UBS Securities Inc. Fine Art Program

BAYAT KEERL, *Schreckhorn,* 1985, oil on photograph, 80×50 inches

UBS SECURITIES INC.

FINE ART PROGRAM

HIGHLIGHTS #1: A Conversation With Bayat Keerl

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UBS Securities Inc. has five remarkable works by Bayat Keerl in its current Collection of contemporary Swiss art. They include three ladder paintings done in 1980, a landscape/chair painting from 1985 and a 1988 figural triptych. Although this jewel-like cluster of the artist' work spanning the last decade invites us to see development and change in his art, each painting reinforces Keerl's fundamental and compelling intellectual, philosophical and esthetic concerns.

The following conversation with the artist took place over the course of several weeks in the Fall of 1989 in his studio on Mercer Street in SOHO, New York's famed art center.

More than an interview, this dialogue between artist and advisor/curator is intended to help UBS Securities' staff and visitors understand what drives the creative process in so personal and unique a way and to encourage, through a broader understanding of Keerl's thinking, a deeper appreciation of his art.

We hope HIGHLIGHTS #1 achieves these goals and offers useful insights into the work of a fascinating and highly articulate artist.

Joan Kaplan

Joan Kaplan
Advisor
Curator

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Joan Kaplan: As difficult as it is for an artist to describe his work in a few sentences, will you try?

Bayat Keerl: What interests me is state of time, physically as well as psychologically; the state of Man in flux...

JK: Flux as change or flux as movement? Or are they the same?

BK: Flux is the movement of being in time, how we act, exist, perceive. Historically, Man has always described himself in terms of objects - ways to relate to reality. We see ourselves through objects and things, like art and architecture, but we're always outside the object of what we represent ourselves by. My work is more and more about that state of flux and finding a parallel between the object we use to describe ourselves and the image it reflects of our psychological state of mind.

JK: How does your combined medium - photography and painting - help you find that parallel better, perhaps, than any other medium?

BK: A photograph records a moment in time. Drawing or painting envelopes the object, expands and embellishes it, creating a new object which is no longer passive observation but active observation, and comment.

JK: So by creating a new perspective you create not only a portrait of ourselves but of our state at that moment ...

BK: Yes, exactly. The images become universal rather than specific.

JK: How does the state of mind of one person at one moment become universal rather than specific or personal?

BK: Symbolically. A figure in space means time and space very specifically but it really symbolizes the condition of Man - his aloneness, the singularity of each person.

JK: Is this why we never see more than one figure in each painting, a single representation of the human condition relating to or defined in some way by an objectified reality - man-made things like ladders, chairs or God-made things like nature or landscape?

BK: Yes. One figure is specific and symbolic. Once you add another figure you have a narrative, a thousand stories. I don't want to get into that.

JK: It seems unlikely to me that someone as animated and full of life as you are - energetic, enthusiastic, optimistic - really sees the condition of Man as so solitary, so alone...

BK: I remember very clearly when I was a graduate student at Rutgers... I saw a performance by Meredith Monk where she stood alone as a figure on an empty stage and repeated "I am alone on this earth" for about a quarter of an hour. I was struck by how right she was. In its most general terms my work is about life and death and the condition of time.

JK: Not a small subject.

BK: (laughs) No.

JK: It's fascinating to me that performance art touched you so deeply while your own art is presented so differently. Yet, to express Man's state of flux specifically, the objects or figures in your work are always in motion, isolated and captured by the camera, then interpreted or universalized by the over-painting...

BK: Dance is the art form of motion in time. I'm focusing on the essence of that motion in time using the traditional construct of a portrait, freezing it and expanding its own perspective.

JK: So in a unique and very personal way, your work is a kind of performance that is captured but has a continuing life, that goes beyond the moment of its happening. You choose photography to create an object on which you can act through painting, but the performance endures and the audience can see it, think about it, return to it at its own pace, on its own time.

BK: Yes, even though a painting is a traditional art form, my paintings are really performances. I go beyond the object, the figure, the photograph, the painting. I get to create a sculptural mass in motion, in time, through planned movements and gestural maneuvers. The photograph is only a document, the painting represents the essence of time. Making the mark on the painting gives an additional human presence.

JK: So the photograph is specific and reportorial, but the painting is universal and interpretive. The two together embodying motion, become timeless, an expression of the esthetic and artistic philosophical vision of the artist.

