



A survey of Jonathan Borofsky's eclectic work opens tomorrow in the cavernous spaces of the Temporary Contemporary of the Museum of Contemporary Art.

Jonathan Borofsky paints by numbers

By Hunter Drohojowska

Artist makes his work count by examining inner and outer worlds

Past the still-life painting rotating in space, behind the gargantuan, ruby-eyed fish, beyond the fenced basketball court and over by the giant animated "molecule man" made of Styrofoam balls and suspended from the ceiling, stands Jonathan Borofsky. With an expression flickering between anxiety and philosophical amusement, the internationally acclaimed artist surveys these creations, made specially for the cavernous Temporary Contemporary of the Museum of Contemporary Art, where a survey of his work opens tomorrow.

"I think of an installation as a stream of consciousness, or unconsciousness. So people feel that they are in my mind," he says.

Borofsky, 43, is a tall, bearish man who wears his dark, graying hair pulled back in a ponytail. He shifts his weight nervously from one foot to the other and talks quickly, explaining thoughts before questions are asked. Appraising the warehouse in a glance, Borofsky says, "The first thing I had to do was get rid of the walls, to have an open space." With a smile, he adds, "It's funny, Jim Turrell had an exhibition here of pure light and space, and he built lots of little rooms for it. I have all of these objects and tear the walls down to have one big open space."

In some ways, it is a more challenging space than the five other museums this survey has visited over the last year and a half. It is dramatically larger, and Borofsky cannot rely on his customary technique of painting the open-beamed, 40-foot-high ceilings to unify his complex installation. Instead, he has scaled up his wall drawings and added a dozen new pieces. The result is an overwhelming cacophony of pictures and sound.

Birds, fish, running men and rabbits are drawn on the walls, video monitors play cartoons, his trademark silhouettes of men are hammering and chattering. There are men flying above it all, and "molecule men" who are dematerializing. Many of these images come from dreams that are also recorded on the walls or on canvas. "I dreamed I was taller than Picasso." One painting of a sailboat is cut in half, another has a rectangle open in the middle. A half-finished painting of flowers in a vase leans against one wall, covered in plastic and tape. A pingpong table is painted in camouflage, with the defense budgets of the U.S. and U.S.S.R. listed on either side of the net. A 20-foot-tall ballerina with one rotating leg frowns with the face of sad clown Emmet Kelly and projects the song "I Did It My Way."

"I see this as being inside of my mind, about how I think and how we all think and reach each other, not only as individuals but as countries," Borofsky says. Besides dreams, he selects images from his unconscious. Butressing the symbolic references is imagery selected in a deliberate way from the media, usually to make a political point, such as the picture of a Cambodian mother with her dead infant, or the photographs of black South African leaders like Nelson Mandela and the late Steve Biko.

Borofsky considers the imagery to be simultaneously personal and archetypal. He hopes to avoid the elitism of the art world to speak directly to visitors. A prevailing issue in his work and life is one of individual freedom. His harmonious, circuslike environments have lofty ambitions, definite targets. "It's nice to let people get close to art," he says.

"People can walk wherever they want here, and some pieces require them to participate, like the pingpong and basketball. It is as though they were in a theater but being on

emotional and honest, perhaps, to give courage to others to be that way in art," he says.

The duality between the counting and the drawing was the symbol of the beginning of his examination of the inner and outer worlds, the public and the private, the male and female, the extroverted and the introverted, the sophisticated and the naive, the political and the spiritual, that he saw not only in himself, but all over the globe.

"I don't think my thoughts are different from those of other peo-

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Jonathan Borofsky

the stage instead of separated from it," Borofsky says as he scans his handiwork.

"Like any artist's work, as far as I'm concerned, it is a self-portrait." Yet, in re-creating his thoughts, fears, dreams, hopes, anxieties, in trying to be utterly aware of his own mental state, he taps into the universal. "I think this could represent anybody's mind," he says.

In "The Moviegoer," Walker Percy wrote, "The search is what everyone would undertake if he were not stuck in the everydayness of his own life." This psychological search began for Borofsky in 1968, when he stopped making art objects altogether and started counting. With degrees in fine art from Carnegie Mellon and Yale universities and a stint in Paris, he was making sculptures when he landed in New York in 1966. The influence of pop art was bifurcating into minimalism and conceptualism, the atmosphere was cool and intellectual. In 1968, Borofsky began counting on sheets of graph paper as a way of slowing and ordering his thoughts. Every day for nearly three years, he counted toward 1 million. One day, he began adding doodles from his dreams to the numbered sheets. In 1972, a sketch of a man with his head tied to a tree appealed to him. He reproduced it as a painting, using an inexpensive paint set and canvas board, the materials of his childhood art classes. He signed it not with his name, but with the last number he had counted. That combination was an epiphany, unifying the two distinct aspects of his psyche.

