

## Joshua Abelow on Joshua Abelow: 1982 - 2022

As told to Jonathan Orozco at Baader- Meinhof  
Omaha, Nebraska  
April 8th, 2022

### OUTSIDE

The painting that's outside on the porch is the biggest work in the exhibition, and the title of the piece is *Tree*. I made it in 2002, back in New York City.

In a lot of ways, this show is my version of *The Truman Show*, and I am Truman. What I mean is that it's a very personal show, and it's very revealing.

There's the inclusion of all this childhood work as well as some personal memorabilia like a 3rd place creativity award I won at the mall in 1983. I identified as an artist early on, and obviously stuck with it. The exhibition showcases all these periods of my life.

I finished college in 1998. I went to RISD, and at the very beginning of 1999, I moved to New York and got a job working for Ross Bleckner. I discovered his work in a book at the RISD library and got interested. I wrote Ross fan mail when I was a RISD senior, he wrote me back, and when I moved to New York I got a job working for him as an assistant. It was a big deal to me at the time. And that was where I worked for seven years.

I made a number of these paintings during that time. I had studio space in his building, and this painting here, *Laughing Heads* (1999) was made in the basement of 77 White Street, a building Ross owned for several decades. This was a breakthrough piece for me. In 1998 I was making work in a Neo-Expressionist style. I was pretty good at it, but I felt like it was student work and did not want to go further in that direction.



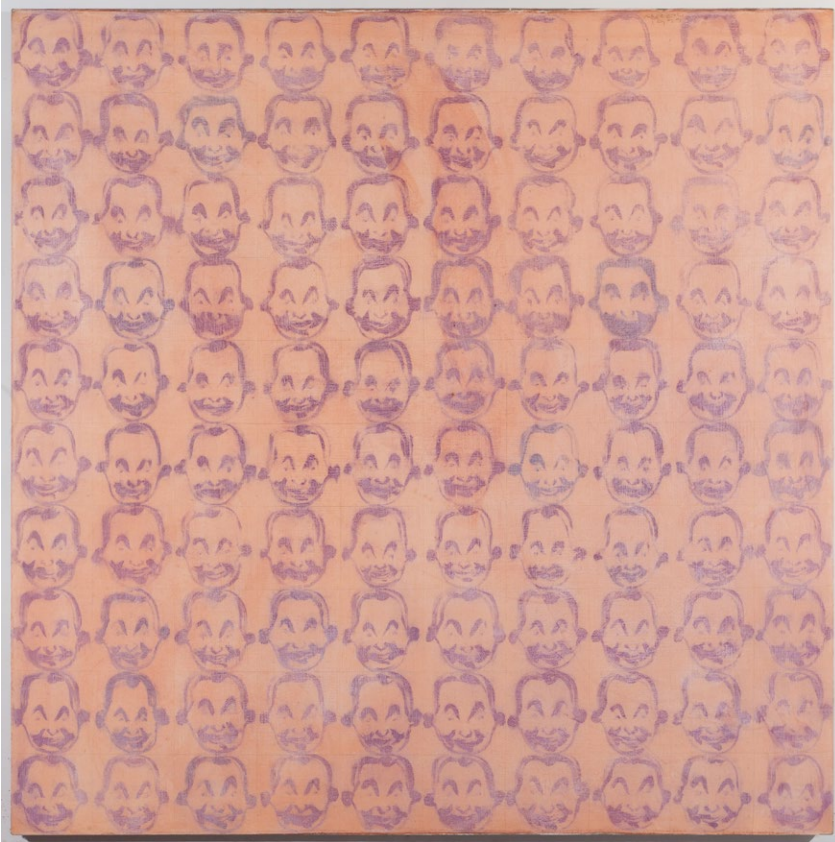
Installation view of *Tree*, 2002 at Baader-Meinhof, Omaha.

