

PORTRAIT OF A BLUE MAN LEAVING

A studio visit with Bali's greatest ex-pat artist, **ASHLEY BICKERTON**, in which he opens the book of his life and prepares to embark upon the next great chapter.

BY NATHAN MYERS



BLUE MAN BLUES

[...in which we visit The Artist in his neglected mansion and find him adorning the walls with brightly painted rocks.]

THE ART IS RIPPED FROM THE WALLS. The rooms all dark and musty. Covered furniture and peeling paint. Pouring rain. Bats in the rafters. The once mad cathedral of Ashley Bickerton now stands a haunted mansion. The tidal reclamation of Ashley's Atoll stares coldly out at the wind-slapped Indian Ocean. The Artist is angry.

This is a good thing. Anger and guilt, that's where his best work comes from. The place where everything gets so fucked up he storms out the door... and into something new.

Welcome to Bali.

Come. Down the rotting staircase. Through an unhinged door. The studio is buzzing with new ideas. Ashley Bickerton is splattered in paint. Clung with clay. Barefoot and smiling. His eyes bright and clear. "Come look," he says.

And look:

-a dilapidated scooter mounted by a headless torso of bloated bio-mass hogtied by frayed ropes...

-a dreadlocked bust of a silver-painted island beauty, splattered in neon make-up, plastic butterflies, and bottle-cap jewelry...

-a half-finished diorama involving mirrors and sand over a switchback tideline of flotsam and jetsam beneath glass fogged with toilets and kitchen appliances...

Complicated. Meaningfuct. The ideas entwine both old and new. Mixing and murdering each other as The Artist grapples to reconcile past and future departures. He left New York. He's leaving Indonesia. After more than twenty years. We've come to ask why, but the question never quite takes shape. Everything else instead. Whirlwinds and history. Waves and art. Beauty. Horror. We are swallowed alive. He floats above the ground.



Above: Ashley at work in his Bali studio, 2016.

Right: "Forgotten Optical Satsuma Filters", Ashley's solo exhibit at Kayu – Lucie Fontaine's branch in Ubud, Bali, 2016.

"How many more of these will I see in this lifetime? Tube knowledge never disappears, but the ability to claw your way into the beasts that produce these things definitely gets more remote with each passing season. A lifelong devotion/religion/addiction that haunts your dreams, and will undoubtedly play out in spinning phantasms as you lay on your deathbed." – Ashley, Kandui, Karangmajat Island, Mentawais, 2016.



Ashley Bickerton's art presents a parody of mediums. An indictment of its own existence. An emotive symphony of discordant notions straining in opposite directions to rip away the rotting flesh of expectation.

"I don't believe in truth," he says. "Only drama."

His works are in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, The Whitney Museum and The Tate galleries. And sometimes, they are forgotten and overlooked.

He's made fortunes. And lost it all. He's surfed Pipeline and Padang. And covered from the crowds of Bali kooks. Escape.

This modern master of the canvas, he hates painting.

"It's donkey work," he says. "Painting bores the hell out of me." His skill with the brush is astonishing. So realistic, one might mistake it for photography. Which is why he stopped. Why bother? "Painting well means nothing," he says. "I can hire someone to do that for me."

His photography, by contrast, distorts reality such that you'd mistake it for surrealist painting. "I'm not interested in photography either," he says. "We don't even own lights."

For Bickerton, the guts of the process occur in Photoshop. Melting elements together. Exaggerating them. Tangling threads of reality and fantasy, then painting them all back together again, and then drilling holes through the heart of it all and slapping sarcastic logos around the frame. Seamless.

Madness. Where does it begin? Where does it end? That is his art. Such eloquent contradiction.

And then there's sculpture, which he returned to as a means to eliminate the model, who is often himself. Another essential Bickerton paradox. A devilish bust of his iconic "Blue Man" stares sternly down from the shelf as if to say: "Not yet. Too soon. Just talk about the work."

"I've made pieces of art I've never even seen before," Bickerton says. "Entirely over email. I've used every medium from Cheetos to bubble-gum. I mostly just like dreaming these things up. The rest is agony."

On the counter, jars of eyeballs. Fake teeth. Cigarette butts. Sand and glass. Wood and paint. Pencils and dust. Blood and tears. A pile of bones.

And rocks. He paints with rocks. He's doing it now.

"What do you think of the rocks?" he asks.

Here on the walls of his studio are these rocks. Painted, cut-in-half rocks, mounted to brightly painted canvases in some semblance of symmetry.

We stare in contemplation. A trick question, perhaps. Standing here in the studio of a man who may be remembered as the next Picasso and Gauguin... whose work inflicts emotional vertigo and mutilated introspection... whose paintings might sell for the down payment of a condo... the rocks are kinda basic.

Kinda dumb.

