

# The Exchange of Image and Meaning

## A Conversation

Richard Bailey and Jesse Morgan Barnett

*Jesse Morgan Barnett: I Would Know You Were Serious*  
Charles Dee Mitchell Residence, Dallas  
October 25 to November 24, 2019

**RICHARD BAILEY** For your exhibition *I Would Know You Were Serious* at the home of curator and critic Charles Dee Mitchell, you asked Mitchell to participate every morning in an artwork called *Sunrise To-Do* (Figure 1). You had meticulously lain out in vinyl tape the hour and minute of thirty-one sunrises occurring between October 25 and November 24, 2019, having acquired the data from meteorological forecasts. The list appeared on a window facing Mitchell's back yard. Every morning at the prescribed moment, Mitchell stood at the window and marked the time with a strip of black tape, rather like one crosses an errand off a to-do list. On the one hand, Mitchell performed a role as a clock keeper, noting specific durations for the various transformations that were happening with the art pieces, some of which were displayed outdoors in changing temperatures. But I wonder if your designs on Mitchell might also have been symbolic. Marking the hours is an archetypal human occupation, and there are many religious and folkloric associations with the hour of daybreak, the threshold between darkness and light, between being in a dream and being awake. Did you conceive of Mitchell acting in a mode of precision or mystery?

**JESSE MORGAN BARNETT** In the preliminary conversations, Dee and I considered a ghost story finding a way into his home. Some of the ways I interpreted this idea bonded with the emotive divorce I was experiencing. Time frequently separates us from long-term relationships. The cat will pass and you won't be able to sustain loving each other. Do you sometimes, too, drift to secrets with permanent sleep? If I momentarily propose the host as a bell-ringer to mark our time together, the host would have to readopt or refuse, daily. I hope his acceptance of our brief tradition reinforced alertness, reassessment and measured optimism.



Figure 1 Jesse Morgan Barnett, *Sunrise To-Do*, 2019. Vinyl, tape, audio. Installation view, *I Know You Were Serious*, Mitchell Residence, Dallas, October-November 2019. All images courtesy of the artist.

