

**INCONVERSATION**

## AARON BOBROW with Alex Bacon

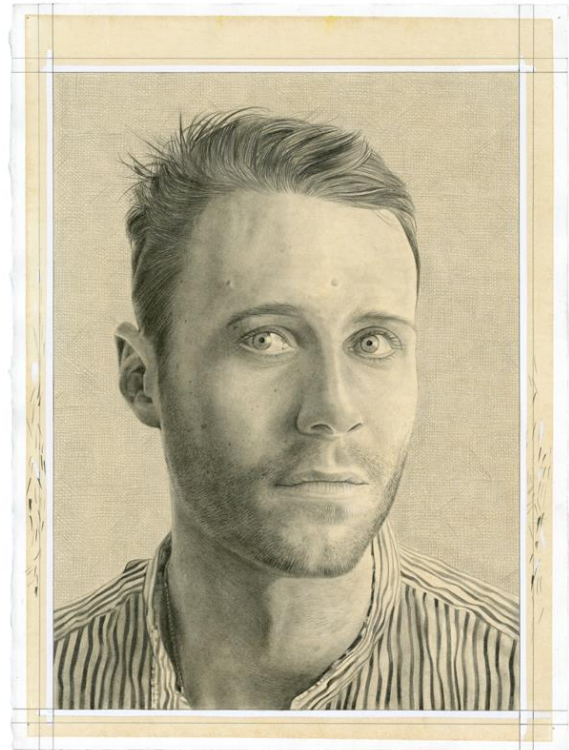
Alex Bacon met with Aaron Bobrow in his studio to discuss the complicated conversation the artist has been developing in his work between painting, sculpture, appropriated imagery, and contemporary commodity and digital culture. Bobrow currently has a solo show, Ventilator Blues, at Office Baroque in Brussels (June 12 – July 18, 2014).

**Alex Bacon (Rail):** How did you come to make art?

**Aaron Bobrow:** Growing up I drew all the time, but I never really considered the drawings art. I ended up studying design at Parsons in a program that I was never really happy in. At the end of junior year I decided I wanted to make art instead of working as a designer. I was living in the Lower East Side at the time and through mutual friends I was introduced to Dan Colen, and started working for him while I was in still in school.

**Rail:** What kinds of things would you do for him?

**Bobrow:** Mixing oil paint for his birdshit paintings and helping make them, and general studio maintenance. I enjoyed working

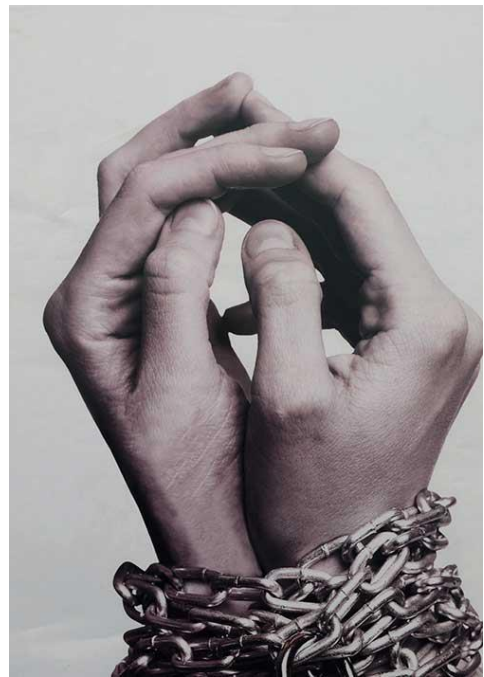


*Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.*

there, it was an exciting time. The freedom that working with paint all day afforded was unreal. Once I graduated I started working there full-time, spending more time focusing on my own work.

**Rail:** What did that mean for you at that moment?

**Bobrow:** I was experimenting with direct applications of industrial or consumer products into or onto painting surfaces. The first paintings were four monochromatic canvases, in the shape of cell phone service bars, with suntan foam that was rubbed directly into the linen. I remember the day that I made them they were bright orange, then two days later and they'd look like the color of a soiled band-aid. It was exciting to see the work's color change everyday. I started making paintings with used motor oil and spray paint. After gessoing a canvas I would put down a thick layer of oil, then I would apply spray paint on top, leaving the enamel floating on the surface, until the oil had seeped in or fallen off the edges. The oil was left to mediate the ultimate shape of enamel, it would move around quite a bit. I was attracted to idea of removing my hand from the process of painting. The trace that was left was what I was interested in.



*Aaron Bobrow, "Untitled (Rabbi's advice)," 2014. Laminated vinyl sticker on aluminium. Courtesy of Office Baroque Brussels and the artist.*

**Rail:** And when would this have been?

**Bobrow:** 2006, 2007?

**Rail:** Why were you attracted to painting as a support for those types of activities, mediations, and processes?

**Bobrow:** My studio was in the front room of the loft I shared. Painting supports were easy to hang up on the wall and store. I have always appreciated the vehicle of the painting, and its internal chassis. Sitting in the studio and viewing a work on the wall is second-to-none. It provides a perfect venue for observation.

