

INTERVIEW

Beer with a Painter: Todd Bienvenu

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**Jennifer Samet**

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Todd Bienvenu, "Kurt" (2014), oil on canvas, 76 × 67 inches (all images courtesy the artist)

[Todd Bienvenu](#)'s studio is filled with stacks: art books on the floor, paintings leaning against the wall. Bienvenu's work deals with omnivorous appetites – for company, pleasure, fun, music. The art books piled up are also unapologetically wide-ranging: Goya, Schnabel, Katherine Bradford, Vuillard, Dana Schutz, Matisse. Paintings lean on top of the books – nothing is treated as overly precious. Bienvenu has a great sense of humor; his paintings are wild and raucous, and the energy of his studio, with dozens of paintings in progress at once, is contagious.



Todd Bienvenu at the opening of his latest show, "Borrowing Tomorrow's Fun", Life On Mars Gallery, Bushwick, New York

We met at the Narrows, a cocktail bar in Bushwick, and talked over something between two and nine beers in their back garden. At the end of it, Bienvenu said goodbye and announced it was time for a cheeseburger. He speaks with a relaxed Southern drawl, and I don't think I've ever laughed so hard transcribing an interview. The subject matter of his paintings includes sex, butts, babes, tattooed rockers, and drinking. But for all the talk of cocks and camel toes, it is clear that Bienvenu's appetite is seriously directed at investigating the way painting works, studying an eclectic range of art of his peers and art history.

Bienvenu was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, and received his BFA from Louisiana State University in 2003 and his MFA from the New York Studio School in 2007. The first solo exhibition of his work is currently on view at [Life on Mars Gallery](#) in Bushwick through Sunday, September 28. He has also shown in galleries including Centotto, Valentine, Novella, Outlet, Tiger Strikes Asteroid, Sideshow and Ethan Pettit. This fall Bienvenu is teaching painting and drawing at Louisiana State University.

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Louis Marie Lemaire

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Jennifer Samet: *How did you start painting and making art?*

Todd Bienvenu: I grew up in Arkansas and Louisiana and in junior high, I was getting teased mercilessly for being a nerdy little dude always drawing comic books. I was a bit young for my grade and the shortest one in class. It was a super painful time. Then I went to a Catholic high school for boys and they didn't have an art program. I was sick of getting teased, so I decided, "I'm just not going to draw anymore" – once bitten, twice shy. I didn't draw all through high school.





Todd Biennu, "Lafayette" (2013), oil on canvas, 76 × 67 inches

When I was applying to colleges, I took an aptitude test and they told me, "You should be an architect, because you are artistic and it's a job." I went to the University of Colorado at Boulder. I studied architecture there for two years, but I was flunking out of school because I was snowboarding and drinking. My parents told me to come back home and go to Louisiana State University, where my brother was.

I met an awesome painting teacher there. He smoked cigarettes with me and gave me tubes of nice paint. He was one of those great teachers who was a friend. He had a studio built out in front of his house. He lived in the suburbs and he made me see that it was a doable life decision. I started painting seriously.

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JS: *After that you came to New York and went to the New York Studio School. What was your experience there?*

TB: The New York Studio School was a great place for me to land. At other graduate schools you aren't necessarily having conversations about the formal issues of making paintings. It was a great experience in terms of learning about the nuts and bolts. But the first year I was there, I was in a room with fifteen other students working from models in a setup, getting through the work, painting full time. But it didn't feel like finding a personal expression; it felt like learning a craft.

After a year, I thought, what is the point? Do I have to have a setup in front of me to make a painting? I've learned how to make paintings that are really nice in terms of spatial proportions, but it doesn't lead to anything in and of itself. So eventually I painted my way out of it, seven or eight years later.

I spent my time painting, not developing the intellectual or conceptual aspect. In retrospect, I think that is okay. With painting, it takes a lot of time to let the technical things catch up with what you want to say. At the age of 23, you don't really have anything to say. Even if you can paint exquisitely, you haven't had any experiences that are worth painting about: you haven't had your heart broken, you haven't been to Europe. I think that painters hit their stride after 35: that is when form and content start to coalesce.





