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An Interview with Bill Saylor

by Sean Scanlan

Bill Saylor has held solo exhibitions at Magenta Plains, New York; Galerie Julien Cadet, Paris; Leo Koenig Inc., New York; The Journal Gallery, Brooklyn; and Loyal Gallery, Stockholm. Two-person shows include Bill Saylor & Josh Smith at Hiromi Yoshii Gallery, Tokyo; Bill Saylor & Aidas Bareikis at Shoot The Lobster, New York; Bill Saylor & Donald Baechler at Makebish, New York; and Mason Saltarrelli and Bill Saylor at Shrine, New York. He lives and works in Upper Black Eddy, Pennsylvania, and Brooklyn, New York. Contact: studiodsaylor@gmail.com
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Abstract: In this interview, *NANO* editor Sean Scanlan talks to Bill Saylor, an artist who lives and works in both Brooklyn, New York, and Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Their conversation ranges from small drawings to large paintings, from grabbing a shark's tail to the rewards of an outdoor studio. The interview was recorded on November 1, 2023, and subsequently transcribed and edited for length and clarity.

Keywords: painting, drawing, exhibitions, studio art, sculpture, artist interview

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Fig. 1: Bill Saylor, detail of untitled work in progress, 2023, Photo: Sean Scanlan

Sean Scanlan: Thank you, Bill, for agreeing to this interview. We're in Bill's Bushwick, New York, studio. My opening question is about how you got started painting and drawing. Was it in high school, college, or before?

Bill Saylor: Definitely before. There are stories from my father about how I used to just lay on the floor and draw. I wouldn't even lift my hand from the paper; I would just draw continually. Something like two or three years old. I was just like any little kid doing drawings, but I stuck with it.

SS: Did you have art classes in high school that were helpful?

BS: I took very little art in high school. Though I kept at it on my own at home. And I did take a couple of classes with a local art teacher in Pennsylvania—private classes with maybe eight kids. And I studied it in high school, but I did more architecture and building—more hands-on construction. In fact, I received the industrial arts award for my graduating class.

SS: Were there any other types of arts you tried out?

BS: I was always drawing, but I also contributed to poetry magazines that we created in high school. I added drawings that went with some poetry, so I had my hand in both, for sure. But I wasn't really diving into a lot of art classes in school. I was certainly doing art at home, and my mother was a painter. When I was at home, I would see her paintings, so I was pretty comfortable around art forms.

SS

That must have been very influential. I was going to ask about art books laying around, but if your mom was a painter, that must have been nice. And you may have had art supplies laying around.

BS: Yes. It was a small home, and she had a studio in the bedroom. I would smell the oil paint, and then one day a new painting would pop up. I was intrigued by that. Definitely, it was a good thing to see. Plus, she was good; her paintings had a really loose style. There were fun compositions.

SS: Did your mother exhibit, teach, or did she paint for herself?

BS: She would show in some local exhibitions, and I think she was part of the Bucks County, Doylestown Art League.

SS: I want to transition to how California, the ocean, and scuba diving seem to be important influences. Can you speak about the underwater worlds of Pennsylvania and California? You started college in California, but if I read your biography right, you didn't exactly move there for college.

BS: That's right. My older brother Mark went to photography school in Santa Barbara called Brooks Institute—a really top-notch professional photography school. When I was maybe 14, I got to go out with my parents and visit him. He was about 8 years older. So that trip out was great: I got to see California for the first time, I saw his school, I saw the land, and plus, it was my first time on a plane. To go to California and get outside, to get lost on these

back roads, and to see hippie communes and people running around. It was a great experience.

Then, the next time [I visited] was right after high school. I had saved up my money from working over the summer, and he was ready for his return back to Pennsylvania. So, I flew out there thinking that I would hang out for a few months and then help him drive back. But I just stayed. I was 18, and I was like—this is too good. I found a night job in the newspaper and quickly got an apartment. When I was 19, I rented a house with two roommates. But then they left for college, so at that point, I signed a lease for the house, and I ended up getting two new roommates. I was pretty established in Santa Barbara early on.

SS: What kind of job did you get so quickly?

