



# CLEMENS, PAINT US A STORY

COLORFUL TALES FORM A PLAYFUL PERSPECTIVE

BY MEREDITH DANTON

Life is full of humor, irony and absurdity. Much of it goes unacknowledged, but not by Dutch pop artist Clemens Briels. He wields an alternate perspective of everyday situations, envisioning a phenomenal coexistence that he calls "antipodism."

How wonderful it must be to be Clemens Briels, privy to the deluge of funny nuances around him. He diligently documents them in the form of painting titles, which he later develops into colorful depictions for the world to enjoy. And the world is increasingly responsive to these "Images from Unknown Sources," the seemingly endless body of work for which not even Briels himself can identify a discernable origin. By telling a detailed story through a picture, he likens himself to the primitive cave dweller who carves daily experiences into stone.

## MID-LIFE CROSSOVER

At the age of 46, Briels transitioned to fine arts from the corporate realm. With a degree from Holland's Academy of Industrial Design, he spent almost two decades as a commercial artist, creating marketing campaigns for various companies. His success did not compensate for the dissatisfaction he felt in producing art devoid of endurance. "Now my ideas have the same quality, but they last 100 years instead of only a few days," Briels says. "I get more respect from people looking at my art. It's different from people using me for my art work."

In the relatively short time that he has been painting, less than 10 years, Briels has managed to assemble a year-and-a-half waiting list for commissions. He lives in Holland but currently spends most of his time in a French countryside retreat where he can concentrate on his work.

"I am just a simple person, and I can't understand how I am here painting a hundred paintings and people want to buy them," Briels astounds. "I'm honored to do what I do and to make other people happy with it."

As an emerging artist, Briels' self-confidence turned the heads of even the most

skeptical constituents of the art world, including Tamar Erdberg, owner of Adamar Fine Arts Gallery in the Miami Design District. "From the moment I saw the portfolio, I fell in love with the work," Erdberg recalls. "At that time he was unknown. Immediately I gave him a show, and in his first two shows, we sold about 60 paintings."

From the outset, the artist titled his paintings in English, anticipating his burgeoning global market. He also titles many of his works in Spanish, to celebrate the Latin culture he so admires, as well as to confuse the viewer about his heritage. "He owns into the beat, the pathos, the high-energy rhythm of the Latin American scene," Erdberg says. "One of his favorite bands is the Buena Vista Social Club. He listens to it while he paints."

## THE INSIDE JOKE

In the past three years that Erdberg has been presenting Briels, she has witnessed tremendous public reaction to the art. "The overriding response is smile and laughter," she says. "That prevails over everything. The second emotion is inquisitiveness; they want to know more about it, what is funny about it. They know that Briels tells a story and they want to know what the story is. He likes the inside joke, the secret, and he plays it on you all the time."

"Sorayda's Secret Language" is a prime example of Briels' wry, playful mentality. The work is a series of five wall objects (three-dimensional sculpture-paintings made from resin), each of which features unusual, hieroglyphic-type characters on its border. When people ask Briels to decipher this secret language, he replies, ▶



(facing page) "A Jump of Joy," 2000, acrylic on canvas, mixed media, 49 x 39". The official painting of the 2002 Winter Olympics, it is also available as a 3-D serigraph. Briels developed a technique of serigraphy (a silk-screening process) whereby both the subject and dimensionality of a painting is reproduced, using a type of paint that rises when heated.

(above) "The Signing of the Wedding Contract with Earthquake Lamp," 2000, acrylic on canvas, mixed media, 35 x 39". This painting documents Briels' own wedding, where the participants had to use a borrowed flashlight to illuminate the wedding contract as nighttime fell.

## "HE OWNS INTO THE BEAT, THE PATHOS, THE HIGH-ENERGY RHYTHM OF THE LATIN AMERICAN SCENE"

"Well if I told you, it wouldn't be a secret."

Erdberg reveals that Briels enjoys deceptively convincing people of his multilingual fluency by delivering lengthy monologues in various tongues, none of which he actually knows. He is also the same zany character who may have tried to seat you prematurely while impersonating the host at the famous Joe's Stone Crabs restaurant in Miami.

