

**THE
ETHER
AROUND
US**

**AN ESSAY
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**JEAN-BAPTISTE BERNADET
STUDIES FOR SUNSETS**

SEPTEMBER 27th - NOVEMBER 9th, 2014

**RETROSPECTIVE
711 WARREN ST., HUDSON, NY**

The flag and the sunset: in the incessantly flowing, morphing, and convulsing sea of images we encounter on a daily basis as citizens of the 21st Century, these are two of the most conventional and familiar. The former a ubiquitous reminder of the nation state, its histories and mythologies, and everything that these might mean to us and others, positively, negatively, and everything in-between, while the latter was once an example of the sublime, ineffable aspects of nature and the passing of time. Yet it has now become a banal sign of travel, leisure, and associated notions of escapist pleasure that have always consistently found their way into ad copy, and now our social media feeds, yet without retaining any of their former sense of duration, change, or liminality, frozen as they typically are into a suggestion of eternal youth and beauty. In his latest series of paintings, Jean-Baptiste Bernadet has, against all odds, successfully brought them together in a group of formally affecting works that are perhaps rivaled in their perversely paradoxical existence only by Josh Smith's tropical themed series of paintings. But, as we shall see, this is not as surprising and unfathomable a combination as it may initially seem.

In a slippage that is highly significant, Bernadet calls these works simply his "sunset" (rather than

flag) paintings, titling each, *Study for Sunset – 1 (After Fredric Edwin Church)*, *Study for Sunset – 2 (After Fredric Edwin Church)*, and so on. Despite taking on a range of sizes and color schemes, all of the thirty canvases that make up Bernadet's sunset paintings more or less follow the same general compositional scheme. In each we find a striated field that opens up towards the upper two thirds or so of the left hand side of the painting, in such a way that it roughly resembles an American flag. In some works the connection is more direct, as in those that mime the flag's colors most closely, though never exactly. While in others the relationship is more tenuous, and perhaps ultimately established only in that painting's inclusion alongside others in the series. Some of the darker, more minimal works are like this, their correspondence to the flag form only becoming visible when placed alongside their brighter, sunnier peers. Further, Bernadet has explored a range of ways of rendering this motif, and it is here that the "sunset" element is to be found. For, as much as each is felt to be a painting of a generalized flag form, so too do they seem to be cloudy skies bearing witness to particular meteorological events, and occupying that liminal temporality unique to the turn from day to night. This is felt most strongly in the muddied, almost watercolor effects of some of the works, where it as if rain

is clouding our vision, as well as through Bernadet's color palette, the expected red, blue, and whites of the majority of them shot through with crepuscular golds and pinks, and matched by a smaller group of nearly nocturnal works executed in greys, navys, and blacks.

It is of central importance to note from the start that we should not get carried away with these references, and think that Bernadet's sunset paintings are simply updates of works like Frederic Edwin Church's *Our Banner in the Sky* (1861), which also marries landscape and flag themes, but to very different ends, and not only because they are painted by Bernadet, a Brussels-based French artist. Close examination of one of these works reveals that it is not so much that Bernadet makes one of his sunset paintings by fusing together sky and flag motifs, but rather that he conjures both such that they are held in tension with one another, slipping in and out, over and under one another. Each painting makes reference to both history and our present moment, and in doing so activates this signifiatory instability, for, as I will sketch in the first half of this essay, the changing signification of both flags and sunsets over the past hundred and fifty or so years has always been the inverse of one another in terms of symbolic weight. This is to say, as the nationalist and imperial ambitions of the

United States have grown over the past century, leading to war and unrest, the formerly neutral sign of the flag has undergone alterations in its symbolism. So too has the sunset lost its vaunted sublimity by becoming ubiquitous through circulation and use, and thus a functional, but weak signifier.

