

CONTENTS
ISSUE
TWENTY-
SIX

- 03 / Editorial
- 04 / Daniel Sturgis in conversation with Machiko Edmondson
- 10 / Andrew Grassie on Juan Bolivar
- 16 / Francis Bacon: Outside, Inside, and Around the Box by Colin Smith
- 24 / Rebecca Gilpin interviews Mary Heilman
- 30 / Still Life: Dan Howard-Birt on Georges Braque
- 38 / Matt Lippiatt in conversation with Cecily Brown
- 48 / Katie Pratt talks to Vivien Zhang
- 58 / Mitch Speed writes about Rebecca Watson Horn's Paintings
- 60 / Gareth Kemp on Caspar David Friedrich's 'Cairn in Snow'
- 64 / Charles Williams and Matthew Askey discuss The Funny Side
- 72 / Michael Szpakowski on a work by Antonio Dacosta
- 76 / Abstract/Figurative Paul Allender on George McNeil
- 78 / What is the Language using us for? Colin Smith on Flexboj and L.A.

ANDREW GRASSIE ON JUAN BOLIVAR

This notion of feeling and expressing two things at once – belief and doubt – is perhaps key to understanding Bolivar’s most recent works.

When I first met Juan Bolivar in 1985, we were both starry-eyed students at Saint Martins College of Art, excited by the hope that we could eventually join the pantheon of ‘great artists’ promoted at the time, but with very little idea of how to achieve this. Years later, our artistic paths crossed once more in a two-person show called *How to Paint* (1993), at the Kingsgate Gallery in Kilburn, London. Starting off with very different approaches to painting at Saint Martins, in this exhibition we found ourselves in a similar place, having both felt the need to empty out our practices; to completely ‘reset’ as it were. Unwittingly, we landed in a similar place, resorting to geometry, arithmetic contingencies, and mathematical chance to guide us. I was covering huge canvases with random printed numbers whilst Bolivar had created grids generating letter-like forms. The ambiguous title of the show betrayed both our confidence in the world of art we wished to be immersed in, whilst also expressing the doubt that this reality was as solid as we had once hoped.

This notion of feeling and expressing two things at once – belief and doubt – is perhaps key to understanding Bolivar’s most recent works. They are a form of ‘full disclosure’, he admits, and in the spirit of confession he declares his equal admiration for Disney cartoons and mid-century modernist art from America.