BS: I got a job in the mail room at a data processing plant from five pm until one in the morning. That night shift allowed me to have my days open. Then I started City College in Santa Barbara. So that way I could have my days free to go to school. Five to one–a fulltime job–was not a horrible schedule.

SS: Did your brother lead you to scuba diving or did you start that on your own or through other circles of friends?

BS: That was just me. I was always a big swimmer, and I grew up on the Delaware River water skiing, so I was always really comfortable in the water. I loved watching Jacques Cousteau! They would swim off into these alien worlds wearing those silver wet suits. I got PADI certified at 19 by an ex-Navy Seal. It was one of the first things I did. And the opportunities there for diving were amazing. Then you have Anacapa Island off the Santa Barbara coast, only a few hours boat ride. It's one of the best diving spots in the world, especially the kelp beds. So yeah, that was an amazing introduction to scuba diving.

SS: And during this time were you doing painting and drawing continuously or were you working too much?

BS: At that time, I'm working the night job from five to one in the morning, and I'm taking classes at Santa Barbara City College. I enrolled in art classes like drawing and painting. Just the basics. I was there for the two-year degree, so I took English and a lot of marine biology, which satisfied the science requirement. That marine biology class was amazing because I think my instructor was a grad student from the University of Santa Barbara, just twenty minutes down the road. Because City College had access to the beach, we could easily do beach walks or surveys. During beach walks we would scoop into the sand every three yards to see what we could pull out. Also, we had access to the harbor, and sometimes we would go out on a small boat and drag a net behind us to accumulate

things. Then we would survey what we found. That marine biology hands-on availability and access was amazing.

SS: That's such an interesting part of your life that may, I think, help readers understand some of your ocean-related images and symbols. Honestly, I love the hammerhead shark. It's a wonderful icon and theme. And this story gives new meaning to, really, all of your animal images. So you studied these things when diving?

Fig. 2: Bill Saylor, Humboldt Hangout, 2017, Photo: Magenta Plains

BS: I did more than just study those sharks. One time I'm out at Anacapa Island. I'm diving at about 80 feet and I ran into a shark. I didn't even have my buddy around. I was just on

my own, and this thing was just so peaceful. I've told the story before, but what I did was I grabbed the shark's tail as he went circles around me, and eventually he swam out of this sunken hole. To be in this other world like that with the quality of the space, the way I felt, the three dimensionality of the things that were floating above and below—all around you. That experience was wonderful.

SS: That's such a...wait. You grabbed a shark's tail. Do you know what kind of shark it was?

BS: Probably, it was a nurse shark just resting near the ocean floor. It was certainly bigger than me. It was very gentle and slow. And super peaceful.

SS: That's fantastic. To imagine that scene in my own mind helps me reflect on the quality of colors that I encounter in your paintings, especially the ones that are more oceanic—the ones that are just more spatially surrounded by colors.

BS: Of course, at that depth, it's mostly sort of brown and green, so not a lot of bright colors. Certainly, the textures are there. The light filters out pretty quickly, but as you go up, the kelp beds have such a translucent brown to them. Gas balls help the kelp float straight, so the effect is like a canopy of trees. It's really dense. It's almost hard to swim through it. But when you're down at the very bottom, it's like a forest where you can go through the stalks and trunks easily.

SS: Do you still scuba or snorkel?

BS: Actually, I just got a refresher course when I was in Australia. I spent a night on a dive boat, and I got to the Great Barrier Reef. I think I made six dives altogether. That was fantastic. Yes, that was a bucket list sort of thing.

SS: Did you find kelp beds in Australia? Was it different from California?

BS: They don't have kelp beds everywhere. California is a premier spot for that. Especially the islands like Anacapa. The sheer drop and the kelp beds are pretty impressive.

SS: This discussion reminds me that there's often a lot of aquatic life in your area of the river in Pennsylvania. And that sometimes the plant life kind of overwhelms the river.

BS: My area of the Delaware river is definitely like a fish tank aquarium. That type of grass gets out of control, especially when there's a drought and the spring floods don't clean it away.

SS: Let's continue talking about the outside. I know you paint inside and outside. Do you have a preference? Do you like to be able to go back and forth?

