 ³/₄" x 23 ³/₄"

Portrait of Robert, 2007, oil on canvas, 60" x 40"





Construction Site I, 2007, acrylic gouache on panel, 11 ³/₄" x 12"



JAMES STEPHENS

Resides Chicago, IL

EDUCATION

1982 BFA Center for Creative Studies, Detroit, MI

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2007 *A Mid-Career Retrospective*, Oakland University Art Gallery, Rochester, MI
- 2005 *New Work*, Lemberg Gallery, Ferndale, MI
- 1996 *Fiction*, Bunting Gallery, Royal Oak, MI
- 1995 *Recent Paintings*, Bunting Gallery, Royal Oak, MI
- 1992 *New Paintings*, Feigenson Preston Gallery, Birmingham, MI
- 1990 *New Paintings*, Feigenson Preston Gallery, Birmingham, MI
- 1988 *New Work*, Broadway Gallery, Detroit, MI

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2007 *Fresh*, Lemberg Gallery, Ferndale, MI
- 2007 *Contemporary Urban Landscape*, Lemberg Gallery, Ferndale, MI
- 2006 *Summer Group Show*, Lemberg Gallery, Ferndale, MI
- 2005 *Winter Group Show*, Lemberg Gallery, Ferndale, MI
- 2004 *Summer Group Show*, Lemberg Gallery, Ferndale, MI
- 1998 *Three Painters*, Detroit Contemporary Gallery, Detroit, MI
- 1997 *Goddesses*, Center Gallery, Detroit, MI
- 1996 *Moveable Feast*, Bunting Gallery, Royal Oak, MI
- 1995 *Visions America*, Gallery Ten, Ft. Worth, TX
- 1994 *Is There Still Life in Chicago?*, Hinsdale Center for the Arts, Hinsdale, IL
- 1993 *Provocative*, Space Gallery, Chicago, IL
- Group Show*, Feigenston Preston Gallery, Birmingham, MI
- 1991 *Recession Proof Art*, Peter Miller Gallery, Chicago, IL
- 1990 *Gallery Selections*, Feigenston Preston Gallery, Birmingham, MI
- New Work*, Feigenston Preston Gallery, Birmingham, MI
- 1989 *New Work*, Feigenston Preston Gallery, Birmingham, MI
- 1988 *Bye*, Feigenston Gallery, Detroit, MI
- 1987 *Apocalypse*, Michigan Gallery, Detroit, MI
- Choices*, MCAD Gallery, Minneapolis College of Art and Design, Minneapolis, MN & Evanston Art Center, Evanston, IL
- Invitational*, Feigenston Gallery, Detroit, MI
- 1986 *Detroit and Vicinity*, Detroit Focus Gallery, Detroit, MI
- 1984 *Slide Review Committee Selections*, Detroit Focus Gallery, Detroit, MI
- 1983 *Painting and Drawing*, Detroit Focus Gallery, Detroit, MI

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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- 1996 *Provenzano*, Frank, Stephens Sees a World, *The Detroit Free Press*, Dec 15, p 4J
- Colby, Joy, His Work is Fiction*, *The Detroit News*, Nov 21, p 8H
- 1992 *Colby, Joy, Stephen's New Exhibit*, *The Detroit News*, Sept 12, p 3C
- 1990 *Pasfield, Veronica, Urban Visions*, *Detroit Monthly*, Sept, p 12A
- Colby, Joy*, *The Detroit News*, Sept 21, p 4C

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