



Portrait of James English Leary, pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

James English Leary with Charles Schultz

NATHALIE KARG GALLERY
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James English Leary was part of the gang of artists who brought Bruce High Quality into the world, and then took Bruce out of it. Since then Leary has been charting a course as a solo artist, making shaped paintings that correspond in one way or another to the human body. His work evokes humor and melancholy, and it has evolved over the years through a combination of increasing materialistic sophistication and intellectual refinement. I met Leary in 2015 when we were both at the Rauschenberg Residency in Captiva, Florida. Since then we've kept in touch and on the occasion of his debut solo exhibition at Nathalie Karg Gallery, I paid the artist a visit in his basement studio at Mana Contemporary in Jersey City. In the conversation that follows we touch on what it means to be making paintings, the legacy of Philip Guston, art school pedagogy, and the different challenges between working in a collaborative and establishing oneself as an individual artist.

CHARLES SCHULTZ (RAIL): I remember when you were introducing your paintings to the Rauschenberg community in Florida and you said something like, "My paintings are about how awkward it is to have a body," and I remember thinking at the time, what could that possibly mean? So let's start there, do you feel like the question of being awkward is still relevant to your practice?

JAMES LEARY: [Laughter] I think I'd just quit smoking when I said that. Quitting smoking is just such an unpleasant experience, it makes you wish you could turn your body off for about six months or a year. So maybe that's where I was at when I said that, and where some of that gamey humor comes from in those earlier paintings.

I'd also just gotten a proper painting studio for the first time in years. Before that I'd been making hunched-over-the-kitchen-table scaled art in

my apartment. But with the bigger space I was making things at a body-in-space scale and over time the studio started to feel very *crowded*. And the paintings started leeching weirder personifications out of each other. They started to become narrative, social, relational, with lots of—yes, sex jokes—but also civics jokes or etiquette jokes or space jokes. The human barnyard.

But, yeah, awkwardness . . . I was just looking at the Ivan Albright's at the Art Institute of Chicago and those are such total gross-out masterpieces, all about the innate dumbness of the body, the sheer ludicrousness of all matter. Everything and everyone is rotted out but then also groomed and fancied-up for some kind of public display of the self. I'm a big fan of Gogol, his whole inscription of social satire onto the body. That disembodied nose from "The Nose" keeps showing up in my paintings.

RAIL: [Laughter] Gogol is great! He's a master of oddness, but also vulnerability and embarrassment, which are like cousins of awkwardness. How do you think about those characteristics in your work?

LEARY: Because of the way that a painting records its own making, there's always these questions of how to mitigate risk and exposure. Do you hide the effort or do you flaunt the effort? Do you show the work you had to do to build the painting or do you conceal that work? Is the painting trying to demystify itself or build its mystique? What kinds of innate ideas about skill or time or talent or the morality of hard work are attached to different kinds of strategies and performances within a painting? I don't think there are terminal answers to these questions, but those showing/concealing economies are often where the vulnerability—and frequent embarrassment—lies. There's nothing more embarrassing than exposing your motives or thought process without meaning to.

When I was figuring out how I wanted to build my first shaped canvases it was a strong revelation for me to see some Elizabeth Murrays. She's just so unfussy, unpretentious in how she builds a painting, moving back and forth between painting the painting and building the painting, cutting away or adding to the substrate. There's something fool-hardy in her approach—you just need to throw yourself in and wrestled the thing into existence within the learning curve of waking life. When you look at them in person you can see how many little things have been worked and changed and worked and changed, always leaving a visible patch or exposed under-layer. Also, the way she leaves earlier painted iterations exposed at the edges, with a kind of archeologically frayed painted edge. The paintings are just very open and generous with their exposures. And they've really come to terms with themselves with their vitality intact. She's the least maudlin artist that ever lived. If the choice was her or Frank Stella, I'd take her biology and morphology and cartoonery over his geometry any day.

RAIL: It's interesting you used the word "exposure," because looking at these new paintings, one of the defining characteristics is the open edges. You can see the wooden supports connecting the front panel to the back panel. It makes the construction of the painting—as an object—seem particularly significant, and it also looks so simple. I can understand in an instant how it was put together, how it exists as a made thing.

