

ERRATIC PHENOMENA

by Amanda Erlanson

If you feel you need any introduction to the luminous and stunningly unique paintings of Chris Berens, please drop back to last year's Berens profile before proceeding. Otherwise, all you need to know is that he has an exhibition of new work entitled "The Only Living Boy In New York" opening at Sloan Fine Art in New York on December 16th. To my delight, Chris graciously agreed to unveil a portion of his inner world for me in this touching and intimate interview.

"Ally Springs"



Erratic Phenomena: You were born in 1976 in the small city of Oss, in the Netherlands. Could you tell me a bit about the emotional and physical landscape of your childhood? What did you most enjoy doing when you were a boy? Was anyone in your family an artist? Is there a particular moment that stands out for you as an artistic awakening?

Chris Berens: *As a boy, I was pretty much what I am now – a dreamer. I didn't really belong in any subculture, nor was I explicitly an outsider. I had enough friends, but I was a very quiet and to-myself little boy. I think I was usually found on the playground amidst all the other kids who were screaming and running around – only I did none of that. I would be befriending a little bug or a bird, which I was certain was trying to tell me something.*

I always had this really special feeling over me... it's closest to what Christmas feels like. Or rather than "over me," it's a feeling of another place, a warm place, deep inside me, and I fill that place with all that I see and hear. But as soon as all those things enter me, and make the transition from something on my retina to a memory, they become wondrous, glowing and extraordinary. That is why I find the 'here and now' the least interesting reality. Not that I hide from it, or don't like my 'real' life. I love my life, I love living. And there would be no marvelous world inside me if it weren't for reality.

I don't really have an artistic family. But ever since I remember, I have been fantasizing and drawing, and it was very much stimulated by my parents – my dad especially. I'm not sure if there was one 'artistic awakening,' but I always felt I was special. I've always been sure that big things were going to happen. I'm not saying that this – my life as it is now – is what I have always been sure of, but I always knew that the world had a lot more for me in store, and vice versa – pretty much resembling that feeling you get the night before your birthday, or on Christmas Eve, when you don't know what you're going to get or what's going to happen, but you do know it's going to be absolutely fantastic.

"Keeping Warm"



EP: As a child, you believed that you had a group of otherworldly animal companions that guided and comforted you. As you grew older, these creatures began to fade, and you began to have difficulty accessing that world. However, a few years ago, at the time of your father's death, you began to be able to perceive them again – as if out of the corner of your eye – and you realized that what you were seeing were guardian figures which had come to take your father home. Has your window into

that other reality been open ever since? Have you gained a greater understanding of what you're seeing?

CB: *It has been open ever since. I always had it. As a kid, they were my imaginary friends. As an adolescent, they were still there, but not so much in the shape of animals – more an overall entity, a feeling that I wasn't alone, something that made me feel safe, and understood.*

Those polar bears running alongside me – they did appear towards the end of my dad's life. I'm not sure if I actually realized they were guardian figures, come to take him home, but that's how things work in my brain. This was a pretty extreme time, so I guess that called for drastic measures. I remember riding my bike to my parents' home, feeling so very small and scared and alone. Thinking how futile it all seemed, me bicycling all the way home, emptyhanded, with nothing to offer – no solutions, no cure, no comforting words, nothing. And that's when they came, flanking me and behind me, leaving me at the head of the pack. And by the time I set foot into my parents' home, I felt like I was bringing him the greatest gift. Those big, impressive, awe-inspiring polar bears. I know it sounds dumb, but there they were, standing behind me, breathing heavily from the journey, casting this huge bright shadow.

They've always been there, ever since. I don't always see them, but they're never gone. They appear when they have to, in the shape needed in that particular situation. I don't know what they are, or why, but I do know where they come from – from that special place inside me – and every once in a while that place floods, I guess. I can make it flood, too. By painting, that is.

"Mohawk Dreaming"



EP: In much of your work, you capture an echo of the exceptional qualities of light that graced the