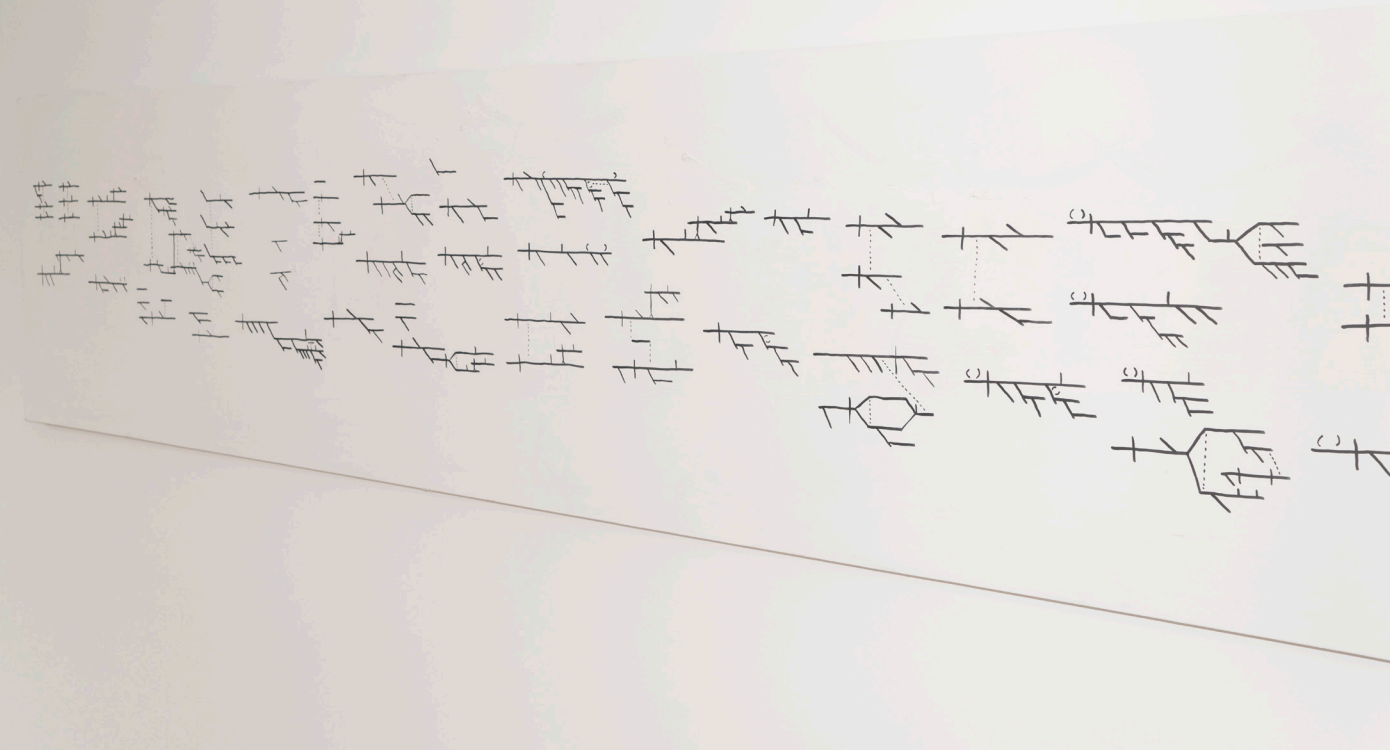


Figure 2 Jesse Morgan Barnett, *A Birthday Present*, 2019. Acrylic and graphite on canvas. Installation view, *I Know You Were Serious*, Mitchell Residence, Dallas, October-November 2019.

**RB** Your painting *A Birthday Present* was shown at the same exhibition (Figure 2). The painting presents a grammatical diagram of Sylvia Plath's poem of the same name. On one level, the poem concerns a problem with the exchange of image and meaning. It questions the adequacy of any image (whether it comes in bright paper or sharp edges) in the face of an extreme situation, such as despair. The grammatical structure mapped out in your painting seems like a fossilized form of Plath's poem. But rather than seeming pedantic, the painting has its own messages of ephemerality and is achingly poetic in its own right. Will you talk about your first ideas for this painting? There's considerable risk in dissecting an established artwork into its elemental bits.

**JMB** Leslie Murrell, the editor of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, generously collaborated with me throughout periods of this painting. We began with interview excerpts and conceptual art texts





Figure 3 Jesse Morgan Barnett, *Season*, 2013. Sailboat bow, chest freezer, plaster marine batteries, color pigment photographs, table, wood fish mount, plaster fish mounts, styrofoam, cardboard, pram packing list, vinyl, video, audio, projector, champagne, lake water, baking soda. Installation view, *Season*, The Reading Room, Dallas, June-July 2013.

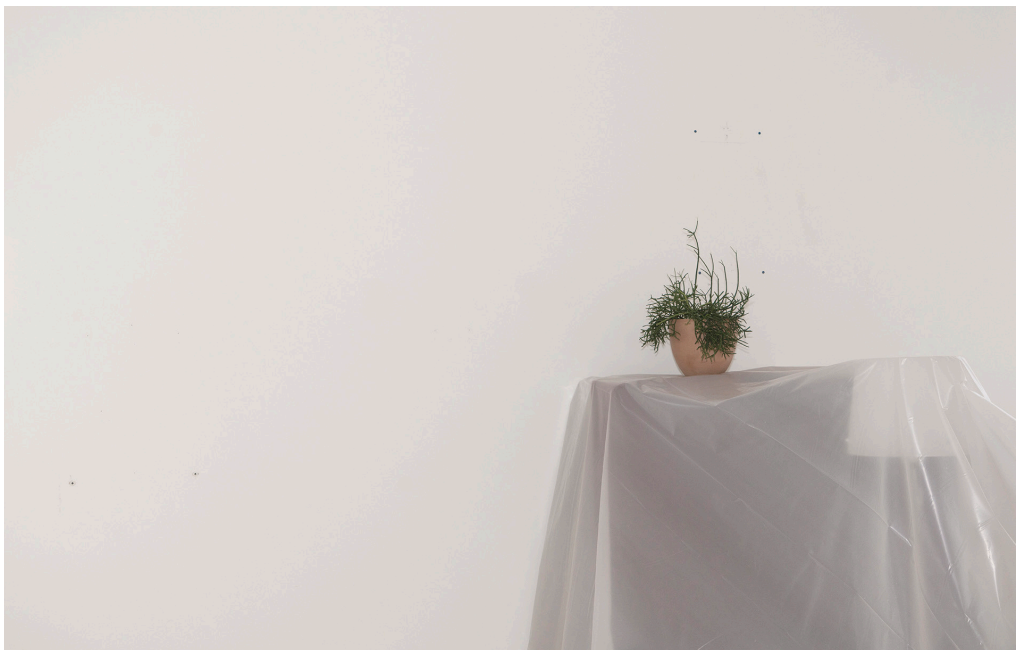


Figure 4 (top) Jesse Morgan Barnett, *Season* (preliminary preparations with sailboat and lettering), 2013. Color photograph.

Figures 5a (above) and 5b (right) Jesse Morgan Barnett, *Adult August on a Horse* (detail), 2019. Guest room objects, plastic sheeting, house plant, graphite, heat lamp, steam table pan, water, photograph, acrylic on canvas. Installation view, *I Know You Were Serious*, Mitchell Residence, Dallas, October-November 2019.





