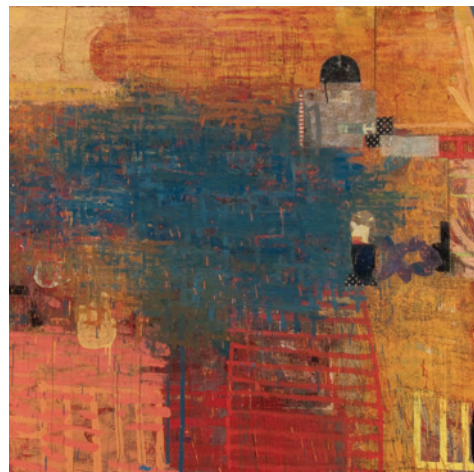


# DISPARATE ACTS

DAVID BAILIN    WARREN CRISWELL    SAMMY PETERS



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BRADBURY  
GALLERY

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For the past few years Arkansas has been featured prominently in news from the art world. The announcement that Crystal Bridges would be built in Bentonville created a buzz on the national level; once their doors were opened, that sound became a roar. The number of visitors in the first year far exceeded even the museum's highest hopes. For those of us who have long appreciated the Arkansas Arts Center in Little Rock, this new museum was a welcome addition, providing us with another excellent venue to enjoy important works of art so close to home.

While exhibitions in the Bradbury Gallery feature national and international artists, often alongside their local and regional counterparts, it seemed like now was a good time to organize a show with a narrower scope. And so the plan to produce an exhibition of serious, contemporary art created within the state was formed.

The idea for "Disparate Acts" began after a visit with David Bailin in his Little Rock studio. Having respected his work for many years, he was one of the first artists I called on in my quest to show off what was happening artistically in Arkansas. Bailin, who has been aptly referred to as a "wizard," creates large, stunning, charcoal drawings. He was receptive to the idea of being included in an exhibition, but almost immediately — and with great enthusiasm — suggested that along with his drawings, the work of Warren Criswell and Sammy Peters should be considered.

I have followed Criswell's work since I first moved to the Mid-South. I had only met him once or maybe twice and didn't know him at all personally. He was someone with whom I was interested in working — his saucy imagery had made an impact.

Peters rounded out the plan. His enigmatic and seductive work lures in the viewer; it is irresistible. It almost feels more akin to sculptural assemblage than abstract painting — not because of any actual three-dimensionality, but rather because of its lush, sensual layering.

At first these three disparate artists made no sense being together in one exhibition. Yes, they were all living and working in Arkansas, but was that enough? Bailin then explained they had been friends and colleagues for nearly three decades, sharing biweekly lunches, talking art and life, and whatever else they may have had on their minds. The clincher was, although they were all prominent central Arkansas artists, they had never shown together.

This exhibition rectifies that. Here you will find three of Arkansas' finest artists, who have informed and influenced one another for 28 years. Their creations all firmly remain their own individual visions, but within each piece a small part of them all exists. The Bradbury Gallery is honored to feature the work of David Bailin, Warren Criswell and Sammy Peters, together for the first time.

— Les Christensen

## WORDS, IMAGES, PRESENCE & PIZZA

I think the “Art Lunch” was going on before my bus broke down in Arkansas and before David moved here as the Museum School director at the Arkansas Arts Center. Sammy, Pat McFarlin, Dan Morris and Kathy Holder were some of the original lunchers. Dan, the art critic for the old Arkansas Gazette, used to throw parties for local artists, and it was at one of these in 1986 that I met the others. Since David and I were invited to the weekly (now fortnightly) lunches, we’ve met at a lot of different places, but since the late ‘90s we seem to have gotten stuck at Damgoode Pies on Kavanaugh in Little Rock. The food is cheap and good, and the upstairs dining room is small and quiet, perfect for running our mouths. I wanted to call this show “Three Damgoode Artists,” but I was overridden.

Many other artists have come and gone over the years, but somehow the three of us stuck it out. It’s a chance to celebrate our creative discoveries or bitch about our frustrations, mostly the latter, to others who have experienced the same thing and are in a position to either agree or set us straight. For instance, when I’m creatively dead in the water, muse not singing, no image in sight, and I say, “I think I’ve painted my last painting,” it’s encouraging to hear Sammy reply, “Warren, how many times have you told me that?”

Also, like most artists, we tend to hole up in our studios and stew in our own juices, and our lunches force us out into the company of other artists. I’m the most introverted and antisocial of our group, but there’s a little of that in the other two as well. At one of our meetings I was talking about how a work of art, like a quantum particle, doesn’t really exist

unless it’s seen by someone (you can hear my recording of this conversation in the barroom scene of my movie, “Moments”), and David said, “That’s the only reason I meet with you guys, because, you know, I’m being observed, therefore I exist.” It was a joke, but there is some value in being able to confess your sins to fellow victims of a fatal attraction.