In his most recent solo show,

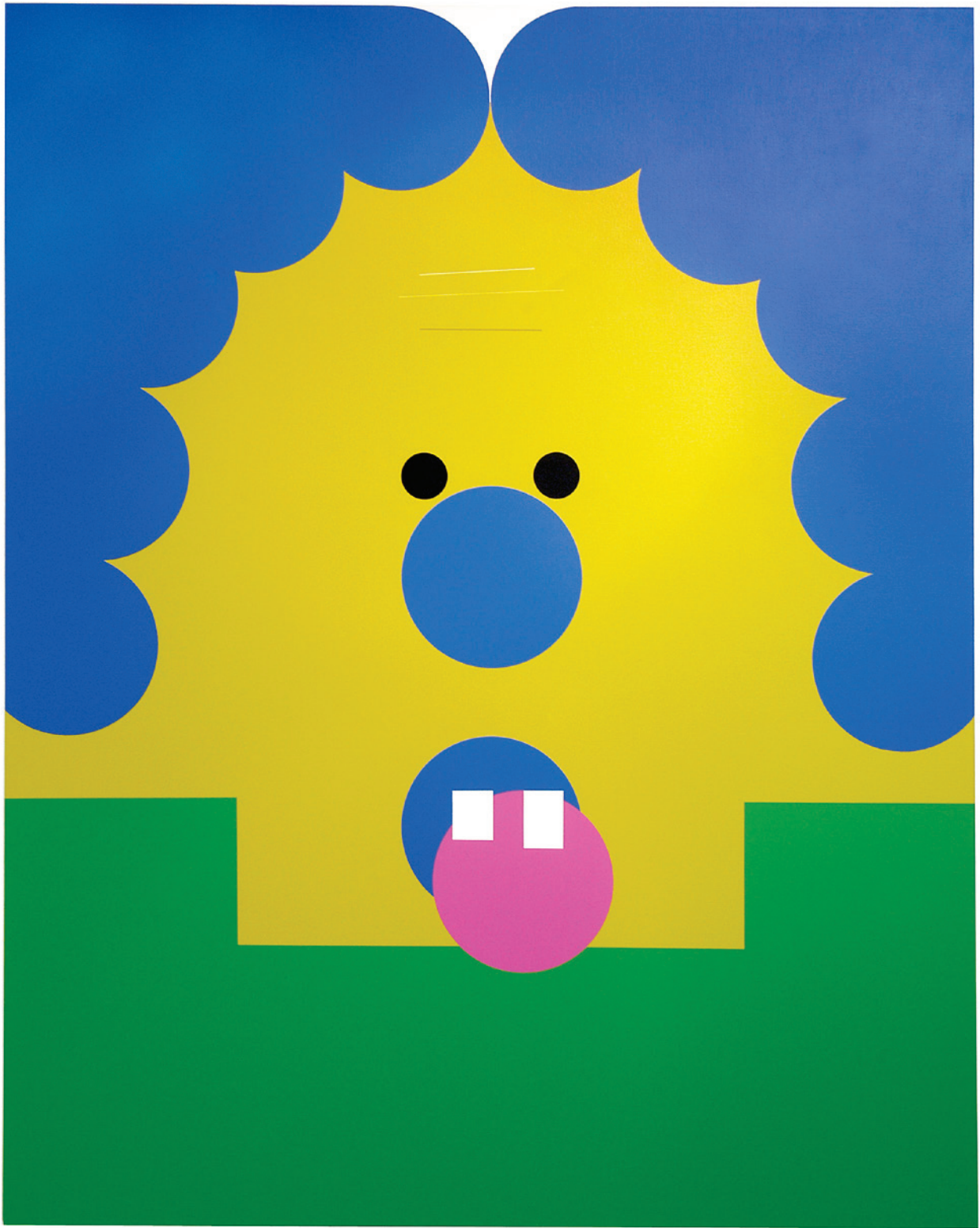
Powerage, shown at JGM Gallery, London in 2021, Bolivar managed to crystallise this by presenting the clearest convergence of his influences to date, including a further connection suggested here, to the cartoon-like character of the *predella*: a panel of five or six images often found below the main altarpiece in early Renaissance art. Bolivar decided to link his new body of work together through a particular reference to Duccio’s famous *Maestà* (1308-1311). Using the titles of the mediaeval panels and some elements of their composition, Bolivar presents a labyrinthian network of visual and textual references.

To arrive at this involved a long process of thumbing through his collection of art books to find a suitable archetypal, abstract painting to scale up, carefully matching the colours with his acrylic paints and replicating the work as a taped-out version on canvas. He explained to me that he then sits with this image until he recognises the potential for the simulated version to become the figurative backdrop for an encounter with a cartoon character. At some point in the process, a title from one of Duccio’s panels would be recalled, which in turn would influence the selection and precise positioning of the cartoon character, thus completing this associative triangulation.

In his painting *Lazarus* (2020-21), for example, the insertion of Tweety Pie into a Kenneth Noland abstraction is not just a standard exercise in intertextuality, but also a deeply-felt and personal re-calculation of that which he values most dearly. He is, in a sense, merely inviting strangers into a party and introducing them to one another. Kenneth Noland’s famous target motif is now permitted (if not forced), to enter into a literal relationship with the cartoon bird. It becomes an angry eyeball or some sign for surveyance in contrast to the doleful eyes of Tweety Pie. And then the title *Lazarus*? If we were to seek out Duccio’s version, we might recognise

Opposite:
Bushman
2004
Acrylic on canvas
190 x 160 cm

Photo by Steve Shrimpton
Courtesy of the artist





Locusts
2021
Acrylic on canvas
72 x 69 cm

*Photo by Steve Shrimpton
Courtesy of the artist*

the compositional similarity between a crouching figure in the foreground and the cartoon bird, or perhaps even between the halo of Christ and Noland's target. It's as if these divergent sources are slowly getting to know each other. So, in Bolivar's world Snoopy can now rest asleep on one of Josef Albers' *Cubes*, almost seamlessly transferred from his famous kennel. Woodstock, the small yellow bird, can wander merrily through a cage made from Mondrian's black grid lines whilst the white-gloved hand of Mickey Mouse appears to pull back the curtain within a Morris Louis *Veil* painting.

In Bolivar's work *Angel* (2020-21), Goofy appears to exit the scene of the Barnett Newman painting *Eve* (1950), using the brown stripe or 'zip' as a theatrical flat, amusingly adding literal space to the work. Newman's original painting was first exhibited at Betty Parsons in 1951. Bolivar playfully refers to an anonymous photograph, taken at the gallery opening, of the artist nervously peering round the gallery entrance. The show had gone down badly, not only with the critics, but more importantly, with his peers, sending Newman into a depression from which he would never recover. In a further meta-spiralling of associations, *Eve* is an antecedent to Newman's most famous *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue* series of works whose title references the 1962 play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, which in turn references the 1933 Disney song *Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf*.