Bernadet's intelligence in this series is to put these two tropes together, and to use the ensuing symbolic instability to give a new and original intensity to the ultimately formal concerns of these works: their resolutely painterly handling of color harmonies, composition, and visual stimulation. This, too, is not a nostalgic throwback to an earlier time when it is imagined we could simply enjoy a work of art for its ineffable beauty. Rather, by generating these paintings out of the frisson produced by both historical and contemporary contexts, Bernadet allows space for form to speak to our networked condition, and proposes ways of thinking about, if not quite acting out, its subversion. For, if in a global, networked society systems have become dispersed, into the atmosphere as it were, wherein our own devices, public spaces, modes of travel, etc. all become means of surveillance and control, of our bodies and actions, as well as of our access to information, and thus to agency, then it makes sense to address this "ether" surrounding us.

Further, since, due to their vastness, it is not possible to represent those systems or their omnipresence, then pictorial strategies of abstraction gain new significance as means by which to address the structurally abstract relations between other people, objects, these larger systems, and ourselves. This is not to say that these are necessarily the subject matter of these paintings, but rather that they are the context that gives that sunset and flag imagery their significance, and which animates their resolute formalism.

We shall deal with the image of the flag first, since in Bernadet's paintings the motif of the sunset quite literally takes on the vague form of America's "star spangled banner," yet we will find that the story of the sunset in art history of the past hundred or so years quickly inversely parallels it, if not quite joins up with it. This is because that period of time has witnessed the American flag gaining new, greater signifiatory weight at the same time as that of the sunset has been drained, to the point where we find the sunset functioning, in terms of the degree of charge its signification carries, somewhere close to the level of symbolic neutrality the flag used to suggest, and vice versa. This very particular, tenuous situation enables Bernadet's sunset paintings to make use of the abstract, networked situa-

tion that we presently live in as the structural condition for a certain visual, painterly experience. In these paintings Bernadet enacts a slippage between the mundane and the charged, which so often feel like the only possibilities for signification today—either something "goes viral" or fails to register at all—and one that incessantly seems to direct all of our energies, consciously and not, into the service of facilitating our own placement within this system. In Bernadet's sunset paintings we find again some kernel of the meaning these images used to hold: both the a priori neutrality of the flag, and the sublime liminality of the sunset. Thus, this feeling of pleasure in looking at Bernadet's expertly rendered color harmonies is intimately linked to a sense of perpetual becoming that allows us to at least imagine what agency might feel like, even if it cannot fully deliver it to us.

Flags have of course featured in art for centuries, since their emergence out of the heraldic standards of antiquity; however, they really began to take on the purposeful quality of a motif in art of the late 19th and early 20th Century with the progression of modernism's *longue duree*. In his series of sunset paintings it is this particular backstory that Bernadet is mining most directly, at least at a formal level. It is my sense from looking at work from that period by artists as

diverse as Monet, Frederic Church, and Childe Hassam that the flag offered to those artists a ready-made aspect of both the cultural and physical landscape by which certain structural formal problems might be solved. This can be seen in various uses of flags to anchor compositions, in which it functions as a kind of literal indicator of the flatness of the picture plane: a possible reading of works as diverse as Monet's, *Rue St. Denis* and *La rue Montorgueil* (both 1878), and Childe Hassam's, *Fourth of July* (1916). In some cases it turns away or towards us, as in Monet's *La rue Montorgueil*, and in doing so becomes an indicator of receding spatial depth, and often a rather literal one, since we are familiar with a flag's material presence and activity in space. It makes sense as well, given the flag's particular marriage of charged, but conventional signification, that this motif would be used to nationalistic, patriotic ends by an artist like Church, when in works such as *Our Banner in the Sky* (1861) he turns the clouds in his twilight sky into a reverential rendition of the "stars and stripes." With the advent of photography war could no longer be gloriously represented, so this symbolism had to persist in painting in an allegorical fashion, as in this painting of Church's. Bernadet follows this particular marriage of two symbolic registers, if in a very different way, in his own series of sunset

paintings, drawing on this essential equation between atmosphere and the flag, both in literal and metaphorical ways.