LEARY: Yes, you mean the edges as in the sides. Yeah, it's a sandwich structure with spaced blocks around the edges but the structure is hollow and open. It's basically the construction of a cheap door. Like those hollow ones in college dorms that people get drunk and break through. I like how an irregular panel compels you to come up and inspect the thing before going back to a medium distance to "look" at it.

I'm a little weary of getting bogged down in certain questions of format, the *side* of a painting and so on. It's like the thing that happens sometimes with my students in a crit, where you always seem to end up giving an intense, excessive amount of heat to the framing device, especially if it's novel. A sculpture on a pedestal is going to be a conversation about pedestals, the history of pedestals and why not just put it on the floor? Then, before you know it you're talking about baseboards and rooms and architecture, and you still haven't really looked at or addressed the thing itself. It's important to maintain a sense of proportion. An edge should serve a surface.

I guess I could acknowledge that the paintings are kind of like set flats. I'd love to do a show with freestanding works. I loved that top floor of the Jim Dine retrospective which invoked theater, carnival, festival. There's a strong affinity between painting and theater. Not just in terms of backdrop painting, but in the whole frontal presentation of both where the picture frame and proscenium disappear (you know, traditionally) and the viewer loses themselves in an overwhelming identification with the contained depiction. I love that Genet play "The Screens" about the Algerian independence movement—which is really strongly about painting. I've only read it, I've never seen it produced.

RAIL: And you can't forget Alex Katz. He's been making "Cut Outs" since the late '50s, some of which are freestanding and very much achieve a theatrical effect in the gallery.

LEARY: Yes, I like that work. I have a memory of that work having some very counter-intuitive crops. It isn't always the case that the cut out aligns with the painted figure, am I right? Sometimes there are strong vertical bands of space cropped out, as if you were seeing the person half-observed from one museum room into another.

RAIL: How did you settle on the head as the form you would focus on?

LEARY: For a period of time I was interested in how obscure you could make a shape. But in most of the new work there's emphatic figuration. At the moment, every painting in my studio is built around either feet, hands or heads. I'm really into structuring a painting around a body part: a "foot painting" a "hand painting" and so on. My friend, the painter Omari Douglin has this wonderful series of butt paintings he's been making. I don't know, I just keep coming back to picture-making as a way of metabolizing, coming to terms with the limitations, silliness and poignancy of the body. I blanch a little at the sound of "*the body*" which sounds like theoretical virtue signaling or something. I really just mean my body or the bodies that are just *around*, the ones you see while people-watching in New York City.

I think the profile is an interesting twist. It's strongly figurative, but it seems to avoid some of the trappings of figurative painting, at least as I've experienced them in the past. The problems of *depiction*, maybe, or the problem of the figure *in space*. I embrace the clichés of "her head is full of thoughts" or "his head is empty." The head frames in a way that inevitably invokes states of being, that sheds a characterological light on that interior content. It situates the works within a camp-psychological ethos. I think a lot of my work is like some kind of satire around interpretation, our ability to 'get it' or to see ourselves clearly.

RAIL: Tell me about the shapes in the heads. Some are straightforward representations—hat, tongue, foot—others are more ambiguous. How do you find your way to these different forms?

LEARY: A lot of times it's about trying to conjure a shape or a form or a depiction that confounds some kind of expectation about what a thing is or what a thing is named. An unnamable shape. And then sometimes a cigar is actually just a cigar, or whatever.

RAIL: Some of the shapes remind me of body parts in Guston paintings, all jumbled up and in some cases cropped, maybe even awkwardly you might say. I know you're a lover of Guston. What's your sense of his influence on your work?

LEARY: There's such an obvious and intense indebtedness that so many of us have towards Philip Guston's painting. For one thing, he's like an artist's patron saint because he really made the work he really wanted to make,

even though it drove him out of New York, cost him Morton Feldman's friendship, and delayed the wider embrace of his work for a generation.