ADULT AUGUST ON A HORSE





Figure 6 *Augusta Deter (L)*, 2015. Painting by Ludwig Schwarz, acrylic on canvas. Installation view, Jesse Morgan Barnett, *I Know You Were Serious*, Mitchell Residence, Dallas, October-November 2019.

before arriving at Plath's "A Birthday Present."<sup>1</sup> Protégé effect-like, I began thinking about various small fires and rock bottoms I wanted to rise from. Sentence diagrams gave me the impression of a kind of anatomy. The study of the structure was like an educational exercise, simultaneously demonstrating and confusing my thoughts about a corpse. Omitting the language was a belated decision. Seeing the adventitious root growths, separated from the inconsolable voice, suggested a much-needed obscurity to find a small bite of internal optimism. Do you know that feeling when one must brake while driving to avoid an impending collision? Afterwards, that combination of *mudita* and temporary paresthesia becomes an abrupt, numb heat.<sup>2</sup> I was oscillating in and out of this state and the final relic attempted to push for closure.

**RB** My first introduction to your work was the exhibition called *Season*, which was shown at The Reading Room in 2013 (Figures 3 and 4). I thought it was an impressive balance of dissection and display. You took the work of fishing as your theme, and in just a few objects, some of them scarcely even whole, managed to invite a serious way of wondering about the rituals of fishing, the passage of time, and most significantly the life-giving and life-taking aspects of the enterprise. I wonder if you operate as a maximalist, who begins with novel-sized ideas and whittles them down to essentials, or rather do you start small, finding connections in just a couple of objects, relying on ideas that flame up from those connections to light your way?

**JMB** Hopefully, an initial idea emerges with enough heat to become itself. Most defense and support for the objects, lives and events I'm considering builds slowly. For example, *Season* initiated with a post from a military base off-loading a small boat due to deployment. The boat was eventually deconstructed into a number of rails, text forms and other objects until the bow finally qualified as the final artifact of the vessel. My typical installation methodology is to over-pack. I appreciate having more options ready at hand when encountering the space, which always seems to be in a defensive position: Begin, stop, more, further, more or less, stop.

**RB** The art work called *Adult August on a Horse*, which was exhibited in a spare bedroom at Mitchell's house, featured commonplace items in a room, one that had accrued lots of books and other shelf items, stacked on a bed and covered thoroughly by a plastic sheet (Figures 5a and 5b).

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<sup>1</sup> Sylvia Plath's poem was written in the fall of 1962, a few months before her death by suicide.

<sup>2</sup> *Mudita*, in Buddhism, is a pure, abundant joy; *paresthesia* is the physical sensation of prickling or tingling.





The work has a funerary aspect; it struck me as a burial mound. There was a houseplant on top of it, as though it grew from the mound like a promise of renewal. I was drawn strongly to this piece and also discomfited; there was for me the sense of curiosity and ache that comes with entering the room of someone who has recently died. Despite the strong feelings of my encounter, I'm probably wrong to look at the artwork as a burial—or only as a burial. But it does seem that a sense of separation, even loss, is the takeaway. Will you please share with us some of your impressions of this artwork?

**JMB** A guest bedroom, repacked to close up. Push the furniture, books, rug, lamps, and phone towards the corner. The preexisting artwork is under and on the bed. Which ghosts measure the right angle of middle age? I wanted to pack up and designate belongings, compartmentalizing the death of a family. Contemplating the future of a son, I signed the wall, imagining his final height, higher on a horse.

**RB** *I Would Know You Were Serious* also features paintings by Ludwig Schwarz and Marjorie Schwarz (Figures 6 and 7). The houseplant on top of *Adult Augusta on a Horse* might be a signal to your friend, the artist Michael Mazurek, who once made an exhibition out of plastic houseplants. Perhaps you're extending the hospitality Mitchell showed you to other artists, which is a warming proposition. There's a good feeling attached to being welcomed in a home. Do you have plans for creating other exhibitions at private residences?

**JMB** I'm lucky that my life span overlaps with many artists I admire locally. The residual effects from what I've seen them do seeps into my own work, undoubtedly. Some correspondences even lead to asking them for help, directly. The *Augusta Deter* portraits began as requests and now reemerge occasionally in exhibitions as notifications of past messages. I really enjoyed seeing Ludwig's painting on the breakfast nook glass support. I'm an enthusiast of difference between exhibition sites. A home is more personal, but still indoor space with a wall or window. Gardens and water features are bonuses. Maybe next time I'll consider a speed bump in an alleyway. **A**

Figure 7 *Augusta Deter (M)*, 2015. Painting by Marjorie Schwarz, water soluble oil on canvas. Installation view, Jesse Morgan Barnett, *I Know You Were Serious*, Mitchell Residence, Dallas, October–November 2019.