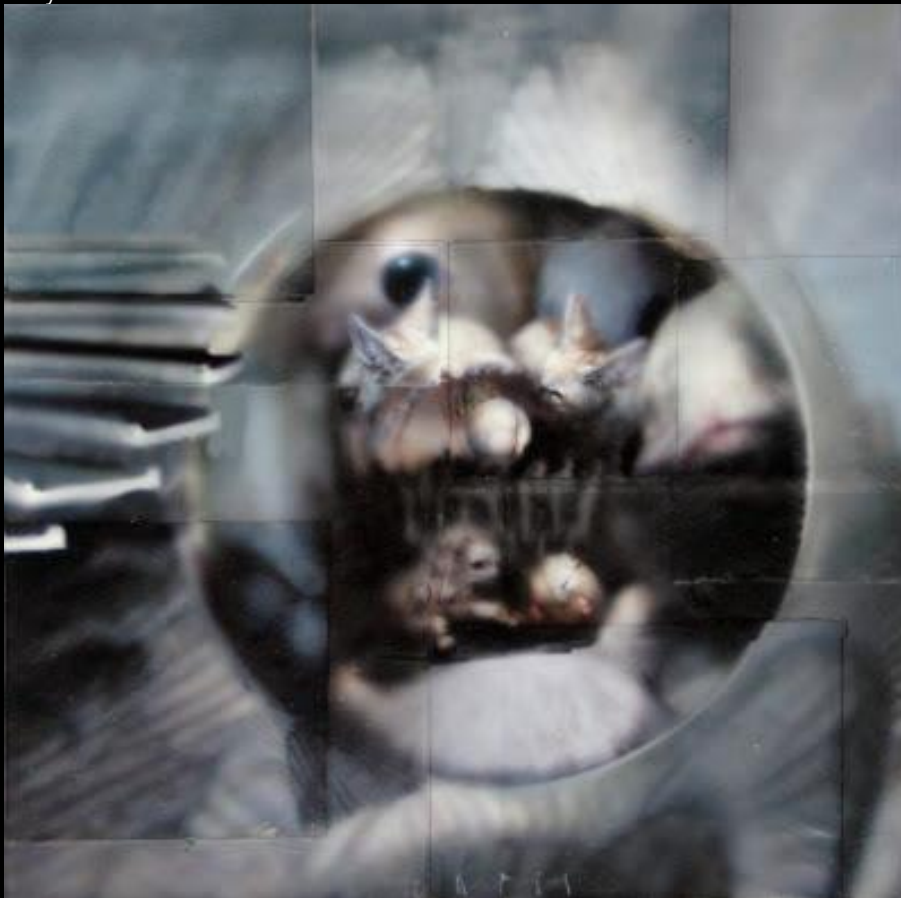
work of Rembrandt and Vermeer. When you were just a boy, your father took you to exhibitions of their work, and of course you grew up in an atmosphere similar to that they painted over 300 years ago. Would you say the unique luminosity they captured is endemic to the inner world you envision, or is the visual language of the Dutch Masters a tool you use to interpret your vision as best you can?

CB: It's both. As I said about my internal world, it's an autonomous world, but its raison d'etre is drawn from the things that I see, and hear, and participate in. Everything in it is an essential part of it. Everything affects everything. With every new entry, there's a mutual adaptation. The newcomer, ordinary as it may be, will adjust to its new fantastic environment, and with that, the world will be a richer, more complete, but also more subtle and delicate one.

And every now and then there's something that enters my mind – a film still, a fragment of music, or a painting – that has such an impact, that is so strong, that it is bound to come out pretty much in one piece. It has happened to me with a number of images. Some of them I have known since I was a kid, usually in the shape of a poster in my bedroom, and some of them I was just recently blown away by – but all of them I know by heart.

I'm not always aware of it – when I'm 'doing it again' – so to me, it can be a bit of a shock, when I find out, or come across the original image, but there's pretty much nothing I can do about it. When such an image imposes itself, I can ignore it, but everything I do from that moment on will be tainted by the image. Until I paint it – then it's gone. So to come back to the light in the landscapes of the Old Masters, it entered at some point and got stuck, and has illuminated the creatures of my world ever since.

"Cozy"



EP: In some ways, your work reminds me of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* series, in which humans are bound to animal companions called "daemons," which are essentially a part of the

person's soul itself. Could you tell me a bit about your relationship with these unique children's books?

CB: That was another shock to me. I started reading that book when I was almost finished working on my Roq la Rue show of last December. So in retrospect, a lot of my work from before I knew about that book could easily be a pretty literal illustration of that concept. It really made me wonder... How could he know? Is it real after all? Coincidence? Known fact?

It's not that I found that my creatures were my external soul, but they sure were an extension of me. I always felt that there is so much of me, so much inside me, that I just overflow. For me, that is kind of a given – that a person doesn't end with his epidermis. That there is a lot just outside you that is equally real. When someone is angry in the same room you're in, it can press on you pretty physically. Nothing has to be said or done. The room is filled with something that makes it hard to move freely, or breathe. And that gets worse when that person is someone you love. So the step from my point of view and visions to his is, in fact, a pretty small one.

"Diorama"



EP: One of Pullman's biggest influences was the great poet, philosopher and artist William Blake, who began to envision angelic beings walking among mankind when he was just four years old. Later in life, Blake maintained that his poetry was being dictated to him by a celestial figure. Deeply spiritual, he rejected all forms of organized religion as misguided and repressive. Does Blake's perception of the world resonate for you? What aspects of his viewpoint do you find most

compelling?

CB: *To be completely honest, I don't really know William Blake. I've heard of him, and you, among others, have mentioned him in association with my work, and through that, I have seen some images of his work, but that is the extent of it. Fortunately, you have highlighted an exhibition of his work in New York, so while I'm there for my new show, I'll be sure to go visit.*

But to answer your question: I'm not a spiritual person myself. Nor religious. I know the first sounds a bit odd, having talked about all of the above. I do have my own (strange) way of seeing the world. I do have some unorthodox ideas and feelings. But they are pretty isolated. I don't really believe in guardian angels, tarot, numerology, astrology or spirits of the deceased roaming this earth.

