

Tiffany Malakooti, 'Mathew Cerletty Frames the World', Tokion, February 2008



### Mathew Cerletty Frames the World

Text: Tiffany Malakooti | Photographs: Justin Heller | Images courtesy of the artist



Mathew Cerletty is probably best known for his remarkably intricate portraits which star friends, family and oftentimes himself. Although these paintings are technically flawless they do not suffer from lack of character—far from it. In fact, Cerletty's portraits are tinged with a dark, dry humor loaded with sneaky cultural references that continue to characterize his work today in what we'll call his "post-mannerist" period. No longer using the language of traditional figurative painting, Cerletty is now creating portraits of a different kind, taking his mostly inanimate subjects from the worlds of pop, consumer and high and low cultures. On a recent call to Cerletty just days after the opening of his solo show at Team Gallery entitled "The Feeling Is Mutual," we discussed the pros (discipline) and cons (boring) of his formalist art education at Boston University, and fancy New York people.

You've expressed to me before that you feel like you missed out on the typical, wild art school experience.

Yeah, I missed out on art school. Talking to people from R.I.S.D. or anywhere that had a bunch of crazy art students at it... B.U. is not that crazy at all. I think there were 22 painting majors in my class, and I can't even remember how many of them are still painting, but not too many. I guess people just weren't that devoted or passionate. I came in not knowing for sure that I

wanted to be an artist, but I left knowing that I did. And I feel like a lot of people come in not knowing what they wanted to do and left still not knowing, but not wanting to be an artist.

What was the turning point for you, if there was one?

I think it was around my sophomore year when we started to get assignments that were not just "do this." I started to get more engaged—there was this big self-portrait assignment where you have to do a big

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Yeah. I missed out on art school. Talking to people from R.I.S.D. or anywhere that had a bunch of crazy art students at it... B.U. is not that crazy at all. I think there were 22 painting majors in my class, and I assume that some of them are still painting, but not too many. I guess people just weren’t that devoted or passionate. I came in not knowing for sure that I

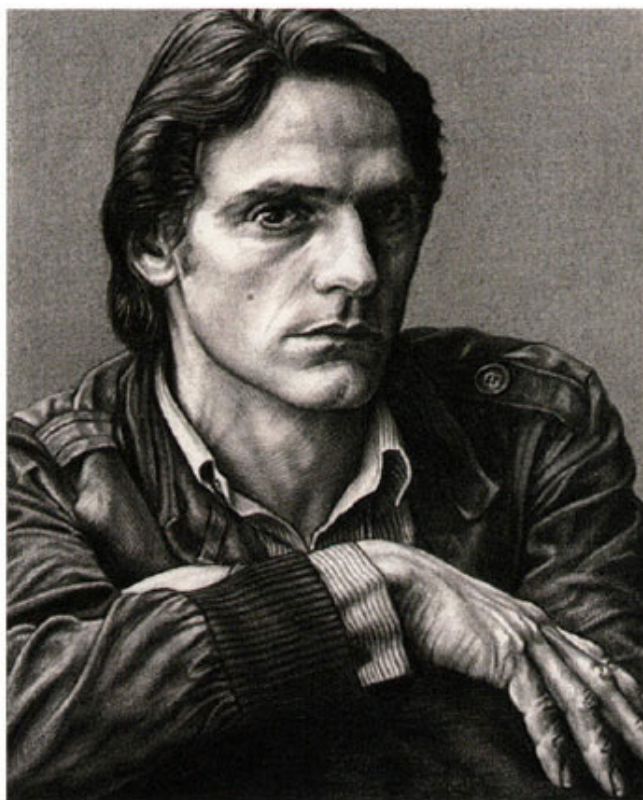
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**What was the turning point for you, if there was one?**

I think it was around my sophomore year when we started to get assignments that were not just still life. I started to get more engaged—there was this big self portrait assignment where you have to do a big







painting of yourself that was six feet tall. Mine was of me on the subway wearing a shirt and tie with a briefcase and just looking very dead to the world. It came out really well and it was the first time where the professor praised me a lot. And I guess after that I realized that I was into it.

