

# Robert Bordo

ALEXANDER AND BONIN

Born in Montreal, Robert Bordo has been a New Yorker for forty years, and his work a point of reference for painters here since his first exhibition at the Brooke Alexander Gallery in 1987. Does the title of his most recent show, “Three Point Turn,” signal a volte-face, a recantation? Thankfully not. But while Bordo hasn’t shifted into reverse, he has changed gears, as could be seen by comparing the eleven new paintings (from 2012 and 2013) exhibited on the ground floor at Alexander and Bonin with the eleven older ones upstairs (two from 1996, the rest from between 2007 and 2011). A telegraphic way of describing the change might be to say that Bordo’s earlier paintings, which verge on both abstraction and landscape, have affinities with works by artists of a tender and sometimes tentative touch such as Raoul De Keyser and Sylvia Plimack Mangold, whereas his more recent pieces evince a Gustonesque brusqueness and spleen. Bordo’s new paintings are somewhat larger in size than they used to be, but they feel much bigger, with a blunter, more robust facture and a more implacable presence.

However, the title’s invocation of driving was entirely to the point. A few of the individual painting titles sustained the metaphor, but more importantly, so did the imagery of rearview mirrors (as in *DWI* and *[wacko]*, both 2012) and windshield wipers (*Dial* and *The Future*, both 2012). The corners of *Joy Ride* and *The Black Dog*, both 2012, are nailed down, so to speak, by hexagonal red doohickies resembling stop signs. Despite Tony Smith’s notorious reflection that the New Jersey Turnpike was “the end of art” because “most painting looks pretty pictorial after that”—“pictorial,” in Smith’s statement, functioning mainly as a synonym for “puny”—the experience of the road has fed the imagery of painting at least since Allan D’Arcangelo’s sweepingly perspectival Pop highways and Vija Celmins’s photorealist views through the windshield. I don’t know whether Smith would have admitted the value of D’Arcangelo’s efforts, or of Celmins’s, or today of Bordo’s; if your criterion is that “there is no way you can frame it,” then any painting at all is pretty sure to fall short. But good paintings often have a way of using their framedness, their evident delimitation (to borrow Clement Greenberg’s word), to imply or convey an experience that resists containment, and this is precisely what Bordo does in his most recent work—not by making it too big to encompass but too intransigent.

Robert Bordo, *DWI*, 2012, oil on canvas, 45 x 55".



For Bordo, however paradoxical it may sound, driving doesn’t seem to have much to do with movement, with that immemorial American urge to light out for the territory. But how surprising is that, really? If you’ve ever had the experience of wondering, suddenly, as you pass the sign for exit 70, why you don’t remember passing any of the others after exit 49, you know that driving can be hypnotic, putting you into a quasi-autonomic state in which distance, speed, and progress through space and time evaporate. Abstract painting was always supposed to be about compressing deep space in favor of flatness, but Bordo’s unexpected move is to use that flattening as a way to evoke the evacuation of time. Zeno of Elea, who taught that Achilles would never catch up with the tortoise, would have nodded in agreement could he have seen these paintings. Driving a Chevy wouldn’t have done Achilles any good, either.

—Barry Schwabsky