At the same time that the flag took form as a motif in certain 19th Century paintings, even if in a mostly unspoken and perhaps unwitting way, Turner, followed by artists like Seurat and Signac, were adopting small, atomized brushstrokes in an attempt to more concretely and powerfully convey atmosphere. What started, on the part of Turner, as a careful dabbing and stippling to lend richness to his paintings' rendering of sky and sea, by the close of the 19th Century was systemized in the "pointillist" technique that Signac canonized in his treatise, *D'Eugene Delacroix au Neo-Impressionisme* (1899). To a degree the prehistory of our current banalized version of the atmospheric is to be found in the mechanization adopted by those artists in their rendering of air and water.

A decade and a half after Signac published *D'Eugene Delacroix...* Picasso intuited the relationship between the stippled wallpaper he found in Parisian department stores and the systematized abstraction inherent in the pointillist handling of sky—which in some cases Seurat even extended past the picture plane onto a painted frame, making it even more emphatically literal and material. In works like *Pipe and*

Sheet Music, 1914 Picasso used this wallpaper to suggest atmospheric space, a la pointillism, but its placement in the composition confuses this identification by also denoting surfaces, complete with shadows cast upon them by objects such as the titular pipe. The line between atmospheric space and that occupied by objects is thus shown to be structurally collapsed in the confusion that has occurred between the mechanization and systematization of this image, as it becomes subsumed into the decorative element of wallpaper, which is meant to be brought into the bourgeois home, where it functions passively as pleasing pattern.¹ So we see already emerging, a century ago, a logic whereby signification and meaning are displaced, such that they are simultaneously everywhere and nowhere.

Today the same image we take with our camera we might upload onto our Instagram as a mark of where we have been and what we have done, and then we can have it printed on canvas to decorate our home. This circulation of meaning, where the feedback loop between consumer and consumed is collapsed, was already beginning to go through its first steps in Picasso's time. Today we are everyday constantly enacting this circulation and translation of images from one form to another, nothing stands still, and it is this very movement

by which things take on meaning, gaining greater significance only as they move faster and penetrate deeper—more likes, more hits, more shares.

Advancing through art history, and returning to the motif of the flag, in terms of postwar art history, we are perhaps most familiar with Jasper Johns's use of that trope, beginning in 1954, as a means by which to literally map the coordinates of the rectangular picture plane, a formal patterning that we will recognize has certain parallels and precedents to both the use of the flag in earlier art, and to the pointillist systematization of atmospheric space into an all-over field of stippled marks. In Johns's own words, he chose the flag motif, as he did numbers and targets, because they were "things the mind already knows," and for this reason something that was "seen and not looked at, not examined."² This consideration of the flag as one of the things that constitutes an a priori state of knowledge is clearly evident in Robert Morris's claim in 1969 that, "Johns took painting, further toward a state of non-depiction than anyone else. The Flags were not so much depictions as copies... Johns took the background out of painting and isolated the thing. The background became the wall. What was previously neutral became actual, while what was previously an image became

a thing.”³ In line with this, the deductive logic, by which the flag, in Johns’s hands, became a device for referencing the structural and material terms of painting, more so than its metaphoric potential, played out in Sixties art in all sorts of minimal and conceptual works, several of which pushed the logic of Johns’s innovation to a tautological endpoint.

The most immediate, and art historically significant, of these are Frank Stella’s black paintings, in which the Johnsian structural logic of the flag motif becomes fully abstract, morphing into patterns that shed most all of the flag’s inherent symbolism in the service of a formal language that corresponds, and speaks directly to, the factual qualities of the painting. By enacting this reduction of signification, Stella makes evident some of the basic elements out of which signs are generated. For example, the cross-form as primitive way of dividing space, one whose vertical line can quickly come to stand for a figure set against a ground, the horizontal line. Stella’s use of ring-, diamond-, and cross-forms, is thus as building blocks for meaning, rather than as specific symbols in and of themselves. A fact Stella underscores by drawing out the formal logic of these motifs into a pattern, at which point the ultimate reference can only be understood to be the rectilinear shape of the

canvas, and the flatness of its surface, these factual and material terms are what we are incessantly turned back to as we try to make meaning out of the composition before us.

