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# ART CRITICISM



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# Critical Moments

William V. Ganis

## A Prefatory Note

The first section of this issue of *Art Criticism* is devoted to an examination of artists who chose to make major stylistic changes in mid-career. The essays and interviews herein contained are the result of an exhibition proposal made to Independent Curators Incorporated. Although the exhibition proved to be logistically unwieldy and prohibitively expensive, our essays, that were composed for an accompanying catalog and wall text, were coherent as a presentation of the idea of “critical moments” within the forum of *Art Criticism*. These labors ultimately derive from a museum studies seminar given by Professor Mel Pekarsky in the Department of Art at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. The artists considered were chosen by the individual authors who were given the assignment of finding an artist with a major shift in style or subject matter, especially following critical and market success. The artists, Romare Bearden, Suzi Gablik, Philip Guston, Robert Irwin, Sally Mann, Malcolm Morley, Jules Olitski, and Larry Poons, merely represent individual cases of “critical moments.” The authors’ intentions were not to ultimately define or theorize such “breaks,” but rather to straightforwardly introduce this idea in eight quite different permutations, and invite the reader to consider the idea of the critical moment in contemporary art. I would like to extend special thanks to Andrea Peffley, Mel Pekarsky, and Kirsten Swenson for their gracious help in editing this text.

## Introduction

The notion of a “critical moment” during the career of an artist that signals a change in style or subject may seem to be an artificial designation made by historians. In constructing biographical narratives, critics and writers acknowledge such changes with hindsight using the artworks themselves as resulting “evidence” of a caesura. While the breaks themselves often seem to be stylistic, the motivations causing such changes are diverse. Sally Mann has made changes in response to the coming of age of her children subjects, while Robert Irwin responded to the advent of an art form more cerebral than expressionist painting. Surely the critical moments outlined here take many different forms, from movements to figuration from abstraction in the cases of Romare Bearden and Philip Guston, to an entire change of art career in the case of Suzi Gablik.

All of these artists have in common modifications that deal with finding new artistic forms during a time of paradigmatic change, i.e., modernism to postmodernism. The implications for Philip Guston, Larry Poons, and Jules Olitski

are clear. Now that Greenbergian modernism no longer reigns as the norm for judging painting, (and the backlash has been long and hard) these artists moved into very different modes, first of exploding formalism through impasto, and later by introducing literal pattern and figuration to their works. Romare Bearden's rejection of modernism, on the other hand, is his realization of not being accepted into "highbrow" circles due to his race and social identity. His stylistic break to collage and figuration allowed him a voice that was an alternative to the hegemony. As a latecomer to expressionist and color field painting, Robert Irwin changed his medium altogether in order to reflect a newer style of reductive "concept"-based art that propelled him from imitator to innovator.

The remaining three artists included in this investigation begin from the other side of the modernist fence. Malcolm Morley's painting successes start with photorealistic "conceptual" works in which he investigated problems of representation, mimesis, and painting as illusion. His "break" is simply to examine other possibilities for these paradigms of vision through painting expressionistically and later systematically reproducing his "autonomous" study marks. Here the subject matter and source material become more personal and are simply less deadpan than the pop/reductive look of his sixties work. Suzi Gablik's critical break is not stylistic, but a break in what she considers the function of art, artists, and critics. Her break is one of conscience giving purpose to her insider status, especially at a time when art became more about wealth, prestige, and fame as the eighties marked the outright co-option of the avant-garde by consumer capitalism. Sally Mann deals not only with a change in subject as she moves from portraits of her children in the landscape to landscape as portrait, but also the problems of working in a venerable genre. Through working with old techniques and vintage cameras, she incorporates historic "looks" in her medium that are evocative of a photographic antiquity. Mann is our overtly postmodern example as she deftly crosses boundaries of style and time incorporating the past as her visual language.

While one may question the idea of a critical moment in an artistic career, choosing instead to see the total production of an artist as a continuum, one can not ignore the fact that major changes occur sometimes slowly, sometimes as an artist works in multiple modes, and sometimes overnight with the artist never repeating him or herself in old styles. The definition of the critical moment in this section is not intended to be narrow. The eight essays and three interviews that follow expand the critical moment concept to include numerous influences including the art market, criticism, socioeconomic factors, politics, dominant movements, morality, artists wishing not to repeat themselves, the search for original expression, and the goal of achieving "quality" in art. It is our hope that these essays will show the complex reasons for such changes that so often become lost in the formal metanarratives of art history. Though our work is hardly exhaustive, through our examples we wish to debunk the myths of stylistic determinism that have become entrenched in the conventional knowledge of twentieth century art.

# Romare Bearden

Jennifer Wingate

*...Bearden insists that we see and that we see in depth and by the fresh light of his vision.—Ralph Ellison<sup>1</sup>*

Romare Bearden's career was marked by a number of stylistic and ideological changes. However, none was so momentous as his return from abstraction to figuration through the medium of collage. The depiction of black life in his collages in 1964 was provoked by personal artistic choice and socio-political motivation. Close study of a collage from this decisive moment in comparison to a painting from the mid-forties serves to highlight the complexity of the formal, political, and philosophical decisions behind Bearden's critical change.

In an interview conducted after the completion of his first collages, Bearden recalls the challenge of seeking permanent and universally relevant values in his paintings.

...the direction of the sign factors in my painting were completely obliterating the representational images...I was trying to find out what was in me that was common to all men. If I remember, it was hard to do and realize.<sup>2</sup>

In the mid-forties, he abandoned his earlier Social Realist style in an effort to connect human experience through abstractions of biblical and literary themes. Highly influenced by Cubism, he also cited Byzantine stylization and African design as sources for inspiration. Bearden completed four important series during this period, painting interlocking planes of prismatic colors defined and accented by linear rhythms. Even as postwar American art became looser and more expressionistic, he continued his studies of structure and composition. He rejected the highly individualistic attitudes of the Abstract Expressionists for a personal need to convey a sense of community and a desire to express a broader philosophical content.<sup>3</sup> However, he preferred ritualistic or mythological themes over the realities of city life. A friend noted the contrast between the images in Bearden's studio and the images that Bearden confronted as a social worker in Harlem: "...there seemed such a disassociation of one life from the other life."<sup>4</sup> He was explicit in his opinion on the relation of art to social reality. In the article, "The Negro Artist's Dilemma," published in 1946, Bearden wrote that "A good painting has its own world. What ideas it arouses are integral and in relation to itself." The values an artist searches for should not be related to "the fluctuating needs of any group, or the transitory social situation."<sup>5</sup> The article was a response to an invitation to exhibit in a show of African-American art. Bearden believed that these types of exhibitions were patronizing, fostering "artificial and arbitrary artistic standards, stemming from sociological rather than aesthetic interest in the

exhibitors' works."<sup>6</sup> "In other words," Ralph Ellison wrote,

the Negro American who aspired to the title 'Artist' was too often restricted by sociological notions of racial separatism...It would seem that for many Negro painters even the possibility of translating the Negro experience into the modes and conventions of modern painting went unrecognized.<sup>7</sup>