After working in an orderly, rational, conceptual manner for so long, his mind had manifested the emotional, intuitive and representational. By signing the new works of art with his numbers, he allowed the counting to act as the order that permitted him to work in so many different styles. What emerged was a reaction against the cool art of pop and minimal movements, to be

ple. If so, it is only because as an artist I've had time to reflect, psychologize, sociologize, philosophize and observe who we are as human beings and how we learn from each other. Underneath, we all want to know what it all means, life and beyond. I'm a student of life and in recording my learning processes, I also become a teacher." On banners hung above the installation, Persian script translates as "All is one." For Borofsky, such a statement stretches from an aesthetic canon applying to his work to an operative theory for international relations. It is the verbal equivalent of counting.

"It represents the interaction between the one and the many, between me and the people of the planet. I want people to feel they are the work when they are playing pingpong, as opposed to putting things under glass, guarding the preciousness of the art object."

When Borofsky began his scribbling and wall-drawing, he says, "my goal was to probe new directions. The scribbling from my psychological state satisfied my personal needs and I didn't see any reference for it in the art world at that time. I had a craving to find a unique statement of my own. Which, in a way, means disregarding the moment because you are looking at the future. You are on your own because there are no rules yet."

These days, the art world has embraced pluralistic, stylistic developments and Borofsky is seen as a ringleader. But, back in the early '70s, a curator told the artist that his museum would love to include him in a show, "but we don't know what you do."

"I'm one of those people who is bucking that way of functioning in the art world," says Borofsky. "To stay a whole year on one tight idea isn't enough of a spread for me. If I spend a week on an expressionistic canvas, the next week I want to do something tight and realistic. The

tradition in the art world is to develop a line in your work and try to sell as many as you can. Teachers and the marketplace like you to concentrate on one thing.

"If I have a trademark, it's hidden. The counting pulls all the disparate elements together. The counting satisfies my yearning for security and linearity."

Borofsky's influences range from Marcel Duchamp, in the irreverence and the integration of ready-made objects, to the surrealists, in the reliance on dream imagery, to Jackson Pollock in his scattered, active and intuitive compositions, to Andy Warhol, in the use of popular culture.

"I think every piece of art I've ever seen has influenced me," Borofsky says. "Artists are vehicles for ideas. As a kid, I painted like my teacher, and like my mother, who was an artist. She had all these art books and magazines which I used to look at."

Borofsky grew up in Boston, where his father was a musician. With artistic parents, his decision to go into art was well-received. Although he started in the practical major of industrial design, as they suggested, he quickly transferred to sculpture when he found an artist could teach to make a living. "Teaching allowed me to survive from the time I got out of graduate school until five years ago." In 1977, a teaching position at CalArts brought him to Los Angeles, where he still lives.

Avoiding the elitist tendencies of the art world, embracing the larger purposes of the real world, is apparent in Borofsky's speech. He does not proclaim his intentions in complicated artspeak. "I'm trying to be as open and direct as I can. The work leads me to speak directly from my own experience, my own dreams, my own political situation. I hope to be as honest and human as I can be with the hope that that will bleed through to others' consciousness. So there will be a world where people can be open and honest, but you have to start with yourself."

When you ask him how an artist can survive in an art world, or a larger world, that is widely considered venal and corrupt with a Pollyanna approach, Borofsky shrugs. "I am that way. It seems to work better than working from anger or fear. Occasionally the method has backfired, but not close to the amount I've succeeded by using these premises. If you are a student of the mind, as I am, and you want to talk about life you have to show that you are open."

Borofsky says that that's evident in a 58-minute videotape he made with Gary Glassman of prisoners from San Quentin and from two women's correctional institutions in China. "We went there as human beings, and what you put out is what you get openness. We got more information for the tape that way."

Borofsky points out that even the undivided quality of his installation is a metaphor for openness. "One danger is that you want to be so open, you talk too much. It can border on the embarrassing, but that's the risk I take. Chatter, chatter, chatter."

Hunter Drohojowska writes regularly about art for the Herald.