As far as 'divine intervention' goes – I don't believe that either. I think everything you do comes from someplace else – something you have heard before, or seen, or thought. That is the crude way to put it. But it is all so very complex – I'm not saying that you copy all you do. That 'nothing is original.' An entire symphony can be extracted from a car backfiring. What I think counts is what happens next, after the backfiring car. A chain reaction of associations can be set loose, which eventually can lead to a painting, or a song, or the idea for a new film or a book.

And I do think you can sense the presence of someone who's not there anymore, or dream about something that is about to happen. I just think that people (some more than others) can pick up on things that are so very small and seemingly insignificant – even more than they are aware of – or that they interpret something that originated inside themselves as external.

Conclusion: Maybe it's all the same thing, and we're just interpreting it in different ways.

"Abridgement"



EP: Visionary psychologist Carl Jung spent six years wandering in the strange, shifting land of his waking dreams, and documented that place in an elaborately illustrated book, which has never been published until now. It was these explorations that formed the basis of his theory of the collective unconscious. He believed that one could bring back something valuable when moving between the rational and irrational planes of reality – that exploration of the unconscious was the gateway to the soul. Jung once told one of his clients who had been having visions, "I should advise you to put it all

down as beautifully as you can – in some beautifully bound book... Then you can go to the book and turn over the pages, and for you it will be your church – your cathedral – the silent places of your spirit where you will find renewal." In the past, you've said that the world you envision "wants to be revealed and seen, and therefore painted" by you. Do you think that perhaps you're on the same quest that Jung was pursuing?

CB: *Well said, Carl, well said. I'm also kind of ashamed to say I never read or heard that either. I did know about his 'collective unconscious,' but never read into it or thought anything of it. I really have to digest this a bit more, but it sounds like what I'm trying to do exactly. I don't think I'm on that quest, in the sense that I have a quest... I don't. Not that I'm aware of, anyway. But as I've stated, that's not saying a whole lot.*

It does feel like a cleansing thing to do. The reason I paint, is because for me, for now, this is the way to get closest to what I actually see. I suppose you could call it my soul, or the center of me, or my essence. And creating is what I do, what I must do. Painting I like, and I can do, and I'm extremely happy doing it. I'm not bound to the medium, though.

I do need to be in an open connection with the source of my imagination. The good thing about painting is that it is quite a time-consuming process, and that gives me time to get to the core of my feelings. That keeps it authentic, sincere. It usually takes me a while to get in the right 'flow,' but once I'm in, I can walk around, move stuff, travel through time and place. It's quite magical, really, and equally addictive. It's literally a 'no-brainer.' If I start thinking, I'm thrown out. It's like running the stairs two steps at a time, or one of those 3D books, where at first you all you see is a bunch of spots and textures, and all at once you see the 'doe with fawn,' and you're able to look around, but it all vanishes when you start being aware of yourself again, being aware of what you're actually doing. Now, of course I think about light and shadow, shape and color all the time – but that type of thinking is 'allowed' in that place I go to when I'm creating. Groceries, all earthly possessions and tax forms are not.

"Room 21: For Your Eyes Only"



EP: You studied illustration at the Academy of Art and Design in 's-Hertogenbosch, with the intention of becoming a children's book illustrator. One of your goals was to challenge modern ideas of what kinds of information children could benefit from and comprehend. Was the world you intended to present to children similar to the one you paint today? What made you change your mind about pursuing that avenue?

CB: *Yes. It's that world I had in store for kids. Perhaps I've already said this, but what I want to show, or rather, what's inside me, has always had the atmosphere my works have today. Of course it is evolving as I am. It's in my subconscious, the corner of my eye, my dreams, all around. My technique is rapidly evolving, though – much faster than my inner world is. So one part of the story is that when I thought I could change the world of images children are served, my work was much darker, much less delicate. That was in part because my technique left me with gaps to fill, and in part because I was much younger, and trying much more to make a statement – making things even gloomier than I intended to, just to kick against the existing. But that's the way it goes, I guess. In order to find out what's loose and what's fixed, you have to kick it. You can't be gentle about kicking.*

What changed it was that at one point I realized that all I was doing was trying to convert my ideas into something printable and suitable for children. Or trying to convince the people on whom I was depending that they had that all wrong. Which I still find a noble cause, but what I find way more important is to develop my own visions and technique and style. In order to do that, I had to be totally free. And I did feel I was in a hurry. The images kept piling up, and I just couldn't keep up with them, doing what I did.

I would like to do it, someday – make children's books, or films. But it has to be the other way around then. That medium has to want me. And in the process, of course, I can and will adjust to the medium, but the convincing shouldn't be on my account.

"Not an Island"



EP: After graduation, you set up a studio in an abandoned building near your hometown and

proceeded to teach yourself to paint. At first, you learned by copying Old Master paintings. After much experimentation, you settled on creating your images via painting in layers of semi- translucent ink, rather than in the traditional medium of oils. It's almost as if you reinvented Old Master painting from scratch, with the benefit of a set of tools that didn't exist until quite recently. Do you think learning to paint by trial and error, rather than through instruction, has made your work develop differently that it would have otherwise? What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of this approach?