Todd Bienvenu, "Sex Tape" (2013), oil on canvas, 34 x 29.5 inches

JS: *When I was in your studio, I felt a unified sense of subject matter: drinking, sex, partying – and I was interested in how they are joyous paintings of these activities – not negative.*

TB: I paint about the things I know. I had a conversation with Graham Nickson back when I had that realization that painting models had nothing to do with my life. He asked me, "What is interesting to you?" I said, "Paying rent, hanging out with my girlfriend, drinking beers with my buddies, making sure I have food on the table, and making paintings." I feel the paintings deal with painting issues, and my social life, and they are really autobiographical.

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I started watching the television show, "True Detective" and making Southern-themed paintings. I never painted any Southern themes when I was down there. If you go to New Orleans there are two gallery scenes: the tourist one, with regional subjects, and the contemporary art scene, with big abstract paintings that look towards New York. I didn't want to be a regional Louisiana painter. But after having some distance and being in New York, you start to romanticize it a bit. You're like, "Yes, New Orleans is cool, and this is part of who I am."

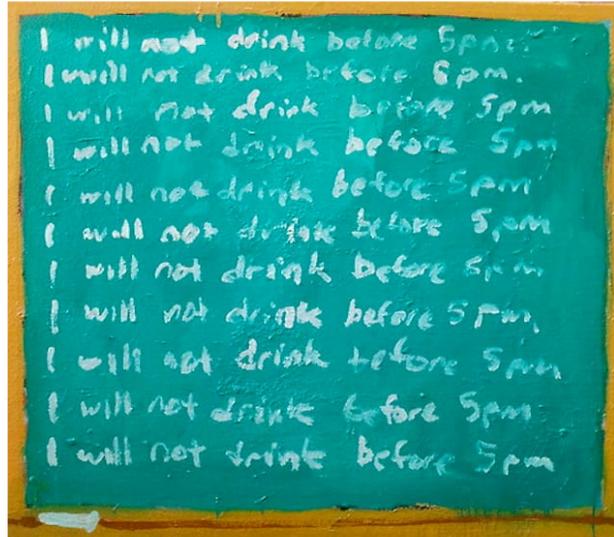
But I am not going to make political paintings about Hurricane Katrina. I don't know that the world needs that from me, and I feel ill-equipped as a painter to address it. I'd rather paint about the awesome things in Louisiana. I'd rather my painting world be babes and drinking, where everybody's got a smile on their face and they're licking each other. I don't think I am an overtly political artist.

JS: *Why is drinking such a compelling subject for you?*

TB: I spend a lot of my time at bars. I just do. And if you're my friend, you'll show up

in my paintings. I've got a buddy Dwain, who's from Alabama and has all these tattoos. We drink a ton of beers and talk through the issues. He is so much fun to paint.

When people are drinking in the paintings, there is action happening; it's not a passive scene. The paintings are about seizing the day. I lost my Catholic thing a long time ago. They are about mortality—knowing that you'll have to leave the party sometime—and considering how much fun you are going to have while you're there.



Todd Biennu, "I Will Not Drink Before 5" (2014), oil on canvas, 31.5 × 26 inches

The way I handle the paint lends itself to depicting the drinkers. I'd like to think that the freedom of the hand, the impatience of the mark, and the color range tend to work with a raucous subject. It started with the painting "Libertines" (2013), which was inspired by a Facebook photograph of metal boy friends of mine at a party in Bushwick. There was a drinking contest, and one of them is throwing up. There is a big table full of bottles—so, a still life—and behind that, are the figures. The figures mirror the bottles on the table. They are covered in shitty tattoos and wearing obscene T-shirts. In the photo, someone is mid-barf and you can see the reactions slowly move across the frame as people start to realize what's happening.

In the recent Piero della Francesca show at the Frick there was a painting of a bishop wearing a cape covered with small images from the life of Christ ("Saint Augustine," 1454-69). It made me realize I can paint this hairy metal dude and on his arm, make these little shapes, like drawings of babes or knives. I can write song lyrics on him. I can put something crazy or funny, or hidden messages, or drawings of other guys on there. And then he can wear a T-shirt and I can put something on his T-shirt. Then I can paint the bottles, and put hidden jokes in there.