In the sweep of art history he looks like one of the first modern painters to get beyond the trappings of progress. Whether in the push away from representation towards abstraction, towards the purification rituals of minimalism, modern art has wanted to see itself as making ideological progress, as moving cohesively towards some improved, infinite thing. Guston went through that whole modern genesis, developed himself, made great, fully spatial, abstract works, and then took this tremendous left turn and departed decisively from the grand historical narrative, freeing himself in the process to be sort of phenomenally peculiar and particular. Amidst the ensuing flood gate he let in a lot of truly strange stuff, even at the expense of the sanctity of the earlier works. That artist-as-KKK stuff is still so disarming. The Nixon stuff . . . I think he wanted to kind of wade around in the culture, trawl around in it. He's wasn't above a good troll. But the late return to figuration is also exciting in the way it evokes the possibility of changing yourself even late in the game. The way that he's feverishly throwing out these painted tropes and characters, it just feels that he has a lifetime worth of that kind of stuff stored up that he's just never been able to use before. What a joyfully anxious response to the culture.

RAIL: Those Nixon drawings were really intense, but also funny and sad. How about your drawing practice, what's a drawing practice for you?

LEARY: I just love cheap paper. [*Laughter*] You can really loosen the reins. There's something about drawing that keeps you in the world. It's a basic tethering of your interior states with an objective thing out in the world—a mark. It's a rehearsal too. There are certain marks in a painting that you don't want to interrupt or have to look away from while you're making it.

RAIL: How much do the drawings correspond to the paneled shapes or the painted forms inside the heads?

LEARY: Well, I never want to feel like I'm fabricating the painting. There should always be the possibility in the painting of the painting for sudden mutations, mistakes, risks, caprices. I want to reserve the possibility of painting being capricious.

RAIL: The airbrush marks all look like they were done in one shot. They add a certain moodiness to the scene.

LEARY: Yeah, the airbrush . . . it's such a thing in contemporary painting. The other day people were posting that meme with chunky Eminem and the caption was something like "when you working that oil and linen and your studio mate's doing that airbrush gimmick." [*Laughter*]

It's such a prominent element in a certain kind of young painting, this post-Laura Owens, drop shadow, photoshop, screen-space development in picture making. It's not the same as the zombie formalism thing, this is different and I think a bigger phenomenon. The picture became the "image" and isn't just a representation of a particular view of space, it's also a field where real and imaginary things, different categories of information can mix. For young painters—who don't necessarily make a strong ontological distinction between a jpeg on a screen versus a picture printed on paper—the image seems to expand dimensionally, with many different, often concurrent conceptions of space. I don't know . . . atomized paint—as opposed to brushed paint—introduces a completely different grammar of space, so it's a logical step for people trying to work through a culture of bombardment and over-stimulation and concurrence. That's my theory of why it's been so widely embraced, other than the 1980s vibe it evokes.

Personally, I love airbrush because it's so dumb. It sort of democratizes trompe l'oeil space. It takes the prestige and magic out of convincingly depicting graduated space and makes it just another kind of surface beyond the morality of talent or hard work.

Maybe what's problematic about that atomized airbrushed quality—in admittedly starchy Greenbergian terms—is that it's too impressive. It's too good a trick. You marvel at it too easily. The impressiveness of that as illusion smothers the possibility of a more disinterested contemplation of whether a thing is good and meaningful or not.

RAIL: It creates a stunning sensual effect. It enhances the brush strokes to a degree that makes them seem grotesque.

LEARY: [*Laughter*] You mean the way that in a horror movie if the light shines on some one's face from below it makes them seem grotesque? Maybe part of what's strange about the experience of the airbrush is that you're in some kind of uncanny valley. It's convincing to some large extent but always eventually falls apart. And so there's, at least, a luridness to that?

RAIL: These heads in profile also remind of coins. From the Roman Empire to today, our coinage has pretty much stuck to the head in profile as the sanctified image of power.



James English Leary, *Casual Lover*, 2018. Acrylic on shaped panel, 55 x 48 inches. Courtesy the artist. Courtesy Natalie Karg Gallery.