BS: I like back and forth for sure. I like working outdoors as there's a lot of natural elements that come into play. The wind might start to blow, or a storm moves in. Suddenly, you're chasing pieces of paper. If it starts to rain—that can break my focus. I can get through the summer and be still productive even though there are challenges outdoors. I built a work shed in Pennsylvania, so I can still work if it rains.

SS: I know there's a lot of natural light in your studio here, but I wonder about working outside. Is natural light part of the process?

BS: At times the natural light can be overwhelming. Honestly, I have to wear sunglasses at times. When really bright sun is at my back and reflecting off things, it can almost be too much. I've been surprised when I'm inside, and I see some works that I've made outside. They can be powerful because the sun isn't bleaching the colors.

SS: I know in the past you've had some open air studio exhibits such as the Chinati Foundation exhibit in Marfa, Texas. How does open air compare to a curated indoor show. Do you like both approaches?

BS: I did one on Governors Island in 2021, which was an outdoor exhibit where my piece had to be outdoors for three months. Because Governors Island is a state park, they didn't allow anyone to secure anything to the ground. Physically, it had to have enough weight to withstand the wind. There were many considerations for this show: What shape did I have in mind? Would that shape even hold up? Would it even last?

SS: Are you talking about Triad and NADA House on Governor's Island?

Fig. 3: Bill Saylor, Triad, 2021, Photo: Magenta Plains

BS: Yes. The bottom of Triad actually had some tree sections that were embedded into them, as well as concrete. Then the top half is made from Aqua resin and fiberglass. Those were much lighter sections, but they could still hold up to the weather. And they disassembled, too. I brought everything in my car and was able to install it really quickly. The design and construction enabled it to just stand there with the wind, and not have any issues.

I was proud of the fact that I had engineered it in such a way that I could deliver it in my car and assemble it within half an hour. And it had such presence—it was large, and it stood for three months.

SS: Where is Trident now?

BS: It is carefully stored in my father's pigeon loft. He passed away, but we still have the pigeon loft. You could say it's in deep storage.

SS: I have a process question. Do you use drawings to begin an idea? And then use that to generate a canvas? Or, is drawing somewhat separated from painting? What's the relationship?

BS: Drawings are my daily bread. I make a lot, and it's a way to kind of limber up, to cultivate new images, new shapes, and new forms. Also, I have fun with the hand, the brushes, and the materials. It's a little bit like painting. Sometimes I have a favorite image that comes out of a drawing. And sometimes I've just blown up a drawing entirely and made a painting out of it. Or sometimes I look over my shoulder and pick out some of the imagery to see what works in a painting. It's not always a direct, immediate narrative from drawing to painting. It's more of a push/pull thing.

SS: Do you keep your drawings in one place? Or do you travel with a stack?

BS: That's a good question. I have so many of them that I couldn't take them all with me. But I have photographed them. I put them on my laptop so that I have access. Sometimes I'll print them so that I can have a little 8 1/2 x 11 version of a larger drawing. If I'm in New York, I have portfolios I can open and pull them out. And then there are times when I just start painting without referencing anything.

SS: Your current show at Cadet Capela titled A.K.A. PSYCHOPOMP displays 15 drawings together. That's an appealing installation.

BS: Yes, 15. I loved making those drawings. I put a lot of time and energy into them. And I thought, why aren't these just part of the exhibition. I think they're very collectible. You know, I'm doing some larger paintings [8' x 10'], and the idea that you're going to sell every large painting is just not going to happen.

SS: I'm a materials guy, so I'm interested in what kind of paints, brushes, paper, and pastels you use. Also, I just now I looked down and right next to me is a decent sized box with maybe hundreds of drawings. That's a lot of paper.