CB: *I sure do think the development is different. When committing to a medium, you take on every one of its advantages and disadvantages. When painting in oil, there are a lot of 'presents' you get from the medium. The way colors mix. The way the paint behaves, from your brush onto your canvas, how fast it dries, what happens if you force-dry it, etc. And oil is the medium that is closest to what I use. The amount of possible interference is at a maximum. I like that – being totally in control. The opposite of that is monotype or watercolor painting. Fantastic things can be created through those media. The unexpected is the best part about it. And of course you can control it to a certain extent, but a lot of it is up to fate.*

I didn't decide to use the materials I use. It grew. I was constantly frustrated with the fact that something happened that I didn't intend to happen. I can imagine using a more traditional or totally different medium at a later point in time. Using all those 'happy mistakes,' as Bob Ross calls them. Right now, I want to focus on translating all those images in my head as clearly as possible. No brushstrokes, or as little as possible. No pixels. No actors. No special effects. No external aspects. Just me. I use plastic because it has no texture. I use the plastic on printing paper because it is extremely thin, and clever people have scratched their heads over how to keep the ink put. And I use the transparent layers because some things – such as skin, fur and light – can not be done in one layer (by me, that is). It's the same as real skin – the color and texture you see comes from all those semi-transparent layers of tones, and bumps and holes, that your mind blends into 'skin.' The fact that they are in fact semi-transparent helps me give it all this smoky atmosphere.

"Crown Jewels"



EP: In creating your compositions, you paint the same image over and over again, sometimes dozens of times, both because it's part of your process in defining the character, and also because your technique requires multiple layers of semi-transparent images to be stacked atop each other in order to attain its characteristic depth and softness. Incidentally, the verso of many of your paintings features a partially finished character or element from the front, which greatly illuminates your mysterious process. Is this repetitious drawing something you were inclined to do naturally, and have bent to your needs, or did you choose to do it specifically because you wanted to achieve this aesthetic?

CB: *Again, it's both. I like repetition. I like that feeling you get in a dream, where everything is normal, but 'something's different.'* And I like getting to know what you're creating. I really like the phase where you've laid the groundwork, and now can actually worry about the little stuff, and savor it. Giving depth to stuff you don't even notice once a painting is done. You don't notice, but you sure do feel it. It's like the difference between the real world and *The Truman Show*. Or *Xena: Warrior Princess* and Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings*. Essentially the same (sorry Peter, you know what I mean), but in two of the four you can feel the depth, feel the genuineness. Although theoretically you wouldn't, because all the essential elements are there. It's something else. Something in the corner of your eye. Or even behind you. But it's there. You know it is, because somebody else has thought of it, and you can sense that. Attention. Commitment. Love.

"Pure Morning"



EP: Painting from "a gut feeling or a distant memory," you work with a sort of stream-of-

consciousness process, allowing compositions to come together piece by piece until they suddenly begin to make sense to you. In fact, you've characterized things like facial features, buildings and animals as abstract forms, which may be added or subtracted as the composition requires. Do you think this approach is related in any way to the surrealists' exploration of automatism?

CB: *I guess. What I do is, I go into that place. I don't want to make it sound all spacey, it's just a form of relaxing, of letting go of all of your day-to-day routines, stress, frustrations. It's really a lot like dreaming. Daydreaming. Or perhaps the way a newborn sees the world. As abstracts waiting to be explored.*

I'm probably taking it way too far, but I'm trying to put into words what it is, so I need comparisons. So perhaps it's like being blind. Instead of seeing, you're touching, tasting, hearing, even sensing objects. You don't start out knowing what it is, you just start exploring. Whereas people who do have their sight, when they see a group of thousands of people, they know it's a group of thousands of people. There's no way you could have actually seen and absorbed and computed all of those shapes and colors and movements and measurements. You fill in 99% of it, taking an average of what you know. A guy three meters tall would throw you off, because you're projecting your images of a man, woman, child, dog, whatever, and briefly noting if it fits.

I guess I go around in my world as a blind man. Feeling all around. By savoring every detail of an object, you become that object. Learning where your fingertips end and the object begins, how they relate, how your fingertips respond, how the object responds, you're breathing life into the object. By being so close to an object, the edges of you and it start blurring. You become energy, it becomes energy, and you become something else. A character becomes alive because I know what its back side looks like. I know how heavy it is. I've touched every part. That makes it real. That makes it something more than ink on paper. That makes us more than flesh and blood. So much for not being spacey.

"Utopiary"



EP: You've said that this other reality you paint is "similar to the regular world, but at the same time, looks and feels quite different." Are the optical distortions you depict artifacts of your approach to imagemaking, or are they evocative of the perception you have of this other reality, seen as if through a mirror, darkly?