BK: In the painting you see the mark, the hand, the presence of the artist.

JK: Because both mediums are integral to your work, the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

BK: Absolutely. The photograph here is a document. It becomes only the skeleton or support of the painting, the structure or sculptural anatomy of the completed work.

JK: By going beyond the photograph, your work breaks down our prejudices of how we read a photograph (as a document) and opens up a whole new realm of possibilities for understanding and interpretation. But I see your work not as an incremental sum of artistic parts - object, photograph, painting - but rather, as the whole of the process, where each part flows into the next and the finished work is not only greater than the sum of its parts but is the effect of the sum.

BK: Of course, but in all great art 2 + 2= 5. That's what it's all about.

JK: Tell us how you moved from performance to combined medium.

BK: Performance is private, confidential. I did performance pieces at Rutgers for no audience. I filmed them, videotaped them. They were simply a way to get pictorial information. But in the end I preferred to bring them back to painting. Performance with an audience is specific, interactive. A painting exists, stands alone. It is. In that sense, the aloneness of the painting is gorgeous.

JK: Kind of a metaphor for or mirror of the aloneness of Man.

BK: In a sense, yes. The performance itself fulfilled my interest in sculpture and dance and photographing them helped me solve the problems of time and movement.

JK: Did you tape them yourself?

BK: No, the still camera was automatic. It allowed me to perform. I started by throwing man-made objects into a bag where their color, form, texture disappeared so that none became more important than any other. Throwing the objects was as important as the objects themselves. Then I realized that the objects could somehow become a reference to human presence and I looked for things like ladders, chairs, stools, wheels that communicate an immediate perception of human scale.

JK: This was your way of expressing how we see ourselves?

BK: My way of expressing the individual portrait of the human form, moving in time and relating to an objectified reference.

JK: In addition to objects as reference for the figure, you also use nature, landscape, cityscape, architecture as recurring backdrops.

BK: They are all things I can juxtapose the figure to, really references in space that become the formality of space.

JK: How do you explain the chair in Schreckhorn? It's an oversized, distorted image, or reference. What does it mean?

BK: For me it's the icon of architectural man-made landscape silhouetted against natural landscape.

JK: Even though it seems overpowering because of the perspective, when you think of a chair compared to a mountain range, you're suddenly aware of all kinds of meanings about the relationship of Man to himself, his artificial and natural environments.

BK: I'm happy if it provokes that kind of reflective response.

JK: Let's talk about the techniques you developed to get photographs which, in some cases, are enormous and, in most cases, disappear into great subtle suggestions of their own presence.

BK: I modeled alot for my father - a commercial photographer - when I was a kid. Everything was a well-lit theatrical presence, really dramatic. Everything about the whole activity was meant for one click of the shutter. I thought it was fascinating. But they always told me to stand still for the picture. That drove me nuts; I always wanted to move - to test the camera.

JK: Now you use the camera the way you always wanted to use it.

BK: When I started throwing objects, I photographed them in bright light. Then I used a strobe light in a completely dark room, moved the object and strobed it a multiple of times.

JK: In other words, you painted with light.

BK: Yes.

JK: Did this create a series of images?

BK: No, no. This created one picture, one negative. With one exposure I can capture 6, 8, 10 different movements. That's consistent throughout my work. One picture with multiple images. In that way they stay true as performances. It's important to understand that I'm never taking a random number of shots. I'm moving or altering the position of the object in space so you get a sense of motion not a change of position.

JK: So you found a way to extend the moment of the camera's recording an action or movement. How did you use the negative?

BK: I made 8 X 10 black and white prints from the negatives as studies to see what happened. Then I chose the most interesting chance occurrences, cropped them but left in the referential lines of the cropping so they would appear later in the painting.

JK: This is very important because it identifies the photographic medium as a structure. What happens next?

BK: The sequence is always the same. The 35 mm negative gets printed into 8 X 10 black and white prints so I can select the imagery I want to use. Then I crop them and determine the scale the painting will be. I reproduce the 8 X 10 print with a Polaroid positive/negative so that it can be blown up to a large scale. The large scale photograph is printed on mural paper that I mount on hollowcore doors. Then I paint.

JK: So the surface you paint on is hard, not soft and absorbable like canvas?