However, as contemporary criticism of Ellison's analysis has emphasized, "this ideology proves increasingly incapable of addressing the slippery area where Art becomes complicit in the construction of social subjectivity...."<sup>8</sup>

Such questions of black subjectivity in relation to modernist artistic integrity were discussed by the sixteen African-American artists who began meeting in Bearden's studio in July, 1963. Calling themselves Spiral, after the mathematical symbol that "moves outward, embracing all directions, yet constantly upward,"<sup>9</sup> the group was concerned with the black artist's role in relation to mainstream art and the civil rights movement. They initially came together in response to a call for participation in the civil rights march on Washington in the summer of 1963. As Spiral member, Hale Woodruff, wrote:

...we, as Negroes, could not fail to be touched by the outrage of segregation, or fail to relate to the self-reliance, hope, and courage of those persons who were marching in the interest of man's dignity....<sup>10</sup>

However, like Bearden, the modernist artists of Spiral did not see their artistic identity as defined primarily by race. They came together for support and perspective at a time when their work was either ignored by white critics or considered elitist by other blacks. Although they were not essentialists, Spiral members considered whether or not culturally constructed racial qualities could or should be expressed artistically.<sup>11</sup> They sought to define "...the possibility of aesthetic goals and styles that would distinguish their cultural uniqueness."<sup>12</sup> Bearden's return to figuration, and his discovery of collage as the most expressive vehicle for his new vision, grew directly out of these Spiral meeting discussions.

Bearden proceeded independently to make his first collages which originally had been conceived as a collaborative mural project for Spiral. As personal interpretations of contemporary views of black subjectivity, the photomontages and projections that Bearden made in the summer of 1964 mark a radical departure from the Abstract Expressionist paintings he had been making for the past five years. It is significant that they not only subvert contemporary journalistic stereotypes of African Americans, but also "...reinterpret the canonical history of art as a visual system that could accommodate and affirm African American identity."<sup>13</sup> His paintings of the forties also demonstrate an interest in making links with the past and connecting with a diversity of human experience through ritualistic themes and abstract forms. However, in his collages, Bearden redefines his vision of a universal human experience in terms of a black subjectivity:

I did the new work out of a response and need to redefine the image of man in terms of the Negro experience I know best. I felt that the Negro was becoming too much of an abstraction rather than the reality that art can give a subject...What I've attempted to do is establish a world through art in which the validity of my Negro experience could live and make its own logic.<sup>14</sup>

Structurally and iconographically, Bearden's photomontages and projections make visual connections between black culture and the themes and paintings of canonical art history. In their references to masterpieces of Western art history, and in their strategic critique of visions of blacks in the media, they navigate between resistance and incorporation, and between high and low.<sup>15</sup> "In my work, if anything, I seek connections so that my paintings can't be only what they appear to represent."<sup>16</sup> Hence the acknowledged 'maximum multiplicity' of reference in Bearden's work.<sup>17</sup> The "...sharp breaks, leaps in consciousness, distortions, paradoxes, reversals, telescoping of time, and surreal blending of styles..."<sup>18</sup> that Bearden achieved through the medium of collage served both formal and political agendas—whether both were emphasized by the artist or not.

Ever concerned with the reception of his new work as mere protest art, Bearden wrote the article, "Rectangular Structure in My Montage Paintings," in 1969 "...with the hope that the structural content of his work will be understood and even more valued than its social message."<sup>19</sup> In addition, Ralph Ellison asserted that "...Bearden had decided that in order to possess his world artistically, he had to confront it not through propaganda and sentimentality, but through the finest techniques and traditions of painting."<sup>20</sup> Both artist and writer felt the necessity to stress the artistic integrity of Bearden's new works over their content, perhaps overcompensating for the one-sided reaction by white critics and dealers. However, as the art historian, Paul Rogers, suggests:

...posing Bearden's practice as an intervention does not imply a displacement of his product from the aesthetic to the political realm. ...On the contrary, might we argue that Bearden's images, irrespective of specific intentions...implicate the political and the aesthetic in the same space?<sup>21</sup>

Formally, collage enabled Bearden to continue his intensive studies of structure and composition. The "sharp breaks, distortions, and paradoxes," and the "appropriation, incorporation, and rearticulation"<sup>22</sup> made possible by collage helped him to resist objectifying images of black life. Like the ritualistic themes and abstract style of his earlier work, the themes and compositions of his collages serve to link them with the history of art. However, their references to canonical art history also highlight inherent revisions and critiques. Bearden's collages revise art history to include black subjectivity, insisting on its significant role in a new universality.

## NOTES

- 1 Ralph Ellison, *Romare Bearden: Paintings and Projections* (Albany: Art Gallery of the State University of New York at Albany, 1968), n.p.
- 2 Charles Childs, "Bearden: Identification and Identity" *Art News*, vol 63, October 1964, 62.
- 3 Mary Schmidt Campbell, "History and the Art of Romare Bearden" *Memory and Metaphor: The Art of Romare Bearden, 1940-1987* (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1991), 7.
- 4 Myron Schwartzman, *Romare Bearden: His Life and Art* (New York: Abrams, 1990), 131.
- 5 Romare Bearden, "The Negro Artist's Dilemma" *Critique* v1 no2, November 1946, 22.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 19.
- 7 Ellison, n.p.
- 8 Paul Rogers, "Ralph Ellison, the Collage of Romare Bearden and Race, Some Speculations," *International Review of African American Art* v11 no3 1994, 9.
- 9 First Group Showing (Works in Black and White) (New York: Spiral Gallery, 1965).
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 Lee Stephens Glazer, "Signifying Identity: Art and Race in Romare Bearden's Projections" *Art Bulletin* Spring 1994, 413.
- 12 Floyd Coleman, "The Changing Same: Spiral, the Sixties, and African-American Art." *A Shared Heritage: Art by Four African Americans* (Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1996), 151.
- 13 Glazer, 413.
- 14 Childs, 62.
- 15 Thelma Golden, "Projecting Blackness" *Romare Bearden in Black-and-White: Photomontage Projections 1964*, (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1997).
- 16 Campbell, 9.
- 17 Golden, 43.
- 18 Ellison, n.p.
- 19 Abstract of the article, "Rectangular Structure in My Montage Paintings" by Romare Bearden. *Leonardo* v2, January 1969, 11.
- 20 Ellison, n.p.
21. Rogers, 10.
- 22 Golden, 43.