Yeah, we shrug. They're good. Ashley smiles.

"A painting is just something that fills a space on a wall with color and meaning, so what is more obvious than a piece of colored wall to affect meaning?" he says. "So, I thought, okay then, hang this. It's dumb. I like dumb."

PORTRAITS & LANDSCAPES

[...in which *The Artist* is born, surfs, becomes rich and famous, and loses everything.]

“HE WAS CONCEIVED ON A BOAT DURING A THUNDERSTORM,” his father explains. His father was a writer. A professor of pidgin linguistics. A tropical traveller. “Maybe a lightning strike had something to do with it,” he suggests.

Here in his musty office, thunder rattles the windows. Ashley Bickerton pulls a large coffee table book down from a shelf. Rain pounds the window. Yellow paint peels from the walls. The cover of the book shows Ashley’s face. Painted green. Screaming. The book says: *I thought about suicide but I don’t want to miss the end.*

“My gallerist complains that articles about me always focus on my personal life too much,” he says. “And that we should try to focus on the work. That is really what’s important here.”

We nod. We are not art critics. We don’t even know what a gallerist is. We are just surfers.

The book costs about \$400 and makes a loud thud on the table. His whole life. Bound between two covers. Recollections from his father. Reviews from his critics. Quotes from his heroes. And an essay about surfing.

But before he opens the book, Ashley sits back in his plastic

office chair and opens up a webcam on his laptop. A swell is coming.

“But really,” he says, “my only interest in this article is that it might somehow help me get more waves at Balangan.”

We nod. As if this were in some way possible. Where do we sign?

He stares at the webcam. Flat, stormy ocean. Frustration. Ashley’s online surf addiction is borderline intervention-worthy. He’s posted over 8,000 comments on Surfer Magazine’s web forums. “Kelly Slater status,” they call it. *Surfer* made him a moderator. “A bit like the wolves guarding the sheep,” says Ashley.

He was born in Barbados. Grew up skipping from one tropical stone to the next. Ghana. Puerto Rico. Ibiza. Hawaii. Painting. Surfing. Sex. These afflictions found him early and took over completely. Addiction. Escapism. Purpose.

But he’s over 50 now. Still lean and strong, but the set-waves don’t come as easy. And his artistic legacy hangs in the balance. And legal entanglements have drained his accounts. And the rain is maybe letting up a little and the swell is maybe starting to

show... the low-life surfer and the gallery-collected artist are wrestling on the ceiling and Ashley Bickerton sighs and opens *The Book* of his life.

The pages stick like old porn.

It reads: *These are literally the first paintings I did upon arriving in NYC in 1982.*



It’s just a word. “SUSIE.” His signature. His brand. His birth. He launches into a lengthy explanation of what “Susie” is about and who it isn’t and won’t be and is not meaningful of... but it’s lost on us. We are not art critics. It looks like a logo for something that doesn’t exist.

“Exactly,” says Ashley. We turn the page. This is fun.

The next page shows more rocks. Like we saw in the studio, but from long ago, with metal hardware and cold, geometric mountings. Instructions for hanging. An interview with the artist. Oblique insults for rich people to cover their walls with.



Left: *Susie*, 1982
 polymer and latex on Masonite
 122 x 244 cm
 Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong

Above: *Tormented Self-Portrait (Susie at Arles)*, 1987 - 1988
 synthetic polymer paint, bronze powder and lacquer on wood, anodized aluminum,
 rubber, plastic, formica, leather, chrome-plated steel and canvas
 227.1 x 174.5 x 40 cm
 Collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York



“I feel that art needs to offer some form of psychic and emotional transport,” he says, “which these rocks are designed specifically *NOT* to do.”

To further alienate his audience, he added overtly erudite texts, names of romantic destinations, and adult phone sex numbers.

And the critics wept.

In other works, he put corporate logos front and center. Brash mockeries of the commodification of art. And the pieces sold for thousands. Next, Bickerton sold space on the art to various brands — Tylenol, TV Guide and Marlboro — and that went well, too. They had titles like: “Commercial Piece,” “Good Painting,” and “Yo.”

His indictment of consumerism was selling wonderfully.

Another piece included an LED display with the current estimated value of the art, rising one-cent every 30-seconds (he secretly added an internal switch to make it decline, as well).

“All these ideas were inspired directly from surfing,” he explains. “The rainbow airbrushes on surfboards were being replaced mushrooming of corporate sponsorship. The Bud Tour was on and surfers were suddenly considered ‘professional athletes.’ They were like billboards.”

Ashley equates being a surfer in the NYC art scene back then with being a gay man in the ‘50s. “We all knew who each other were,” he says, “but nobody spoke about it in public.”

The critics never deciphered his surf-world referentialisms... they just found him delightfully rebellious.