CB: *They are, in fact, what I see. As I said, the images I make started out being 1 or 2% of what I see. Nowadays they're close to 50%, I guess. It's not science, it's a hunch. It goes back and forth. That doesn't necessarily mean that the more realistic a painting is, the more it resembles what it is that's going on in my mind. It's certainly not my thought-up idea of imagemaking. But of course, all the images that are floating around inside me are affected – maybe even made – by my internal world, and thus my imagery. Something goes in, does its little interplay of cross-pollination with me and all that's already in there, and out comes this new thing, often resembling something you've seen before.*

"The Whaler, the Ermine and the Bait"



EP: You've said that the world you paint is "an actual world, with living creatures and villages, countries and seas... a lot like this place, constantly changing and evolving, only more beautiful," and that because this other reality is so infinite, you could never run out of inspiration. Some of the figures you paint seem very specific, and recur again and again in different paintings. The Whaler, for instance, is rendered so compellingly in "[The Whaler, the Ermine and the Bait](#)" that he projects the emotive power of an [Ingres](#) portrait. Are characters like the Whaler protagonists in this narrative, with stories of their own? Is the story still unspooling, or is it a completed saga that you are offering glimpses of through your paintings?

CB: *It is certainly not a completed story. There is a story to each character, I just don't know all of them. I only start storytelling as I paint. That doesn't mean that the creatures only start living as I start painting. They're alive, all right – living, growing older, gaining personality and depth – pretty much on their own. I'm exploring as much while I paint as you would, looking at a finished painting. There always seem to be protagonists in each show, sometimes overlapping. It is usually well into the preparations of a show that I find out which one it is that plays a big role. And it's usually only after the opening of a show, when I've had time to reflect, and actually see all the finished works on a big white wall, that I realize or can guess why it's them.*

What that means is that I don't think about the meaning of a work or of a character – let alone 'symbols,' because if I do, the work becomes insincere, dishonest. You probably could explain my paintings by making symbols out of the imagery, laying that alongside my life, what happens to me, what I do, where I am, what and who affects me. Often I can start answering the matter of 'what does it all mean' only after I've had that week or two where I keep returning to the gallery or museum, and taking in what's on those walls. It helps when I've had some distance from them, both in time and in space. What helps me most in understanding them are the stories and associations and reactions of other people. They're often very personal and emotional.

"Snow Angel"



"First Snow (Guide Me Home)"



EP: Death is a recurring theme in your work, which you've explored in paintings like "[On a Midnight Voyage](#)," "[In Paradisum](#)," and the diptych "[Snow Angel](#)" and "[First Snow \(Guide Me Home\)](#)." You've said that "there is a great deal of beauty present in the moment of death," and indeed you usually represent it as a moment of peace, and the beginning of a wonderful journey in which one is guided by a benevolent menagerie of creatures. Your father's death was a major catalyst in the evolution of your work. Has your subsequent exploration of this theme led you to further develop your philosophies about death and the afterlife?

CB: *The works you've mentioned are very personal works. Each one of them, I've hesitated to show. But that feeling of not wanting to show them only made me more sure that I should. Although I am a pretty shy person, and hate speaking in public, and get very nervous when there's more than one pair of eyes pointed at me, I am almost an exhibitionist when it comes to showing my work. I like the nakedness of very personal works hanging on white walls for everyone to see.*

I like writing better than I do talking. To me writing is more true, more real. When I write, I can think about what I really want to say, without me getting in the way. When I talk, I get very clumsy, because you have to do it in real time. My mind goes way slower than real time. More specifically, in my mind there is no time. Or at least the scientific rules of time don't apply. I can easily go back and forth and hold still as long as I want. I can sort of do that when I write, but I can really do it when I paint. I can make things float, hold still, speed up (although I rarely feel the need for that), slow down and repeat. That's just the way my mind works, and I think that rubs off on my paintings.

And death, as it seems to me, is all that. It's your soul, with all you have filled it with, all you have seen, all you have loved, all that has loved and seen you, all that leaks out of my brush as I'm working, but infinitely more – and no time. I'm not sure if I actually believe in life after death. I even think I don't. Because 'after' is a time definition. I have this feeling that it all comes down to the moment you die. That moment of letting go. Where you're still there, still here, and then you let go. Your soul is the last to go. And in that moment is eternity. So as far as I'm concerned, there's no life after death, because after death, only the living go on – in death, on the contrary... And because your body is tied to time, but your 'soul' isn't, I think it's all bundled in that last moment.

But anyway, that's the reason I need to stay so close to my 'soul,' so close to me, to let nothing, or as little as possible get between me and, in this case, a painting. And perhaps that is why my works feel a little bit like death. But I hope it doesn't frighten people. If anything, I hope it brings people hope. Consolation. It does that to me, anyway.

"Not Just Yet (Waiting to Exhale)"



EP: I am very curious about the figure in "Not Just Yet (Waiting to Exhale)" that seems to be a submarine polar bear made of ice and snow, with a spotlight shining from the center of its chest. Can you tell me what this strangely compelling apparition represents?