BK: Right. Because it's hard, I can rub out thin, transparent layers, or have an effect of heavy impasto. It gives me a great range of possibility.

JK: How do the backgrounds get into the work? Where do they come from?

BK: The objects I had been using were very specific. They gave the figure a scale reference and together they embodied movement, flux.

JK: But the space was amorphic so you needed another structure as a reference point?

BK: Right. At one point I went to Paris and was bowled over by the 18th century French paintings I saw. I decided to add another dimension to my work by photographing the moving objects/figure against a backdrop in my own studio, my own "manufactured" landscapes, so to speak. It was like setting the stage and creating a device to create questions about the origin of imagery. In some cases the object becomes the figure against an ambiguous, provocative backdrop.

JK: Things become less specific and more symbolic, less personal and more universal.

BK: I guess so.

JK: How do you know how fast to move when you're photographing, rather, when the camera is shooting?

BK: I learned how to figure out how many positions the camera could record at what speed for one exposure.

JK: Although this differs with each work, the idea of a performance is still always consistent.

BK: Yes, each work is a private performance that could be, or becomes, a public performance. It's about a dance, a ladder dance, a wheel dance, whatever, that's also about my philosophy.

JK: But the work is private expression and public exposure. Isn't this an absolute contradiction? A totally private work totally exposed?

BK: Yes.

JK: Do you agree that this seeming contradiction essentially defines the fundamental role of art? The artist sharing a private vision, communicating with a voluntary audience on his own terms?

BK: Yes, the critical point is that the communication is on my terms. I do it my way, with my own private vocabulary. But communicating individual vision is only a part of it. Being an artist is finding out how to communicate with yourself. There's the struggle, trying to grow. Some artists can do this alone, some can't.

JK: Isn't the interaction with an audience important, both positively and negatively in order for an artist to grow?

BK: Absolutely. It's hard to grow in isolation. Brancusi made a big thing about how isolated he was but you read about how many other artists visited him in his studio and soon you realize that he wasn't really isolated at all. The whole world was going in and out of that studio! There must have been a lot of interaction.

JK: In this culture of instant communication, where technology makes information and access to ideas so immediate and so vital and integral a part of everyone's experience of life, what is the effect on the artist, his work, his relationship to other artists and to his audience?

BK: The faster we communicate with the world, the more insular we get.

JK: Is that a defensive mechanism we use that lets us become more selective about information, influences?

BK: The overwhelming sense is clear and strong about how small we are in relation to the whole world. Our personal significance seems to be diminished.

JK: Is this primarily a consequence of urban life?

BK: Urban life intensifies everything. But this access to information - visual, audio, every way, any way - makes us sense the vastness and complexity of the world. It makes us question how important, how short our experience of life is - how valuable our contribution really is. We are confronted with the issue of the mortality of thought.

JK: Historically, eastern and western cultures have seen things so differently. Do you think that now, with the world growing so much smaller in terms of communication, that there is more shared judgement about human value and contribution?

BK: How we perceive history and our roles in it is still very different. Americans have a short-term view, Europeans a longer view. That's cultural and historical. Maybe it's changing; I'm not sure.

JK: Where is art in all of this? Are our views of what's valid, important in art, changing too?

BK: Everything's always changing, expanding. To survive, art does that too, always a personal vision reflecting a bigger universe.

JK: Is that why you started using the computer in your work? Does it help communicate your vision through a newer, extended vocabulary?

BK: The computer helps me problem solve: it helps me make personal what appears impersonal. I've always loved problem solving; there's a mystery, a discovery in the process.

JK: Using the computer to make new backdrops, new parameters of space, new definitions of perspectives - does that add a magical, seductive dimension to the work?

BK: Oh yes. Just as I don't know what the camera will capture with the click of the shutter, I don't know what the computer will give me when I feed it information and it swallows it and throws back a visualization of my questions and ideas.

JK: That's a really exciting process of discovery! How do you decide what information to give the computer? How do you structure the parameters?

BK: Intuitively, with a sense of what the image will be. But the camera and the computer are very much part of this process of creating and capturing an image in movement in time.

JK: When did you start using the computer?

BK: In the early 80's.

JK: Has it changed your work in some fundamental way or simply expanded it?

BK: The computer expanded the work because it's only a tool, a means, but not the only one - to an end.

JK: Is the primary use of the computer in your work to create backdrops?

