

# “#”

DAN NADEL



*ASTRAL BRAINED PLANE FREEZE, 2015*

Let's follow *Astral Brained Plane Freeze* [2015, p. 104] together. At first glance we can only chase its lines and colors across the plane, trying to keep up with the energy of its unfurling. Long before iPhones allowed us to record, animate, and transmit our doodles, Aaron Curry made paintings that assemble themselves as we look at them, leaving behind the artifacts of their creation—a swashbuckling line, a casual drip, a radiating hue—against a deep-space darkness. The acrylic gouache he employs makes for a graphic flatness, slightly removing the work from the realm of the squishy hand and into something that looks unassailable and permanent. *Astral Brained Plane Freeze* begins in the top left corner where a mass of lines equals a brain, which spits pools of white-hot pink, which in turn activates a crooked stitched smile.

That smile might be holding a pipe, and if so, the pipe is emitting hash marks, curly-cues, totem signs. Just above it a gently placed rain of lime green dots descends, marking the edge of a face. And all around this viscous head are gorgeous bursts of color, as though the thought patterns of this thing have achieved cosmic liftoff, and breached sense so completely that all it can think is: “#.” That is as good a metaphor for Curry's activity as any. When a being is made completely of signs, and given both form and non-form, it can only say other signs. “#!” Curry's entire mode of art making is an orchestration of his own cumulative visual language. He operates like a collagist, but instead of scavenging for materials in magazines, he raids his own deep well of visual symbols, signs, and signatures.

Curry has developed his language for over twenty years. It was initially built upon a flatland of twentieth-century visual tropes: everything that incorporates and lies between Picasso (and all the invention, allusions, and approaches to art making that that word conjures) and Wacky Packages (and all the irreverence, play, surface treatments, and pop history that that term engenders). All the images one can find rummaging through a stack of magazines without regard for notions of provenance or hierarchy. Curry has described himself as a gobbler: a consumer with a stated goal of amalgamating material to make it useful. His output is the reverse: it gobbles space and movement and time in painting, sculpture, and installation. In a collage, Picasso and Wacky Packages might be equal compositional elements, but they are not qualitatively equal in the world. And this is

reinforced by the fact that Curry is not interested in imitating his stacks, but rather mashing them together, obliterating reference points, and generating his own modes, so that the artworks exist within a contemporary art space and context.

The last decade has seen Curry distill his influences into the highly personal language he uses in *Astral Brained Plane Freeze* and other recent works. But this is not a language that goes  $1+1=2$ . It is a language that is indifferent to arithmetic or fixed meaning. It is far more musical. It is a language of color, form, and line that treats modernist tropes as just that, on the same plane as big nose cartoons. And Curry is not afraid to treat his own language liberally. The disparate sources from which it was synthesized allows it to be deployed in painting, drawing, sculpture, and rooms. In turn, his language demands the same flexibility of the world it inhabits. If one is searching for meaning in the work, it can be found here, where there is give and take and give again, and in the affection and humility with which he treats its components.

There are reasons for this, well told elsewhere. The artist grew up in Texas, which has spawned an unusual quantity of artists who are democratic in taste and avant-garde in practice—Gary Panter, Trenton Doyle Hancock, and crucially for Curry, Robert Rauschenberg, whose work he first physically encountered in Walter Hopps's 1992 exhibition, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s* at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. Seeing the diversity on display was eye-opening: paintings that could be just white, or a tire mark, made by the same artist who took collage into the contemporary world both on and off the wall, and who, as Curry would do later, memorialized the artifacts of production—the silkscreen dots, smudges, and traces of photographic processing—in and as artworks. Finding Rauschenberg in Chicago and learning from artists such as Barbara Rossi (who wisely told Curry's class that they would only be as interesting as the things that they were visually engaged with) and Karl Wirsum gave Curry a schooling in a work ethic that valued gut-level precision image creation as much as guttural image- and collage-spewing. And next it was Los Angeles and the psychologically rich territory of the Art Center College of Design. Bypassing New York meant not living there but also not being “New York,” which is to say, being free of linear hang-ups. It became an attitudinal preference. Discussing his personal cultural stew in a 2016 interview with



Artspace, Curry remembers: "I've gone through a Rauschenberg phase where I was just obsessed with the early works and a lot of his cardboard pieces. I've gone through an Arp phase, and Picasso of course—a lot of Surrealism. I'm kind of a junkie—I really like art. Like, I love it. I'm all over the place, but I definitely think that those Chicago artists had a huge impact on me, because it somehow related to where I was coming from—skateboard graphics and things. There was a graphic quality to it that was easy for me to pick up on."

