

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

Radcliffe Bailey

by Lily Lampe, July 16, 2013

BOMBLOG

Radcliffe Bailey on artistic and regional labels, testing his own DNA, aging, and the power familial ancestry holds on his practice.



An easel on Bailey's studio patio, May 2013, photo by Lilly Lampe.

Radcliffe Bailey investigates memory—personal, genetic, and related to place—as the basis for his artistic practice. Old family photographs and his own DNA collide with symbols of the African Diaspora and potent natural materials like Georgia red clay and sea water. Bailey's work is rooted in personal experience but posits this experience as part of a greater whole, diverting the focus from himself and towards a greater history. Bailey speaks of his work with the air of a mystic, describing himself as a vessel that carries many histories, or as a lens for viewing the past and future. He vacillates between personal pronouns, frequently interchanging "I" and "you;" even in casual conversation, the line between individual and collective experience is fluid.

I visited Bailey at his home and studio in Southwest Atlanta, built on old Civil War grounds, in May of 2013. The building was designed by Mack Scogin Merrill Elam Architects and completed in 2003. The house is 2,200 square feet; the studio almost matches the house at 2,000 square feet. A driveway bisects the two at the ground

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floor, but house and studio are connected by a causeway at the top level. After a quick tour of the studio, Bailey and I retired to an open-air porch on the top level of the house where Bailey could smoke as we talked.

(Sitting on porch)

LILLY LAMPE Do you paint out here as well as [in] the studio?

RADCLIFFE BAILEY Sometimes, sometimes.

LL How long ago was this studio built?

RB I think we're going on ten years. The reason why it was even built was because, well, I realized I was going to stay in Atlanta, my parents live two blocks away, I grew up in the same neighborhood, and this was the first piece of property I've purchased from my work. I purchased this in the early 90s and had a dream of building a studio, you know, like most artists. It was one of those things I could probably never do in another city and I had an opportunity to do it here.

LL Do you say that because of the amount of space, or other reasons?

RB Cost. *(laughter)* The only way I could stay in Atlanta and make work was if I had a space [that] I was comfortable in, family and work-wise.

LL What kind of space were you working in before you built this?

RB I was in several spaces. I used to be at Candler Smith Warehouse; I was there for seven or eight years. I was at the [Atlanta] Contemporary, King Plow... eventually I got tired of renting spaces. I wanted to have a space of my own.

I've had spaces across town. My first space was at Chastain Park, at the Art Center there. I had one of the classrooms. Then it was the Contemporary, when it first opened up on Means Street. At the same time I was at King Plow. I'd live and work at King Plow but was also at the Contemporary.

LL Were you doing two different types of work in each studio, like painting in one and sculpture in another?

RB No, mostly painting. I started out painting but was more a sculpture major. It was easier to move painting than sculpture, and my work has always fallen between the two. Some people see me as a painter, but I don't see myself as a painter or a sculptor, just an artist.

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Radcliffe Bailey in his studio, May 2013, photo by Lilly Lampe.

LL I read somewhere that you said you were really glad to be categorized as an American artist, not as a painter, an African American artist—not any one thing. What do those titles mean to you and why do you want to eschew those labels?

RB Those labels don't bother me but when I walk into a museum and see my name, I want to be put around others; I don't want to be the "other." *(laughter)* Not a Southern artist, not a Northern artist, just an artist. I was born in the North and raised in the South. A lot of people see my imagery and my work and assume "South!" when really the photographs are from the North. I don't put myself in a region. I see myself as making work that is universal in many ways. First and foremost people say, "You're this, you're that," but I'm human. These names and categories change across time and I want to make work that's timeless. And I want to make work that deals with who I am as a person, politically or spiritually.

But then there's this other place where I'm fascinated with what I don't know about and what we all don't know about. Yes, I'm an African American artist—proud of it! I'm someone who sits between generations. In many ways I'm connected to a lot of older artists. And I understand their struggles and the fact that they didn't get a lot of opportunities that I'm able to get. I have a lot of respect for them, so much so that I see myself as a vessel and things go through me. I don't take for granted their struggles. I don't see myself as a young cynical artist who rebels against, as much as I respect it. Sometimes I feel I'm walking on a tightrope made of razors, where no matter which way I go, I'll get cut. So I just try to take it in stride.