But perpetuating the inside joke is only part of what makes Briels tick. He knows that he has a rare take on life, and he takes pride in his originality. "I want to show people that they have the possibility of looking from a different view at situations around us, and in my case it's a positive way." Briels can put a positive spin on almost anything, including excessive amounts of dog doo. He describes his experience in Nice, France, where many free-roaming dogs and a lack of pooper-scoopers leave the sidewalks "soiled."

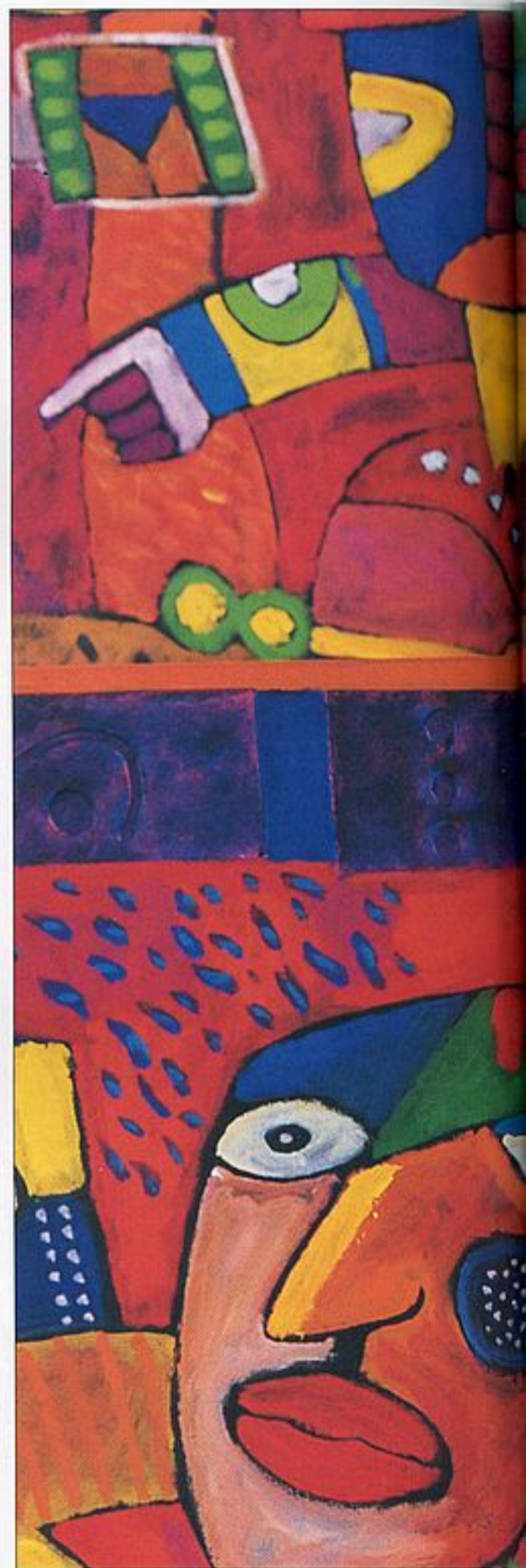
"Most people would say, 'I've got to get out of Nice because there's too much dog shit.' But I like it because it makes the people dance. They have to dance to get around it. I call it Dog Shit Dancing!" Briels says.



### ANTIPODISM IN MIAMI

Briels ventures to Miami at least two or three times a year, so you might want to keep an eye over your shoulder for a fun-loving Dutchman on the prowl for antipodal antics.

Many of Briels' paintings recount experiences he has had while in Florida. He was charged with anticipation one day when he saw a policeman on rollerblades chase a fugitive down Lincoln Road, the subject of his "There's More than One Way to Catch a ▶



(facing page) "The Model and the Lion at Indian Creek,"  
1999, acrylic on canvas, mixed media, 39 x 49",  
also available as a serigraph.

(below) The artist sits among his creations,  
often-humorous renderings of events that Briels witnesses.





GOT THE BIBS ON AT YDES STONE CRAB  
MIAMI AGAIN  
© 2000

Thief." He describes the day some friends in Miami took him deep sea fishing in "A Whole Bunch of Floridians Waiting Almost a Whole Day for the Fish to Bite. They Didn't Show Up." Then there's "The Signing of the Wedding Contract With Earthquake Lamp," inspired by his own wedding last year at the Indian Creek Hotel to his companion of 16 years, Jenny. The object in the hands of the figures is a flashlight borrowed from a guest to illuminate the contract after dusk had set in. "My national sales director who flew in from California never travels without her earthquake flashlight because she says, 'You never know when you are going to get stuck in an elevator during an earthquake,'" Erdberg recalls.