This is possible because we all three take each others’ work seriously and probably have a deeper understanding of it than anybody else in the world. We’re like junkies who understand perfectly the others’ addiction. We sympathize but



know we’re not going to be able to kick it. I think it’s important to have this kind of relationship. We can manage it because our work is so dissimilar—so disparate—that we’re not in competition with each other, which is probably why we’ve been able to stay friends for so long. So let me try to look at some of those differences—and then some similarities that I discovered recently.

David’s images come from narratives. He has been inspired by the Torah, Kafka, the Holocaust, Buster Keaton’s movies, the novels of José Saramago and old newspaper clippings. Lately, he has related these narratives to memories of his old job as a bookkeeper, which he presents like scenes in a play. In the 1970s it was well known in academia that painting was dead, so David switched to theater, working with the avant-garde playwright and director, Richard Foreman in New York. The result was The Abreaction Theater, which David and the composer Geoffrey King established in 1979. Though he later backslid into visual art (as I did, from a similar experience, having spent five years on the road as a writer), his work has remained theatrical. I have written elsewhere that a drawing by David, having survived many trials and scrubblings—which

are often visible as pentimenti, traces of erased marks—is really the last scene of the play.

But that's not quite right. Yes, it's like one frame from the storyboard of a play, but not the last one. Back in the early '90s David had a bad habit of breaking into exhibitions after his work was installed and continuing to work on them. As I wrote at the time, "One minute David is busily rubbing out and redrawing, the next he's being strong-armed out of the place." Because his drawings are never really finished, the play is never really over. It's just arrested.

It's just this instant of being caught in the act of becoming that gives his drawings their uncomfortably familiar feeling. A reviewer of one of his plays, "Disparate Acts," — which we decided was the logical title for this exhibition — wrote that its "structure of abrupt, isolated scenes has been chosen in part to dramatize those unexpected, fleeting moments of sudden realization which occur in daily life." Those words describe his drawings as well.

So, though David's drawings have no resolution, they are nevertheless images inspired by narratives, while mine are just the opposite: narratives inspired by images. I've used the word "ambushed" for a long time to describe how this happens. I can be driving down the highway, walking in the city or in the woods, watching a movie, stepping into my kitchen or bathroom, when suddenly what I'm looking at jumps out at me and takes over my brain. It's usually something I've seen thousands of times before but not as a painting until that moment. Maybe it was the light, or the darkness, external or internal, some experience that day, something that has made me see this thing in a new way. This can also happen in my



head, while reading a book or listening to music, but it's still an image, not an idea in the intellectual sense.

But from this image a narrative inevitably emerges, even when I don't want it to. I may understand it immediately or not at all, but I think what I saw is somehow linked to some story lurking in my unconscious. I take this image to be a revealed truth and feel compelled to make it visible, no matter how weird or twisted or self-incriminating it may look. This revealed image, however, what I call the "virtual image," only exists at that first moment of ambush, and the final painting, print or sculpture may undergo as many transformations as David's drawings or Sammy's paintings. But when I try to do it the other way around, create an image from an idea, like David does, my attempt usually fails.

Another difference between David's work and that of the other two of us is the art materials we use. Years ago I wrote this about David's dislike of art materials: "He has a horror of my practice of making my own paint. David is as appalled by my grinding slab as some people are by spiders." Although he painted when he first got to Little Rock, he soon abandoned it and got rid of everything but a huge roll of surplus milk carton paper and a stick of charcoal. Inspired evidently by black and white movies, he stripped the sets of his plays at the Abreaction Theater of all color, and then he did the same to his drawings, denouncing color as a contaminant, and only occasionally dipping a brush into his cup of coffee for a warm wash or two, the same cup that sat on his desk in New York while he cooked the books. Lately, I see, he's been experimenting with the occasional, tentative stroke of color. "Ride, boldly ride ... if you seek for Eldorado!"

In contrast, I was inspired by the Old Masters, researched their techniques and materials, and became an alchemist of paint, refining my own linseed oil, making my own ink from tree bark, galls and iron sulfate, grinding my own pigments in a medium of oil and beeswax as Titian is thought to have done, and discovering all kinds of amazing secrets about the relativity of color from Rembrandt and Josef Albers. Like Sammy but unlike David, I enjoyed the physicality, the manual labor, of stretching canvases and pushing paint around on them. There's so much pleasure in glazing and scumbling that they should be added to the Seven Deadly Sins.