LL Do you see the younger generation of artists as overall a cynical group that, perhaps isn't necessarily ungrateful, but is less aware of or respectful of how things used to be for African American artists?

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RB No, I couldn't lump any group and assume they think this way, but I know it exists. There is something that agitates. I'm not really interested in the agitation or the friction, but something else. My concerns are the concerns of a child being brought into the world, who's curious about everything that's around them. I don't want to get caught up in how we define ourselves. It's more personal, I'm just dealing with my own relationships between myself and my family and where I live.

LL You speak about your work through a personal viewpoint, yet at the same time speak to representing a collective consciousness, like this idea of being a vessel. What do you feel the relationship is between the individual and society, and where does this idea of you as the vessel or the artist as a vessel come from?

RB I remember some older person said they thought of me as an old soul. And I said, "Really?" I think it has to do with how I was raised. I grew up around my mother and father and I never took for granted the fact that I had the opportunity to go to college. But then I can look at someone like my grandfather who had a sixth-grade education, but made the most of it and created a lot of things and did a lot. And that was just yesterday. Not too long ago [certain] people weren't allowed to vote! And right now we're dealing with issues of sexuality, homosexuals [not having rights]; these things still exist! I kind of walk in a way where I wouldn't be surprised whatever happens. Beyond the art, there's this whole other part about just living. I didn't go to art school thinking about a career. I went to art school because my mom was a schoolteacher and gave me pencils and paper and I drew. And then she pushed me into it and I was led into it—and that was by way of her aunt who introduced *her* to museums—and so she passed that down to me and that was a beautiful thing. It wasn't because my parents had *this* or *that* that gave me the opportunity to go to art school. I don't think that a lot of kids even thought about art school.

When I was in undergrad there wasn't a lot of talk about grad school. Now, how can you not go to undergrad and not go to grad school? And I didn't go to grad school and had a different experience than people who may have gone. It's a different space to occupy. Another space is being an artist living in Atlanta and seeing myself outside of Atlanta. I don't necessarily have all the guidance or those I can talk to about my experience outside of here. It's an interesting place to be in. It's like going to a studio for a first time, or trying to create a studio space within a world or place where it's not the norm. And you're trying to make work and you're uncomfortable with your surroundings and you learn to adjust and deal with them and not move away from them. For me, it's like I went to my mom and I said, "Hey Mom, I've finished school. I want to get a studio! And I want to go to grad school." I remember going to the Maryland Institute to visit and Grace Hartigan was alive then and I met her. She looked at my work and said, "What the hell do you want to come here for? You need to go do your work!" I came back to Atlanta and told my mom this and my mom looks at me like, "Why would she say that?"

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Work in progress on a table in Bailey's studio, May 2013, photo by Lilly Lampe.

So I was encouraged and that came from many places. I see myself as being here [in Atlanta] but being of the world.

LL Like in your house here, you see the forest but you're not seeing Atlanta, you're not confronted with the skyline.

RB Yeah, [this property] is also Civil War grounds, and the history of Atlanta is another part. Sometimes I think about those histories of the Civil War and the battles that were fought here. And I think about growing up in this neighborhood, and the promises that were made to African Americans that fought in the Civil War about forty acres and a mule. And I think, "Wow, I have my forty acres!" It's in the oddest ways. It's not about what someone else gives you, but about doing as much as you can.

LL It seems like you have this very pragmatic viewpoint, of being an individual within these histories, in Atlanta, in the world, pulling from many lineages. It would be easy to confuse this idea of the individual as a vessel as a mystical idea, but it seems for you it's grounded in historical knowledge and storytelling and this sense of feeling yourself a part of a greater history.