# Suzi Gablik

Greg Bryson

The contemporary art environment instigated a radical change in the work of Suzi Gablik. She began showing her collage paintings in the mid-'60s and continued to work and show until the late '70s when she stopped making art altogether. Her works are intricate and well-crafted, obviously made with care. One has to wonder why Gablik abandoned the art into which she had put so much time and energy. It is important to note that while her work sold and was favorably reviewed, she is best known as an author. Her writings of the early eighties and her book *Has Modernism Failed?*, published in 1984, could lead one to speculate that she discontinued her work out of anger, protest, or inner conflict, but Ms. Gablik's own words tell a different story.<sup>1</sup>

Suzi Gablik did not simply change careers from artist to critic. She had been writing all along, publishing articles, reviews, and books like the biography, *Magritte*, and *Progress in Art*, in which she proposed a developmental theory of art history. She alternated between making art and writing, spending years painting in preparation for a show, then stopping to write.<sup>2</sup> She had, in fact, taken almost total leave of her art for four years from about 1971 until August 1975, during which time she wrote *Progress in Art*.<sup>3</sup>

Suzi Gablik's *oeuvre* consists of photographs and oil painting on canvas. Images of nature and sometimes of human beings, collected from magazines, were synthesized into painted images. *Trompe-l'oeil* painting was employed to paint in "the parts that are already there if only we could see them."<sup>4</sup> In her works, minute details and closely matched colors make distinguishing the transition from photograph to painting difficult from even a short distance. The three-dimensional space in Gablik's early work is momentarily convincing before becoming distorted. She sought to achieve a cinematic quality, stating recently that she wanted to capture the audience imaginatively with an image that could not be translated literally into a story.<sup>5</sup> In almost every case, humans or their creations play unclear roles in her ambiguous narratives. Their activities are taken out of their usual contexts. Often, they appear threatening to one another and their environment. Sometimes they appear vulnerable.

It is obvious that the formal visual relationships of different objects are a strong interest of Gablik's, second only to her interest in creating a powerful narrative quality. Elements are juxtaposed based on visual similarity alone. Lava echoes a waterfall; the sunset visually matches burning trees. Plants and animals are grouped by the patterning of their foliage, fur, or feathers. Objects metamorphose into other objects. Everywhere patterns are related and repeated, an approach which distinguishes her from the Surrealists, who emphasized the lack of relatedness between the objects they collaged together.<sup>6</sup> Gablik said of her work, "Instead of thinking atomistically in bits and fragments, I like things to be directed

towards the idea of making wholes, integrating systems, bringing elements together and interweaving them into a whole system.”<sup>7</sup> One reviewer took these generalizations to imply that “all human systems of judgment, classification, definition and coherence are just as arbitrary...and surely no more convincing or complete.”<sup>8</sup>

Gablik continued to explore these relationships in a series of twelve numbered pieces, each entitled *Tropism*. Most of the identically sized works in this series were completed in 1970. She stated that the pieces are related to one another by a “deep structure” that is independent of meaning or content. She borrowed this terminology from the linguist Noam Chomsky and suggested that the works result from a generative grammar, a finite structure of rules that allows for an infinite set of images. Once a certain number of elements are utilized, a system results which dictates how additional parts must be integrated.<sup>9</sup>

The subsequent series, *The Tangled Bank*, which takes its title from Darwin’s writing, is a departure from certain aspects of her previous work. There is less painting involved, and it functions more to fill background space or expand the size of an object than to connect separate elements. These six pieces are mandala-like works, not entirely devoid of space, but possessing a space more like a Jackson Pollock painting than the cinematic landscape spaces of the earlier works. Gablik was aware of this; one of her goals was to embrace modern “allover” sensibility to space without sacrificing concrete imagery.<sup>10</sup>

All immediately perceptible images of humans and their devices have vanished in the *Tangled Bank* works; only nature remains. The majority of these images are invertebrate animals and simple plants and fungi, but also included are images of the internal anatomy of human beings, the latter appearing as luminous, undulating forms. In the form of organs, humans are abstracted, and appear as bits and pieces. Gablik was interested in showing the relationships between the marine environment and the internal “marine” environment of the human body.<sup>11</sup> These paintings no longer suggest narrative, and formal content assumes a more prominent place. Gablik’s sensitivity to color and to the visual similarities is profound. She makes use of nature’s habit of repeating itself to give unity and harmony to pieces which ought to seem cluttered and busy. Her “tangles” of images symbolize the interconnectedness of natural objects.

*The Tangled Bank* series were the last paintings produced by Suzi Gablik. At this time, her writing was becoming increasingly concerned with the social aspects and moral implications of the contemporary art environment. The essays of the early ’80s led to the publication of her book, *Has Modernism Failed?*, in which she argues that the values of the early modern art movement are scarcely found in today’s art world. She saw the early modernists as individuals who, as a response to the breakdown of spirituality in modern culture, turned inward to concentrate on their inner selves, to seek meaning within.<sup>12</sup> Modernism grew hand in hand with the idea of the avant-garde; its innovators created their art in the spirit of opposition or revolution. They felt that their art could bring about change in society.<sup>13</sup> For Gablik this began to change in the sixties, due in part to the critic Clement Greenberg who stressed formal aesthetics and denied content of any kind

as useful to artistic progress. She feels much of the art made in this environment was devoid of communication.<sup>14</sup> In her opinion, the unfortunate legacy of the modernist movement is an impotent art, self-indulgent and unconcerned with responsibility to the public.