*Astral Brained Plane Freeze* and its siblings are simultaneous with Curry's cosmic paintings like *Cosmic Gorgy* [2015, pp. 78–79] and *CosmicCnot* [2015, p. 107]—joyous, multidimensional, riotously-shaped paintings (think kites, surfboards, and demented road signs) that in their grandiosity reflect, as the artist says, "an understanding of life as precious: they deal with mortality as the smallness against the infinite." There is great beauty in these, which comes from an interest in the cosmos in both the aesthetic and moral sense. Because of their spiritual leanings, these are among Curry's most intimate works. Like most good spiritual art, they do not attempt to depict, but rather evoke. They summon, but do not picture. I can imagine actually meditating underneath one of these things, to great effect. *Cosmicgasmatical* [2015, p. 88] deploys many of Curry's signs to evoke, but not depict, a state of infinity within a dome. There is a void within the shape that anchors the thing, and Curry's pixel-line, used elsewhere on wallpaper or collage parts, pierces that void and anchors it back in space. Behind it all is a kind of big bang, including streaking stars, reflective spheres, and little fiery tears.

In this work, as in others, I imagine Curry as the leader of an orchestra, but one that breaks atonally. Which is what makes these paintings so personal—the passages of unreality. And while, sure, there is something maniacal about the work, it is also humble. The lesson of it is indeed flexibility of form, of taste, but the means are goofy in the best way. The heads in his recent paintings want love; the cosmos wants to be gazed upon, and we feel small under its dome. In all of this there is a sense of humor, a laughter, which points to the seriousness of the affair.

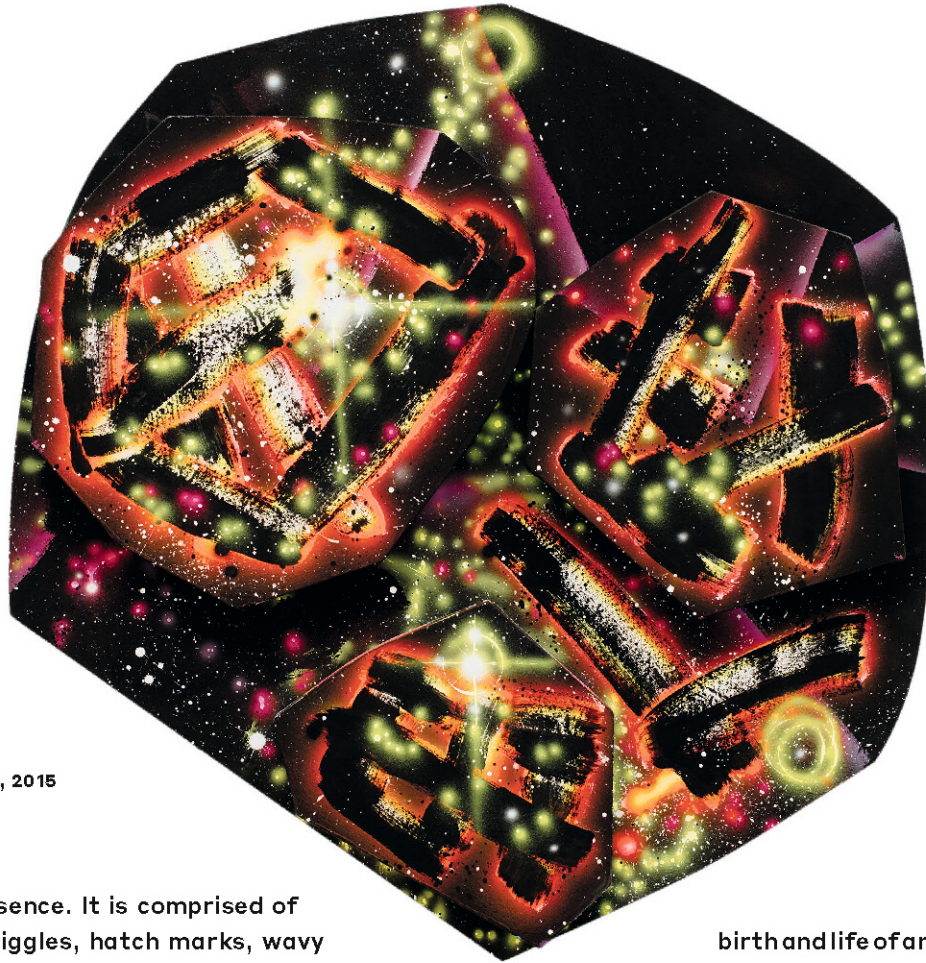
Curry pulled all of these modes together in the Bad Brain paintings, named for the band and employing the kind of pun that Curry relishes. *My Brain Is an Antenna*