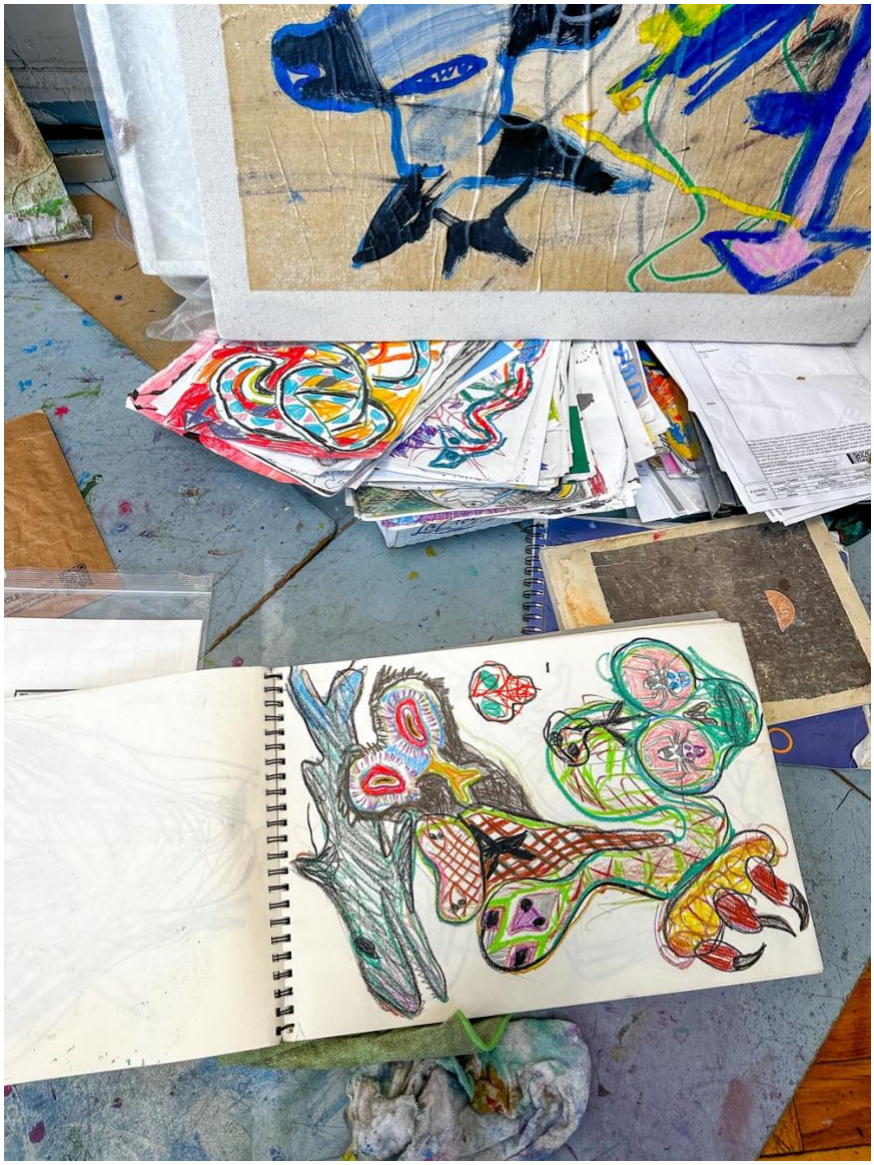

Fig. 4: Bill Saylor’s studio accumulation, 2023, Photo: Sean Scanlan

BS: I use a wide range of materials for drawings. Some of the drawings that you're looking at now are 8 1/2 x 11. I use regular paper and some that is more expensive. Of course, when I work with pastel or charcoal, I have to fix it to the paper so they don’t get destroyed.

SS: I have one of your books titled *Kitokie orai / Other Weather* (2014). It was a project you did with Aidas Bareikas. There’s an interesting theme of charcoal and muted colors.