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## FIRST FLOOR

*Laughing Heads* is the first painting that came from a conceptual approach. I wanted to repeat the image of that laughing face without using a printmaking technique because I was interested in repeating the same action over and over. I wanted the painting to have the feeling of a comforting old blanket, but at the same time wanted the work to have a disturbing quality, an almost mocking, self-aware painting that mocks itself and the viewer. That's the key to how my work has evolved over the last 20 years – everything I do has self-referentiality.



*Untitled (Laughing Heads)*, 1999. Oil on linen. 60 x 60 in.

This is a piece I made when I was a sophomore in college (1995). It's an early iteration of what would later become a motif in my work, the witch. This painting is interesting because I didn't set out to make a witch. Working intuitively, this image appeared, and when I came back to the witch many years later, I wasn't thinking about this painting. That's the other thing about this show that's interesting – there are certain conceptual and visual threads that come and go throughout the years, but it's not something that's forced. It's something that happens because I'm the same person.



*Untitled*, 1995. Oil on linen. 20 x 16 in.

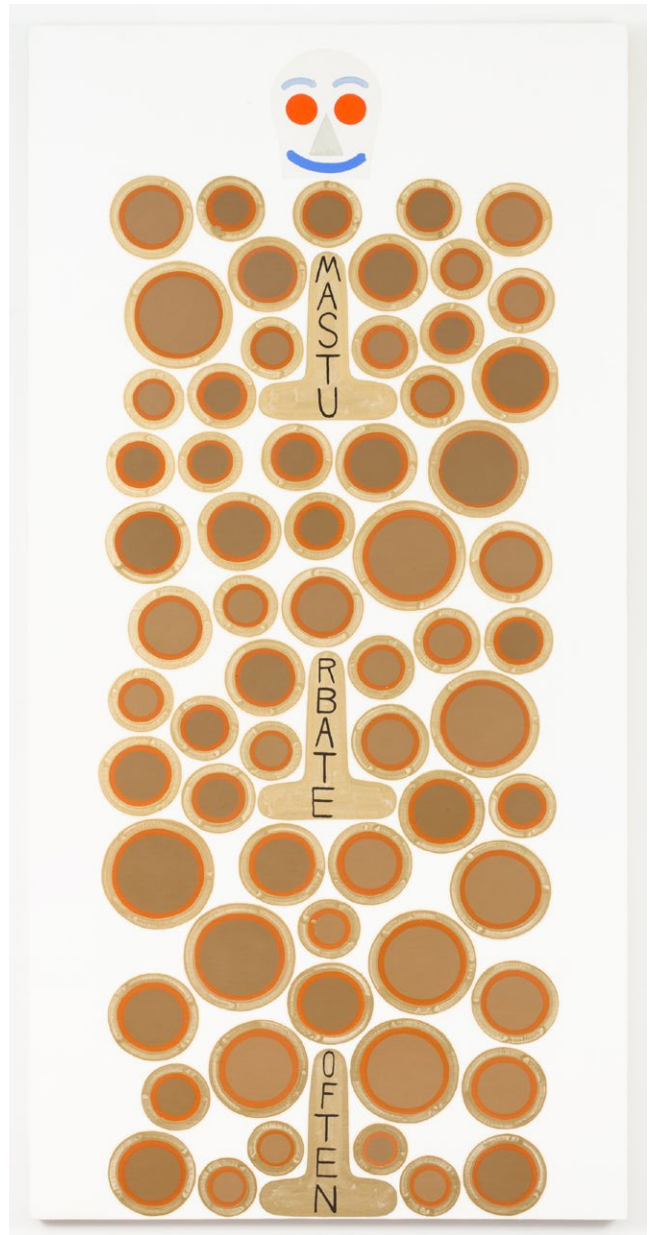
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These two paintings are also from the early 2000s. This is a painting called *Releasing Tension* and this painting is called *Masturbate Often*. I think these paintings have a lot to do with frustration I was feeling as an artist. Making work was frustrating for various reasons, and at times, it could feel very masturbatory and egotistical. I was interested in making paintings that were self-critical. The scale of these two paintings is something



*Releasing Tension*, 2003. Oil on linen. 96 x 48 in.