CB: *I started that one as one of the first ones for the Seattle show. Then it was just the polar bear, and some other elements which I wasn't sure of what they would become. Then I did practically the*

entire show, and weeks before they were all to be shipped out, I took that one to hand again. I had been inside this big wave for months. All, including myself, had been washed westward. The journey of *"Go West"* started out in Amsterdam, with a parade of ships and other vessels riding through town towards the water. And then they all took off, but very soon I realized there was no sea in front of them. They were riding this one big wave. There were people and creatures on the west side of the middle painting (*"Halfway There"*), that were awaiting this big wave – they were looking at this big storm and twisters on the horizon, rapidly coming closer, and there was this big wave, with boats and creatures riding it.

"Checkpoint 49"



Then there's *"Checkpoint 49,"* where it seems more than one wave is gathering just before the 'halfway' point. Or it started out as one wave, but it broadened, and here it all comes together again, waiting until everyone has gathered. In *"Halfway There"* (somewhere around the North Pole), the wave crashed, swallowing everyone that had been in this desert, that is now the bottom of the sea. And the journey now goes on, with part of the party still on top of the water, but most of them being dragged underwater. So I guess I figured that since we had such a long way to go, they'd better learn how to survive underwater. At one point jellyfish arrived (seen in *"Not Just Yet"*), which pretty much had the function of umbrellas – underneath the jellyfish, it would be dry. As the only thing I knew about Seattle at the time, when I was halfway into the show, was that it always rained.

So with the work *'Just Like Rain, Dear,'* I told the creatures that were being held underwater and had each been appointed their own jellyfish, not to worry. That they shouldn't see the sea as threatening.

Like biblical angels that tell you to 'fear not.' And then there's this polar bear that was walking on the ground in "Halfway There," just before the wave hit. He has learned how to use the water, and he has this light with him to guide others that have just been caught by this wave, or that are lost. It's funny that you describe him as 'a bear made of ice and snow.' I always had this feeling that it was the accumulation of icy water and oxygen, more than it was a bear. Or that foamy cloud just underneath a wave. All energy. Like the vacuum reverse of a wave.

"Just (Surrender, Submerge and Keep Breathing)"



EP: The text in your paintings seems to be deliberately childlike – yet somehow ominous. In some ways, it reminds me of the scratchy, jumpy, handwritten text in Kyle Cooper's groundbreaking title sequence for *Seven*. What led you to make this choice?

CB: *This is actually the way I write – not when I'm making a quick note or a grocery list, but when I write in a journal, which is the writing equivalent of painting to me. That way of writing is a lot like drawing. It's partially the meaning of the letters and words, and in part I just let the shapes be isolated shapes. I used to get a '1' for writing in primary school. (That's the lowest grade you can get – I think it's equivalent to your 'F.' Also for 'listening' and 'paying attention,' by the way.) When I write, I like to use tools that give as much resistance as possible. In school we had to write with a fountain-pen, and I always wrecked the tip before the end of day one. And when *Seven* came out in cinemas, I was in my second year of Art Academy, and I really loved that sequence, as well as Joel Peter Witkin and graphic designer David Carson. So I guess it has affected me to this day. I used to spend days and days scratching into negatives in the darkroom of the Academy's photo lab.*

When I write, I always hold my pencil vertically. I like the amount of emotion things can collect when you're not in control. So I still do that. The reason I don't paint like that anymore – I used to – is that everything you do is affected by that way of working. You can't let anything have a different atmosphere than your 'gesture.' It determines all.

I love and admire Tim Burton. But the film that's dearest to me is Big Fish. I think it's because it's undeniably Burton – it's in every frame, in every corner. But it's not so much in your face. Not every fence is of rusty curled cast iron, not every face is ghostly white with sunken eyes. (Don't get me wrong, I think white faces with dark sunken eyes and curled cast iron fences belong to the most beautiful things ever created.) But the fact that that same feel, that same spirit is in the whole film – only not as clear – makes it to me so very beautiful. It's like that dream that starts with you waking up – my favorite. Everything seems normal, but you know it's a dream. Or at least you have that anxious feeling that not everything will be normal. The whole world seems to be dipped in this particular atmosphere, you just can't make out what it is.

So as much as I like the way things look when you let your 'gesture' guide you, right now I want nothing to stand in the way of me and what is inside me. And gesture will still be present in everything I do, just not as clear. My writing is a remnant of that.

"Searchlights"



EP: The backgrounds of many of your paintings incorporate rudimentary pencil sketches of characters and objects – usually so faint as to be invisible unless one is standing quite close. This might come as a surprise to many American art enthusiasts, who are accustomed to the refinement of work like that of Mark Ryden, and haven't encountered highly rendered work that retains traces of the artistic process. I understand that in Europe, less finished work is often appreciated more than work which is highly polished. Could you tell me a bit about why you choose to incorporate these drawings?

