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## Investigative Activity: An Interview with Joshua Abelow

by Ross Simonini



Before we met in person, I met Joshua Abelow by reading his online diary, Art Blog Art Blog. I learned about his art viewing habits through the daily, sometimes hourly posts, featuring canonical, obscure, and emerging artists (myself included). He posted music, literary quotes, videos, and his constant documentation of gallery exhibitions around

Gene Beery and  
Joshua Abelow.  
Photo Jason Frank  
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New York.

He also posted his own work—drawings, paintings, poems —much of which expressed the same kind of compulsive chronicling found in his blogging. He often works in series, repeating simple abstract forms or crude, cartoonish figuration with subtle variations, as if capturing the slow development of his most basal desires. In this way, Abelow revealed himself as a documentarian artist interested in any form that suited his impulse to record. The publication of his book, *Painter's Journal* (Peradam Press, 2012), which followed the trials of love and life of his early years as an artist in New York, provided yet another medium and another entry point into his larger project. Like all of us young artists, he was trying to understand how his work fit into the history of art and the current climate of art, but he was doing it publicly, vulnerably, in real time

For his many readers, the blog was as an intimate, idiosyncratic window into an industry that usually prefers white-walled neutrality. For me, Art Blog Art Blog, which ceased publication in 2015, served as one of the great art publications of the 2000s and a masterpiece of the blog form.

Abelow now lives far from the urban art world in upstate New York, where he paints and runs his gallery Freddy. We conducted this



where he paints and runs his gallery, today. We conducted this interview over many emails.

**ROSS SIMONINI** Why blog?

**JOSHUA ABELOW** I was interested in the cataloguing capabilities the medium provided. I was also interested in reaching a potentially large audience with unprecedented speed.

**SIMONINI** The last post was published five years to the day after the first, right?

**ABELOW** Yeah, in fact, it was five years to the minute.

**SIMONINI** What were you cataloguing?

**ABELOW** Every post on the blog (there are more than thirteen thousand) is catalogued by the date and exact time of entry. The content of the blog is primarily the work of other artists, both living and dead. But now the blog exists only as a sculpture, *ART BLOG ART BLOG, March 30th, 2010, 2:51 PM – March 30th, 2015, 2:51 PM*. I had it transferred to a solid-state storage device that uses integrated circuit assemblies as memory to store data. Then I worked with a graphic design team in Brooklyn called Other Means to create a housing for the device that could be presented as a sculptural object which I presented at galleries in New York and Los Angeles. So, the sculpture is both an object in a room and a five-year memory bank or time capsule. I destroyed all the visual content on the blog (as it

exists online) by replacing every image with my painting of a running witch.

**SIMONINI** Why destroy it?

**ABELOW** Destroy isn't exactly the right word. I wanted to *infect* it. I wanted to infect the blog with a virus of running witches. I got perverse pleasure in taking apart this thing that millions of viewers had seen. I think there's poetic content in this destructive act. I wanted to override the primary content on the blog with a digital reproduction of a painting I made so that my painting could literally run through time and space indefinitely. But I hope an institution will acquire the work and present it to the public again via a new URL. That way the blog can exist in both forms online: the infected alongside the original.

**SIMONINI** Why is the witch running?

**ABELOW** The witch is running to keep up with the information overload that defines our culture in the twenty-first century.

**SIMONINI** How did you think about the act of posting your own work? Were you creating a context for it?

**ABELOW** When I started the blog I had little presence in the art world. I was living in Maryland and the blog was an easy way for me to get my work seen by a New York audience. Yes, I was absolutely creating a context for it. As time went on and the blog became popular I shifted the focus away from my own work and onto other artists'

work. I particularly loved sharing work by under-recognized and undiscovered artists. I moved back to New York about seven months after starting the blog and made it a goal to visit as many studios as possible.

**SIMONINI** How did the blog affect the reception of your work? For me, it connected the dots between your painting, writing, curating, and your personality. I could see the larger Abelow project.

**ABELOW** Back in 2010 when I started the blog I was thinking about a Bruce Nauman quote from a 1978 interview: "Art is a means to acquiring an investigative activity." The blog was a way for me to explore this idea and, like you said, it allowed me to connect the dots between my studio work and my work as a writer. However, I'm not sure the audience for my work (in the broader sense) connected all the dots. Countless times I was referred to as "artist and blogger," rather than just "artist" and, over time, this began to irritate me. In 2012 or 2013, I started to make paintings and drawings that referred directly to the blog, and then I showed the sculptural version of the blog in 2016. To me, this felt like a victory for the blog as Art.

**SIMONINI** How did you see the blog affecting the reception of other artists' work? Like, say, [Gene Beery](#).

**ABELOW** Many, many times I posted the work of a more or less unknown artist, and later on said artist would have a solo show somewhere. It's almost uncanny the way this happened repeatedly and, in some cases, with very short intervals. For the most part, I was

happy to play a role in a number of careers. Gene and I had a wonderful working relationship instigated by the blog, which has led to a good friendship. Gene liked sending me lots and lots of images, primarily photographs of himself and his family. I think Gene is on the blog more than anybody. He became a sort of collaborator on the blog, especially toward the end. It's shocking he doesn't have more recognition because it's clear he is an important artist. He's an American treasure. I've introduced his work to as many people as I can and I'm proud of that. His painting, *ART GAME*, hangs above my bed.

**SIMONINI** Is Freddy the new Art Blog?

**ABELOW** Freddy is the evolution of the blog. Some of the objectives are the same: to show work I think is vital to a larger audience primarily through the internet. But, one significant difference is that Freddy does have a physical address. Originally it was in Baltimore. Now it's in a church where I live and work in upstate New York.

**SIMONINI** You seem to have a conflicted relationship with the art world—sometimes obsessively documenting it, sometimes living in remote areas and demanding it come to you.

**ABELOW** My relationship to the art world has been conflicted since I first learned about contemporary art as a student in the '90s. The art that was the most interesting to me was the older stuff. I wasn't able to connect to most contemporary work and it left me with a certain feeling of disdain for contemporary art and artists because I didn't

think they were as good as the dead. Doing the blog was fun because I could easily put the dead alongside the living. It was like time traveling, and it helped me to have a better understanding of and appreciation for contemporary art. I also have admiration for artists who go their own way—Donald Judd, Agnes Martin, Clyfford Still, Lee Lozano, Robert Smithson, and Georgia O'Keeffe, to name a few. Living in a remote area can give an artist a bird's eye view of the scene and not get caught up in trends or petty social nonsense. I think Gene's work embodies this position.

**SIMONINI** The blog and your books, such as *Art Fiction* [Karma, 2013], make the relationship between your writing and art appear very fluid. Is that how it feels to you? Do the two processes intersect?

**ABELOW** Yeah, I think part of what I've tried to do as a painter is to suggest that painting isn't just painting but a world view. Anybody can pick up a brush and literally paint something, but this isn't inherently interesting. What's interesting is an artist's relationship to the world and, perhaps, the world's relationship to said artist.

**SIMONINI** Are you done with blogging?

**ABELOW** Yes.

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