So that painting was about that layering; and this, and this, and this. That is sort of a clue as to where the work is. It's ostensibly a gross painting of these crazy characters, but there's a tip of the hat to this old master painting that only a connoisseur might be aware of – a bit of high and low.





Todd Bienvenu, "Backseat" (2013), oil on canvas, 47 × 37.5 inches

It is about also about separating the action enough so that it tells another pictorial story. I like to make sex paintings; I've been trying to make sex paintings for as long as I can remember. But, if you just paint two people fucking on a bed, it doesn't work. The solution was eluding me until I realized that if you can find a way to separate it, by putting it on a television or computer or cell phone screen and painting it green, there's something that happens.

There's another painting I did of all these computer screens. It was people looking at forty computer screens with porn all over them – like a masturbatorium. I was thinking about Augusten Burroughs's book "Running with Scissors." The character sees a psychiatrist who has a room to jerk off in. The painting looked kind of like surveillance monitors but it also looked like a painting of a room at the Salon filled with lots of paintings in gilded frames.

JS: *Why do you think sex has always been such an important part of the subject matter in your work?*

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TB: It's on my mind and it's fun to paint! I don't want to get complacent. I don't want to fall in a place where you think, the space really works or the color is really fine, but it doesn't do anything. I want to make wonderful paintings or horrible paintings. So a lot of the paintings fail spectacularly. But I think that's important.

The paintings are about sex and death and enjoying your life. I want to paint about the big issues. Maybe as I mature, I'll be more interested in painting flowers or something. But it's really funny to paint a dick.

JS: *Yes. And your paintings are often hilarious. They really make me laugh.*

TB: Thank you. Humor is honesty. The real struggle for me is to get butt naked in the paintings, to be completely vulnerable. Whatever it is that is on my mind, whatever my concerns are, I don't want to hide from.

I did abstract paintings for a while, when I first got out of school. They started with an idea, but I would abstract it, and sort of hide behind the dexterity of the paint handling. I feel like I could be super comfortable making them, and they were just about paint, without anything for you to grip onto as far as a narrative, for lack of a better word. But it also is sort of alienating.

The earliest painting—cave painting—is very abstract, but it’s also a hand, or a deer. My instincts are that I’m a figurative painter. It took me a little while to be comfortable with my depiction of the figure. They start as abstract paintings and then they build up and at some point I’m like, “Oh shit, I know what this is.” Every time I put a mark down, it’s like, “That’s a hand, that’s a head.”

Over the summer I had this conversation with a girl about yoga. I was doing a painting and then I thought, “It’s a guy touching his toes. It’s a yoga painting.” I have no interest in yoga and it wasn’t a yoga painting before I knew her. If I hang out in the studio too long, I run out of momentum. I’ll go out, have an interesting conversation, see a show, have a drink, and then, in the paintings, this subconscious thing becomes apparent.

JS: *So your paintings begin abstractly?*

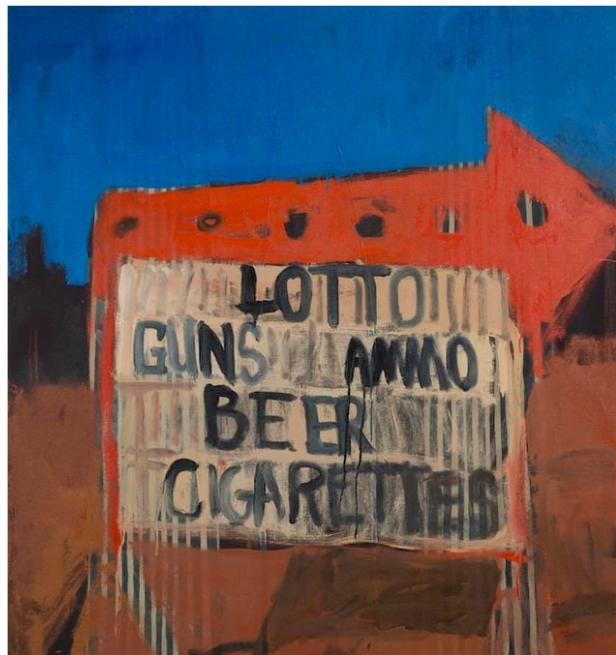
TB: Yes. I’ll look around the room and think, “I haven’t done a yellow painting in a while.” So I’ll mix up some yellow and start drawing with the yellow. Maybe the paintings will hang around for a long time, and I’ll read something, or think of something I would like to paint, and then I realize the painting is all set to be that.

