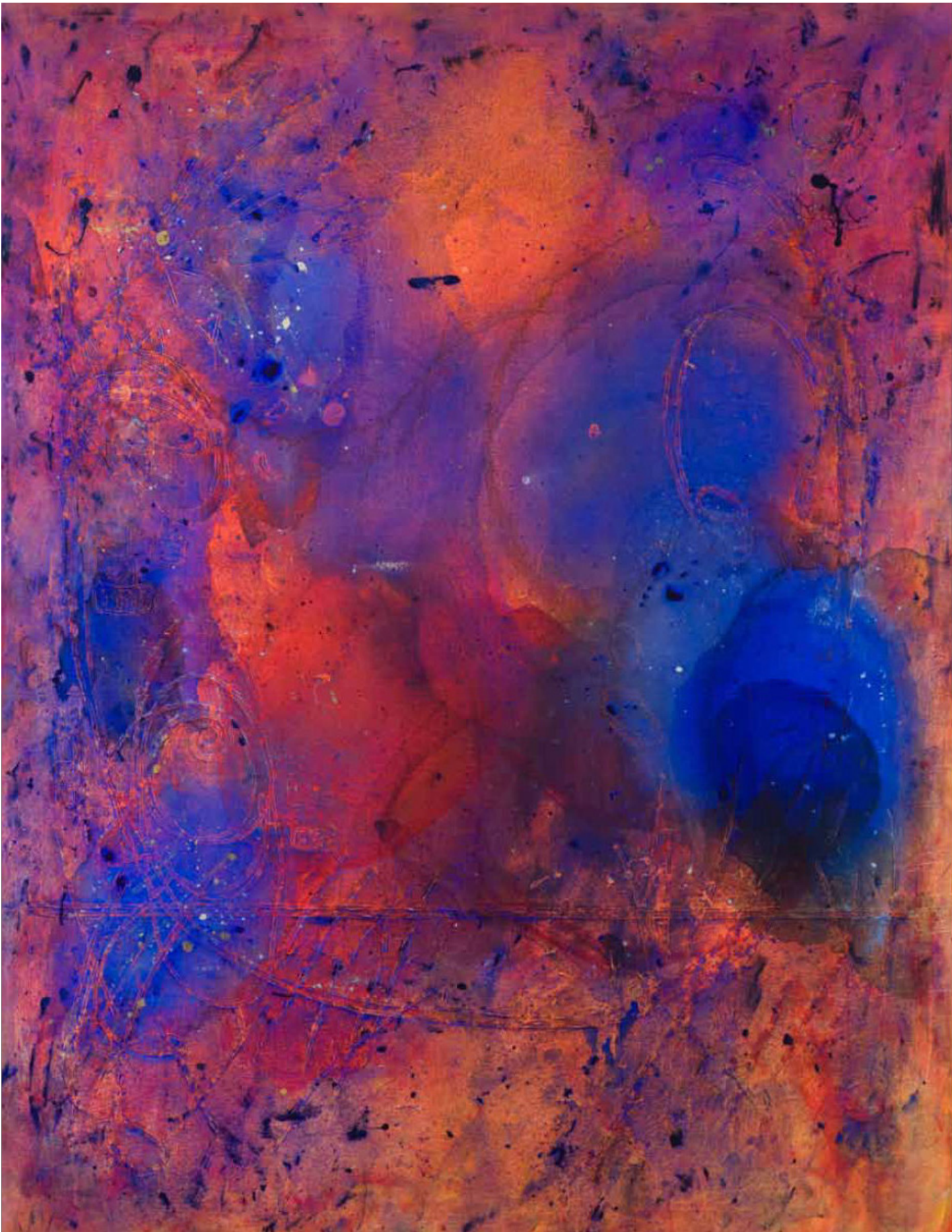


WINTER 2014

# ARTNOTES

LOU BERMINGHAM  
7th Anniversary Issue



# LOU BERMINGHAM

## THE COMPASSIONATE WARRIOR

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I create an object and release it out into the larger world with the intention of sending something joyous. I feel there's a certain energetic charge that goes out when you do something positive.

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**Diamond Head**  
acrylic, 95 x 74in., 2011

Behind the anonymous roll-up door of a windowless industrial warehouse space, Lou Bermingham performs the physical and mental exercises central to his longtime Aikido practice. Designed to prepare the practitioner to receive, merge, and harmlessly re-direct an enemy's attack, Bermingham employs the unifying focus of this martial art towards his painting. There is nothing of the self-conscious painter-as-shaman pose about the artist. He's low-key and thoughtful as well as quick to laugh and conversationally generous. Our discussion revealed a man who is balancing many earthbound responsibilities – family, full-time job, intermittent financial worries – with a dedicated painters' life.