LEARY: Yeah, the Roman thing is interesting. I'm reading a lot of Catullus. It's amazing how much of it feels like end-of-empire New York City circa 2018. The Roman/American profile on a coin thing encodes some idea of power. Maybe, it's the claim the powerful make about their own worthiness to be looked at as a model of something. Or that while we're all looking up at them, they're looking off into the future? I don't know. I love Kara Walker. I'm not saying the work is necessarily related, but she sort of owns the silhouette. There's something so haunted, violent, and tragic in her use of profile. These people lost to history . . . I think I'm invoking the profile/silhouette less in a presentation of power way and more in that latter spirit of detachment, absence, vacancy, mystery. Though in mine there's more levity, the sad humor of someone who doesn't know they're being watched.

RAIL: I remember seeing your show *Smoked Fruit* at Ray Smith's studio in 2015. That was the first time I saw your shaped paintings and at that point they were mostly painted a single color. The shape of the painting was the central thing. Now there are forms within the shaped painting. The paintings were also on canvas then. Can you talk about how that transformation happened?

LEARY: At that time I had been doing a lot to empty out the work. I was really into making these spare things. But I've never been able to make a really centerless painting. There was a tendency to build in some occurrence, a form that was leering in or out of the frame, losing its register with the painting. And a big part of the painting became this illusion-structure where a conventional frame is invoked and then breeched. It was also important to me that those entering/leaving shapes invoke improvisation but immediately yield the necessity of some sort of special construction with planning and forethought, etcetera. In the new work there's a less clear relationship between the panel shape and the painted forms. They never align perfectly. It's more about mutual interruption.

RAIL: On a formal level, I see two different strategies employed in this new body of work. In *Shameless Artist* the wood grain exposed and a lot of shapes are jostling around the edges of the painting, in *Casual Lover* the whole surface is painted a single color and one form dominates the field. Talk to me about the difference between these two approaches.

LEARY: Some of these paintings are built around a single event, and some feel like an environment. This painting *Casual Lover* is really built around the event of that brown forward-stepping foot. Though the profile contour still breeches it in the chin and ponytail, the foot is contained in the painting and

exerts some inter-determinant power on the over all shape. They work on each other—the head and the foot—balancing or stalemating each other, keeping up that mutual pressure. In *Shameless Artist*, it's more about all this traffic around the periphery. There's a register to the crowd that's hysterical. Those eyes—for me—are like gapers taking it all in. There's a din. The anxious mood proceeds from the cloisteredness and the compression of the edges with the build up of shapes. It's a more the effect of an environment with no single plot. It's funny, there's still a desire to empty out the paintings, though here “empty” is this center of exposed luan plywood, the material of the panels.

RAIL: I like this dichotomy of events vs. environments. Strangely, it reminds me of Rirkrit Tiravanija's exhibitions. He was on a panel I attended recently at the Studio School and he used this phrase “evocative narrative” to describe a kind of open-circuit formation that was different from the closed circuit of a linear narrative. My sense is that by putting all of these heads together, which all have titles that suggest types of people—*Bored Dissident*, *Proud Coward*, *Reluctant Capitalist*—that you are setting up a narrative this is basically open and evocative. Would you agree?

LEARY: Sure. There's something about a modified type—a sleepy clown or whatever—that seems to make some sort of innate moral claim. Like it has some of the smugness of a parable.

RAIL: I wanted to ask you about Cooper Union. I know it was an important place for you. Did you study with Dore Ashton?

LEARY: Yes, I had Dore. What a brilliant woman! She really did spend her whole life looking, talking and writing about art. When it came to her stuff, the stuff she loved and lived for, French and American painting between, let's say, 1900 and 1970, she was a total savant. She had encyclopedic knowledge and also loads of scandalous anecdotes about things she'd probably been in the room to witness firsthand. There was also a disconnect. There were certain post '60s cultural moves in which she didn't seem as interested. I don't think she had any patience for Warhol.

I had her right after September 11th, 2001. And then again during that first year of the Iraq War. I think in some ways she was disappointed in the student class. I mean historically disappointed with the student class since the dissipation of the student movements of the '60s, that they hadn't gone far enough or had petered out. I remember once in class her saying “why is nobody is doing anything!?! You should all be out in the streets! Come on! It's easy, just get a truck and throw a PA in the back and drive around raising hell.” [Laughter] She was probably right.