Bickerton and several contemporaries similarly lampooning the Reaganomic, marching powder fueled, snob-elite art world were dubbed “the Neo-Geo Movement” by overly educated critics uncolloquially refer-

encing their the neo-geometric conceptualism of scrutinizing mass social consumption, advertising, packaging and the resulting social alienation. You know?

“Naturally, ‘we’ hated that term,” says Ashley. “I personally felt much more affinity with it being called ‘Commodity Art.’”

There was another side to his work during these years. While the logo and geometry branded boxes were what Bickerton called “self-portraits,” he also made “landscapes.”

Note our liberal use of air-quotes here. His “landscapes” looked like this.



Left: *Bismarck Archipelago Shark*, 2002
rubber, leather, canvas, rope, coconuts, acrylic, PVC, Scope
287 x 94 x 68.6 cm
Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong

Below: *Landscape #1*, 1988
mixed media construction with black canvas covering
82.6 x 204.5 x 91.4 cm
Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong

Landscape #3 (Desert Biosphere), 1988
rubber, wood, anod., aluminum, lacquer, nylon, sand, safety glass, and steel
245.1 x 153.7 x 113 cm
Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong

“*Wall Contemplation Units*,” he called them.

And then there were the “Anthrospheres,” which were like strange lifebuoys fills with seeds and soil and such things as might be cast into the sea in times of apocalyptic distress: a three-piece suit, smoked sturgeon, paper thin bresaola with a cluster of shitake mushrooms and many bottles of booze.





With his art world success, Bickerton began backing carefully away from the self-swallowing high society his art openly mocked. Surf trips to Tahiti, Fiji, Hawaii and Indonesia. Long, swaggering South Seas sojourns that began to infiltrate his work in dark, contemplative ways.

After one such trip, he decided he was done laboring away with urban fabricators, and he began sculpting with driftwood, flip-flops, and other flotsam and jetsam he harvested at the tideline. Buoys and bottles. Salty syringes and shipwrecked diapers. He hog-tied it all to wooden canvases with crusty rope and ukulele string.

The tide was turning. A jagged reef exposed. The economy crumpling. Relationships

withering. On Black Monday, all of Ashley's potential clients declared bankruptcy at once. His wife filed for divorce. His critics wrote nasty, dismissive snippets. The bottle was empty. The record skipped. And New York coughed and coughed alone in a dark alleyway.

The sharks appeared. Plastic, molded monsters. Meaningless and menacing. Tangled up in buoy line and pink straightjackets. They were both landscape and portrait. Dead and alive. Terrifying and benign. Their own unique, inexplicable shark-ness.

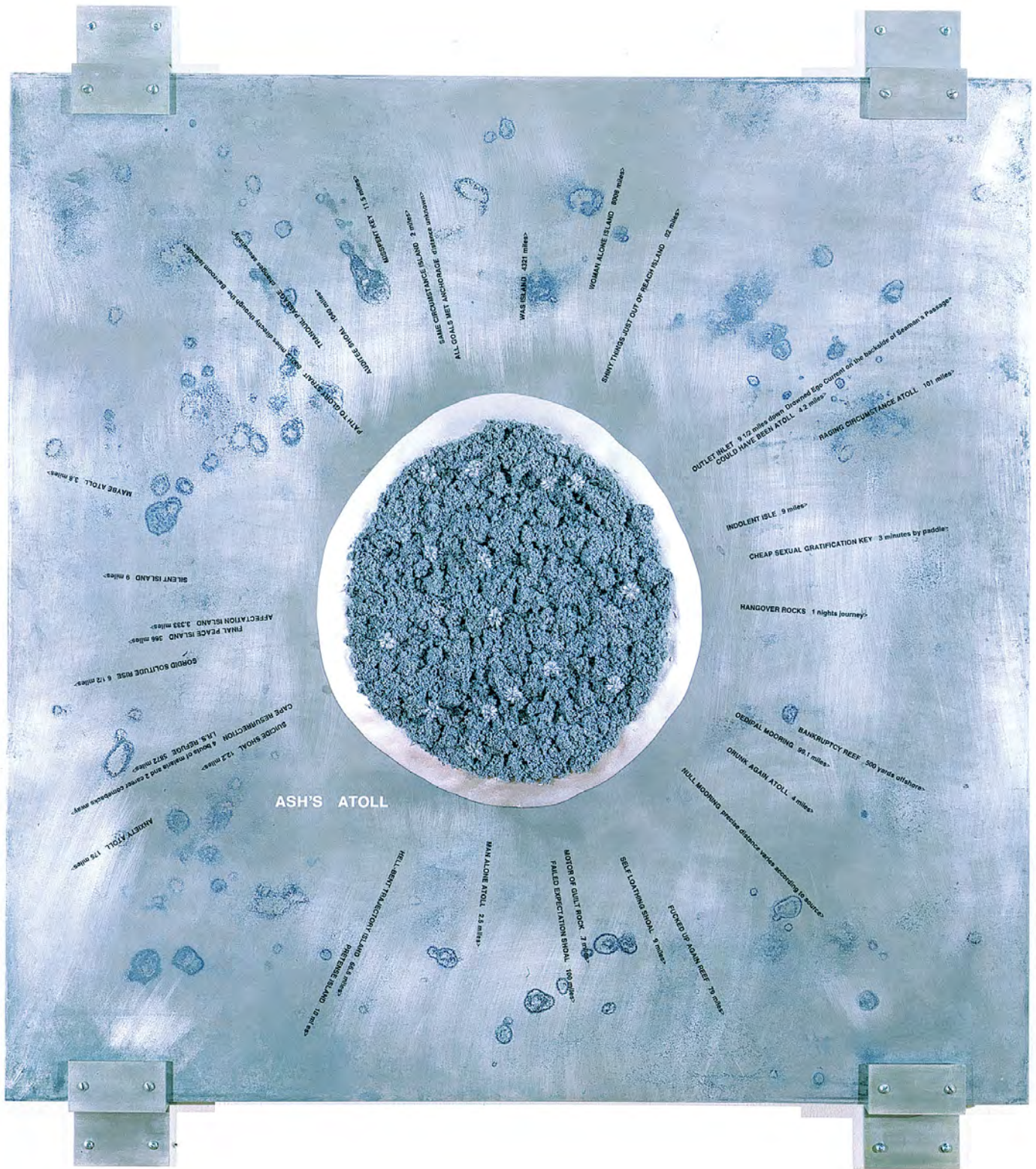
Ashley turns another sticky page and recalls those dark days with fondness. "My career was in the toilet. My marriage in tatters. And my financial prospects were bleak."