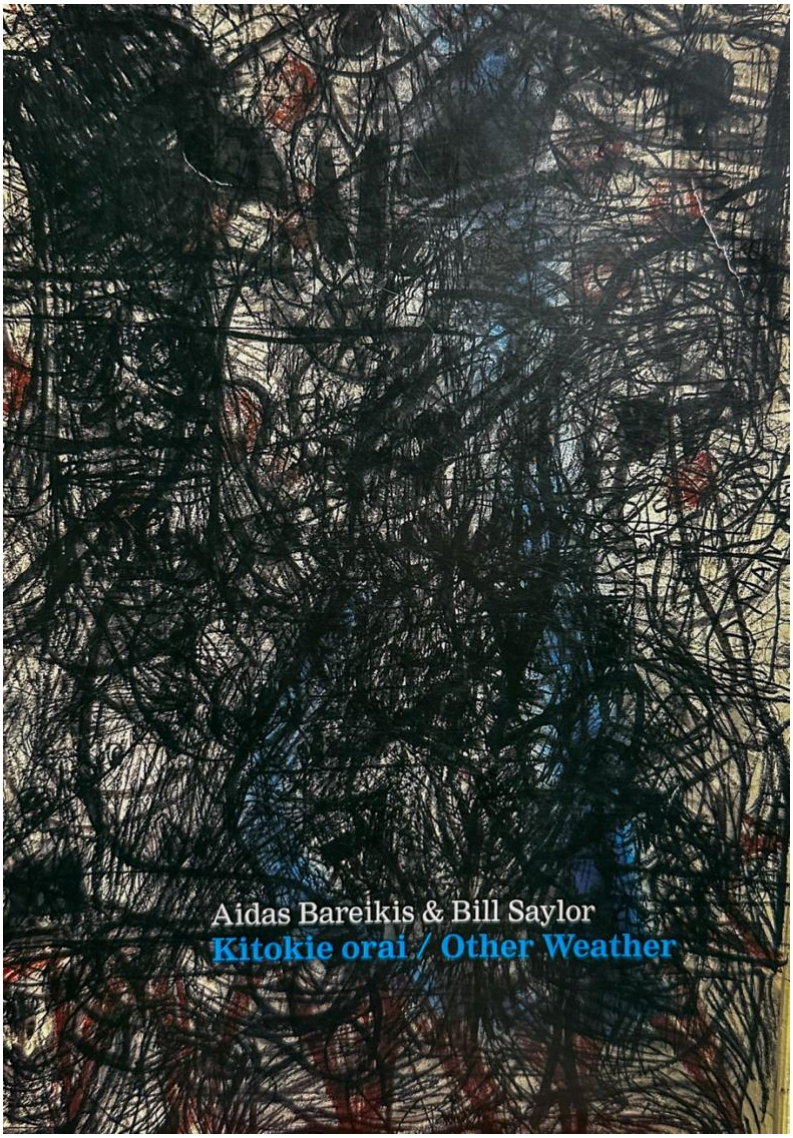

Fig. 5: *Kitokie orai / Other Weather,* 2014 (book cover)

BS: They were black and white. This project came up through Jose Martos who has a gallery with a side project called Shoot the Lobster. I was invited to do an exhibition there. It was only up for two weeks. Because of the timing, I spoke to my friend about doing a collaborative drawing show. Jose came to my studio and saw some drawings and said "this is amazing. We should just do the entire space." So we ended up making about 130 drawings, and they were about 18" by 24". We spent two months doing the drawings. We would make five each, and then we would exchange them; we would work on top of the original trying to fill the entire space. In order to keep it sane—though I don't want to say easier—we kept the color low. We just agreed let's not go crazy with color; we kept it in a very tight range. Mostly browns and blacks, with a little color here and there.

SS: Let's talk about your large canvas, here, that appears to be in process.

Fig. 6: Bill Saylor, untitled work in progress, 2023, Photo: Sean Scanlan

BS: I just brought this up from Pennsylvania. I started it late in the year, just as the weather turned. Now that I have it here in the studio, I can do a bit more with it.

SS: How big is it?

BS: Roughly 96" by 145". About 8 feet tall.

SS: Two things stick out. First, it looks like the canvas is beige or has been stained or painted. And second, the colors look nearly fluorescent.

BS: I use oil sticks which form a nice contrast to the brown background. I might start with a thin coat of a white but tinted down a little. I usually lay it flat ,and I spray color on it. I also do very thin washes of tone with a bucket that I do really fast. And then I wait for it to just sort of settle and dry out. Often, I lay big canvases flat so I can walk on it and not worry

about the cross bars interfering. It’s very slack when I'm making and working on big ones like this. When they're done, they will get stretched.

I didn't get started this year until August due to the rain and heat [in Pennsylvania]. I was slow on finishing this one. I just brought it up here [to Bushwick] about a week ago. At my last show Low Level High (at Magenta Plains), I had three large ones this size, and I think I spent three months making them; and there were some small ones too, some six by eights.