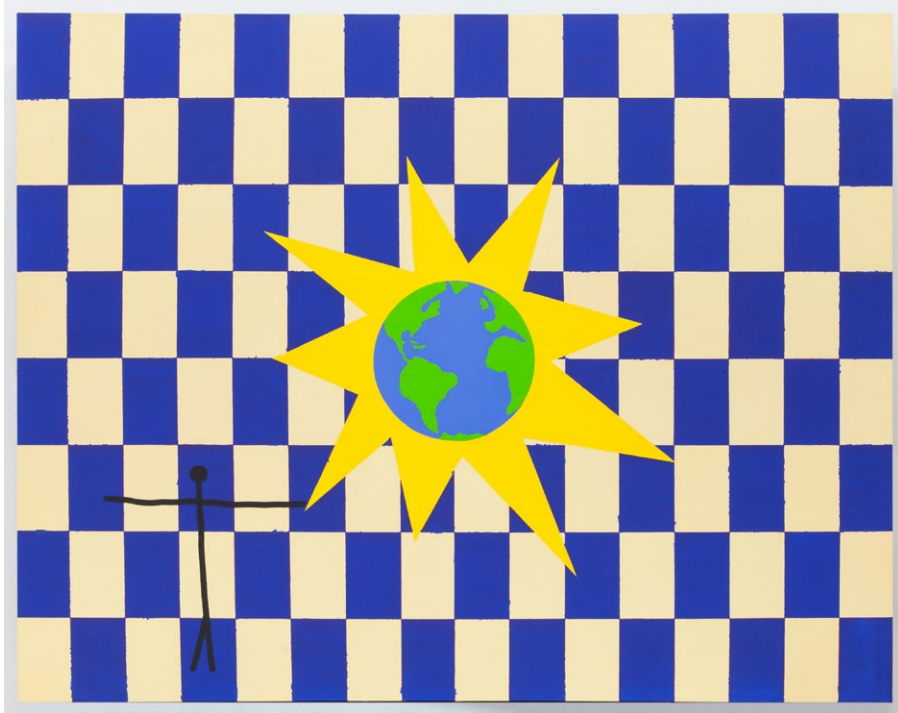


*Masturbate Often*, 2007. Oil on linen on linen, 96 x 48 in.

that's stuck with me over the years. I am often drawn to vertically formatted paintings because they read like windows, doorways, or portals into another world, as opposed to horizontal paintings which tend to read as landscapes. I also think the vertical format has a lot to do with how we look at images on iPhones. Of course, iPhones didn't exist in the early 2000s, but they do now.

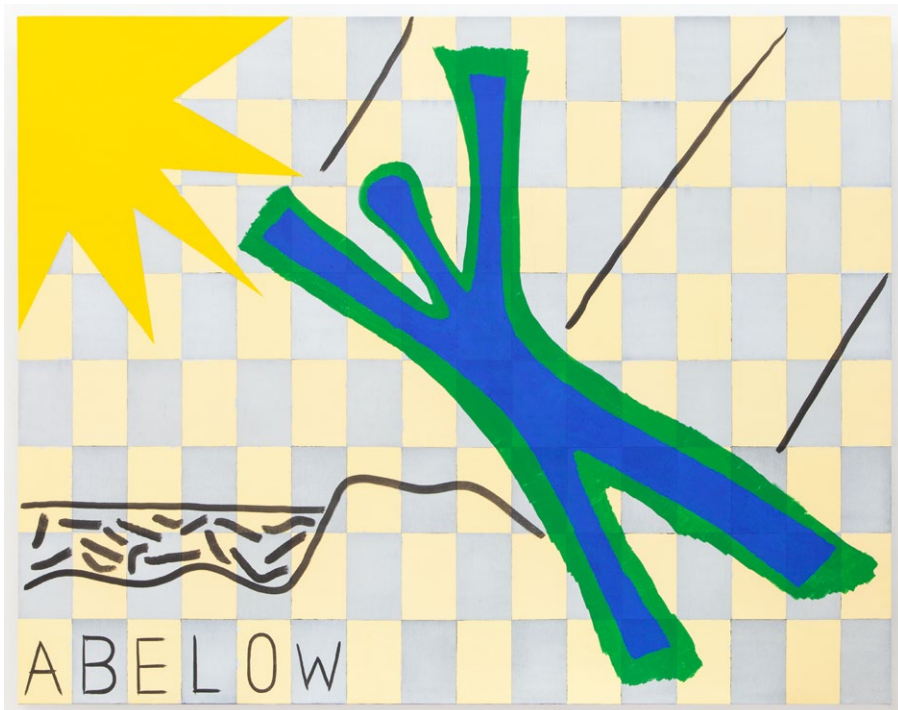
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*Planet Earth*, 2019. Oil on linen, 78 x 98 in.