Much of *Has Modernism Failed?* reflects her negative views of capitalist society, which she illustrates with examples of artists consumed by their fame and success and marketed by galleries as valuable commodities. She suggests that the very freedom for self-expression which modernism struggled to achieve has helped to create this environment; that the total freedom of pluralism has eliminated the possibility of making distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable art; that pluralism breaks down the narrative history of art; and that pluralism's lack of standards of excellence has eradicated tradition.<sup>15</sup> She calls for an art classified by function rather than by style.<sup>16</sup>

Gablik sought a change. Though she was uncertain of exactly how to proceed, she was clear that we must put purpose before style if personal vision and social responsibility are to once again be compatible. Somehow, we must regain a tension between freedom and restraint without regressing to an earlier state.<sup>17</sup> Change will necessarily hinge on the individual because the work of art, as she sees it, is "merely the evidence of the individual's self-transformation..."<sup>18</sup> She states that she does not "believe an artist gives meaning to his audience. What he may give is an example of personal commitment to the search for value and for truth. To recognize truth is not a matter of talent but of character."<sup>19</sup>

Gablik's analysis of the contemporary situation is strongly moral in character. Reading her judgments, it would be easy to assume that Suzi Gablik stopped making art because, perhaps, her own work did not satisfy her views. Perhaps she was too disillusioned with the art world, with its strong emphasis on money and fame, or perhaps she found that her collages with their strong emphasis on formal aesthetics lacked a useful function in society. According to Gablik, none of these speculations are correct. She now expresses an alternative possibility, that her life as a writer is simply more satisfying than her life as an artist:

I thought what's the best thing that can come of all this? ... Would it be to be hanging in the Museum of Modern Art? Or get your picture on the front of *Art News*? Whereas the writing was really giving me an exciting life. I was being called to be heard. People wanted to hear my ideas and were interacting with me...<sup>20</sup>

Gablik says she does not miss painting because her writing process parallels her painting process. She weaves together numerous ideas derived from a variety of places,<sup>21</sup> much like the generative grammar of her collages. Writing "organically" replaces the painting. The texts she produces are ostensibly more satisfying because she feels she is able to change people's thinking, while her art only gives the viewer a temporary experience. While she denies that inner struggles caused the cessation of her making art objects, she believes that the writing changed her thinking. She became less interested in art as the creation of rarefied objects made by a

specialized person and more interested in the idea Thomas Moore called “the enchantment of everyday life.”<sup>22</sup>

Gablik followed *Has Modernism Failed?* with *The Re-enchantment of Art* to provide an alternative model of the artist and art-making. She argues that the so-called feminine values of caring and helpfulness need to replace the so-called masculine dominator values currently in place, that systems based on interconnectedness must replace Cartesian systems. Gablik points out art’s failings and society’s shortcomings in general. She argues that the environment must be the first concern of everyone alive today, particularly the artist. Artists whom she considers to be models of useful art-making can be found cleaning rivers, aiding the homeless, making art with disadvantaged children, cleansing crystals, and making water-catches for desert animals. Her rhetoric is persuasive, but her culture entrenched audience may be impossible to convert. After all, her ideas devalue much of the art of the last century.<sup>23</sup> Her most recent book *Conversations Before the End of Time* was her attempt at putting these ideas into practice.<sup>24</sup>

Gablik indicated that she recently embarked on a third life; now she is making an “inward soul journey.” She has left behind her entire “power base and a whole set of activities” as she embraces her new surroundings in the small town of Blacksburg, Virginia. At the time of this writing, she is working on a book, but it will not be a sequel to *Conversations Before the End of Time*. While Gablik is still concerned with environmental and social issues, it seems that she is no longer concerned with art’s role in these matters.<sup>25</sup>

## NOTES

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- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Jennifer Heath, "Gablik better known as a writer than a painter," *The Colorado Daily*, Nov. 7, 1975, 16.
- 4 Henry Martin, "New worlds for old," *Art and Artists*, Oct. 1967, 22. From a statement by the artist.
- 5 Interview
- 6 Lawrence Alloway, *The Nation*, May 8, 1972.
- 7 Heath, 16.
- 8 Henry, 22.
- 9 Howard Rose, *Studio International*, vol. 183, May 1972, 227.
- 10 Interview
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Suzi Gablik, *Has Modernism Failed?* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 21.
- 13 Ibid., 22.
- 14 Ibid., 22-3.
- 15 Ibid., 73-76.
- 16 Ibid., 14-15.
- 17 Ibid., 127-128.
- 18 Ibid., 82.
- 19 Ibid., 86.
- 20 Interview
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Suzi Gablik, *The Re-enchantment of Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991).
- 24 Interview
- 25 Ibid.

## AN INTERVIEW WITH SUZI GABLIK

### Introduction

This interview took place in Miller Off Main Street Galleries in Blacksburg, Virginia. Suzi Gablik's work, having been in storage at Dintenfuss Gallery in New York City for over two decades, has been recently returned to her. As her local group of friends and associates did not know her when she was working as an artist, she decided to have a small retrospective show of her work.

Interview of Suzi Gablik by Greg Bryson, March 28, 1997

Bryson: So you stopped painting in the late seventies, about 1978, 1979?

Gablik: I stopped painting after this series (pointing at a piece from the *Tangled Bank* series) and...after the publication of *Has Modernism Failed?*, and I guess I started to do some teaching and writing...I think the key thing for me was that writing afforded me this kind of place in the world I never got quite from art. I just started to find my ideas provocative to people and I started being invited to speak and do things and so in the end I got this much more educational and interesting life. I was invited to go all around the world, just sort of a freak...U.S. Information Services, the Diplomatic Corps, around the world, to Nepal, and Sri Lanka,...India, Egypt, a bunch of places, on a number of trips. So somehow or another, I had up until that time alternated, going through years of painting to make a show and then stopping and switching gears and doing both. It seemed like the writing just took off. Painting, it wasn't so much that it didn't take off, but I didn't see a future in it. The future I envisioned at that time it's a bit altered now for how it is for artists but at the time, I thought, "What's the best thing that can come of all this?...Would it be to be hanging in the Museum of Modern Art? Or get your picture on the front of *Art News*?" Whereas the writing was really giving me an exciting life. I was being called to be heard. People wanted to hear my ideas and were interacting with me and every time I went I *learned* something. And it was more interesting than having my face on the cover of *Art News* or being in some prestigious collections. And I think basically that was the basis of my choice, that between being [stuck] alone by myself in my studio for the rest of my life cutting and pasting, and seeing the world for free and being, not so much a celebrity—it wasn't about that but a celebrity in the sense of an honored guest. People asked for me. They wanted me to come and wanted to hear what I've said and they looked after me. It's all very alluring.

GB: Did you ever miss painting?