RB Right, right. Yeah, that's me. *(laughter)* It wasn't planned. It just happened. You say that and I get it completely. But when I say it's not planned out, I mean: I didn't go to grad school; I didn't have that plan. I don't choose or say, "I want my work to speak for this group of people," that's not my concern at all. I just want to make beautiful things. And I want to solve problems. But the problems that I'm solving, sometimes they're just basic problems about color and composition and then I take color and composition and I push it somewhere else.

LL But when you bring in items like the tintypes and the busts, how do those fit into this problem-solving?

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RB Well, the tintypes were given to me [from] my grandmother so it was like, “Hey, how do you deal with these things?” It’s almost like what I was saying about moving into a space. Say, if I moved into my parent’s basement and wanted to make art in that space, I have to figure out a way to [make] art and not remove myself from who I am. So here I am given these photographs from my grandmother—who didn’t know the kind of work I was interested in making, or even the situation I was dealing with as to art school.

I’ve always been concerned with how I put myself in my work. Right before she died, [my grandmother] gave me this family album. What do you do with that? So I pulled my inspiration from the first thing close to me, my grandma, rather than my art professors. That was to honor her, and my family. I’ve always been concerned that art history—which we like to say is “art mystery,”—never really talks about all people, just a certain group of people. It was always limiting and I was always curious about what [those other groups] were doing.



Bailey points to a work in progress, May 2013, photo by Lilly Lampe.

LL Meaning the very Western-centric viewpoint of art history.

RB Right. But for me it was like, “Hmm, I’m a young African-American artist. I grew up here. I want to know about my own family background in terms of religion, spirituality, DNA, all these things.” I’ve always been curious about it and when I start to paint I think, “Okay, I know art history but what about this other history that I don’t know about that’s so close to me?” I was always curious, looking at my mom and wondering where she was from, before DNA testing was possible. And I’ve done that now and figured out those things and now [in my work] I’m somewhere else.

LL Did you test your own DNA?

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RB Yes. There were no surprises, but there were things that you just want to know. If there's this doubt and you're curious about it, you want to know! And once I'd found out I was finished with that chapter. But I take my sweet little time in doing it the way I want to do it, and I don't really deal with the pressures of why I'm doing it, I do it for myself.

LL Speaking to your own curiosity?

RB Right. I'm not concerned with art trends, but with what's important to me and what's important to pass down to kids. We live in a world where things are moving so fast that... I don't know how to explain it. But I remember as a kid going outside, and being in one of those 17-year locust storms in Virginia; I remember watching my grandfather work with his hands. Those are the things that influence me. As simple as they may be, I draw a lot from them.

LL You're saying its images from your past that have led to the make-up of your identity.

RB Yeah, and I can do them in a very contemporary way. Those are the shifts that I'm making, in these different materials, all the thoughts are there. One painting led to the next painting, which led to the next. They aren't quick shifts. It's like writing a book—every page, every painting, there's a connection to each one. In the studio, your last painting is where you stopped and all your materials and things are left around your painting so you know how to get back into it. And that's how I work in terms of my thoughts.



Bailey points to a work in progress, May 2013, photo by Lilly Lampe.

LL So if someone lined up all of your works in a row they would see an unfolding of your biography until now?

RB Yeah, I think so. I'd hope so.

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LL Joseph Kosuth was speaking of his curation and said something like, "a painting or a work of art is like a word and when I arrange them I can make paragraphs." It's interesting to apply that to your artistic work and read the story. So you've explored the past with DNA and old photographs, what's next? The future; the present?

RB Right. There's another part of it where you go to the studio and you don't know what's going to come out, it just happens. I'm a news junkie. There's a lot that's spiritual but I'm very concerned with [the news].

LL When we walked past your desk earlier I noticed a news station was streaming. What was it?

RB Al-Jazeera. I'm on that every day. I think part of it is [that] I've always watched the news every morning. I lived in this little yellow house [on my property] while construction was happening [on the house and studio], before I had a family, and I didn't have TV; all I had were books. That was my getaway. I'd do my own residencies here. I'd lock myself in on the weekends and just read my books and slept and just walked and my mom would say, "You don't know what's going on around here! You need to watch the news!" and I'd say, "Really, Mom?" And now I can't help but watch the news, especially with the presidential elections. So now I'm trying to figure out how to incorporate what's going on today in my work. But figure out how to do it in a way that's timeless, that can stand the test of time.