These two paintings are called *Planet Earth* and *Letting Go*. Both paintings were made at the tail end of 2019, and they read as a diptych, although that wasn't something I thought about beforehand.



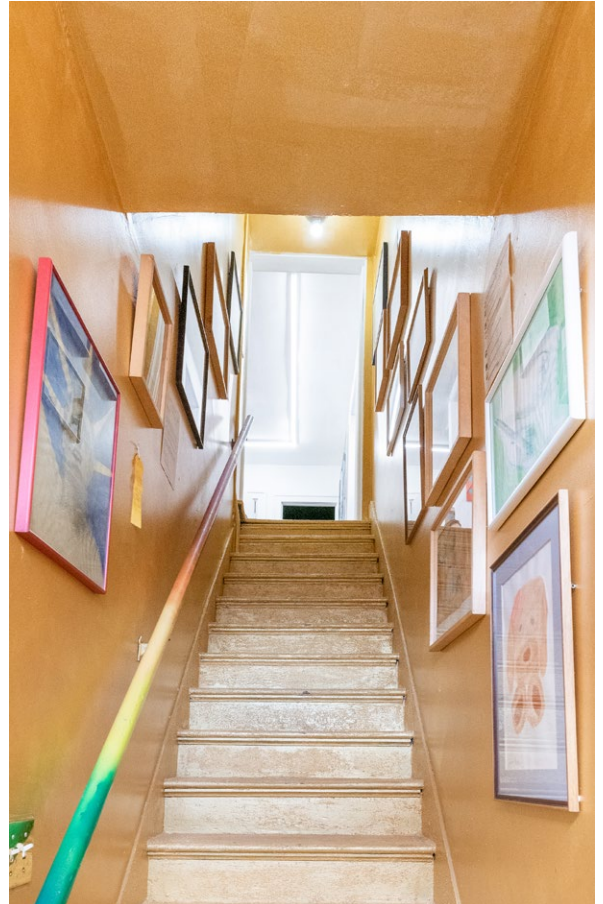
*Letting Go*, 2020. Oil on linen, 78 x 98 in.

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## HALLWAY

One of the reasons I was attracted to having the show in Omaha and working with Kyle is because we both run art galleries out of our homes. I live and work in an old church in upstate New York where I run a gallery called Freddy. I'm really interested in art exhibitions taking place in unusual or off the beaten path locations. I think in the last couple of years, there have been more and more contemporary art galleries opening in "out of the way" places all over the country. I find that really interesting as an artistic statement in itself. And to do it inside the home, there's this mixing of the art space and the domestic space, and the private space and the public space. This exhibition deals with those concerns.



Installation view of gallery hallway.



*Self-Portrait*, 1994. Oil pastel on paper. 22 x 17 3/4 in.

In the hallway, I wanted to mimic that vibe like when you go to your friend's mom's house and there are old family photos or childhood artworks lining the walls. In this hallway, there is a self-portrait that I made in 1994 when I was a senior in high school. Most of these other works were made in the 80s when I was a kid. This is my 1982 school report from elementary school. It's saying that I still print my name in all caps, but the objective is to use upper and lowercase letters appropriately. I'm still struggling with that one.