That Stella understood this relationship between his forms and their potential or latent signification is evident in the titles of the black paintings, which he came up with in conversation with close friends like Hollis Frampton and Carl Andre. These evoke a dark aura of “deviant” and downtrodden spaces around New York City—gay and lesbian bars, apartment buildings in Bedford-Stuyvesant, and, in the case of *Die Fahne Hoch!*, the title of a Nazi anthem, which translates to “the flag on high.” Of course none of the paintings are literal images of any of these spaces, but rather these titles, added later by the artist, are meant to conjure up for their viewer a general sense of unease and melancholy. Thus, it is not that Stella stripped the flag of all its meaning when he took on its formal logic, but that he revealed how an even greater emphasis on a supposed formal “neutrality” in fact just allowed for meaning to enter the work by other avenues, which he explored directly in his handling of his titles. This smuggling of content, in the context of the 1950s American cultural landscape, was highly effective, and perhaps one of the few avenues by which it could

then enter the work. In our present moment, when meaning seems to only operate either hyperbolically or incredibly weakly, based on the currency it gains (or fails to gain) in its circulation through our various networks and systems of distribution, this idea of meaning filtering into otherwise weak or overdetermined images from elsewhere feels newly relevant. Bernadet’s sunset paintings combine both kinds of images to strike a sort of balance—the weakness of the sunset juxtaposed with the overdetermination of the flag.

Already by the time Johns painted his seminal first flag painting in 1954, America’s “stars and stripes” was a symbol of global power, and this had added resonance in an artistic context due to the nationalistic aggrandizing of New York as superseding Paris as the new center of “high” artistic production. Subsequently, over the course of the 1960s political and social events such as the Vietnam War and racial unrest further altered the meaning of the American flag. This is of course not to say that it was a purely neutral symbol when Johns used it in the mid-1950s, but that its signification was more univocal, and opposition to the particular past and ideals it represented was fashioned in a necessarily more private, underground way. In the McCarthyite 1950s, it could be downright dangerous

to challenge something like the American nation state.

However, as the Sixties progressed increasing social unrest led to the American flag becoming a target for political action. For example, flag burning became a ubiquitous symbol in the late 1960s of protest against the Vietnam War and, as the potential uses of this symbol proliferated, so too the availability it had to artists changed. We can see this in Johns’s own case where, when he returned to the image of the flag in 1969 it was as its inverse, an image that appeared in several works, including a poster for the Committee Against the War in Vietnam. This reimagining of the flag was based, formally speaking, around a “magic eye” effect. Johns used the opposite colors from those in the conventional American flag—green for red, yellow for blue, black for white—and, central to the image is a small white dot which, when stared at for a while, will cause the rest of the image to change, green reverting back to red, etc. so that the image becomes that of the American flag again.

This formal and conceptual move is an important one for understanding how the flag had come to function, symbolically for the left at least. For it is not as simple as an inversion of the flag, but the particular way that the image has to be viewed, essen-

tially means that the work is never complete, the image never directly or fully available to the viewer. One either “sees” the green, black, and yellow flag, but this is quickly revealed to be just an apparatus to a certain optical effect. Yet, having then summoned the “corrected” flag, one realizes that this image is transient, a play with the terms of vision, rather than an “actual” flag, and, further, one that is lost as soon as one’s gaze moves on. In this way Johns comments directly on the incomplete availability of the flag, which, by the end of the 1960s can only be accessed indirectly and in a compromised fashion. It is this aspect of the flag’s symbolism, negatively charged for the left in the wake of the unrest of the 1960s, that becomes the base for its subsequent use by politically-oriented artists like David Hammons and Danh Vo. Hammons’s *African American Flag* (1990), for example, has taken Johns’s inversion more literally, replacing the typical colors with those of the Pan-African color scheme, which was invented during the Harlem Renaissance by Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association. Again, Bernadet’s sunset paintings may not have this particular kind of political charge to them, but nonetheless, in refusing to ever finally deliver the image of the flag (or of the sunset, for that matter), they must be seen as working from this space, whereby meaning cannot ever be

seamlessly and definitively arrived at, it must always be rendered contingent and in flux. Even to title each a “study” shows that Bernadet is more concerned with the idea of where the sunset paintings might point, than with what they concretely declare.