LL Does this come from a sense of [understanding] your own aging?

RB *Me? Aging? (laughter)*

LL *(laughter)* No, I don't mean you're old! But, people freak out about turning 25! Sitting here right now, we're aging.

RB No, I like growing older.

LL What I mean is, are you wondering what your own legacy will be?

RB Maybe so, maybe so. There are artists whose works we think about and we may not have seen them in person, but on a computer screen or in books, their work stands out and it helps us. And we learn through people. We're not interested in repeating what they've done but you learn from other people's experiences and some of the things that they've done that were great and some of the things that they've done that were not so great. I can go down the history of musicians and some of the greatest musicians had the most tragic lives. So you learn what not to do. I think about, "What can I leave behind for those that I care about?" I would be an idiot not to think about it like that, to think of my own worth. When you're making art, selling art, moving things around, you don't collect your own work. And maybe you don't think of it that way, but [you realize] you have to.

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Radcliffe Bailey's studio, May 2013, photo by Lilly Lampe.

LL Are there things you've sold that you wish you'd held on to?

RB Every single one. *(laughter)* But I can't hold on to everything. I have to let it go; let it have its own life.

LL Place is such an integral part of your work, like your house and studio being on Civil War grounds. Do other sites resonate with you in the same way?

RB Yeah. Everything influences me. I was just in Syracuse for six weeks and the thing I remember the most was snow *(laughter)* and making work in the snow! I did this thing in Skowhegan in 2006, and it's funny I applied two times when I was in school and never got in, and then here I am being invited as a visiting artist, and that was a whole different space. Going back to Grace Hartigan, it's weird it's almost like, [after those rejections] I'm having those experiences with those institutions regardless. It was nice to have someone like Grace to push you, not even by going to school there. And I've made a lot of friendships with artists, art historians, and curators in different cities. When I think about art community I think about everywhere. And that's the only way we can truly exist as artists in Atlanta is to move, to not fall into placing yourself in one particular way, but to just move. The more we move, the better it is for the city.

LL I like this bird flapping motion you're making.

RB Yeah *(laughter)* it's like that phoenix [the symbol of Atlanta], the city rising from the ashes.

LL Oh yeah *(laughter)*, we're always hearing about the Phoenix in Atlanta. Changing topics a bit, I was reading last night about your studio practice and read that you wake up at 3am and work in the studio until 8am. Is that an exaggeration or are you working like that every day?

RB Well, time doesn't exist when I'm working. I shut everything down and don't think about how other people operate. It's like you get off a plane and you're still in the time zone you came from. I have to create that time

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zone to work, which doesn't relate to any particular coast or anything; it's more like my own personal time zone. And that's when I work the best. I put myself in that time zone. I sleep when I want to sleep, get up when I want to get up, I work when I want to work, and I create a pattern and try to stay to that. I don't look at it as the sun rising or the sun sets, or a nine-to-five, it's a day to day. Which can be difficult if, say, you're a professor and you have to deal with time. Or when you're living in a city and things are moving around constantly.

I think if I lived in New York I'd definitely have to work when no one else was around, when the streets are quiet. I like working when I can go out and listen to insects or take note of the moon. It's a full moon today, oh man, maybe I need to go to work! *(laughter)* You do find these periods where you're just real creative. I'll go through this period when I don't eat. And it's like a fast, and then my brain is thinking a different way, and I start to see things, things become clear. You're so caught in your thoughts where you don't want to leave.

LL Is it fasting in a spiritual sense? Are you thinking of eastern religions or a mind-body relationship?