CB: *I don't know if that's true, that 'we' Europeans appreciate unfinished work more than finished. I do. Leonardo DaVinci is a great example. He has this one unfinished work called something like "The Repentant Hieronymus" [a.k.a. "St. Jerome in the Wilderness"]. Fabulous. I love Da Vinci in general, and more so than I do – for example – Michelangelo, because of the rough edges.*

I use the term 'unfinished' loosely, as people use the term 'modern' instead of 'abstract.' In the case of this Da Vinci, it actually is unfinished, but to me the fact that you see sketchlines or unpolished parts means anything but that it's unfinished. There is unfinished, there is finished – that's that undetermined point where everything is right – and there is overly finished, a.k.a. 'killed' or plain 'ruined.'

The thing about 'unfinished' works is – for example with Da Vinci's "Hieronymus" – that it's a guy with a lion. If he had finished it, it would still be a guy with a lion. Now it's a guy with a lion, but you can actually see all of the emotions, doubts, considerations and decisions the artist has made. So it's not just a guy with a lion, but both 'guy' and 'lion's' whole history.

I don't believe there are any normal people. Normal people are the ones standing behind you in line at a post office, passing you by in an oncoming car on the highway. They stop being 'normal' the moment they open their mouths, the very second you look into their eyes, and start being human, start being real. Not to say that a perfectly polished painting has no soul, or is not real. But I really do love the openness of a work that you can see through to the very bottom. The fact that it clearly has a history gives it a future, in my opinion.

(To be clear, the fact that you mentioned Mark Ryden and that I talk about the benefits of a unpolished work have nothing to do with each other. I love Mark's work, think he's totally unique and a modern day Master.)

"Slumber"



EP: In some of your paintings, you openly reference the work of past masters like Ingres, Bouguereau, and Delaroche, borrowing elements like composition, posture or costume, while at the same time elevating the transformed image into another plane of meaning. This is the sort of thing photographer Joel-Peter Witkin would often do with his cadavers and human oddities – re-staging Old Master paintings in his quest to create beauty out of something terrible and disturbing. Tell me about your philosophy behind revisiting these centuries-old academic paintings.

William-Adolphe Bouguereau – "Two Bathers," 1884



"Something's Up, Going Down"



CB: I think I accidentally answered that question in my previous answers. Bouguereau, Ingres, Vermeer and others, I've known by heart ever since I was a little boy. I was a happy kid, and never thought about death, but I have always pictured my funeral filled with the characters out of those paintings, and how surprised everyone would be. A lot like the final scene of Big Fish, where you don't know if it's real or if the son finally gave in and embraced his father the way he was.

But the point is that in fact that's the exact same thing. Not Tim Burton's point per se – my point. I know them. I'm safe with them. Sometimes I miss them as you can suddenly miss your childhood. So I recreate them, for comfort. The way I get all warm and fuzzy when I see a Christmas episode of a sitcom in summertime, the way you look at a picture of a beach with palm trees in winter. Where you almost can't remember what sun feels like on your skin, but you know it's bliss. And in some ways that is even better than actually feeling the sun on your skin, maybe even better than Christmastime. There are elements that get stuck in my memory. There are pieces that I just love.

Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres – "Louis-François Bertin," 1832



"The Fool on the Hill"



There are also parts, especially technical stuff like clothing, that I still know inside out from when I was painting over the Old Masters. It gives me – as the maker, and maybe you as the spectator – a tool or a handle to step in. Like the projection you use on new situations to fill in the gaps, or why we use words so we don't panic every time something new happens. You can label it, so it already exists. And later, you can refine your thoughts about it. So there is no message or quest there, they're just part of me.

Delaroche is another story, very personal, so I'm not sure I should tell. But I was in Paris with Esther, my girlfriend, at Christmas three years ago. We were in the Louvre, and there it was, "La Jeune Martyr." It took my breath away. Just a week before, someone pretty close to us had died in much the same way, and we were at that point still horrified by it. (I'm sorry, I would tell you who, but you don't know her, and it may be too painful for some to re-read it.) And that was her – already there, for over a century, in the Louvre. Peaceful. There was no shock in that image, no horror. Only beauty. I sucked it up, every detail. Weirdly enough, I couldn't quite remember what happened above her. I was quite sure something sat on her, or maybe floated above her... anyway, that she didn't end at the edge of her soaked dress. So there the animals were – comforting and leading the way, like midnight cowboys.

Paul Delaroche – "The Young Martyr," 1855



"On a Midnight Voyage"



EP: What other artists from the past move you powerfully, and what aspects of their work do you find most intriguing?

CB: *There's Jeroen Bosch. I love his work. But what I love more is his work, in his time, in his town. I lived in that town for years, and I can imagine a lot about his time. It's the Middle Ages – he was born in 1450. People were not so well off, being human. We could barely manage to stay alive, between the plague, fires that burnt down whole cities, cold winters, and the Church. People were afraid of everything they couldn't control. We still are – but back then, that was a lot. The Church had no intention of telling the people that it was going to be okay, and that they should just try and enjoy their short and miserable lives, because no one has a clue what's next.*

And Bosch illustrated that. His work is bewitched. It is intense. Beautiful. Sometimes even funny – but you daren't smile, let alone laugh. Like Sinterklaas, who later became your Santa Claus. Yours is quite jolly. Ours isn't. He's tall, he's scary, he has black servants, and he's pretty mean. If you're good, you get candy, if you're bad, you get whipped. He looks ridiculous, but you'd never ever laugh at him. You'd be put in a big bag and be carried off to Spain (our North Pole). I think it's incredible that in that time, where the only art was divine art, Bosch got through. It must have been such a fine line – between being accepted and being burnt.