Erdberg is the main reason for Briels' frequent trips to Florida. Convinced of his appeal and imminent success, she established Side Roads Publications in 1999 specifically to publish the artist's work. The company distributes Briels' original artwork as well as serigraphs and editions of resin sculpture throughout the United States, Central and South America, Canada and soon, Asia.

## A RISING STAR

Anyone who crosses Briels' path, even for just a moment, is a candidate for immortalization in one of his paintings. On more than one occasion, Erdberg herself has discovered her multi-hued likeness represented on canvas.

"We were in San Francisco last September, and on a street corner in Union Square there was a panhandler dressed like one of the old soft shoe dancers from New Orleans. He had on a white suit with a sequined vest and a white satin top hat. He was serenading me. Then Clemens says, 'Write this title down — As Soon as I Heard Old Man River I Knew I Would Cross the San Francisco Bridge.'"

Six months later, that painting sold.

Side Roads plans to take on additional artists, but Erdberg notes that there will

never be another Briels. "He will be our quarterback, our star."

A rising star, indeed. Briels' "A Jump of Joy" was selected by the Olympic Committee as the official painting of the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City. Flags of all the countries that have hosted the Olympics are displayed along the border, and all the disciplines of the Winter Games appear in a grid-like pattern on the bottom half of the painting. The central



subject, a figure skater, is "a very aspirational, happy character with a worldly significance," Erdberg explains. "The dove-winged head symbolizes unity and peace." The honor has earned Briels an immediate place in the spotlight, from appearances on most major television networks to the potential for licensing the image to corporate giants.

He has already been commissioned by several prominent entities to design original items ranging from furniture for Leolux, scarves for KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, upholstery for a limited-edition Ford car sold in Europe and even a portrait ▷

*"Got the Bibs on at Joe's Stone Crab," 2000, acrylic on canvas, mixed media, 35 x 31.50" (facing page) recalls the artist's visit to the famous Miami Beach restaurant. "A Whole Bunch of Floridians Waiting Almost a Whole Day for the Fish to Bite. They Didn't Show Up," 2000, acrylic on canvas, mixed media, 35.50 x 39" (above) depicts a fruitless attempt at deep-sea fishing.*





of the queen. But Briels considers his greatest professional honor so far to be the implementation of his art into an upscale theatrical ice production appropriately called "Images from Unknown Sources." Pending final approval, the five-year tour will bring to life Briels' exotic, expressive characters for audiences worldwide.

## GOOD VIBRATIONS

Many people have tried to categorize the work of Clemens Briels into cultural and stylistic genres, a difficult endeavor. He has been compared to Karel Appel and other artists of the World War II-era CoBrA movement. Like Briels, these artists from Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam incorporated primitive figuration, bold color and animal imagery. Briels also proudly shares some commonalities with his professional idol, Picasso.

"Other artists make things from unknown sources," Briels notes. "That's why I admire Picasso so much — because he had vibrations." Briels too, has vibrations. "I'm always moving — my fingers, my feet. I'm always standing up; I can't sit down. I'm always looking for new things."

And like Picasso, Briels' figures are anything but conventional. "Sometimes I ask myself, 'How dare you paint a figure with four legs like that because anatomically it doesn't fit at all.' But I don't know — when I am able to explain what drives me to make paintings, the mystique is gone," he says.

For Briels, challenge is part of the mystique. He enjoys his steady upward climb toward success, and he wouldn't have it any other way. He admits that he wouldn't mind having a castle in France and an apartment in Miami. "But as soon as there is enough bacon on the ribs, the joy is over. That means that as soon as I can buy two castles, it isn't fun anymore." □

*"Pintante los Labios Maria," 2000, acrylic on canvas, mixed media, 71 x 49". This painting was inspired by an old Cuban folk song about a woman who was rejected by her lover. A man stands under her window, serenading her and telling her to paint her lips and not be sad because he loves her.*