BK: Presently. It can develop three dimensions in space in a way that lets me manipulate space fluidly. It' a kind of extension of geometry.

JK: How does that matter to your work? Does it create a new context for the objects, the figures?

BK: Not really. The important thing is it's just a more economical process in problem solving. The computer extends the backdrop, evolves it to other possibilities. The computer is really a drawing tool. Much like the camera, it interprets space. It's still very new to me. I'm not sure where it's going. I'm still trying to figure it out.

JK: You feed the computer geometric information, a kind of 3-D language, and use it to design space and objects in space.

BK: Yes. It's like seeing the camera's negative feed the computer all the information, then slowly, after thousands of calculations, the paper emerges from the printer. It's beautiful. The process is beautiful.

JK: Then you photograph the print-out to make a backdrop. Can you make changes on the print-out before you decide to use it as a backdrop?

BK: Sure. The changes become the next drawing. To give evidence of the artist's presence, I make finger prints on the negatives before processing them.

JK: So the process is print-out, photograph, negative, blow-up.

BK: Yes. But the negative has everything: the presence of the artist, the texture of the paper, everything. They all become esthetic properties of the resulting image.

JK: They become the backdrop against which to photograph a moving object. It sounds awfully complicated.

BK: (laughs) Well, it is and it isn't.

JK: So the computer, a vital part of our expanding world of instant communication and spontaneous access to ideas has found a real place in your work.

BK: It seems so.

JK: In such a complex world marked by extremes of contradiction - extraordinary accessibility and growing isolation - what do you hope for your art?

BK: I hope to maintain my personal expression in a world I see as increasingly impersonal.

JK: Why do you make your art? Why will you continue, beyond the need for personal expression?

BK: The private vocabulary is the channel that keeps art alive whether or not society wants to look at it today or tomorrow. Hopefully, because it exists, it creates and maintains a standard for culture, for the way we see ourselves.

JK: So you agree with Hans Haacke who said, "Art is part of those elements that in one way or another create values, shape beliefs, form goals, and just in general, how should I say it, have an effect on the understanding of oneself and one's role in the social environment...on how we see ourselves in the world." (View, interview by Robin White at Crown Point Press, Oakland, California, 1978)

BK: These really are the ideas artists believe in.

JK: Bayat, is there something you'd like to say to a group of businessmen and businesswomen - bankers, especially - if you were standing there with them looking at them look at your work?

BK: No, not really. I hope the art itself will ask its own questions of the viewer. I guess I'd like to think this conversation helps create the curiosity to see my work.

JK: How do you want people to feel about your work?

BK: I want them to ask questions. Different questions from different people. I want each person to be free and open to look, really look, at the work and respond in his or her own personal way.

JK: Thank you for sharing so much of your time and thought with us. This has been a marvelous opportunity to learn more about you and your work.

BK: Thanks, Joan. It was fun.

Bayat Keerl

Born in Basel, Switzerland, 1948. Studied at the Layton School of Art, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, B.F.A., 1970; Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, M.F.A., 1972. Lives and works in New York City.

Selected One-Person Exhibitions: Graham Modern, New York, New York, 1989; "Bayat Keerl Paintings 1978-1988," B.R. Kornblatt Gallery, Washington, D. C., 1988; Laurence Miller Gallery, New York, New York, 1985, 1984; Peter Noser Galerie, Zurich, Switzerland, 1984, 1982; Martha White Gallery, Louisville, Kentucky, 1981; Alexander F. Milliken, Inc., New York, New York, 1980, 1981, 1982.

Selected Group Exhibitions: "Synthesis," Graham Modern, New York, New York,1989; "Black, Grey & White," Henry Feiwel, New York, New York, 1988; "Ten From Layton," Milwaukee Institute of Art & design, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1988; "Works on Paper, Paintings and Prints," B. R. Kornblatt Gallery, Washington, D. C. , 1988; "Exposed and Developed," Laurence Miller Gallery, New York, New York, 1987; "Gallery Selections," Cantor/Lemberg Gallery, Birmingham, Michigan, 1986; "Ruckschau/Vorschau 5 Jahre," Peter Noser Galerie, Zurich, Switzerland, 1981.

Selected Collections: American Express Company, New York, New York; Best Products Collection; Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, New Brunswick, New Jersey.

Selected Awards: National Endowment for the Arts, 1987, 1981.