He'd refused the offer of a Harvard teaching position. Denied the possible "fall-back career." There was no Plan B. Art was everything. And art was dead.

In one of his final New York pieces, Bickerton conjures a faraway tropical island – Ash's Atoll – pinpointing its relative distance from all his problems:

- Suicide Shoals: 12.2 miles
- Cape Resurrection: 4 bouts of malaria and 2 cancer comebacks away
- Silent Island: 9 miles
- Maybe Atoll: 3.8 miles
- Final Peace Island: 366 miles
- Affectation Island: 3.33 miles
- Shiny Things Just Out Of Reach Island - 0.2 miles

And then he moved there.



Left: *F.O.B.*, 1993
 fiberglass, enamel paint, and steel
 203.8 x 78.7 x 73.7 cm
 Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong

Self-Portrait: Desert Island Head, 1993
 translucent turquoise rubber head, dyed human hair, steel, coconuts, and river rocks
 216.5 x 36.2 x 33 cm
 Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong

Above: *Ash's Atoll*, 1993
 aluminum, fiberglass, resin, foam, enamel paint
 142.2 x 121.9 x 12.7 cm
 Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong

PORTRAITS IN PARADISE

[...in which The Artists leaves New York to disappear to tropical dystopia and re-invent himself as a self-portrait hallucination caricature of himself, then totally deny it.]



“MAKING THOSE EARLY PAINTINGS IN BALI,” he says, “was like trying to re-write the Bible by hand with a broken ball-point pen.”
 This is why he hates painting. Those first works he made in paradise. Exhaustive, masterful and horrifying life-size self-portraits painted on wood with blood and sweat and anything he had left.
 -Self-portrait as a naked,

tattooed, meth-head biker (“Bickski”).
 -Self-portrait as a beefed up body-builder. Naked. (“A.B.”)
 -Self-portrait as a naked androgynous, transsexual (Ashleigh”).
 Vulnerable. Confused. Dangerous. Like any expat, Ashley was re-inventing himself. Molting. Morphing. Painting himself new sets of skin. Becoming. Naked.

The ghastly metamorphosis continued. There was a large, detailed painting of a South American warlord bugging a morbidly obese 14-year-old; an anal-raped Donald Duck Nazi with hibiscus in his asshole; babies in make-up and monkeys breastfeeding human infants; blood-drenched crucifixions. These were happy times. Productive times. Sixteen-hour work days bunkered in

the studio between swells and debauchorous strike missions back to New York to spill martinis with his less unfortunate art world Neo-Gisms. Three-meter bar tabs and Jacuzzis full of flesh. Bio-chemical revolutions exploding across black out curtain skies. Super nova revolutions, quickly forgotten.
 “So you *really* live in Bali?” they’d all ask. “My gawd, whatever is *that* like?”