SG: No, because basically I write the same way that I paint. I write from a

zillion ideas and a million places that I intricately weave together just like I did these paintings. I kind of miss the visual part; the mental part is already in place. The thinking process is the same...carefully crafting out the sentences and weaving them together, assembling them from all over the place, just like the images are, but synthesizing them in some way so that by the time you actually read the chapter it sounds like me talking and just as with this (pointing at her work). None of these are photos taken by me but by the time you get to see it, it feels like something you haven't seen before...and then when I moved here I got a garden and I started making altars. I had enough money at that point to buy the kind of furniture and stuff I wanted, so, I was able to put my appetite for visual stuff into my garden and I also changed in my thinking after writing into the whole idea of art, less as a rarefied thing...It's more what Thomas Moore called "the enchantment of everyday life." I discovered that...That model, I just left that behind. I've written it out of myself...I just found that with writing I have, I came to have an audience and I came...I saw at my opening (the present show) for instance that to do the art...gives a great deal of pleasure to people, and some people were really fascinated and it was very gratifying, but it's kind of like they come, they look, they have an experience, and they go away...But the book where you're really changing people's thinking or inspiring them or speaking on behalf of—giving a voice to something they haven't been able to articulate themselves. They carry it around in their heart in a way, but it's very rewarding—and then they ask you to come dialogue with other people who are just as smart or smarter than you are, so you start learning stuff and shifting your ideas in the public forum and all of that, so it was more kind of a living art form for me, where I was able to grow and change and have many experiences. Now it's more, or has been, I think it's shifting again because of the money thing and because there are so many artists, but you know, in those days, artists didn't get asked around as much as they are now to talk about their work, [so not many people weren't asked.] I mean, it wasn't like every department had a speaker's program and all that as they do now. And if they wanted a speaker, then they wanted somebody who could really come and bring a bag of ideas with them.

GB: I had speculated that you stopped making these photo-collages, stopped painting because you changed your ideas about the function of art and because of your concern about environmental issues.

SG: Well, I had already stopped, but that's the other very subtle thing. It was that the writing gave me a very interesting life on the one hand, but it also changed my thinking on the other, so I became less interested in making these static, rarefied objects...than a spokesperson for a different kind of art, and in the course of that my own thinking changed to a certain extent.

GB: So these thoughts, these ideas weren't the cause?

SG: Well, I think the primary thing was that my writing took off past where my painting ever did in terms of response from the world. And I just went with that because I got more out of it. In other words, I got a more interesting life; so what I got was, you know, people saying, "Come. Come to this place and do this or that," whereas before, you know, if I was lucky, what I would get was a paragraph or two by Hilton Kramer in the *New York Times*, but that didn't give me a life. That would be there; people would see it, maybe...maybe it was a big deal at the time. I don't know, but then it was over, whereas the other stuff, it kept going on. And then the more I did and became a good speaker, then you get a reputation and people ask...and there would be all these forums and I would meet all kinds of interesting other people and that...led in a sense to *The Re-enchantment of Art*...The people who I wrote about were people that I met along the way in my travels or people who contacted me by themselves out of [the last book.] If I had been totally just sitting at home, I probably wouldn't have learned as much as I did of what's out there. Like now, I don't go away nearly as much so I'm no longer an expert on who's doing what out there, because I'm doing my own thing here...So in terms of your topic, I'm on my third lifetime here and gone from being in New York, a Modernist, growing up with all those people around me...and writing some maverick books on criticism and eventually giving up painting and now I'm on my third life, in which I'm not doing any of that. I didn't quite envision it when I left England and moved to here, that my life would change so much as it did. I wanted to change out of the urban environment, to live in a small town, to take root somewhere. Now I find I'm on a kind of inward soul journey and I've had to leave my whole power base and a whole set of activities behind again, just like I did when I left New York and went to England, and then build up another one as this kind of guru art critic, and now that's all finished.

GB: So, this means there's no sequel to *Conversations Before the End of Time*?

SG: That was the end. That was a trilogy, I see it as. *Has Modernism Failed?*, which was a process of becoming disenchanted with the art world scene and then the book which was related (referring to *The Re-enchantment of Art*), you know, the alternative framework for another picture, another model of the artist, and potentially artistic activities. And *Conversations* which was putting it all into practice myself...That was the other thing, writing educated me. When I started the *Conversations* book, and I never intended to write about issues and multiculturalism—that's where the book took me. In order to work with it, I had to really spruce up on what these issues really were and who was saying what, and so I worked a lot. Painting was never that kind of vehicle for me, although painting trained me to do all the work I did later because the way I put all these things together is the way I put everything else together, from my books to my life.

GB: Was the thinking process more important in your work than holding the paintbrush, than making the work?

SG: Not when I was doing it. When I was doing it, the images and making paintings that would fire people up and hold their attention, particularly with not an enormous space. Don't forget, I was an artist in the period where big huge walls were the deal. Yeah, everybody worked big and that was my biggest effort (pointing at *Summer Garden*, 44 x 56.6 inches) and even now it's small by comparison to a lot of other things, but my idea was to pack a big wallop in a limited scale, and I think I succeeded at that. They're pretty intense. It would be hard to just walk past and not notice it.

GB: What I like about these (*The Tangled Bank* series) is that there is so much going on in them. You could come back to these over and over and still find new things to see.

SG: Forever and ever and you may never see it all—that's the other thing. There's a lot of things you don't know what they are. What I was trying to do was put them in a context...one of the things that I like and enjoy is that they have resonance; they have depth, and they're not superficial. They're painstaking; they're thoughtful. And you have a kind of quiet intensity and luminosity.

GB: Looking at your work, I wonder if you feel its evolution parallels your ideas in *Progress in Art*. It moves from a very pictorial space to sort of an all-over pattern painting.

SG: Yes, that's right...

GB: It helps me, seeing your work, and it was good to hear you talk about how the writing replaced the painting because I had speculated that it was probably a dilemma for you, to stop making art.

SG: No, it just happened organically. It wasn't any sort of heated inner struggle or anything.

# Philip Guston

Nathan Japel

*I do not see why the loss of faith in the known image or symbol should be celebrated as a freedom. It is this loss we suffer, this pathos that motivates modern painting and poetry at its heart.<sup>1</sup>*

In October of 1970, at the Marlborough Gallery, Philip Guston showed his recent paintings of cartoon-like caricatures of the Ku Klux Klan, bumbling and plotting in either a desolate city-landscape or a cramped interior. These both menacing and humorous Klansmen drove cars, smoked cigars, and even painted self-portraits. Adding to the ominous feeling of these white-hooded figures hung images of naked light bulbs and timeless clocks. Piles of shoes, sometimes connected to legs, implied a kind of booty for the Klansmen. In his palette of primarily reds and achromatics, Guston paradoxically evoked the visceral responses to blood and flesh as well as pastel lightheartedness.