[2016, p. 136] renders the *Astral Brained Plane Freeze* mode into a solid thing. Here is a Picassoid form, a dimensionalized brain, bleeding into a neck, fronted with a square-jawed tough guy. What makes these more than the sum of influences and technique are the colors—luminous blues of the kind found inside oyster shells; milky eyes, with glinting irises disconcertingly passaged within the being, that are not solid at all—that remain "unfinished" somehow. That is part of Curry's goal: to leave things unfixed and in motion, allowing the viewer to create the thing, to animate it.

Contrast that work with *Compositional Abstraction with a Weird Headdress* [2016, p. 137], which has a familiar outline—including that square jaw—but otherwise dares the viewer to find the visage in a green, red, and purple agglomeration of shapes, curves, and flesh. Here are eye sockets askew and a deep gash in the "neck" revealing a bulbous green area flattened with red drips. Where a jutting nose might be, there are only flat building block shapes, balanced tenuously. Above it all, once again, is an odious hash mark—a thought, perhaps. All the more disturbing, there is even less resolved here. We want to read a head into a hairy green flesh form with Arp-like fields of flat color. There is even a shadow to help us along and force the issue of whether this is abstraction or not. So here is a thing that is built, like a sculpture, from Curry's language, but cannot be truly identified. And if you find a name for this thing, what do you do then? Curry calls this a kind of "obliteration"—a further diffusion of meaning.

This obliteration, which sounds dramatic at first, but is actually quite an accurate way to describe what Curry does, is a positive, not a negative. Like Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* [1953], Curry's work finds a living way forward in an act of destruction. This can be the process of the creation and obliteration of a creature's head on a canvas in order to get to a more satisfying painting, or, writ large, the act of language building through the acknowledgment and synthesizing of it.

Moving further into unrecognizable terrain, the sculptures, which beget environments, do what the paintings cannot: expose and focus on the signs as things in-and-of-themselves. *Creator Creator* [2015, pp. 31–35] for example, appears at first glance like a digital projection inserted, collage-like, into space. Its blackness is disconcerting, rendering it at first glance an uncanny,



COSMICNOT, 2015

ghostly presence. It is comprised of Curry's squiggles, hatch marks, wavy lines, globes, and other signs. But rather than bringing them together, this work, and most of his recent sculptures, explodes the language. If the paintings are sentences, the sculptures are free-verse collages that do not settle on a subject. Moreover, as with the "graphic" surfaces of the paintings, the objecthood of the sculptures is deceptive. The precariousness of the globe in *Creator Creator*, for example, nods to the whimsy of an Alexander Calder mobile, but then subverts it with the dematerialized counterweight at the end of the line. Motion is implied where there is none, and flatness is implied where there is volume. These are delirious, mystifying experiences.

Curry has said that one of the things he likes most in sculpture is the idea that a strange object can suddenly intrude into our daily existence—that our space becomes compromised. This is another form of erasure, and Curry takes it even further in his room installations. In some, his calligraphic line drawings, which also inspire his sculpture forms, beget patterns for wallpaper and flooring that surround sculptures or paintings, allowing viewers to be immersed in the

birth and life of an art object. In others, as in the environment for *Creator Creator* at the Bass Museum, in Miami, Florida, he uses a deteriorated Xerox-upon-Xerox-upon-Xerox—there is the obliteration again—checkerboard pattern to create a disorienting space where his work alone is the focus. Across the gallery from the large sculpture is one of Curry's smallest, *Little Bang (Dark Matter Headband)* [2018, pp. 18–19], a gorgeously strange grouping of a well-modeled human eye, an Arp comma, a sphere, some hatching, a squiggle, and a crescent bearing the artist's initials. The condensed intimacy of the object gives it some of the compact meaning of Curry's paintings, but without color or holding lines to move us around the form. *Little Bang (Dark Matter Headband)* asks for more engagement, more energy, and it repays the effort. If the room in which we encounter this odd couple of a sculpture is, in fact, a kind of obliteration space, it is simultaneously a creation space: the eye above us humanizes the experience by both giving us a point of reference and making it OK to look and to feel. It shows that there is something warm here to encounter: that like the Cosmos paintings, Curry wants his work to affect its interlocutors, to show humility in the face of the void, and to find peace in the face of fear.