Above: *Completion*, 2002
 photcollage, acrylic, and objects on wood
 182.9 x 243.8 x 30.5 cm
 Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong

Right: *Rat Island Painting*, 1993
 acrylic and objects on wood
 175.3 x 152.4 x 48.2 cm
 Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong

Next: *Famili*, 2007
 acrylic and digital print on canvas in carved wood, coconut,
 mother of pearl and coin inlaid artist frame
 218.4 x 182.9 x 17.8 cm
 Lindemann Collection, Miami Beach

Blue Bar, 2007
 acrylic and digital print on canvas in carved wood, coconut,
 mother of pearl and coin inlaid artist frame
 182.9 x 218.4 x 17.8 cm
 Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong







Gargling black paint. His entire head painted green. Flowers blooming from his skull. Ashley describes modeling for his own paintings as an awkward performing art. Playing a roll. But the roll isn't him, he insists. No, he's an archetype...of an expat artist who left the big city because his life there imploded and now finds himself giddily stuck in some South Pacific dream.

"I made every attempt to ignore the world I found myself in," he explains. "There was no way I was going to be confused with the endless parade of wispy expatriate artists that inexorably wash up on these shores."

But Bali wouldn't ignore him. Within days, years passed. At

some point it struck him that he'd been here longer than he'd been in New York. Another wife. Another life. Child on the way. Goaded by requests for images of him "at home" in Bali, Bickerton concocted a series of portraits outlandishly lampooning his "perfect" tropical life.

He thought he was being funny. But no one got the joke.

Even funnier. So Ashley took the joke one step further. And *The Blue Man* was born.

Now... to understand the genesis of *The Blue Man* completely, we must flash back to two more late NYC-era "self portraits," conjured from Bickerton's outer island surfing excursions: "F.O.B." and "Desert Island Head."

"F.O.B." portrays a blobulous mass of pale, limbless, headless blubber. "This is how I feel upon arriving at the beach after many months in New York. Fresh off boat." Grotesque.

"Desert Island Head," features Ashley's grinning melon, mounted upon a pole with the most blissful, zen-like smile and his hair braided up into two devilish palm tree horns. "And this is how I feel after months of surfing and living as a dusty tropical road weasel." Enlightened.

Betwixt these polar electrodes, *Blue Man* came into being. The Frankenstein monster of Ashley's South Pacific surf lab. Later, we see him as semen slithering amongst all the women to ever pass through his life. We see

him cradling his pregnant wife, and holding his newborn son. And so on...this doppelganger continues to parallel Bickerton's Balinese existence.

"But he's not supposed to be *Me*," says Ashley, pulling the book away from our grasp. "I just happened to be available as a model. I work for free and I do whatever I tell myself. It's all purely convenience."

As *NOT* him, *Blue Man* smokes his cigars, sleeps amongst his wealth and women; rides his family motorbike; screams inside his nightmares... borrows his face.

In an interview translated into comic book, Ashley eventually just evolves into the *Blue Man*. But no... it's not him. Not him at all.



Keeping with his lifelong dichotomy, Bickerton's work continued to oscillate between (air-quote time) "landscapes" and "portraits."

The landscapes became large wooden wall-hangers, hog-tied with driftwood, abandoned flippers, buoys and other oceanic debris spewed forth from the seas, then drilled full of holes and painted with the names of bacteria in a dozen languages.

In a portrait, he imagines himself dead, staring up through the roots of a tree that has overgrown his bones, which mix with trash and condoms and Coke cans. Kites in the sky. Drill-holes gutting the wood, which sprouts outwards with

tangled branches.

Happy stuff.

We turn the page: tiny Blue Man semens squirm and wriggle around the sculpture betwixt the names of every woman who ever passed through his life, each stamped with the word "COMPLETION" and festooned with toy airplanes, booze bottles and children's toys.

"The critics called this one, 'So bad, it's good,'" he says. "At first that pissed me off, but then I thought about it and realized, 'Of course it is.'"

Through it all, Blue Man keeps bursting his head into the frame. At first, he's kind of a family man. Husband. Father.

Drinker. Drunker. Weirder and weirder he evolves. Derails. A green-faced snake creature. Crocodilian trash-eating sewer dweller. Zen-like joyful in the wreckage of Ashley's highs and lows. Divorces and marriages. Bankruptcy and fortune. Binge. Purge. Create. Destroy. Surf. Wipeout. Paddle-out. Repeat. The Artist is angry. The Artist is working. Leave a message after the beep. Fuck the beep and just go away. Blue Man is drinking. Blue Man is armed.

In future incarnations, Bickerton employs fucking superfat-sized surfer Jimbo Pelligrine to incarnate The Blue Man, as if to merge the forces of FOB and Desert

Island Head into one heathenous monstrosity. Draped in coconut hookers. Blinded by neon wilderness. Debauchorous and vainglorious. Slathered in ridiculous logos: Bickerton. Susie. Un-tribal tattoos and cheap stickers. Naughty excitement and existential anti-heroism.