Nineteen seventy was a major turning point in Guston's career, a seeming abandonment of his nearly two decades of abstraction. His lyrical atmospheric swatches of chiefly reds and pinks landed him wide recognition in the early fifties, and his later chunky patches of color were widely heralded as important works coming from the New York School. Guston was honored for these paintings with major retrospectives at the Guggenheim Museum in 1962 and the Jewish Museum in 1966.

Prior to the abstractions, Guston had established himself in the thirties and the forties as a figurative artist. Influenced primarily by Piero della Francesca, Giorgio de Chirico, and Pablo Picasso, as well as social and political issues, Guston was determined to give a social critique and at the same time deal with formal aesthetic problems. But as times changed Guston became discontent with figuration as it could no longer embody the kind of "essence," or direct expression he was working toward. So in the late forties, along with other artists, Guston left figuration for abstraction.

Guston's return in the late sixties to figuration and recognizable objects, did not come easy. It was a turbulent struggle:

I remember days of doing 'pure' drawings immediately followed by days of doing the other drawings of objects. It wasn't a transition in the way it was in 1948, when one feeling was fading away and a new one had not yet been born. It was two equally powerful impulses at loggerheads. I would one day tack up in the house a bunch of pure drawings, feel good about them, think that I could live with them. And that night go out to the studio to the drawings of objects— books, shoes, buildings, hands, feeling relief and a strong need to cope with tangible things. I would denounce the pure drawings as too thin and exposed, too much

'art,' not enough nourishment, and as an impossible direction with no future. The next day, or the day after, back to doing the pure constructions and to attacking the other. And so it went, this tug of war, for about two years.<sup>2</sup>

This change, although great, is not ungrounded. Some of Guston's late sixties images of the Ku Klux Klan, shoes, and clocks can be found in his work from the thirties and forties. Like many painters of his generation, Guston painted American social realist murals in the mid-to-late thirties, as part of the Works Progress Administration, and was committed to art that while formally relevant, also provided commentary on society's injustices. He also embraced the Marxist ideal that art was for the people.

During the late sixties, social and political problems greatly affected Guston. The war in Vietnam, violence at the Democratic convention, and numerous civil-rights outbreaks had profound effects on him.

So when the 1960s came along I was feeling split, schizophrenic. The war, what was happening to America, the brutality of the world. What kind of man am I, sitting at home, reading magazines, going into a frustrated fury about everything—and then going into my studio to adjust a red to a blue?<sup>3</sup>

Guston channeled his concern for these social and political problems into the Klansmen, who represented a universal symbol of tyranny and evil, a nonspecific representation of the violence in humankind.

This "new" imagery, for lack of a better term, of cartoon-like caricatures also had a history in Guston's life. Guston had a lifelong interest in both the American comic strip and producing caricatures of his friends. This imagery provides a dichotomy when used with weighty subject matter. Although the objects represented were simplified and had thick black outlines similar to cartoons, they retained his signature chunky brush strokes from the earlier abstractions. Formally the images from the seventies have some basis in Guston's abstractions. Because of the obvious intent, the paintings continue, on one level, to be about paint. The thick brush strokes and the clumsy figures provide a residue that, like the abstractions, give strong evidence of the act of painting. Guston's paintings are about the creation of a symbol, not representation.

There is also evidence in Guston's abstractions from the late fifties and early sixties that the figure was about to emerge. "Toward the end of the fifties I was slowly evolving toward a different kind of figuration. Sort of black heads on fields of grey. Again I began to feel the necessity for a subject."<sup>4</sup> Stripped down to black and grey, gestures of indiscernible "heads" either singular or in pairs floated heavily on a flattened ground. These ominous objects show a shift to paintings that are no longer colorful and relate specifically to the more recognizable objects of the seventies.

Guston's mind-set remained similar throughout his life's work. The plague of anxiety and despair can be sensed throughout all the periods of his paintings. In

the early figurative work, of the thirties and the forties, the dark plotting and violence of the Klan illustrates the harsh reality of a divided country. In the later “children” paintings of the forties, where the distinction between play and war is blurred, the sense of a failed future or a dominating society is evident. When Guston produced abstractions, the feeling that nothing was worthwhile except the act of painting, that through the act there was a document of the self, provides an anxiety for the painter. In the late figuration, although the images at first appear to be lighthearted, the existence of alienation and despair is evident.

During several points of Guston’s career, a shift or evolution is apparent. He was constantly reinventing himself and never allowed himself to stagnate within one set of boundaries. In the forties, when he was a well received muralist he moved to easel painting, then after some recognition he moved to abstraction. Similarly in abstraction Guston changed from lyrical, somewhat geometric swatches for which he received major critical attention, to centrally located clusters of color, then moved to the black and grey “heads.” Guston’s daughter, Musa Mayer wrote,

For him, nothing was as constant as the continual need for change. Never to be satisfied. Never to rest on one’s accomplishments. But it was never change for the sake of change, but instead a painful process necessitated by a ruthless self-examination and criticism.<sup>5</sup>

It is this constant desire and ability to change that relates to what Willem de Kooning said in reference to Guston’s 1970 Marlborough show, “You know what your real subject is, it’s about freedom, to be free, the artist’s first duty.”<sup>6</sup>

Although for a long time there were hints of an evolution toward the late figurative work, they do not diminish the radical change that took place for Guston in the late sixties. He was lambasted by the majority of the art world for turning his back on the ideals of abstraction, for falling back on symbolism, disrupting the “sacred” evolution of painting. Guston reported, “Some painters of the abstract movement, my colleagues, friends, contemporaries, refused to talk to me. It was as if we’d worked so hard to establish the canons of a church and here I go upsetting it, forgetting that that’s what good artists should do.”<sup>7</sup> Most critics were equally hard on Guston. The headline in the New York Times read “A Mandarin Pretending To Be A Stumblebum.” In the article, Hilton Kramer attacks Guston on grounds of hopping on the bandwagon of figuration, pretending to be a “primitive,” and basically being a fake. This attack and others like it along with public disapproval affected Guston both economically and socially. Due to lack of sales, Guston left the Marlborough Gallery, isolated himself in Woodstock, New York, and took a teaching job in Boston to support his family. It is this risk that shows Guston’s integrity—prioritizing his artistic vision rather than profit or recognition.