Around 1966, while the symbolism of the American flag was undergoing this radical revision, the de Menil family of prominent Houston collectors commissioned Andy Warhol to make a film of a sunset, to be shown in a church they were restoring. He shot several color reels of sunsets in East Hampton, San Francisco, and New York City, but “never got one that satisfied me.”⁴ However, he did use some of the footage in **** (*Four Stars aka The Twenty Four Hour Movie*) and *Sunset* (both 1967). The latter film uses a sequence from California where the sun seems to set and then rise over the course of 33 minutes, while the singer Nico recites a poem off screen, and at points a plane flies through the sunset. The de Menils—who were, like Warhol, devoutly Catholic—likely selected the subject matter of the sunset because of its sublime, spiritual connotations; as such, Warhol’s lack of satisfaction with the resulting footage can perhaps best be understand as due to a failure to capture this esoteric, affective element of the sunset. Then when, in 1972, Warhol was

commissioned by the architecture firm Johnson & Burgee to decorate their Hotel Marquette in Minneapolis, he produced a set of four interpretations of the same image of a sunset, possibly lifted from that footage taken a few years earlier, 472 of which were used in the hotel. Despite this “failure,” Warhol nonetheless found the banality of the image of the sunset to be interesting enough to produce work that made use of it.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, at the same time that Johns, who had first used the flag in the mid-1950s as a motif to get at a certain form of symbolic neutrality, could not avoid the charge that image had taken on in a time of war and unrest, Warhol could only use an image of sunset, which had formerly held strong spiritual significance, as something already rendered banal by its circulation in an advertising and tourist economy. No doubt this is why, asked to produce a body of work to decorate a hotel, Warhol thought of a mundane, decorative image he had already encountered, the sunset. Whereas in the 1960s Warhol had often experimented with how charged imagery, car crashes, race riots, celebrity head shots, etc. could be rendered oddly disconnected by being brought into a painting frame and executed in a serial fashion, by the time he returned to painting in the 1970s,

it was with an interest in the kinds of transformations already banal images—portraits of the simply rich (and not necessarily famous), Chairman Mao, etc.—might take on when brought into that same serialized painting frame. It is in this context that Warhol’s selection of the sunset motif must be understood.

Having given this necessarily brief and highly selective accounting of a certain history of how both flags and sunsets have functioned in the past hundred years or so, as they move in and out of art history, it is easier to understand why Bernadet might both be able to accomplish certain formal maneuvers with this coupling, and also why he might have been drawn to those motifs in the first place. Yet, to understand the formal activity of this work in the present it is necessary to now place them in relation to other, more contemporary work.

Consider, for example, Thomas Ruff’s series of Jpegs, which he worked on between 2004 and 2007. Ruff selected images he found on the internet of everything from incendiary events, like the 9/11 attack on the Twin Towers, as seen in *jpeg ny02*, 2004, to more “conventional” scenes like those of jungles and icebergs, spanning across the series the range of the prosaic to the charged that Bernadet combines in each of his sunset

paintings. In his use of these images Ruff retained the pixilation that resulted from him taking those low-res images he found on the internet and blowing them up to outsize history painting proportions, 105 15/16 x 143 5/16 inches in the case of *jpeg ny02*. Formally significant in terms of parallels between this work and Bernadet's, is the fact that the digital image's degradation into the pixels that comprise it, is not only an emphasis of the building blocks of the image, but we find that atmospheric effects of luminosity are separated out as well, since they too are generated through the arrangement of pixels.