"All that stuff went crazy on the internet," says Ashley, "but ironically, little of that particular body of work actually ever sold."

The Book ends here, like some sort of nocturnal blackout culminating in 15-minutes of online fame. But The Artist carries on, of course. His recent "Mitochondrial Eve" series seeks to invoke the



ancient mother-whore spirit. Dread-locked hair and faces slathered in thick, rainbows of paint. Butterflies and cigarettes. Horrifying and beautiful. Susie. The statues were originally conceived to be photographed only, to avoid employing models, but after seeing people's reactions to the oversized busts, he followed the way.

Forwards. Onwards. Into the sky. Bali is fading. His children remain there. Until they don't. He'll visit. Life goes on. He's married again (4 years now). Happy. Angry. He sells paintings. Paints some more. Hates painting. Dreams big. Gets barreled. There is no Plan B. No fallback position. There is only art. There is only everything.

Left: *Yellow Canoe*, 2006
acrylic and digital print on canvas in carved wood, coconut, mother of pearl and coin inlaid artist frame
182.9 x 218.4 x 17.8 cm
Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong

Above: *Scooter*, 2008
oil and acrylic and digital print on canvas in carved wood, coconut, mother of pearl and coin inlaid artist frame
183 x 244 x 20 cm
Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong



Above: *Neon Bar*, 2010-2011
 acrylic, digital print and plastic laminate on wood
 198.8 x 166.4 x 12.7 cm
 Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong

Right: *Red Scooter Nocturne*, 2010-2011
 acrylic, digital print and plastic laminate on wood
 166.4 x 194.9 x 12.7 cm
 Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong

Next: *Bed*, 2008
 oil and acrylic and digital print on canvas in carved wood, coconut, mother of pearl
 and coin inlaid artist frame
 183 x 224 x 20 cm
 Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong



LANDSCAPES IN HELL

[...in which The Artists leaves paradise to live in Los Angeles in hopes of not ending his days poor and forgotten, but instead rich and famous. You know.]

SOMEWHERE ON THE 405 FREEWAY, THE BLUE MAN IS SCREAMING. “Talk about the work! My personal life is not important here.”

The miles upon miles of concrete and ambition hear nothing. Honking horns and silicon tits, marching aimlessly across the botox wasteland. Welcome to Los Angeles.

The rain has stopped. Ashley checks the web-cam again. Yes, the swell is definitely filling in. Waves. Sunshine. Bali. Already the tropical goo is gumming the pages of *The Book* back together. We’re losing him.

“My entire career has been completely schizophrenic,” he says. “There’s no definitive Ashley Bickerton piece. It’s all over the place.”

He’s confessing something. Rationalizing what must come next. Trading in this rusted paradise for the world’s greatest parking lot. Surfing for art. Sanity for success. Something...

“I’m fortunate to hold something of a mantle position in the art world,” he says. “So I need to go back and make something of that. I’ve got to make my end run. Draw the circle to a close.”

Maybe that’s why he’s is revisiting old themes in his studio. The rocks. The metallic boxes. Thumbing through the pages of his career. Tilling his artistic soil for the next crop.

Or maybe the LA plan is just some weird threat to scare some artistic ideas to the surface. Not even Ashley knows.

He spins in his chair, rattles the keys of his laptop and books a ticket to the Mentawais. One way or the other, he’ll need it.

Meanwhile, Blue Man options his screenplay. Opens a vegan taco truck. Blue Man wears Google Glass. Blue Man drinks Absolut. Blue Man covers your empty walls in colored rocks. Drinks your booze and violates your daughter. And the paparazzi go wild.

“Los Angeles has become one of the world’s great art capitals,” says Bickerton. “All the big Death Star galleries are there.”

He dreams of movies. Perhaps an exaggerated *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*-style porno filmed in smoky barroom light and Blue Man’s swinging dick. Maybe he’ll write a novel. Try some of those designer drugs the kids are all

talking about. Take up jogging. Buy a convertible.

Yes, LA’s gonna love him. Gonna swallow him whole and pay him twice to bitch-slap them in the face with their own perverted vanity stick. Consumerism will rise from the ashes. *Neo-Geo II: The Online Shopping Edition*. This time it’s digital!

The surf will suck. And he’ll keep checking Bali Belly webcams when he’s feeling depressed. The lifelong tropical hallucination that flows in his blood will beg and beckon him back towards insanity...but it’s nothing a few hours of freeway can’t dull. Therapy and xanax. A plane ticket to the equator. The circle will not draw to a close. But circles are bullshit anyway. Spirals are the new circles. Whatever that means.

From a therapist’s couch in the Hollywood Hills, Blue Man says: “Can we *plu-ease* just talk about the work? Why is this so hard for you?”