Guston continued to produce these autobiographical cartoon-type paintings until his death at his home in Woodstock in June of 1980. At that time a major retrospective of his work, which revealed the biographical-contextual content of Guston’s *oeuvre* was traveling the country. In considering Guston’s lifelong body of work, the so-called “radical” changes reveal a continuity in artistic agency and process.

## NOTES

- 1 Philip Guston from *Nature in Abstraction*, exhibition catalog (New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1958), 10.
- 2 Artist's statement, *Philip Guston: Drawings 1947- 1977* (New York: David McKee Gallery, 1978), n.p.
- 3 Jerry Talmer, "Creation is for Beauty Parlors," *New York Post*, April 9, 1977.
- 4 Mark Stevens, "A talk with Philip Guston," *New Republic*, 182, March 15, 1980, 26.
- 5 Musa Mayer, *Night Studio, A Memoir of Philip Guston* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1988), 63.
- 6 Stevens, 27.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 27.

# Robert Irwin

Kelly Dean

*...imagery for me constituted representation, 're-presentation', a second order of reality, whereas I was after a first order of presence... The thing to realize is that the reduction was a reduction of imagery to get at physicality, a reduction of metaphor to get at presence.—Robert Irwin<sup>1</sup>*

For Robert Irwin, painting was a mechanism for thinking, for asking questions; it was a hands-on way of deciphering each assumption about art through marks and brushstrokes. But by 1970, Irwin had sold his studio and its contents and had given up painting altogether. At this point, he had been painting for half of his life, using paint as a means of autoreferential problem solving, mark making and creating expressive language. It seemed as though each painting that was made further clarified and honed his vision. He solved formal problems only to reveal others. Eventually, this direction led him to disbelieve the credibility of painting while he searched for what he called “true perception.” He states that he did not dispute the painting process until the mid sixties, when he challenged himself in “how not to make a painting.”<sup>2</sup> Since his departure from painting, Robert Irwin has been fundamental to the “light and space” movement, incorporating the use of scrim and light on architectural site specific environments. Irwin perceived painting occupying a different dimension than the one our bodies shared. As Ad Reinhardt had said, “painting had been pushed toward a limit of almost,” and for Irwin, this “almost” didn’t qualify as true perception. This interest would continue in the study of energy through process. There was no more concentration on the physical object.<sup>3</sup>

Irwin’s early paintings from the late fifties consisted of large, bold, Abstract Expressionistic pieces, created in an automatic, unconscious stream. His first solo gallery exhibition at the Felix Landau Gallery in 1957 in Los Angeles, created an environment for Irwin to see his own work in a more distinct manner.<sup>4</sup> He was utterly disappointed in their lack of meaning and was intent on identifying more seriously with painting. Irwin created a series of what he called the “Zen” paintings, of which he recalled, “that it was very much about gesture, the authentic mark, of just trying to get it down without thinking too much about it.”<sup>5</sup> His invitation to join the “New Ferus” Gallery in Los Angeles led to a show of these paintings in 1959. Even though he received a small review in *Art News* and sold a few works, Irwin was still dissatisfied with the paintings. This led to the “small hand-held” series of pieces; paintings roughly a foot square framed by thick bands of wood. In each case, the large wooden frames dwarfed the paintings proper and made the canvases boxes instead of flat surfaces. Irwin wanted the viewer to physically control the work in order to redefine the ways of seeing. This untitled series of hand-held works were created between the fall of 1959 and the spring of

1960. The purposeful control of the medium combined with the idea of the viewer manipulating the object was the early beginning to the perceptual awareness that occurred in his later work.

Irwin felt that the brushstrokes still indicated imagery and symbols that could be identified and reduced, especially in light of reading the gestures as "Abstract-Expressionist." He wanted to create a physical presence that had no boundaries but also still make marks. The production of his line paintings, which he called "Pick-up Stick" paintings ensued. *Ocean Park* of 1960-61 shows an attempt to simplify the mark which is made into a series of lines, looking less pictorial. At the start, these works contained from forty to fifty lines, "composed one on top of another, muscling in and out of space."<sup>6</sup> Gradually, in his desire to reduce pictorial markings, Irwin went from forty or fifty lines in one painting to finessed, crisp, four line paintings. The violet lines in *Crazy Otto* of 1962 are not seen cohering as a composition, but as individual lines, each seen individually. By investing in the new paintings, Irwin sought to make painting not only more reflexive within its own space, but to extend this space as well. Irwin was making an effort to step away from illusion; to dissolve the whole idea of the object.<sup>7</sup>

In a process of over ten years, Irwin had stripped down his conception of painting, first by delineating what was "arbitrary, and then ridding the work of marks that could be read as signs."<sup>8</sup> The colors of the "Pick-up Sticks" paintings still wrestled with one another for dominance or became too much of a determined composition so Irwin's mark itself was later reduced to a minimum. The edge of the painting became his new concern. The rectilinear shape defined space, and Irwin's works gradually challenged this delineation. A series of dot paintings was produced from 1964-1966 in which red and green dots were alternately placed on a canvas that physically bowed at the center. The result was a rendition of the subtle way light reflects off a convex object.

The ensuing disc series was a more direct and visual translation of the conceptual goals of the dot paintings. He created discs first out of aluminum from 1966-67, and then plastic from 1967-69, that were installed protruding out from the wall. The lighting of the discs would create a quatrefoil shadow on the wall, and the gradation of color painted on the disks from center to edge confirmed the round shape. This modulation was a dissipation of physical substance into pure evanescence.<sup>9</sup> These disc pieces led into further exploration of warm and cool light, while scrim was used to cover areas and gradations of color. The first installation of these findings was in a small room at the Museum of Modern Art in 1970. It included wire tautly drawn from either side of the room seven feet from the floor and eighteen inches out from the back wall. A section of scrim hung above the wire, four feet from the ceiling. Warm and cool fluorescent bulbs were alternated to make a prism effect play across the scrim. None of the objects were easily fixed in space. The perceptual condition of the work was limited to the installation in that exact space, and so the work became more about the moment and the space than the physical piece.<sup>10</sup>

Irwin continued to struggle with the questions that confounded him about art. Reading Piet Modrian's theories along with viewing the Dutch painter's 1970

retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum in New York compounded Irwin's questions. Irwin suspended working altogether and traveled extensively for a year through the Southwestern deserts believing that, "As long as you have something to do, you can't get to your questions."<sup>11</sup> He worked on ideas that had "no form, no subject matter." He decided to accept invitations to speak in order to create ideas in response to dialogue. He traveled the country and worked out problems mentally. After his sojourn, the availability of white, pristine gallery spaces intended for oversize canvases and minimal works were made available to Irwin in the seventies. In response to this stark environment, he began to once again use scrim, tape and string. *Eye Level Wall Division* of 1973 and 1974's *Soft Wall* were installation pieces at the Pace Gallery in New York. *Eye Level Wall Division* bisected the room lengthwise. *Soft Wall*, in response to the "objectness" of the previous piece, had scrim that was stretched floor to ceiling, placed eighteen inches in front of the rear wall, and was almost undetectable. To Irwin, this work was a "statement of principle more than a piece of art."<sup>12</sup> He considered this area defined by the scrim the realm of "pure presence."