**Rail:** You wanted to make objects and, even in the beginning of your career, you wanted to enable your viewer to have an experience with the work.

**Bobrow:** Yes, definitely. Another work from that era consisted of a silver emergency blanket stretched over an old room divider from my apartment, it was hung backwards on the wall.

**Rail:** That is interesting because, in different ways, you are still making work where you stretch and hang found materials. Was that the first work that you made in that vein?

**Bobrow:** Probably it was the first one, yeah.

Growing up in the Bay Area, there were many earthquakes. I remember watching the news, seeing

people cling to those blankets during disasters. I think the idea to use one as a readymade came from my childhood. I used the old room divider in place of a stretcher, it was an attempt to join past memories together with my surroundings at the time. The “vehicle” of painting became a placeholder to observe and further investigate objects and their histories. I think the tarps grew out of this place.

**Rail:** How did the tarps, with their particular histories, function when you moved them into the aesthetic space of art?

**Bobrow:** In the end I think they functioned as monochromes for the viewer, each differing slightly in color and appearance. This variety interested me. I found the colors to be vibrant, pure, and encompassing—completely synthetic beautiful surfaces. If you order 30 of the same blue tarp on Amazon you’re going to get thirty different shades of



*Aaron Bobrow, "World Parent," 2014. Anodized aluminium. Courtesy of Office Baroque Brussels and the artist.*

blue. No two are exactly the same. I experimented with painting a few of them. But I ran into trouble here, nothing sticks to the tarp properly, so my ability to paint was inhibited. Ultimately it wasn't the right surface to paint on. I had a premonition that I was tampering or contaminating the surface with paint. It detracted from a focus that was already there, just in the materials themselves. It took a while for that realization to solidify in my practice. There was a green tarp stretched diagonally that had been on the wall in the studio for six months or so. I studied its imperfections, the melting of the plastic, different striations of color. By stretching the tarp I mediated the intended utilitarian function, and created a new object, one situated through the lens of a painting.

**Rail:** What was exciting about that piece for you that made you want to expand on it into a particular body of work?

**Bobrow:** It was exciting because of possibilities it unlocked in my practice. My studio practice changed, I started collecting used tarps from around the city, even traveling to other



Installation view of *Ventilator Blues*, 2014. Courtesy of Office Baroque Brussels and the artist.

countries. Their means of acquisition—buying, bartering, or stealing—replaced what formerly had taken place in the studio. I was picking up the fragments of a larger narrative, one outside of my control. Each piece displaying an interrupted record of its history and use. Eventually, in 2012, I made a show featuring these works at Office Baroque. The exhibition consisted of all tarp works. Many different colors and sizes. They varied from brand new to filthy and old. Each work was cropped and composed, all on wooden stretchers. I thought that show was very generous to the viewer. Some of the works were very intimate. I wanted the works to function just like paintings, and I think they did.

**Rail:** And some of those works were actually very laborious for you to make, perhaps not in the act of stretching up the tarps into the final painting, but certainly in finding the particular tarps they are comprised of. There is a certain kind of labor involved, which I think is part of how we read them too. Because we, as viewers, wonder how you sourced them. This conceptual, even political angle is the necessary other side of the aesthetic one.

**Bobrow:** Yeah. I think of them as skins, or urban shedding. The byproduct of construction, which can take quite some time. I like to watch buildings change or go under the knife, get a facelift or a sex change. These observations lead to the show at Andrea Rosen. The works were made with debris mesh instead of tarps, and were not composed or cropped like the tarps. I wanted to see what happened when I removed myself even more from the decision-making process, what would be left.

**Rail:** Yes, I'm interested to know what you found were the ramifications of that decision, and how it played out in the show at Andrea Rosen. Because, for me, that show seemed to take the work in a more sculptural direction, one that emphasized materiality; whereas the earlier ones, such as those shown a couple of years ago at Office Baroque, had tempered the inherent objecthood of the tarps with the painterly aspects of your choices related to color and, as you just mentioned, composition and cropping.

**Bobrow:** What I found was exactly that. The work became more sculptural. The patina was removed. Any last notion of the painterly was eliminated with the transparency of the mesh, exposing the stretcher. The support was always the backbone of the work, now it was front and center, in conversation with the viewer. I felt like I had really reached an end game. But it was actually the beginning of a larger body of work.

**Rail:** Could you now walk us through the work that you're currently showing in Brussels? Maybe a good entry point is to talk about these modified stretcher works, which seem to be the most direct extension of that sculptural understanding of the tarps, right?



