

An abstract painting by Brendan Cass, featuring a dense composition of thick, expressive brushstrokes and splatters. The color palette is dominated by deep blues, purples, and blacks, with vibrant accents of yellow, green, pink, and orange. The texture is highly tactile, with visible paint layers and a sense of movement. The overall effect is one of intense energy and emotional depth.

# BRENDAN CASS SOJOURN





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# BRENDAN CASS SOJOURN

Kenny Schachter **ROVE** Projects LLP 2011

# Brendan Cass and the Dream of Europe

Max Fierst

There is a well-known Wallace Stevens Poem called *Anecdote of the Jar* which begins “I placed a jar in Tennessee,” It is a poem about the nature of American aesthetics. Out of Europe flowers Keats and *Ode To A Grecian Urn* while we in The States have only Stevens and a jar in Tennessee. We must face a bareness in our cultural history. Florentine bronze and Grecian marble will always be a bit alien to the child of New York or, in the case of Cass, New Jersey. But there is the “Dream of Europe” something which actual Europeans probably never get to experience. To continental ears the dream of Europe probably has an economic ring to it, but in New York its resonance is romantic and philosophical.

As an undergrad at Yale my professors would speak about the dream of Europe. They spoke of a sense of continuity, a humanism that extends from the renaissance through the enlightenment and remains an ideal to strive for. They were speaking of the philosophical fantasy of Europe, a kind of near utopian society characterized by intellectual freedom and general prosperity. Though Adorno declared an end to such optimism after Auschwitz, the fantasy of such a Europe persists in the gritty streets of New York.

Cass manifests his own personal vision of this dream in his paradoxically internal visions of European cityscapes. It is vital to understand the context of these works to appreciate that they are actually acts of defiance against the grey pessimism of New York.

The New York Times has called Bushwick, Brooklyn (where Cass has his current studio) “arguably the coolest place on the planet.” However, no one would suggest that it was one of the loveliest. Working in his studio above the quotidian gravel and chic grime of Brooklyn, Cass has taken the En plein air tradition of Monet and the escapist tropes of Gauguin and inverted them. Cass does not advocate an escape from the modern into a more “primitive” innocence, rather Cass creates a vision of a more civilized urbanity.

His vision is not a rendering of the actual, but rather a simulation of a place generated by a formal process. That process is marked by an instinctual approach to painting and a complete absence of illustrative clichés. To adapt the phrase of Sol Lewitt’s, Cass’ landscapes are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach. They do this by an abstract formalism that finds its roots in Chinese watercolor techniques and the refined compositions of Joan Mitchell.

Cass’ obsession with postcards and travel photos has a fetishistic intensity. The small, flimsy, photographic representation of a postcard of Cologne becomes in Cass’ painting an ode to transcendental voyages. Travel in these paintings is a metaphor for consciousness and like consciousness they seem to be endlessly revealing new layers of themselves.

In *Düsseldorf* the night sky becomes a sublime vision of the ultramodern. The rich surface reveals the artist’s process: painting and repainting for months until the perfect image materializes out of its formal history. In contrast

*Stockholm* hums with good natured vitality and sensual optimism. One lives in the city vicariously through the artist’s endlessly varied brushstrokes. These works are the celebratory antagonists of the paintings of Anselm Kiefer, offering a vision radically free of angst. They are filled instead with pleasure and pure joy.

In contemporary art, sarcasm and metaphorical sticking out of the tongue have become commonplace and clichéd. Cass rejects ironic, reductive solutions. Instead he offers us a fully imagined vision of his internal Europe, which is operatic in its scope, agonistic in its aspirations and glows with promethean fire.

I first met Brendan when, as a 19 year old student at Yale, I would take the Metro North from Connecticut to New York City to see the galleries and hang out with my friends who were art students. I met Brendan through a mutual friend, the painter Brian Belott. The first thing I noticed about Cass was that his clothes were covered in drawings and paint. The second thing I noticed was that he didn’t like me. Later when I asked Belott “What’s his problem?” he answered: “You’re from culture, he’s against culture.”

What culture was in the early nineties is a subject for debate, but my recollection is of a particularly prudish and pedantic era in the institutional art world and perhaps the beginnings among the artists themselves of what has grown into the intellectually open atmosphere that rules today. In any case, then and now Cass has always had a dissident and strongly individual voice. He is an original, unswayed by external trends. Times have changed and Cass has matured, but he remains infused with a revolutionary spirit. W.H. Auden said that all revolutionaries are either Utopians or Arcadians. Cass is unquestionably an Arcadian, a believer in an ideal lost before history that perhaps is only attainable in art.

**LOIRE**  
32 x 66 in  
Acrylic on canvas  
2011





**ZURICH**  
50 x 90 in  
Acrylic on canvas  
2011





**PROVENCE**  
37 x 67 in  
Acrylic on canvas  
2011





**HOLLAND**  
33 x 86 in  
Acrylic on canvas  
2011





HOORN  
30 x 39 in  
Acrylic on canvas  
2011





**SALZBURG**  
33 x 50 in  
Acrylic on canvas  
2011





**STADTHUSEET**  
36 x 60 in  
Acrylic on canvas  
2011





HELSINKI  
34 x 67 in  
Acrylic on canvas  
2011





KOLN  
50 x 84 in  
Acrylic on canvas  
2011





**RUSSIA**  
37 x 64 in  
Acrylic on canvas  
2011





**GEIRANGERFJORD**  
64 x 131 in  
Acrylic on canvas  
2011





**STOCKHOLM**  
37 x 86 in  
Acrylic on canvas  
2011





MONT ST MICHEL  
33 x 50 in  
Acrylic on canvas  
2011





**DUSSELDORF**  
52 x 73 in  
Acrylic on canvas  
2011