For years his studio was near a creek at the edge of the redwoods of the Santa Cruz Mountains, a run-down shack of a building in a ghost town called Holy City. He became a highly skilled stained glass artisan there, first experimenting with color-driven abstraction in flat glass before translating that approach to painting. As a Californian who has never been far from natural beauty, Bermingham says he "needs a body of water

by **Kathleen Loe**

around". Although now cloistered in his Santa Cruz industrial studio, the ocean is near and he's grateful to have a stand of olive trees planted in the complex.

Caves seem an unlikely place for the imagination of a west coast painter to lodge, but Bermingham loves caving, affectionately refers to his studio as one, and feels deeply connected to the monumental imagery of Lascaux. He has developed a vocabulary of symbols culled from dreams and intuitive preparatory drawing. Both personal and universal, these shapes are also repeatedly found in Paleolithic cave paintings and ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics. "Information travels" he says, referring to his belief in a collective unconscious. A focused meditation each year identifies an animal totem whose spirit and image he will use in the work.

During our interview he revealed a childhood rich in an everyday acceptance of the mysterious. His

[right] **Perfect Curvature of the Earth**, acrylic, 24 x 36in. each panel (triptych), 2012

[below] **The Deep**, acrylic, 112 x 79in., 2011



mother, a French woman with a passion for culture shared with her children, was also clairvoyant. (More pragmatic, his Irish-American father carried a post-Depression fear and reverence over the power of money to hold society, and family, afloat.) Drawing constantly as a young boy, Bermingham's earliest subjects were martyrs and devils. A thunderbolt came at sixteen from seeing a densely blue Yves Klein in a Paris museum. It was during

his college year abroad in Aix-en-Provence that he first encountered Aikido with its life-affirming philosophy and precise physical training. Later he lived an extended time in Egypt and visited Morocco, exhilarated by the pattern and color. As a mature artist he deeply respects the work of Elizabeth Murray, Sigmar Polke, and Mimmo Paladino. Although Bermingham's practice does not share the formal rigor of Murray or the wide-ranging appetite for irony and material experimentation of Polke and Paladino, he is keyed-in to the powerful ability of their work to communicate through rough and tumble expressionist form and virtuoso juxtapositions. Bermingham's teaching is inspired by Joseph Beuys' concept that every human being is an artist. As a full-time high school art instructor, Bermingham is devoted to his students' self-realization through art making.

The chromatic charge and textural armature of his current paintings are fueled by internal sources; titles typically "are heard" during the making of work and are associational more than descriptive. Occasionally, though, they are anecdotal and funny. In *She's Still There* a stormy Payne's grey and ultramarine blue field surrounds a gestural, de Kooning-ish portal (think *Door to the River*). In the early stages of the painting, Bermingham got things going with loose drawing made in raised relief lines of acrylic medium. Part of this initial activity



(left) **Sphinx**  
acrylic, 47 x 63in., 2013

included a stylized image of the goddess Isis. These early figural outlines form a quiet narrative-within-the-narrative. Weeks later as he continued to pour, splatter, and glaze many layers of color, he noticed, "oh, she's still there..."

In the studio, necessity often being the mother, Bermingham needed a use for several randomly sized canvases. This led to experiments with diptych and triptych forms. *Perfect Curvature of the Earth* emerged across three vertical canvases, visually and metaphorically linked by a large wonky oval. This symbol for abundance and creativity is drifting across the sky portion of a fluid landscape. He earns some tension from the up-and-out directional exchange of strong vertical and horizontal simultaneity.

Bermingham likes to have several canvases going at the same time to keep his energy flowing and to establish a useful problem-solving matrix. As he works, the resolution of figure and ground is suspended until his practiced instinct settles on the issue. This delayed search for gravity continued for over a year in *Sphinx*. Finally, the dark areas of paint pooled around the ancient totemic images in a way that suggested the weighty form of this Egyptian mythical creature. He explained that a work is done when he gets a feeling in his solar plexus that the painting has reached a non-verbal harmony of intention and materiality.

The years of disciplined Aikido practice have trained Bermingham to merge the sensory beauty of nature with its unseen forces. In hefty paintings like *The Deep* and *Diamond Head*, luminous pools of color accrue saturation from strategized chromatic overlays. Like hot air balloons, they need the ballast of the underlying bas-relief drawing to collect and organize their efflorescence. The topography of the painting might resemble California's ocean and mountain terrain, but the artist's ultimate intention is to express an ageless joy in our primal creative instincts.

Lou Bermingham continues to fuse ancient symbols, present-day dream imagery and expansive arenas of aqueous color. He denies any religious meaning or intent to the paintings. When asked what he wants from the viewer, "I create an object and release it out into the larger world with the intention of sending something joyous. I feel there's a certain energetic charge that goes out when you do something positive." His unpretentious, sometimes garrulous dialogue about his work and life left me with something like that— a sense of being thrown an uncanny hardball right into the sweet spot of the mitt.

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