I work on a bunch of things at once. I try to make to make them all one-shots. I paint the whole thing in one day. I’ll think, “This is so awesome. I’ve never painted anything this good.” Then, I’ll look at it in the morning and be like, “No, no, no. Nope.”

Sometimes I won’t know what to do with it, so it will kick around for a month or a year. I have a painting of this girl’s underwear, “Hustle” (2013), and it took me six years to paint. It’s a ten-inch painting. Then, when I finally painted on it the last time, I painted it in five minutes. I painted the legs and I painted the underwear and I painted the word “Hustle” onto it and the color was just right.

JS: *Tell me about the painting, “Measure Up,” which shows a guy’s penis being measured. You got a huge response when you posted an image of it on Facebook – people talking about how it only measured three increments on the ruler.*

TB: Yes, it got as many Facebook comments as I’ve ever gotten from a painting. I’d like to disconnect from social media more but it is nice to have instant critique on a work you’re unsure of. I’m trying to remember the circumstances of making it. I’d had a dry spell. Working on a lot of paintings at once, like I do, you can go for weeks or a month without finishing anything. Then suddenly, you’ll finish ten or twenty paintings within a couple days, and you’ve got a room full of finished paintings as opposed to walls of mud. As you paint, at times, the old answers become unsatisfying, so you have to find a more sophisticated solution to the old problem.





Todd Bienvenu, "Lotto" (2014), oil on canvas, 53 × 46 inches

From what I can remember, it had been about six weeks since I had finished a painting. All of a sudden, I finished this painting, of a naked man's torso with a penis, and a woman's hands holding a ruler up next to it. It was hilarious to me because it is such a silly painting. But, it was also a beautiful painting, and the solution felt sincere and heartfelt. The colors really sang and it all clicked abstractly. If I had sent a picture of it to my mom, she'd be like, "Oh, those are nice colors." That's how I know the painting works.

JS: *Ha! So you're dealing with either an avoidance of the story or people reading their own issues into it. It makes me think about the painting, "Boys will be Boys" (2014), which you have told me also got interesting interpretations.*

TB: Yes. It doesn't really matter what I think. Somebody told me the painting, "Boys Will Be Boys," of kids playing football in the backyard, was about Palestine. I was like, "Hmmm. That's funny. It totally could be. I could see that." To me it was a meandering abstract painting full of limbs and faces that didn't know what to be until I spent a week upstate with Meg Lipke, playing in the yard with her kids, looking at her paintings. A lot of her new works have a big form in the middle. I stole her compositional device and used the memory of backyard football to solve my painting.

Having a story gives it the personal thing; there's a narrative I can hold onto. Instead of just a pile of bodies, I know what the colors are going to be, what they're doing. And it is painted in a loose and fast and juicy way that speaks to the story. There is a painting language you have to be faithful to. What you see, or what your dreams are, or whatever the impetus is, is nice place to start. But in the course of making it, the painting has certain demands that must be fulfilled.

JS: *I think of Max Beckmann a lot when you talk, and what he said about his paintings always having subject matter but also something inexplicable.*

TB: Yes, Beckmann is definitely someone I have looked at a lot. I don't feel like I am treading anywhere new. There's a precedent for every place I'm walking. The artists that I look to aren't secret gems. But that is what painters do. We take. We're emotional vampires. In 2014, there's not a whole lot that hasn't been said through paint. But I haven't said it my way yet. So I will say it the way I say it. That's the beautiful thing about painting now. We can just let it rip.

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A Anonymous · 28 Sep 2014
Great paintings and great questions. I am drawn to the ideas of humor and abstract art in this work. There is a quality to the paint itself, apart from the narrative. Whenever I hear artists talk about abstract art in non-typical abstract art I go first to how the paint is handled and this paint, feels good. I get to the humor too in the narrative but also in the "touch" Todd has. Wish I could see these paintings in person because they look wicked good. Also, glad to hear Mr. Bienvenu is teaching. Sounds like he has a lot to offer.
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