I like Breughel (both father and son). I like their way of looking at the world – of making their own truth. You'd think you know what that time looked like, but it's almost impossible that it actually looked that way then. It's like thinking the '50s were in black and white. I like Anton Pieck. Judging by his images, you'd think he was from Breughel's time, but he died in 1987. I like the fact that he, too, was very constant in his way of picturing the world around him, in a way that is so convincing that it must've been real on his head. Similarly, I think Bacon must've had some sort of 'malfunction' in his brain. His distortion of the things he paints is so consistent, that I do think that's the way he saw things – felt them at least. I like Rembrandt, I like Vermeer – but that goes without saying.

"Midnight Cowboys"



EP: If you could hang just one classic painting from history on the wall of your studio, what would it be?

CB: *Too hard. I really like "Portrait of Christ's Head" by Rembrandt. I just get sucked in. I doesn't matter that it's only a head, because once I'm in, it's the whole world, painted with that brush. It's a very moving portrait, too. It's sad, it's pure emotion, he's so tired, but there's hope, there's light, there's even a hint of a smile. Man, that's some kickass painting, that is. His "Lost Son" is breathtaking, too.*

Vermeer's "Woman Holding a Balance." One of the most sensual women ever portrayed. Seen in real life, it's larger than life. Small as it is.

"Half Moon Hotel"



EP: You recently had your first museum exhibition, in which 13 of your paintings were on view in the Noordbrabants Museum in 's-Hertogenbosch – which is incidentally the home town of Hieronymous Bosch, whose lurid, symbolic paintings could be considered the fount of surrealism. How did it feel to have your work displayed in a museum, one room away from the work of Vincent van Gogh, in a city with such a rich artistic heritage?

CB: *That was such an honor. I was so very happy. I love that museum. The first time I was there was with my mom and my best friend (okay, one of my best friends) and his mom. And the second time was with my girlfriend. Both of them were very special. There was, in fact, a sign that said, "Vincent van Gogh, left – Chris Berens, right." Funny. There's something about the sanctity of a museum. The smell, the lighting, the silence, the sound of squeaking shoes on linoleum. And me hanging there was surreal. Just surreal. Wonderful.*

"Little Prince at the Plant"



EP: Your upcoming show at Sloan Fine Art, which opens on December 16th, is entitled "The Only Living Boy In New York." How were you inspired to name the exhibition after that lonely, haunting Simon & Garfunkel song? Will this show also have an Old World-meets-New World theme, as did your show at Roq la Rue last year? Since New York was once New Amsterdam, I imagine there could be some interesting associations.

CB: *I have always loved that song. The emptiness in it. But also the joy. It floats. The show is in fact me, alone, in New York. Quite literally. I had never done a self-portrait before, so that was pretty exciting, and strange, too. The fact that it's all my imagination was up until now inherent to the fact that I wasn't in it.*

"The Compass"



There are Old World and New World aspects in it. This year, it's 400 years since 'we' turned Manhattan Island into New Amsterdam. So that was a bit of a peg. There's me in New York, and I'm all alone. I have all these things with me – like suitcases and books – that hold all my friends in them. As memories. Or as solace, I don't know. In a way, that brings me even closer to them. And there's this centerpiece, that is in fact cut up into 22 pieces. It's New York inside snowglobes, and underneath is all of New York's history piled up in the shape of a mountain. Cowboys and Indians, factories and old Dutch houses. The mountain is called Halfmoon Hotel (after the ship that Henry Hudson used to get to Manhattan), and the hotel has many rooms. There's a separate gallery at Sloan Fine Art where some of those rooms are portrayed.

"Room #49: How May We Help You?"



EP: What's on the horizon for you after that? Hopes, dreams, plans for the future?

CB: *There's another show at Roq la Rue in October 2010. Also, I'll be participating in TEFAF (The European Fine Art Fair) in March 2010. It's excellent, one of the most prestigious fairs in the world, so that is an extremely great honor. As for way into the future, who knows. As I've said, I'm extremely happy painting, and I will always keep doing it. But I can imagine side-stepping at one point. When perhaps another medium comes along that allows me to express myself in another way for a particular project. Film could be one I could see fit, but who knows.*

And I have a very special and very personal project to let you in on – Esther and I are having a baby! We are so excited about that, I can't tell you. It already truly is one of the most special things I have ever felt. So we're really looking forward to that. She or he will be born in May of 2010, so after our trip to NY, we're dedicating ourselves to making our place into a warm and welcoming place for the three of us.

Chris Berens' marvelous exhibition, "The Only Living Boy In New York, opens on December 16th at Sloan Fine Art in New York.

"Sisterhood"