Why hasn’t surfing ever appeared in your art? we ask.

This whole visit was supposed to be an interview. But this is the first question

we actually managed to ask. We own no art.

Bickerton laughs. “Can you imagine?” he says. “It’s like... skiing or something. Can you think of any great *skiing* art?”

On the laptop, he Googles a name: Raymond Pettibon. “There,” he says. “The only guy out there doing decent surf art hasn’t ridden a wave in his life. So... no, no surf art for me.”

He’s lying again. Surfing has always been his secret weapon. From the first sarcastic logos to the inverted tidelines and driftwood “landscapes.” Perverted expats and unnamable locales... so totally surfy. Even the rocks... like a Lunada Bay local hurling them at the kooks. There’s a reason the Blue Man is, you know, blue.

But the comparison ends at the water’s edge. Past the greasy warungs and litterbug tidelines. The moment Ashley’s feet leave the sand, the connection between surfing and art ceases to matter.

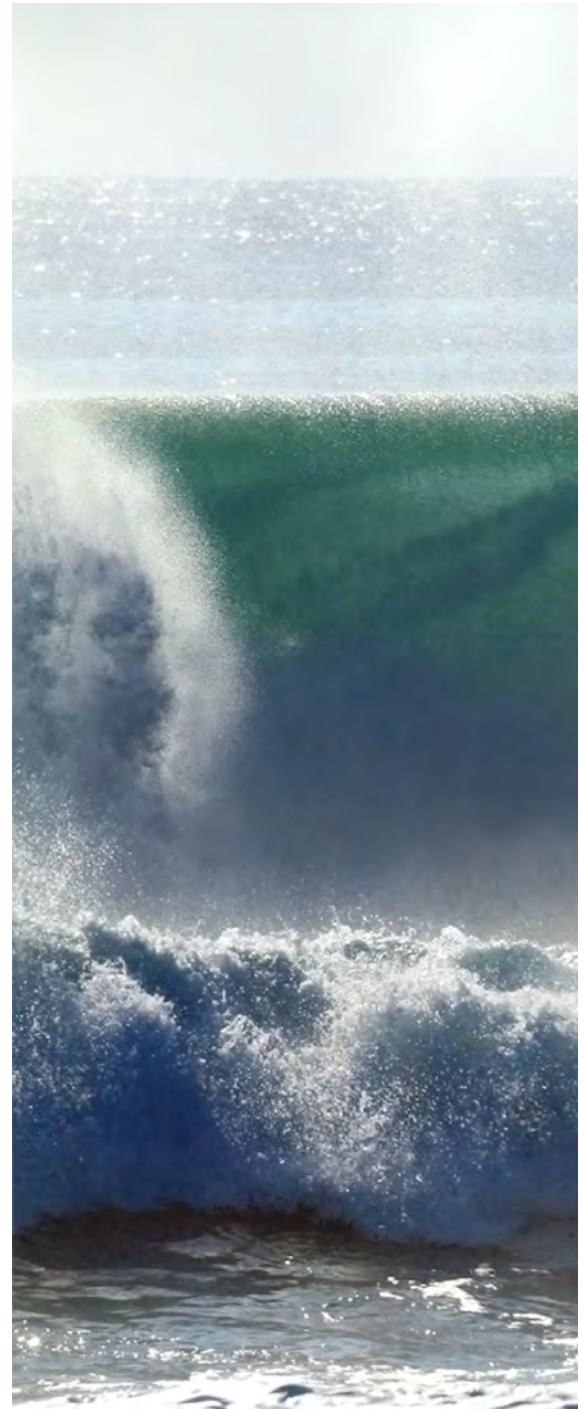
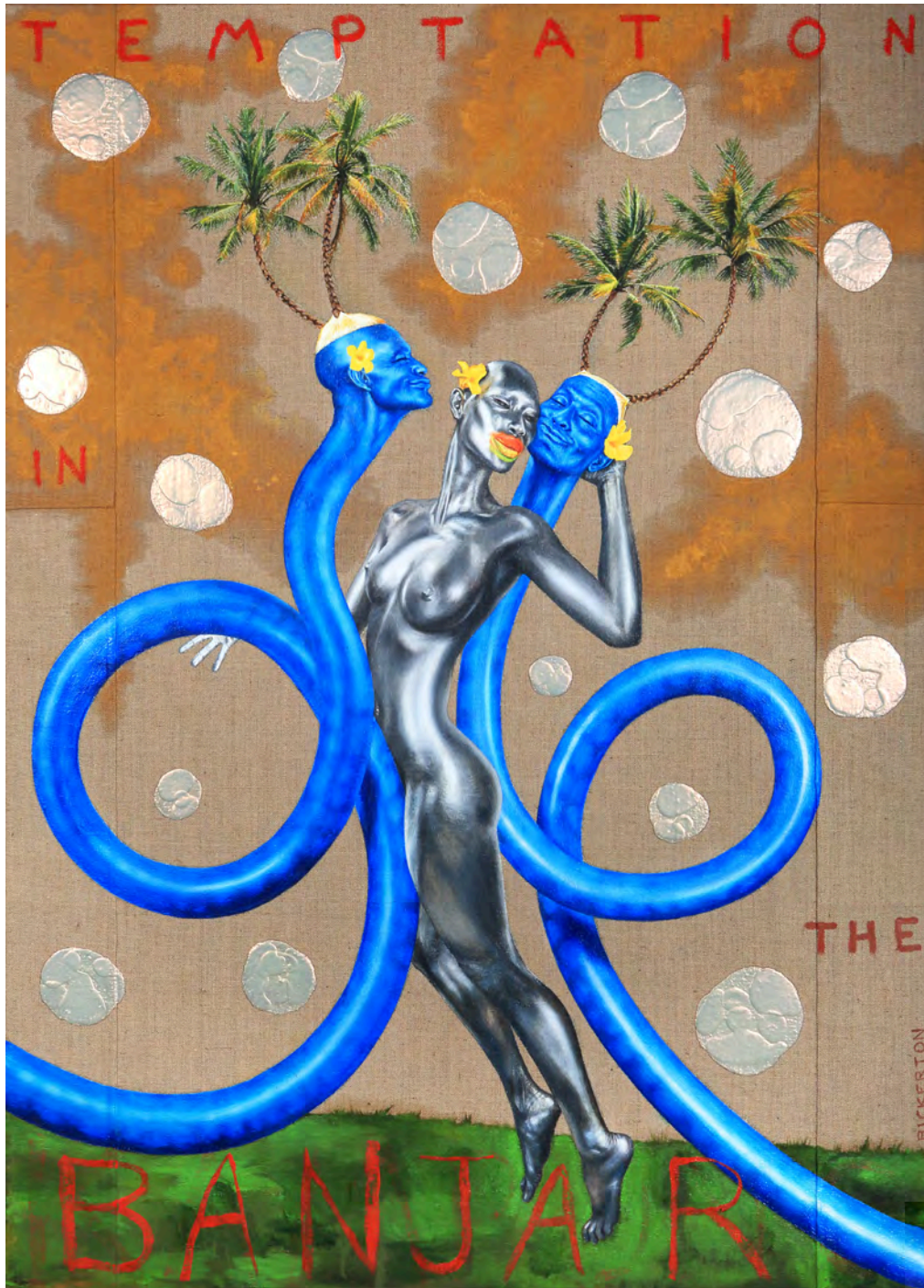
To be a surfer is one thing. To surf, is another.