Essentially this underscores the compositional logic of the digital image as one that enacts a collapse of the structural and atmospheric into a single coded sequence. This is of course then also the way in which such things exist today, in terms of something like the so-called data "cloud." Where the information that we experience as disembodied and instantly accessible is in fact stored in gigantic banks of servers that take up very literal space in terms of land and other resources like electricity. Of course, Bernadet's paintings, by fusing the structural symbolism of the flag with the atmospheric effects of a sunset, are part of this same dialogue, even if they do so through paint on canvas. Though it should also be said that Ruff's painterly

scale necessarily places his work in dialogue with that medium, if from an opposite approach than Bernadet, whose sunset paintings look outwards towards the world they also occupy as objects, rather than Ruff's images, which seem to shy away from that world by retreating into the space of art to make their claims. Bernadet's works, as paintings, begin firmly in the space of art, and can then gingerly extend themselves somewhat into the actuality of the world, by allowing themselves to be "infiltrated," as it were, by the outside contexts of the sunset and flag imagery, which suggests parallels that are as worldly as they are art historical.

To paint something as banal and ubiquitous as flag and sunset elements today is thus to suggest something similar to how Bennett Simpson describes Ruff's Jpegs: "pictures of 'the world' in its current guise—not as an individual vision, but as an authorless, generic, and collective expression."⁵ This is precisely what photographer Penelope Umbrico has explored since 2006 in her series of photographs of sunsets, tableaus of which she fashions from images sourced from photo sharing site Flickr, and each of which she titles based on the number of images of "sunsets" that had been uploaded to the site as of the date she made the search, i.e. *5,911,253 Suns from Flickr (Partial) 8/03/09*, *6,069,633 Suns from Flickr*

(Partial) 8/27/09, and *8,730,221 Suns from Flickr (Partial) 02/20/11*. Yet, in essence, Bernadet's flag paintings enact the opposite, but no less unstable and critical, operation as the deconstructive gesture of Ruff's jpegs, or of Umbrico's playful conceptualism.

While Bernadet's paintings, and not just these "sunsets," but also his other series, can easily be misread as nostalgic throwbacks to an earlier moment, not just of modernism, but even to a pre-modernist or "anti" modernist past of artists, such as Hassam, Church, and Monet, that are often considered reactionary, or minor, or outside of the canonical narrative, including revisionist ones. Yet Bernadet is nevertheless still drawn to their example, even if for him it is for largely intuitive, formal reasons. I would argue that he does so precisely because of the relevance today of combining atmosphere and symbolism, since it is quite literally there, in the ether around us, that we are made to imagine data, images, information, etc. exists. As Simpson phrases it with relation to Ruff's jpegs, "as digital images on the Web, compressed and hyper-functionalized to the degree that, like the leaves, clouds, and debris these particular images depict, they become ambient and groundless."⁶ Our present sense of foreclosed agency results in part from the sense that we cannot

ever extricate ourselves from the data clouds and screens that constantly surround us, and which we increasingly cannot imagine living without. Somehow it has become compulsory to upload and download content, sometimes when we are not even aware we are doing it, being told that we not only find our identity there, but indeed we now find this mode of mediated access unavoidable, such that it is hard to navigate the world without an array of virtual identities that manage our information, and access to that of others. Further, while previously a flag may have symbolized a singular set of meanings around the nation state it stands for, today the "nation state" has been dissolved into every aspect of the globalized world. So in a sense these paintings are also about the impossibility of signification and its inevitable failure, again carving out a space for experience since what was thought to be foreclosed is revealed to have been abandoned and thus potentially available—they make us ask what new possibilities might exist in either a space of hyperbolically charged imagery, like that of the flag, or of radically drained, anemic imagery, like that of the sunset?

Certainly Bernadet's highly formal paintings of sunsets that take on the vague contours of flags are not directly *about* such issues, they do not wear these politics on their sleeve, nor are they necessar-

ily made out of explicit knowledge of these issues on the part of the artist. In this way they are unlike, for example, Constant Dullaart's, "The Censored Internet" (2014), where the flags of the 19 countries, including the United States, Saudi Arabia, United Kingdom, China, and Russia, that censor the internet, and are thus "enemies of the free internet," were put on display with strobe lights that caused the colors and contours of the individual flags to morph and fade, blurring the distinctions between each. In this way, not unlike Bernadet's flags, Dullaart's work incorporated an element of ambiguity and significant instability. Thus, while producing very different bodies of work, both Bernadet and Dullaart are concerned with strategies of formal slippage.