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## SECOND FLOOR

I like the arrangement of these small paintings because it relates to the grids you see in the paintings downstairs, and I wanted to make that connection. 12 x 9 inches is a size I like and I've stuck with it for quite a while. I think the earliest painting in the grid is from 2008 and the most recent ones are from 2022.



Installation view of 12 x 9 grid on the second floor of the gallery.



*Below in Luxury*, 2016. Oil on linen. 80 x 60 in.

They are all mixed up with no chronological order. One of the things I like to do is to set rules. I think that's what this installation is all about – it's showing just how much can be done with a very specific limitation such as the size of the canvas.

This painting is from 2016. The face in the large *Below in Luxury* painting is taken from an early Clyfford Still painting and I made it my own. That's another thing I do a lot – I'll take something from art history and I'll change it in some way.



Clyfford Still  
*PH-171*, 1944  
Oil on canvas  
57 5/8 x 27 1/4 inches

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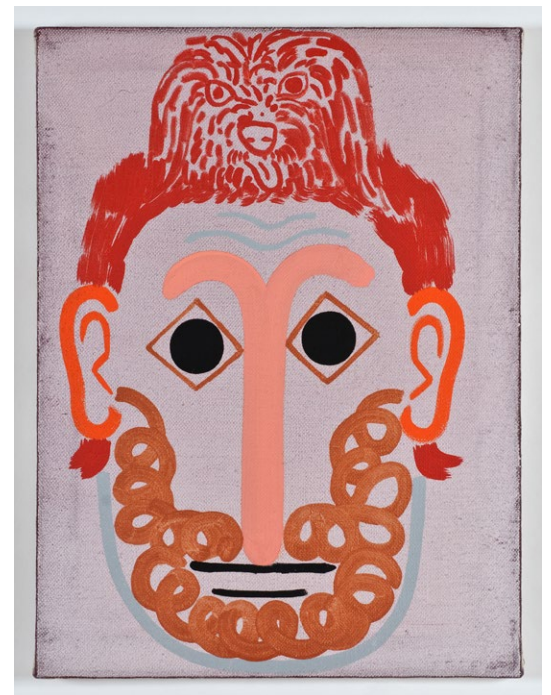
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*Running Witch*, 2016. Oil on linen. 80 x 60 in.

*Running Witch* is a funny one because I think I just googled “Halloween Witch.” What’s interesting is that you can take something that’s familiar in pop culture, and you can make it unfamiliar and make it feel new, make it feel different. With this particular body of work, the *Running Witches*, it was a matter of combining two familiar things in a way that would be unfamiliar.

This is another self-portrait (2007) with my dog Georgia (RIP) on top of my head.



*Self-Portrait*, 2007. Oil on linen. 24 x 18 in.

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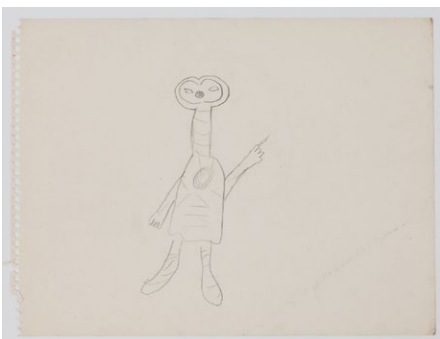


Installation view of *E.T.*, 1982 presented at the far end of the gallery's storage closet.



*E.T. Painting*, 2021. Oil on linen. 35 x 70 in.

This is the earliest work in the show from 1982. It's a drawing of E.T. that I made after seeing the movie. I'm taking something from popular culture and making it my own, but in this case, I was doing it as a five-year-old. More recently, I made a whole group of paintings, some of which are currently being exhibited at A.D. NYC in New York. These E.T. Paintings are obviously referring to the movie, but they're also referring to my five-year-old self experiencing the film for the first time.



*E.T.*, 1982. Pencil on paper. 9 x 12 in.

The original 1982 drawing is staged in the back of this walk-in closet (painted all black), illuminated by a small spot light from above.

The beginning at the end.

- Joshua Abelow, 2022