RB Kind of but not really. I don't fall under any particular practice. Religion has always been a tricky space. Yes I grew up going to a Baptist church but do I go to church? No. Do I understand Christianity? Yeah, I get it and for people to find strength and believe in certain things, that's fine. But, studying the history of slavery I know people were given this one opportunity to go to church which was on Sunday when they didn't have to work in the fields. And I don't really prescribe to that. So I look at it a different way. A studio is a church. If I have a problem I go to a studio and solve it. I get in there and work it out.

And the day by day experience of art, even though my work may seem to have this layer of history, it is also a cover for what I'm dealing with on a day to day. It's very much about today. We were talking about where I go next: I'm still thinking about today and yesterday and what's coming in front of me tomorrow. It's my attitude to my studio practice. I try to make it as simple as I can: I try to erase everything I know about painting and sculpture when I go into the studio and I just try to *play*.

It's like picking up an instrument for the first time, you don't know anything about how to play an instrument but you start to figure out how to make this sound. I have an upright bass in my studio and I go and play with it. I don't know how to *play* it but I play with it. That's kind of like painting. I kind of play chess with myself, back and forth. I create problems in this corner and try to solve them create problems over there and try to solve them. It's like going to a canvas, and its white canvas that's just been painted. And I decide I'm going to paint the canvas black, *ch-ch-ch* [waves hand in the air as if holding a large brush], because I can see more into space with that and pull from that. That's a kind of play.

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Radcliffe Bailey's studio, May 2013, photo by Lilly Lampe.

LL It sounds like it's important for you to be working on several things at a time.

RB Right. I can't work on one thing at a time. I have to work on maybe twenty or thirty different problems and learn from each one of them to influence the next. Maybe it's a mindset I picked up from having shows and having created a certain amount of work. But if I start on these thirty things at one time, I've learned I become comfortable with almost any mark I make. Tricky, but any mark I make, I have to live with it, I can live with it. It's just like being comfortable in your skin, and I'm probably one of the most insecure, shy, standoffish people. But I've learned to. I've become more secure. I still use that insecurity. It's actually a good space to be in. It's like making something and making marks and you just don't like it. Well, walk away from it for a little while and appreciate it. It may not make sense to people around you. It may not make sense to you. But people will remember it. And so, I've learned to, as I'm painting, have a bunch of places that don't work. And then, I create almost like a band. And they all play with each other. It's like making music. I say music because most people can relate to what music is. Most people don't understand art. But music... I think that we all make a certain type of music. And I'm using music and there's probably another word that we need to create, but music tends to be the glue for everything. We can all relate; we're all playing.

LL When you say you make marks and have to live with them, in your paintings is there not a lot of layering and covering up? Does everything that happens remain in the finished product?

RB Yeah. Even though I cover it up it's still there for me. So, it's like you see this space that's covered up right here (*gestures*), well I may look at it and smile and grin about it because I know what's behind it. It's almost like, you put something in a box and you shut that box up and nail it and wrap it up tight; everyone's going to become very curious about what's in that box, which is going to make it relevant. So for me, it's like creating that

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[box]. And I think it's important that every artist keeps a certain level of secrecy in your work, which gives it a longer life too. I think that's very important. Not everything should be known.

LL It seems in your works you see a lot more going on than just what's formally available. It's not just composition, it's not just color; there's a history within the canvas or whatever it is that you're working on.

RB Yeah, yeah. There is. I mean, I like using water from different places.

LL Do you have a collection of water?

RB Yeah, I use it every once in a while. I figure out a way to use it. Not that I drink water and then pee on something (*laughter*) but I carry water from different places and I think it's interesting to mix it in.

LL What has been especially good water for painting?

RB Oh, I couldn't tell you. (*laughter*) I like salt water.

For more on Radcliffe Bailey visit his [website](#).

Lilly Lampe is an art critic, writer, and editor. Originally from North Carolina, she came to Atlanta by way of Chicago, where she earned a masters of humanities degree with a concentration in art history from the University of Chicago. Her writing has appeared in Artforum.com, Art Papers, Modern Painters, Raw Vision, and Sculpture. She is a member of the International Association of Art Critics. Lampe is relocating to New York City this Fall.

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