I love Cooper Union. For me it embodies a bunch of progressive institutional ideals. I am stamped with the conviction that education should be free or affordable at all colleges—that it was a moral abdication for the left (which largely withdrew to the universities after the '60s) to have gone along with this trajectory towards such gratuitously high tuitions which have indebted a generation or two of students. I am so keen for Cooper to reinstate free tuition for all who attend (there is currently a plan to do so over the coming years) for the sake of future students, but also as a beacon to the idea that educations should produce a social, cultural and political indebtedness rather than a financial indebtedness. I strongly believe that it produces better artists and better citizens. Okay, okay, I'm sorry, I'm getting sort of zealous about this, I need to be careful. Cooper really brings out my inner evangelist.

But it was formative for me also for the pedagogy. There's a model of rigor there that I think is really smart. My friend, the sculptor Kylie White described it as “how a thing is made is what it means”.

RAIL: What does that mean?

LEARY: Well, what it means to me is that an arts education can err too much on the side of craft or too much on the side of meaning. One side says “Before you break the rules you need to learn the rules and master them. Here, take this palette and chisel.” The other side says “Contemporary artists, being naturally cross-disciplinary, have moved beyond any one

medium or discipline. We can't teach everyone how to do everything, so why try? What we teach is how to think and talk, the discourse, the criticality, the social components." But in good work, those two spheres of art making, content and form, are always dialectically bound up in each other and arts pedagogy needs to reflect and encompass that by not leaning to one side or the other.

It was a revelation to me when I was a student to hear a professor talking about things in terms of the philosophy of their construction. That the problem of how to join one kind of material to another kind of material, while certainly being a physical, aesthetic, and economical problem, is also most definitely a moral and political problem, and that the solutions to those problems—different joints—embodied different ideological positions in the world. Different types of joints look better, are more hidden, cheaper, stronger, or whatever they need to be, etc. What gets prioritized and singled out in a particular construction, the sense of priority, promotes an inherent world view, whether intentionally or not. I think I remember that she then went on, the professor, to lecture hilariously on the politics of a butt joint: How a thing is made is what it means.

Some of this related to the wisdom of the generalist curriculum, where the disciplines are defended on their own terms but are also allowed to spill into each other. It's just very dynamic to have sculptors in painting classes and painters in design classes and so on. There's a fizz, a hybrid vigor.



James English Leary, *Shameless Artist*, 2018. Acrylic on shaped panel, 46 x 56 inches. Courtesy the artist. Courtesy Natalie Karg Gallery.

RAIL: Cooper Union led to Bruce High Quality.

LEARY: Yes, many of us had met at Cooper. And as more time has passed, it's become more clear to me the extent to which Bruce High Quality was a way to recreate out in the world some of the social and critical infrastructure that had existed for us at school. The sense of context that make a historical or ideological conversation about art possible in the first place.

RAIL: How did the collaboration function?

LEARY: We invented and killed off an artist, a pretentious and bellicose social sculpture named Bruce High Quality. Quickly thereafter, The Bruce High Quality Foundation was established to carry out his legacy and manage his estate with us as the arbiters. This satirically institutional framing allowed us to carry out works in an anarchically wide variety of forms while maintaining a central fiction of bureaucratized, non-individualistic creativity—art-by-committee.

Over the years there have been exhibitions and artworks, videos and films, performances, musicals, publications, lectures and eventually a school. Much of the work was geared towards questions around arts education, with many pieces directly invoking pedagogy: Chalkboards, books, and (revisionist) art history videos.

In my mind the main purpose of the Foundation is the re-imagining of the art world so that peer relationships between artists (as opposed to money or festivals or institutions) are at its center.

RAIL: What was it like going from serious collaborative art making to an individual pursuit?

LEARY: Running the Foundation is like running a political party. Everything begins with some kind of expressed thought. You spend most of your time sitting around a table and spitballing, and the ideas that evolve tend to be the kind of ideas that are political and verbal: Social ideas, language jokes, historical jabs, institutional metaphors, and so on. The breadth of that voice and frame is invigorating, but it chafes, because there are certain things that are hard to explore, because they don't begin with language. The articulation of a mark, for example. For me, making paintings comes from a different place, a pre-verbal place, out of a desire to relinquish what you know and look really hard and fresh at stuff. It's a thing you have to do over and over to even know what it is you're looking for. ☹️

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