In all this, Bolivar repeats that his paintings are not to be mistaken for postmodern parodies of a modernist approach to art. He's not so much undermining Newman's and Noland's aspirations as extending his own relationship to them by tracing common routes and convergent lineages, deliberately drawing connections from his own personal memory bank of visual images to further interrogate what they might mean.

During his formative years growing up in Caracas, Venezuela, Bolivar was exposed to a melting pot of cultural forms. He recalls how Venezuela's attitude to the heavy American influence was exemplified by the fact that *Usnavy* became a popular boys name after a reading (or misreading) of the logo on the side of US military vessels anchored off the coast. This cheeky mistranslation is typical of a gentle disarming of authority. Bolivar also recounts how he would visit his parents at work in the Universidad Central de Venezuela, or Ciudad Universitaria, designed by the acclaimed modernist architect Carlos Raúl Villanueva under the influence of Le Corbusier. He remembers drawing from the various geometrically-designed murals by the likes of Calder, Arp, Vasarely, etc., adorning the walls of the university campus, and later reimagining them at home. Then at the age of ten, Bolivar was confined to bed for a year due to a bout of hepatitis. Far from finding his confinement boring, it gave him the perfect excuse to spend long days reading and copying from comics such as *Astérix*, until he knew the drawings by heart and started to create his own.

Regaining contact with these sources would only happen in earnest some thirty years later after a series of conversations with influential artist and teacher Gerard Hemsworth at the start of his MA at Goldsmiths. These conversations allowed Bolivar to realise the unfolding potential contained in his geometric compositions, being introduced, moreover, to artists such as Peter Halley and David Diaó, with whom he has been in contact ever since. It is clear to Bolivar that his work really began with his painting *Bushman* (2003), which consists of a series of simplified geometric forms scattered over the canvas to create what appears to be the face of a surprised man with his tongue hanging out. How we recognise that it's a tongue, or that the man is surprised, or even that *it is* a



Angel
2021
Acrylic on canvas
190 x 158 cm

*Photo by Damian Griffiths
Courtesy of the artist*

man is where the associative magic comes in. The fact that it can also recall both Marge Simpson and Dougal from the *Magic Roundabout* illustrates how attuned we are to spotting cultural similarities and meaning in visual forms.

The paradox in Bolivar's most recent work is that the more direct his approach to imagery the more space there seems for ambiguity and play. He carefully guides us through perplexing scenarios, discreetly and overtly feeding us associations, and carefully guiding our expectations. These are paintings of paintings: the imaginary distance allowing a sense of freedom from the responsibility of the authentic and original echoed by the technique of taping and stencilling (ostensibly removing much of the 'touch' seen as so important for a painter). However, this sense of 'touch' is only displaced, not replaced, just as the paintings' latent originality could be considered a more honest and revealing assessment of his sources. After all, in a world so saturated by images, it could be argued as inauthentic to ignore them. (After all, in a world so saturated by images it could be argued as inauthentic not to incorporate some of them into one's art.)

The paintings' museum-like scale and complex construction unfold as we stand before them. Bolivar explains the excitement of unpeeling the tape to reveal just where the image has landed as much of the work is made 'blind' as it were, covered up with tape until the last minute. There is still a sense of jeopardy and chance in all this; still a need for improvisation and response. There is no plan before a painting starts. The slow build-up of each image affords Bolivar the opportunity to decide just how much to include, and conversely when to leave things out to evoke maximum meaning. *The Healing of the Blind* (2021) is a good example of this. Josef Albers' painting *Homage to the Square* (1962) frames the head of Donald Duck, reminiscent of

the way the concentric circles of the closing sequences to many Looney Tunes cartoons operate. It's the "*That's all Folks*" moment. Donald's eyes however are missing, indicating the blindness suggested by the title. Somewhere in all this mix, Bolivar noticed the duck's head's strange resemblance to a famous cap worn by another Donald in presidential rallies at the time. Thus, a weird synchronicity builds up in obvious and sometimes not-so-subtle ways. The trick is in recognising it and knowing when the obvious is less than obvious, remaining sublimely amusing and bewildering.



Andrew Grassie
Diving Suit, Loch Ness
 2022
 Egg tempera on paper on board
 28 x 21 cm
 38.7 x 31.8 cm (incl frame)

© Andrew Grassie
 Courtesy of the artist