BODE

In Conversation with Seth Cameron
By Ivan Shapiro

A few months ago, during the opening of *Measure for Measure*, I was able to sit down with Seth Cameron following a talk with Tom Healy at *Nina Johnson*. While Seth is perhaps most well known as the President of *Bruce High Quality Foundation University*, he is also an acclaimed writer, artist and educator. I had the good fortune of being able to speak with him about his background, new work, and the state of art education at present.
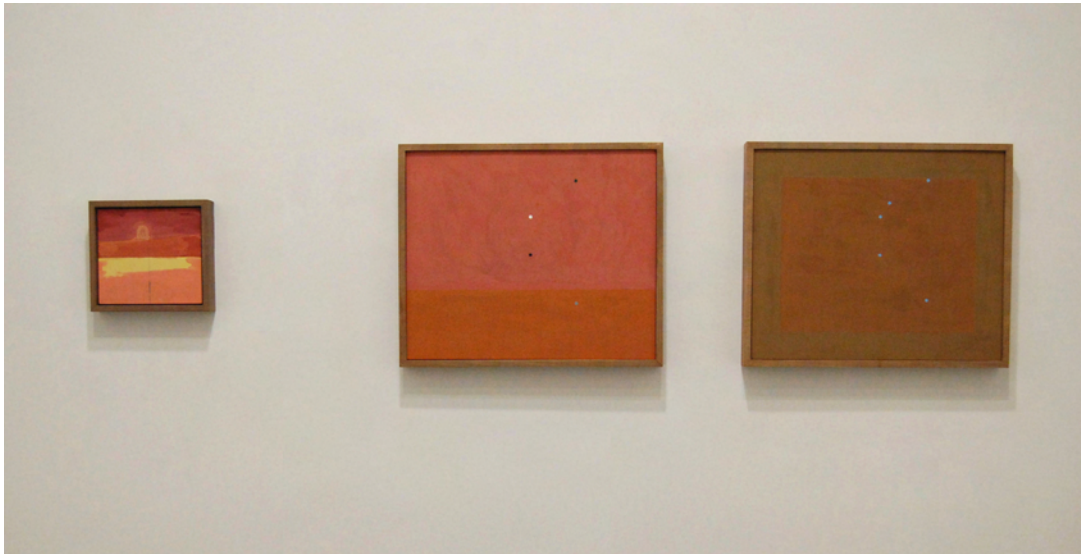
BODE: When did you first become interested in art? What compelled you to go to art school?

Seth Cameron: I don't remember a time before making art. My mother recognized early on that I had some visual acuity and left me to explore it as I saw fit, and that's really all I could have asked for.

So the question of being an artist never happened. I was always going to make art, and when it came time to graduate high school

the best way to make art seemed to be to get to New York and meet the best artists I could find. I considered studying other beautiful, useless activities like music and literature and philosophy, but the point was always to make art.

I was lucky enough to be accepted to the Cooper Union, which at the time awarded full-tuition scholarships to all admitted students. My parents couldn't really say no to that, and without it I have no idea how long it would have taken me to get to New York and what sort of community I would have been able to make there.

BODE: Where were you before Cooper?

SC: I grew up in South Carolina. When I was 15 I joined a drum and bugle corps and spent the summer living on a bus, sleeping on gymnasium floors, touring the country. So we had a day off, somewhere in the dusty middle, and I wandered into a used bookstore and found a book called *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition* by Robert Rosenblum. The crux of his argument is, in essence, that there is a formal and conceptual link between the transcendentally empty skies of Caspar David Friedrich and the color-fields of the Abstract Expressionists. It's a novel conception because it traces a lineage to Modernism that doesn't really need Picasso and the French. But what mattered to me was I could see a project in it – I recognized, unbounded by time, an art problem that I could contribute to. So when I returned home, I covered the walls of my bedroom in garbage bags and started painting.

BODE: So, you were drawing up until that point and then you started delving into painting?

SC: Yeah, I'd made all sorts of things up to that point. But what changed was that I understood what I was doing as part of a larger shared human investigation into how fictional space works. I wanted to figure out what art *is*. This question led me from color-field abstraction to language-based practices and Institutional Critique. But the problems of abstraction have persistently held my concern.

BODE: How was Cooper? Did it provide, what you imagine to be, the ideal art school experience?

SC: It was right for me at the time. It's only now that I've been a visiting artist all over that I can really make any comparisons, but that's also the key to what made Cooper special: it didn't compare itself to other schools. It built a curriculum, a faculty, a diverse student body, all in order to educate artists, and not to compete in the marketplace of education.

BODE: Yesterday, you spoke about preferring viewing art in a record store or a book store. I enjoyed hearing that because I also share an affinity for cover art and album art, and I can have as much of an appreciation for something like that, something that's considered "low art" or "kitsch", as something in a gallery or a museum. Do you have

any other thoughts on that? How important is it to break down this barrier between "high" and "low"?

SC: I'm very much a defender of the high, fine, free art tradition. I just don't think the fashionable museums of today are always such a part of that tradition. They're becoming, more and more, spectacle malls, kitsch propagandists, peddlers of the politics of self-congratulation. So where is someone looking for true art to go? You'd think maybe it's hiding out in schools, but it's really not anymore. MFA programs are now all about entrepreneurship and dentistry. So when I make the allusion to fading commercial spaces of popular culture (bookstores, record shops), it's in recognition of their liminality – right now, as their lights go out, they have the capacity to be the keepers of high art.

So real art, in all its transcendent timelessness, is constantly on the move. Maybe we can hide it at a friend's house, somewhere with lamplight and a thoughtful conversation. Maybe galleries are as good as it gets. I particularly love the idea of days when no one comes in the door and the paintings are left in peace. But my bet is that we're going to have to rebuild our academies of fine art, and rebuild our public museums. They should be free to visit, but much harder to access.

BODE: For the sake of the interview, can you explain this idea of curriculum, the ledge, and the thought process behind deciding how to display your works in the way that you did?

SC: The works are small, which could become a bit twee if displayed too preciously. So the ledge is a solution, allowing the paintings to relate to our bodies in a particularly haptic way. You have the sense that you could pick them up in your hand. The ledge also introduces the question of arrangement, of making order of some kind. I doubled the ledge to allow for a

divergent organizational strategy, the way footnotes might interrupt an otherwise linear argument.

And so the paintings become a kind of curriculum, a map of thinking that may function in irregular formal cycles through ideas about color or compositional relationships. The paintings themselves are premised on destabilization – foregrounds and backgrounds existing dialectically, and so the doubled ledge is of a similar order, introducing narrativity with one hand while disturbing it with the other.