But while Sammy and I both get off on the joys of paint, his creative approach to his work is different from both David's and mine. He doesn't start with either a narrative or an image. These may appear later, after what looks like several geological epochs of volcanic upheavals and continental drift, but in the beginning he just needs to be present in his studio. There's a table covered with paint cans, tubes, brushes and deadly solvents, the sound of traffic on Asher, maybe some blues on the radio, and a blank canvas on the wall. Sammy is standing there, not so much like God before creating the heavens and the earth as the football player he used to be, crouched behind the scrimmage line, waiting for the snap.

But I get carried away. Actually, I have no idea how Sammy starts a painting or what's going on in his head. I only know it's not a story of anything or an image of something, as is the case with David and me. I should insert here that both David and I have benefited over the years from Sammy's technical knowledge. He owned Atlas Signs, which he

inherited from his dad, and knows all kinds of stuff about paints and inks, canvas and paper, and every now and then David or I have to call him with an "art emergency!" As for those deadly solvents I mentioned, things like xylene, I think he gets away with it because his studio is a large warehouse (which was once Atlas Signs) with a high ceiling, so the fumes must rise up there and kill only the spiders around the skylights, sparing the human below. If David or I used it in our smaller studios we'd be dead in a month.



Anyway, the first thing I feel when I look at Sammy's paintings is their existential presence. In a review of his show at the Arkansas Arts Center in 1994 I wrote that each painting "is a corporeal existent, a physical, thought-numbing presence, before it's anything else." I described how countless layers, which I like to think of as geological strata, of thick, waxy, translucent or opaque paint have been brushed or troweled on, gouged or drawn through, dripped on, glazed over and

scraped off, and how rectangular forms and bits of cloth play a kind of mischievous melody over a ground bass of colors without names. "Such presence," I wrote, "is an emotional perception, an experience more of the senses than of the mind."

But, I went on, "It's a function of the intellect to protect us from that kind of thing—to create a space between the self and a phenomenon which threatens to absorb it. If you are able to take that creative step backward from the existential—almost breathing—presence of these works, it's just that emerging and submerging of form that begins give them a conceptual dimension, a 'content.' "

So here is where the similarities in our work begin to bite into the differences. Because even though a painting by Sammy is obviously not a narrative picture, I think it tells a story anyway. Stories are our primary means of imposing order on a chaotic world. Art, religion and science all grew out of stories, and stories take place in time. Time came into my work after a trip to New York with Sammy in 2005, during which I saw an animation by William Kentridge at the Metropolitan Museum. Before that I had thought of animation as Mickey Mouse and Quickdraw McGraw, but now I imagined my own drawings coming to life. It took years of Frankensteinian experiments, most of which failed, to make this happen, and I won't go into the ugly details. My point here is that about a year ago I realized I wasn't the only artist in our group who had—maybe unconsciously—pushed into the fourth dimension.

Some of David's drawings, especially the ones with pentimenti, the remains of earlier scenes in his dramas, whether from the Torah or the office, are almost animations in themselves. You see them happening in time as well as space. One of my favorite drawings of his is one you will never see because he destroyed it. I call it "Ghosts," because all the figures had been rubbed out, only the ghosts remained. Even the room was starting to fade. Similarly, my favorite paintings of Sammy's are those in which almost everything has been lost in time—but not quite lost. Objects have been stuck on, then painted over with bright colors, themselves now only faintly visible through layers of mud. Ancient strata are exposed by excavation. Sometimes, in the same painting, you're looking at different rates of change: very fast movement—the splatters and drips—and the static strata of impasto paint. So there's all this painting and pasting and scraping, and in the end you have a very complex integration of time and space. And sometimes, as in David's "Ghosts," everything that went

before almost disappears, leaving only incomprehensible traces. Traces of what? An extinct civilization, a former life, youth? When I discovered that bringing my images to life also brought them to death—because now they had an end as well as a beginning—I thought this was unique to animation, but maybe the same can be said for a painting or drawing that incorporates time in its attempt to outlive its time-bound creator.

Maybe all our drawings, paintings and movies are just acts in the defunct Abreaction Theater. "Abreaction," you know, is the psychoanalytic term for the vivid return of painful memories. But it also means catharsis, and all artists know that feeling when their work magically unfolds before them. That's why we're hooked on art instead of following the sensible advice of our parents.

But while munching our pizzas at Damgoode Pies, we don't talk about such esoteric things. We just listen to each others' troubles or pleasures, failures or successes, and are consoled by this convivial proof of our existence. We talk, therefore we are.

