

Solid, Liquid, and In Between: *The Frag Sculptures of Joe Bussell*

Joe Bussell: Frags at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art continues the institution's forward-facing practice of bringing the art of our time into conversation with the ideas and challenges of the same. Former Museum Director and Chief Curator, Bruce Hartman, has selected twenty-one of more than fifty works in the *Frag* series by Joe Bussell, who holds a BFA in painting from the University of Kansas and MFA in both painting and ceramics from Washington University, St. Louis. Both traditions are boldly present in this body of new work that is formally dynamic, emotionally complex, strangely compelling, rich in ideas and allusions to modernism, postmodernism, the culture wars, and the histories of sculpture and painting. While as a people we continue to stand under the hulking form of COVID-19, a terror so large that its shadow looms over our daily lives, how might we approach, experience, and understand the dark beauty of the *Frag* sculptures by Joe Bussell? Bussell has shown a willingness and an ability to use expressive abstraction as a profoundly emotional form, one that uses fragments of his own history to interpret our time and place, our culture and challenges.

Crafted from the flotsam and jetsam of contemporary life, each *Frag* reveals the strata of its making; each is a fragment of a memoir, told with bravado formal and wrenching personal authority. The artist is both painter and sculptor, but also diarist and seer, actor and commentator, patient and analyst. "Having this opportunity at this stage of my life—it's time that all the secrets are told. It's an opportunity to have enough work so that they can play together. They share the secrets with one another." The dynamic of "two" is central to how Bussell is inspired to begin these complex objects. "The juxtaposition of things is very important to me. A piece could start from two things that are very discordant, but how they 'fit' and tell a story matters." Each *Frag* disguises its reincarnation, masquerading as layered concrete, stone, or plaster. What we are looking at is an object formed from layers of acrylic house paint discarded at the Johnson County hazardous waste facility where the artist volunteered and from which they were scavenged. Objects imbedded in these layers of paint are often plastic ones, upcycled from a Goodwill store; a neon orange pupu platter gingerly finds its place as the base for *Frag #3*. "I think plastic is absolutely the right material to be working with now, because there is so much of it," Bussell asserts.

In the process of making 2-D or 3-D, I always add what makes sense and subtract what doesn't. That is usually in the context of formal elements. In the case of the *Frag* series, the materials I add represent the different parts of my history, dreams, or memories. I want the additions to finish the psychological loop and have aesthetic resonance.

The acrylic house paint from which the *Frag*s are primarily sculpted—"solid, liquid, and in between"—has been utilized and manipulated in a variety of ingenious manners reflecting the artist's history as both a painter and ceramicist. Remains of desiccated paint were wrenched from the bottom of gallon buckets, cast and cured, becoming the cylindrical discs from which *Frag #2* finds its monolithic form. Paint that was still fluid was poured dozens of times onto now camouflaged chicken wire in *Frag #1*, each layer allowed to dry until after many weeks a new form altogether has been created.

In addition to acrylic house paint, Bussell utilizes both traditional and unconventional materials, such as aluminum-based oil paint and organic dried and sealed vegetation (*Frag #3*), and Damar varnish and a mid-century plastic bowl upended to create a topper (*Frag #18*). Many of the *Frag*s have a sort of topknot: "I try to get away from a finial. As a classical ceramicist, it's a ploy, yes, and it's the humor part. It adds to the piece. It's a crown. It's not just an adornment." While all of the *Frag*s on view at the Nerman were completed in 2020, the series began in 2003 with works that are smaller in scale and less complex formally. In 2019, the artist challenged himself to "grow the work":

Joe Bussell

Frag (#1-22), 2019-2021

Cast acrylic paint, cast aluminum based paint, cast glue, cast spray foam, cast resin, cast wax, cast plastic clay, cast paper, red iron oxide, black iron oxide, polyester string and yarn, molded paper, spray paint, acrylic paint, oil paint, glue, found plastic objects, found wooden objects, found knitted objects, plastic coated wire, archival tape, oxidized copper wire, dried and sealed organic material, encased metallic, powder, encased cardboard, Damar varnish, cement, cotton rope

Courtesy the Artist

As the work got larger, the narrative got more complex and so did the list of materials. I began gathering extra material with the criteria that "extra" had to have relevance to my life. Then came the other materials that were surprises: a cannibalized painting on BFK, archival tape, plastic coated wire, discarded polychromed plastic, sticks and twigs and cardboard.

For the Nerman exhibition, Bussell also brings his experience as a master stager, for major department stores and theaters, to bear. He has encased the gallery in a shade of "cobalt purple," a violet redolent with emotional connotation evoking histories of privilege, luxury, and the sacred rituals of mourning. The artist shared, "I always like the sound of the word 'violet.' It goes to 'violins,' then to 'violence' and back to 'violet' in my ear. I'm not ignoring the political and psychosocial vibration that is inherent to the color."

Bussell was born in Topeka, Kansas; he grew up first in rural towns and then suburban Kansas City. He lived and worked in major cosmopolitan cities including Los Angeles, Tucson, Boston, and London before returning to Kansas City, Kansas, in 2001 where he still resides with his artist husband. Bussell has fought (and continues to battle) the culture wars first hand; he is highly literate and passionate about theater, music, art, and community; he is funny and thoughtful about his friends and colleagues. A major influence on both the formal and psychological qualities that we see in the *Frag* sculptures comes from his work in an AIDS clinic:

The ghosts of my experiences at the AIDS hospice always halo my work. The *Frag* pieces dip in and out of my pool of experiences to perhaps give me a chance to heal from some experiences; sometimes to inform the art and the viewer and sometimes to give me the opportunity to joyfully make a body of work.

For all of the complexities of the *Frag* series, there is also humor and joy. "When I get to the heart of why I make art, it is to find a sense of play—most likely the play I was looking for when I was a child. Of course, making art satisfies my intellectual self as well, but it has to be fun in the studio." The humor can be dark, as in *Frag #4*, with its clownlike figure wheeling its way toward us with an unsteady gait. *Frag #1* suggests a dancer in a full body bend with its vibrant, performative energy and palpable sense of kinetic dynamism: "I'm careful about finding the work's center of gravity, but I like it when the pieces float, lean, and dance." Bussell seeks a balance, comparing his work to theater:

You have to have everything: moments of tragedy and comedy and pathos. And each character—if it is just one thing, it's a cardboard cutout. It's hard to laugh at Stanley in *Streetcar*, but ... he's a clown. He was a mean clown. ... Theater stays with me. I love working and thinking about a character.

When pressed on how he knows a work is finished, Bussell replied with marvelous self-awareness, "Do we talk about instincts? Collective consciousness? Things that we cannot put in black and white? At some point, I create a full narrative that is still only telling part of the story." The story is only told when it is heard; the work is alive when it is experienced in the gallery. The vibrancy, intelligence, and ingenuity of the *Frag* objects find an ideal setting and cadence, gathered together atop a low plinth and cosseted within a violet aura within the McCaffree Gallery at the Nerman Museum.

— Barbara O'Brien, independent curator and critic, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She was the Executive Director of the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, Missouri