As an artist always searching for significant form, Bernadet has in much of his art, even beyond these sunset paintings, worked with variable confluences of art historical referents, symbolic content, and an optical experience that corresponds to atmosphere. For example, his best-known series, the *Fugue* paintings, while perhaps appearing to be fully abstract updates of the optical fields of Monet's late water lily paintings, in several respects in fact operate in reverse. Bernadet's *Fugue* paintings, instead of building an image, however ambiguous and hard to discern, as in Monet's paint-

ings, break it down, both through an optical shimmer that, when they are beheld for an extended period of time, becomes disorienting enough that we stumble away, afterimages in our eyes. Monet responds, and thus to a certain extent records, a particular atmospheric experience in his paintings, which is most evident in the serialized works, as of the haystacks, houses of parliament, etc., where studies are created of those subjects at different times of day. The *Fugue* paintings, however, have no such referents, but instead react directly to the environment in which they are placed, in a way they record the time of day, rather than simply represent it. For example, by electric light they become illuminated as if with neon, while under natural light they take on a softer, more organic pastel cast. The intensity and evenness of the light source similarly affects how emphatic or subtle the colors, and their relations, are. In this way, Monet, who, as with his fellow impressionists, hoped to evoke the "realism" of atmospheric effect, rather than simply represent it, does find his logical extension in Bernadet's paintings, who has formally solved, whether he realizes it or not, one of their goals.

Like his sunsets, Bernadet's *Fugue* paintings are, in line with the musical analogy suggested in their title, about abstract systems

of meaning. In this way, despite the superficial formal similarity to Monet's late water lily paintings, the color field they conjure up is more akin to the way sunspots fill our vision when we glance too close to the sun, or the dance of color across the back of our eyelids on a sunny day. That is to say, they are about some of the most particular and yet ubiquitous optical experiences we might have today, that private space of vision's breakdown or occlusion, yet where experience and even pleasure persists, and one which cannot (yet) be simulated digitally. This is perhaps one of the last spaces that has not yet been privatized and instrumentalized, yet can still be evoked by a painting, and which is thus shared, because physiological, but not public, for it cannot be photographed, uploaded, or downloaded. It is thus an experience that is still the viewer's own property.

The sunset paintings exist at the other end of the spectrum, so to speak, from the *Fugue* paintings. In this series Bernadet turns to examine, not unlike Monet, the effects of a very specific time of

day—that of the setting sun—and also suggests different meteorological effects, such as rain. In one sense it is to explore the other extreme of a formal vocabulary that he has established in his work, needing to see what would happen if he would invert his own most tried and true ways of working, which is to directly create a particular kind of experience for the viewer, one that is usually optical in nature. It is for this reason that I think Bernadet has taken a real risk with these new sunset paintings. These works were conceived of, and executed, as formal experiments, a perverse attempt to see what would happen if he followed Church's example, and copied *Our Banner in the Sky*. After which he decided to put the idea through its paces, so to speak, over the course of thirty canvases, finding himself far away from that original idea, creating a self-contained and complex body of work. What he ended up with in the sunset paintings, a slippery cycling of reference, between the referential, the non-referential, moving over and under significance, is also what they share with the rest of Bernadet's oeuvre.

Notes

¹. Here I am following a line of argumentation in Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Picasso Papers* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999), 160-1.

². Jasper Johns, as quoted in Kirk Varnedoe, *Jasper Johns: A Retrospective* (New York: MoMA, 1996), 16.

³. Robert Morris, as quoted in Varnedoe, *Jasper Johns*, 99.

⁴. Andy Warhol, *Popism: The Warhol Sixties* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 217.

⁵. Bennett Simpson, "Ruins: Thomas Ruff's Jpegs," *Thomas Ruff: Jpegs* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2009), not paginated.

⁶. Simpson, "Ruins: Thomas Ruff's Jpegs," not paginated.