SS: That was a fun show with those large pieces and the bench. Can you talk about the bench?

BS: The bench was five days from start to finish. There's an invasive beetle killing ash trees in Pennsylvania. And there's a ton of trees cut down, laying around, so I grabbed a section out of a neighbor's yard. I had a problem with it standing up on its own, so I had a welder fabricate a circle plate with a pipe welded to it. Then I could drill a hole in the tree and get it to stand. I was amazed that I got the welding plates made so quickly. I really wanted to have it in the show, and I really wanted it to be a functioning bench. Glad it worked out.

Fig. 7: Bill Saylor: Cobra Bench from *LOW LEVEL HIGH* exhibition, 2023, Photo: Magenta Plains

SS: It's amazing how quickly that came together, and it was an unexpected treat to see the bench and use it at the show. Knowing your history of construction and building, your skills come through.

BS: I had a model, and I knew the shape I wanted. But I didn't recognize at first that the tree trunk would fall over. I needed a metal plate and I had to get one made quickly. Then, I happened to go to my car mechanic and asked him if he knew any welders, and there was

a welder in the auto shop at the same time. It turned out the guy's an amazing fabricator. And for that reason, I was able to get it done.

SS: I'd like to ask another question about this painting [Fig 7]. Did it come together organically or through drawings?

BS: For this one, there were some parts of it I really liked, and then there's an abstract part that is freewheeling. Parts are flat ,and some parts are moving forward. In a way, a lot of it is open and gestural. And I'm weaving imagery into it.

SS : I can see many different elements happening here but also it almost looks like these figures are looking in one particular direction. I can't wait to see it develop.

BS: There will be more images, and perhaps it'll feel like they're registering something. I want them to feel open and expansive in the way that they sit on the wall. Lines and spills and stains add up to abstractions, then the closer you get to it, things break apart. It's a very visceral kind of energy, which is really what I like to attempt and orchestrate. Both aggressive abstraction and figurative elements are there.

SS: That's fantastically described. Is this for a show?

BS: It could be since I have a group show in Paris in a couple of months. I have so much space down in Pennsylvania and I wanted to take advantage of that and make a large work. Unfortunately, the season got weird, and so I had to bring it back to the city to finish it. Soon as I can get it done, I'll put it in another part of the studio and work on smaller works for the winter because I don't have a huge demand for that scale. But I love making them that scale.

SS: Have you always liked large scale paintings? Was there an influence?

BS: When I was in high school, I asked my parents if I could paint my bedroom, and they said sure, go ahead, and I bombed out the entire bedroom. Floor to ceiling! I covered it all with images. It was fantastic. I've gone for that idea in a number of the shows. One time in Sweden I had a show completed and installed. I suggested we create a new wall, part graffiti and part drawings, collage, and spray work. So, we ran out and got plywood and made a 12' x 16' wall. I knocked that out in three nights–right before the opening. That was one of my favorite works. The stress of the exhibition was off my back because it was installed, and then I got to have all this fun and be in the moment.

SS: I love the idea that you mention stress and fun. What's another stress?

BS: I like using oil paint, and so for me, it's the dry time that's stressful. Especially the closer I get to the moment I have to ship paintings out of the studio. Sometimes I have colors that

never dry. I try not to think too much when I'm grabbing colors and working, but in the back of my mind, I know I have eight days before I need to put it into a crate. If I'm going to roll it, it really has to be dry.

SS: Do you think you'll make more benches as sculptures?

BS: I really think exhibitions should have a place where people can feel comfortable and sit, a place to reflect on the works. It's a bit selfish to make people stand. I like the duality of a work where you can see it, but you can also sit on it. This bench takes away that art mystique.

Fig. 8 Bill Saylor, Untitled, oil on canvas, 2024, Photo: Bill Saylor

Recent Book:

Bill Saylor: Snow Paintings (2024)

2025 Paris Exhibition:

A.K.A. PSYCHOPOMP. February 1 – March 1, 2025. Presented by cadet capela

2025 Monaco Exhibition:

July 8, 2025. Presented by Blue Economy and Finance Forum and the 3rd United Nations International Conference on the Oceans