**There's definitely been a noticeable shift in your work recently.**

Yeah. Before, I was doing what I was taught to do, largely, like figure paintings. I had my own take on it. I was able to personalize it, but it was still in a language that people understood. You can read a face—that's something that everybody understands. I guess I felt like people will bring their baggage to the painting, like I wasn't in control of a lot of parts of it. Everybody would think that it was their favorite portrait of someone they knew, or I was trying to make some sense of my relationship with whoever was in the painting and it was like, 'Er... No, it was just my friend who was around. My grandma, in fact, isn't selfish.'

**I thought you had told me she is kind of selfish.**

She is kind of selfish. (Laughs.) That can't go in...

**Oh, come on.**

I guess she doesn't read *Tokion*... I guess it was my mannerist phase. It was like I knew how to make those paintings too well. Then there was this long stretch where I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. I just knew that I didn't want to continue making figure paintings in the same way that I had, and so there's a bunch of weird transitional attempts in the middle, like some hand painting and there's a painting of a shirt that says "No" on it. I guess I did Lincoln—it was from a photograph that I just found on the Internet and he is someone that is more of a symbol than a person at this point.

**What motivates you in these really specific pieces, like *Smith House* and *Yoplait* and *Jeremy Irons*? Why *Jeremy Irons* and why *Yoplait*?**

I guess it's the particular character of these things. It relates to all the work that I've always done. It's just a more subtle way of expressing yourself I guess. It's something that people are familiar with and I feel there's something about it, like there's a little bit more life than people might expect. In *Diet Coke* or *Yoplait* or *Jeremy Irons*, I just feel like if anybody is going to tell everyone about Yoplait it should be me; I'm the guy for that job. Are there lots of painters and stuff at, er...

**CalArts?**

At your school, yeah.

**No, not at all. It's probably the opposite of a school like Boston U. It's all about conceptual art; painting is almost frowned upon.**

Painting is embarrassing, yeah. Do you get a lot of technical training though?

**No. I think if you want to, you can. There are figure drawing and painting classes available but even then those technical skills are seen as tools to help you achieve a conceptual goal.**

I just wonder how that works, albeit it wasn't very rigorous conceptually at my school. It seems like that's kind of easier to pick up on your own. I'm not at a bar learning glazing techniques or something.

**I guess that's assuming that the work that people are going to make is going to require some kind of technical knowledge. A lot of it is installation or video or text based stuff. The emphasis isn't formal.**

But, do 19-year-olds have anything to say? Not often.



# THE BOLD LOOK OF KOHLE

Maybe I'm biased because I came out of a place where everybody had to do all that stuff, and I feel like it's useful. I liked that you had to be disciplined. I guess I just don't think like 18- or 19-year-olds... It's not the time for them to be making their statement.

**How did you first get in contact with Melissa [Bent] and Mirabelle [Marden] from [Cerletty's gallery] Rivington Arms?**

Well, I got to know Mirabelle's sister Melia in Boston. She went to Harvard, and I invited her to a party at my house at some point. I had a bunch of my paintings in

the apartment. She liked them and told her sister about them, and they had just opened the gallery and were looking for new artists, so they came up to Boston to check me out and a few other people that Melia had recommended and... The rest is history.

**They were just starting up when they came to speak with you right?**

They'd been open for two months or something when I met them. And they're, you know, approximately my age so everyone was very innocent. (Laughs.) But I think especially me; I was the most innocent.

**What was your impression?**

Totally intimidated. I didn't have an impression almost; it was like I hadn't even seen people like them on television. They were a new type of person to me.

**What type of person?**

Fancy New York people. I hadn't met any fancy New York people before. Not even at Harvard. Harvard is full of nerds. [Marden and Bent] were just like super fashionable and, in my head, you were doing well if you were wearing some J. Crew or Banana Republic gear. They were next level. I just didn't know what hit me.