*Installation view of No sleep in the exit room, 2012. Courtesy of Office Baroque Brussels and the artist.*

**Bobrow:** I had the stretcher works for this show fabricated in Los

Angeles. I have tried to treat them as full-blown sculptures, adding extra braces. I want them to feel simultaneously like a ribcage and a stack of servers. The content of these works for me manifests itself between the convergence of the content and the delivery system. The works revolve around how to reintroduce content into my practice, and my apprehension about it, being as the tarps were a reaction for me to a lot of painting at the time that relied on the duplication or presentation of a specific image or text from an obscure source. With the tarps I wanted to eliminate all content in favor of an object so that there was no esoteric knowledge involved—it just was what it was.

**Rail:** It was more accessible.

**Bobrow:** It was more accessible, and it was also pure. Last year, I started actually painting again in California for a few months. I said to myself, “Alright I’m going to let the content come pouring in and see what happens.” With the free flowing access to all images today, how is value placed? It is access which interests me, not the results. What do we do with this freedom? We need to manage it of course, content management is the new dogma. Pinterest provides mood boards for denim from Japan, and for Judd from Marfa, all without actually ever experiencing it—faux omniscience. Our generation is one that seems to feel entitled to all of that information. We think of ourselves as the lead protagonists in a choose your own adventure novel.



**Rail:** The most visible artistic expression of these ideas would be post-internet art, right? But your work seems to be really insistent on materiality and objecthood.

**Bobrow:** Yeah I still enjoy the process of producing physical objects.

**Rail:** And presenting things which are meant to be experienced in real space and so, even though a certain body of your work actually deals in these appropriated images from the realm of digital culture, it seems important to you to place this work in the context of a larger conversation or context than just the “digital.” Your work seems to be about not wanting either yourself or your viewer to live on the net, or in the data cloud 24/7.

**Bobrow:** The new show entitled *Ventilator Blues* is about the cloud, and the act of breathing. Along with the naked stretcher bar sculpture. For me these works readdressed similar material concerns, but shifted their focus from a painterly to a sculptural point of view. There I was concerned with the entire object and its ability to facilitate a narrative.

**Rail:** Are these the next play in the end game of the stretcher-based works?

**Bobrow:** When I allowed myself more freedom to construct the work as a sculpture, rather than as a process-oriented painting,

everything became a lot freer. I see the naked

stretcher bar works as like a newly born, while the two pieces wrapped in plastic are like a charred lung that has been through the ringer. I wanted to create a narrative of objects at different points in a life-cycle.



*Installation view of Electric Bathing. Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery and the artist.*

**Rail:** How does that conversation around breathing and a life-cycle relate to the other works in the Office Baroque exhibition?

**Bobrow:** They are about temporary placeholders for commodities. One work is an adhesive sticker on aluminum, which is based on an ad for a pharmaceutical drug, the same kind you might find pasted onto the side of an expired form of media, like a telephone booth.

I'm drawn to their vacancy. The sticker depicts two hands holding a tangled ball of wires, with one coming out as a possible, singular fix. I correlate that to the cloud. We're dealing with this technological addiction, and we don't know what's going to happen as a result of this dependency. Maybe there is no solution, things are moving too quickly for us to really have any perspective. Thinking about our addictions to technology and the expiation and evaporation of physical media in favor of cloud-based systems, the solution is not clear, nor is the outcome.

**Rail:** This makes me think of the word-based work in the show, which hangs from the ceiling, and reminds me of the signage at Whole Foods. Does that relate, then, to this conversation about contemporary commodity culture?

**Bobrow:** That sculpture is of the word "produce," and is based on photographs I took of peeling signs on the side of a fruit truck. I was thinking about the correlation between the expiration of our food and the farming for content. Produce is both the verb for the action of making something, and also the noun for the generation of energy. Instead of making a decision to use the image I was capturing, for a painting say, I directly made it into a sculpture. After the paintings I made in L.A., and the search for visual content there, when I came back I thought the ideas I was exploring there could be stronger, more direct, that the work could more directly occupy a space, and so the object needs to fit the content, rather than being forced through the plane of a painting support. So, in a way, I thought of this in relation to the empty banner works in the show as well. For me those were these rotten goods—completely outmoded, expired signage that was once an advertisement for a tire company, but now is just a placeholder for something that was once there, but is worn out physically. This in turn brings us back full-circle to the aluminum stretchers, which also function for me like the resurrection of a ghost, a temporary shell.



**Rail:** Wow, that's quite a complex circuit you have constructed in the current show around the life-cycle of objects and images in contemporary society.

**Bobrow:** Everything in my work, from a photograph to a stretcher, I view as content. This show for me is about finding ways of closing the gap between content and delivery system, so it makes sense to me to explore the different stops that content makes, and the different systems and manifestations it passes through along the way.