Pumping iron down on Venice Beach, Blue Man gives us a long hard stare.









Previous: *Wahine Pa'Ina*, 2015
aluminum
210 x 86 x 50 cm
Courtesy Gajah Gallery, Singapore

m-DNA_eve 1, 2013
oil and acrylic on digital print on wood
224.8 x 189.2 x 12.7 cm
Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong

Above: *Temptation In The Banjar*, 2014
mixed media on jute
180 x 130 cm
Courtesy Gajah Gallery, Singapore

Right: Just down the road from his studio, Ashley pursues further artistic endeavors (or is he avoiding them).



Ashley grabs his board. His trunks. Last of the daylight. Last of Bali. He's got a short-cut to Balangan. And it doesn't involve Photoshop.

This conversation is over. Our one-question interview: a failure. If we learned anything here today, it's lost on us. We are not art critics. Just fellow surfers. Ashley is a cool guy, a core-to-the-core surfer and a mad genius artist. The lineups are going to miss him. Whoev-

er will replace him? Kooks, we hope. Lots and lots of kooks.

"You can hold onto The Book," he says, climbing onto his motorcycle. Already the pages are going themselves back together in the tropical yuck. "Just remember what I said about Balangan..."

Yes, of course. Set waves at Balangan. Done. And then he's gone. And without ever typing a word, this article is already working its magic. More waves

at Balangan. Ashley is on them.

The studio stands empty. Rocks on the walls. Sharks in the closet. Paint on the floor. We peel open Ashley's book and read the last sentence from his essay on surfing, hoping to poach some sort of drop-in denouement from our studio sojourn:

"I guess there will always be a wave to glide upon unmolested," he writes, "just as there will always be a

meaningful mark to be made on a surface where once there was none. Beyond that, well, that's where we all are right now, isn't it."

Down at Balangan, The Artist skirts past the warungs, doesn't even notice the bikinis on the beach, consciously ignores some interesting candy wrappers and a solitary flip flop at the water's edge, and finally enters the ocean. The swell is here. His feet leave the ground.