– Warren Criswell

Page 2: David Bailin, *PROW*, 2012  
charcoal and coffee on prepared paper, 52 x 54 inches

Page 3: Warren Criswell, *Wild Geese*, 2013  
oil on canvas, 24 x 18 inches

Page 4: Sammy Peters, *Momentary: accessible; appearance*, 2012  
oil and mixed media on canvas, 72 x 60 inches

# DAVID BAILIN



*PAPERS*, 2013

charcoal, pastel and coffee on prepared paper

72.5 x 83 inches



## PAPERS

I think this is one of the first of David's recent drawings to be invaded by color—with frightening results for the leading character. When I first saw it I thought the accountant, in attempting to escape from the confines of the office, had found himself in a natural world even more terrifying! But now I see the fading remains of papers scattered in the foreground, so maybe the building itself has exploded and dumped its contents in the road, forcing our guy out into the open. A charcoal vortex, reminiscent of the labyrinth from his 1999 "Moses and Aaron," pursues the victim. Change is both traumatic and cathartic, and a necessity for the artist.

— Warren Criswell

*HAMMER*, 2012  
charcoal and coffee  
on prepared paper  
52 x 54 inches



*DISPATCH*, 2012  
charcoal and coffee  
on prepared paper  
52 x 54 inches



*PLUG*, 2012  
charcoal and coffee  
on prepared paper  
52 x 54 inches



# WARREN CRISWELL



*Eldorado*, 2013  
oil on canvas  
30 x 40 inches

### *Eldorado*

Ride, boldly ride, indeed! Warren is an autodidact who insists on finding his own way, often against my advice. The meeting on the road may be symbolic of the encounters the artist has with the images that ambush him – and with himself. To what or where does Warren the shade point? The Warren on his stork may be assumed to be the seeker, but seeking what or whom on this post-apocalyptic road? The fun part is that answers are not required to enjoy Warren's work. The slices of life depicted in his paintings are worthy of our contemplation, and as with all great works, the images stay with us long after our encounter with them.

– Sammy Peters

### *Flash Flood, 2002*

oil on linen  
36 x 48 inches



### *Conjunction, 2012*

watercolor  
30 x 23 inches



### *Cut to Black, 2007*

oil on canvas  
18 x 24 inches



# SAMMY PETERS



*Structure: defining; rationality, 2013*  
oil and mixed media on canvas  
30 x 40 inches

*Structure: defining; rationality*

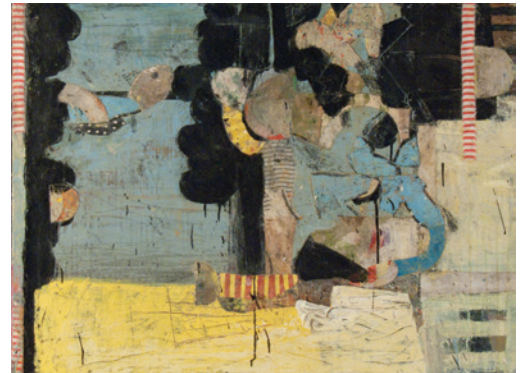
Pushing paint, in Peters' hands, is perfect. This is neither hyperbole nor mere alliteration. It is not something that can be substantiated with scientific proof; one only has to immerse oneself into his subtle surface displacements, his lush rich color palette, his painted strokes of ladders and swirls, and his placement of striped fabric collages to know that it is perfect. In fact, Peters' painting is the most aesthetically satisfying and beautiful work I know. It rewards the viewer time and time again not because it tells a story but because it breaks the painterly structure into open-ended visual possibilities for the viewer.

– David Bailin

*Subjective: inclined;  
illumination, 2012*  
oil and mixed media  
on canvas  
36 x 48 inches



*Enigmatic: deterritorial;  
form No. 2, 2011*  
oil and mixed media  
on canvas  
30 x 40 inches



*Emblematic: turning;  
reversal, 2012*  
oil and mixed media  
on canvas  
48 x 36 inches



## Cover Art:



Left:

David Bailin

*PUSH*, 2013

charcoal, pastel and coffee on prepared paper

72.5 x 76.5 inches



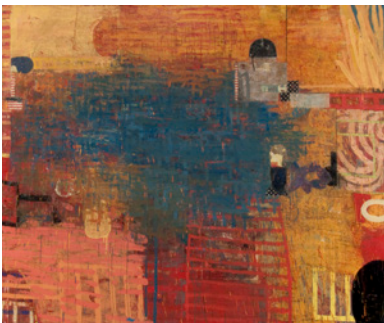
Middle:

Warren Criswell

*Lonley Night*, 2009

oil on canvas

30 x 24 inches



Right:

Sammy Peters

*Determined: necessary; relation*, 2013

oil and mixed media on canvas

60 x 72 inches

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