

Interview with artist Ben Schonzeit

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Interviewer: Jessica Csanky

Jessica Csanky: Where and when were you born?

Ben Schonzeit: I was born in Brooklyn, New York on May 9, 1942. I have never lived anywhere else than New York City for more than a month or so.

Jessica Csanky: How did you become an artist?

Ben Schonzeit: It never was a choice; I always was an artist. It was the only thing that I did not have to learn. I was the kid who was painting Santa Claus on the windows in the fourth grade. I grew up near the Brooklyn Museum, which is one of the great museums of America, and at a young age I saw mummies and other fascinating things that appealed to my nine-year-old self. I sat on the floor with my classmates, newsprint pad, charcoal, and pencils and created art. I also grew up surrounded by paintings that my parents kept in the house, some of which were actually stolen during a break-in.

Jessica Csanky: You were exposed to art from a very young age.

Ben Schonzeit: Yes, my mother was a nightclub singer and my father was a fireman, but he also had a wonderful eye and owned a used furniture store for some time. He bought exciting antiques and objects. Once, he looked at that painting and said, "You know, there is something here. I am not interested in paintings, but I will give you 10 dollars for the frame." The work was by the Hudson River School painter, John Frederick

Kensett. If we had that painting today it would be worth 70,000-80,000 dollars. I keep hoping that it will show up at auction.

Jessica Csanky: When you were young, you had an injury to your eye that changed your life. Would you be willing to discuss?

Ben Schonzeit: When I was five, I stuck an ice pick in my eye and lost it. During that time, I had to stay in the house and could not handle great sunlight. As a kid, I had crayons, model airplanes and clay. With my time, I drew and made sculptures of houses, airplanes, and boats. I developed the capacity to entertain myself and became an artist. I think that the accident gave me some understanding of mortality from a young age.

Jessica Csanky: How do you think that mortality influences an artist's expression?

Ben Schonzeit: I think that artists ultimately want to express life and illuminate a certain celebration of what we see and how we live. There is an excitement and preciousness to experience.

Jessica Csanky: Did you choose to study art at a higher level?

Ben Schonzeit: When I went to college I began as an architecture major. I already knew how to create art. My parents thought that I would be able to make a living studying architecture, so I gave them a year of architectural school before switching over to fine arts.

Jessica Csanky: Do you think that studying art in school was pivotal to your success as an artist today?

Ben Schonzeit: I think so. The challenges that my teachers presented to me broadened my vision. Most of my teachers were Abstract Expressionists. Some were Figurative. The combination of styles was interesting. In school I was attracted in cubist form: Matisse-like and Picasso-like work.

Jessica Csanky: How did you get your first professional break?

Ben Schonzeit: I went to see Ivan Karp, who at the time was the director of the very prestigious Leo Castelli gallery in New York. When I showed him my art, I presented a few different styles. He said, "Do 20 more of these and then come see me." Ivan eventually opened his own gallery called OK Harris. When I went to see Ivan in SoHo, I showed him the 20 pieces. At this point, I was using photographs to make paintings. I was also teaching at James Madison High School in Brooklyn. I had my first solo exhibition at French and Company in about 1970. A dealer in Berlin saw my work, which led to an exhibition there, and then Hamburg followed by Cologne and many museums throughout Europe.

Jessica Csanky: How would you describe your artwork?

Ben Schonzeit: I am an abstract artist who believes that art should represent something. I love abstraction, and sometimes even wonder why don't I do it professionally; it is much easier to produce [than Photorealism]. My parents used to look at my abstract art and say: "I know it must be good because you did it, but I don't get it." What I have discovered through photography is that I need my artwork to refer to something. Though Picasso was an abstract artist, he thought that art should reference something and tell a story. I come from the same foundation. On a similar note, Ivan Karp talked about the

universal movement of Pop: a major force that precipitated the modern art world. He described Warhol's work as creating "transcendent quotidian epiphany." I think that idea is what Photorealism is all about: discovery and enlightenment focused on the every day. This is what I do. My work gives evidence of my life and what I perceive life to be like. I love how great paintings become like old friends. You sit down with them and five years later, it's as if you saw them just yesterday.

Jessica Csanky: What has inspired your recent paintings, which beautifully depict blurred imagery?

Ben Schonzeit: I think that is how we actually see in the world. Although focus might be sharp, the rest is blurry. A great percentage of visual experience is vague and I wanted to concentrate on that. I was looking at old pictures, because today is my son's birthday, and a lot of the images were out of focus. I thought, "Wow. I have got to paint these." However, creating these paintings is a tremendous challenge. They are very very difficult. Essentially, I have to paint something that I can't see, and the brain doesn't like this.

Jessica Csanky: Would you like to discuss your relationship to photography: an art form that is deeply connected to your paintings?

Ben Schonzeit: I look for paintings with my camera. I am a serious photographer, but that comes second to being a painter. I take photographs like a painter and think that artists see the world differently from most people, catching things that others might not. In fact, when I photograph, sometimes people think that I am taking pictures of nothing. However, I approach photography as though it is a way of shining a light onto the invisible. Photography puts me into a zone and a state

of flow that is always about the moment. It captures time, whereas a painting takes time. Paintings are crafted by hand and are all about interpretation. They are slower to make and elicit a different sense of time and energy.

Jessica Csanky: Is there anyone in particular who has shaped your artistic career and path?

Ben Schonzeit: There are many people. First, Velázquez. Picasso and Matisse would be the strongest influences, though they are at opposite ends of the spectrum [from Velázquez]. The only reason I am not a sculptor is because I love Brancusi too much; after him was nothing left to do! Photographers and writers also influenced me and some of my favorite painters are Rothko, Barnett Newman, and De Kooning.

Jessica Csanky: What is your biggest challenge to overcome as an artist?

Ben Schonzeit: When I am creating a Photorealist painting, I feel inclined to paint something big and sloppy. Photorealism is a very disciplined form of artwork.

Jessica Csanky: That is why Photorealism moves me; the patience involved is extreme, and the end product is spectacular.

Ben Schonzeit: It takes commitment.