An exhibition in 1977 at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York embodied Irwin's "theory of objectless space."<sup>13</sup> Upon entering the building, one would notice a space devoid of objects; sharpened by the natural light and scrim hanging from the ceiling, the geometry of the room became the subject. A black line ran along all four walls of the room, starting from the edge of the scrim and wrapping around, making the scrim almost imperceptible from the bottom. Irwin continued this piece beyond the wall of the Whitney. The black line square from the room was repeated outside of the building, exacting the shape and size of the room onto the cityscape. This *Line Rectangle* was installed between two buildings using rope, forming a rectangle visually framing the space between the two World Trade Center towers. Also, the square area of the floor was transferred as a painted black square at the intersection of 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue. This work exemplified Irwin's belief that "art is a non-thing, that is, it has no actual physical properties, or if you wish, it has infinite physical properties. It is whatever we posit it to be."<sup>14</sup> The subject of the work became "the pure void of contact." The artwork no longer delineated specific space, it was about *all* space.

From the late seventies until now, Irwin has worked in the outdoor public arena, incorporating works directly into urban environments. This incorporation included such works as the *Portal Park Slice* (1980), in the John W. Carpenter Park, Dallas; *Two Running Violet V Forms* (1983), located on the grounds of the University of California, San Diego; and most famously his outdoor garden for Los Angeles's Getty Center that debuted in 1998.<sup>15</sup> Most of Irwin's work from the last twenty years no longer exists because it was only intended to last a couple months or never existed because it was only conceived and its execution was never funded. Otherwise, his works are permanently installed public pieces that are designed strictly for a specific site. There are no objects of Robert Irwin's making; as Rosalind Krauss puts it, they are "landscape and not-landscape, architecture plus not-architecture."<sup>16</sup> They are in public space in private time; "The abstract

sign, human figure, has been replaced by an expanded responsibility for the individual artist/observer as actively charged with completing the full intent of the work of art experientially.”<sup>17</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 Robert Irwin in Sally Yard, “Deep Time,” 56 from Russell Ferguson, ed. *Robert Irwin* exhibition catalog (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art 1993).
- 2 John Hallmark Neff, “Hands On: Irwin and Abstract Expressionism” from Ferguson, 77.
- 3 See Bois on Reinhardt “The Limit of Almost”.
- 4 Neff, 79.
- 5 Ibid., 80.
- 6 Yard, 54.
- 7 Neff, 85.
- 8 Yard, 61.
- 9 Ibid., 58.
- 10 Ibid., 61.
- 11 Lawrence Weschler, *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982) 61.
- 12 Yard, 65.
- 13 Ibid., 66.
- 14 Robert Irwin, *Notes Towards a Model* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1977), 29.
- 15 Also in the summer of 1998 the Pace-Wildenstein Gallery, SoHo held a retrospective exhibition of Irwin’s work that included many of the works included in this essay. The paintings from this show have rarely been exhibited.
- 16 Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture In the Expanded Field” *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 287.
- 17 Irwin, Robert “The Hidden Structures of Art” from Ferguson.

# Sally Mann

Lisa Barnett

Sally Mann was born and raised in Lexington, Virginia, where she lives now with her three children—Emmet, Jessie, and Virginia—and her husband Larry, in her childhood home. This corner of southern Virginia takes on mythic proportions in her biography and her work: It offers both sanctuary and inspiration; insulates her from the dizzying rush of the late twentieth century (one monograph of her work is called *Still Time*);<sup>1</sup> functions as the ground zero from which meaning takes shape; is the mundane and over familiar that is (al)chemically altered to reveal the marvelous. This terrain to which she is so deeply rooted has always been a presence in her work, insinuating itself strongly even into photographs that are ostensibly portraits.

Although landscape photography proper does appear in her early work, Mann made her reputation with portraiture, first with 1988's *At Twelve*,<sup>2</sup> portraits of girls on the brink of womanhood, and then with the *Immediate Family* series of 1992.<sup>3</sup> The latter are the photographs for which Sally Mann is best known. Taken in and around her home in Lexington, they are narratives of childhood, at once universal and particular. One hardly needs to be told that the children in the series are her own, so familiar is she with the inherent grace of their gestures, postures and play. Her images document the details of their lives while evoking their metaphoric potential. The lush southern gothic surroundings provide the eternal summer of their existence.

The timelessness of Mann's photographs is due in large part to the conventions of pictorialism in which she is deeply entrenched. Championed by Edward Steichen, Edward Weston, Alvin Langdon Coburn, and others of Alfred Stieglitz's photo-secession group at the turn of the century, pictorialism established photography, beyond its mimetic quality, as an art form capable of revealing the poetic truths latent in the physical world. As Minor White would decree, "the function of camera work, when treated as a treasure, is to invoke the invisible with the visible."<sup>4</sup> Through the painterly effect of soft focus and the exploration of symbolic form, the pictorialists transformed mundane objects into subjective visions of high aestheticism.

The tender lyricism of many of Mann's images is reminiscent of the allegories of Julia Margaret Cameron, a turn-of-the-century pictorialist who photographed local women and children in her back yard, dressed as biblical and literary figures. Mann's *Fallen Child* is a disheveled angel in a halo of soft light. Grass and hair and skin lend their earthy textures to an otherwise ethereal being.

The integration of child to the natural features of the landscape yields "equivalents" like those revealed in Stieglitz's series by that name. In Mann's photographs, the connection is often emphasized by the title, as in the portraits *Arundo Donax* and *Night Blooming Cereus*. The delicate tendrils of the *Cereus* are

echoed by the strands of hair that fall close to the young girl's face. Her emerging sensuality is evoked by the mantle of blooms, and the grace and symmetry of their curvilinear forms creates an Art Nouveau abstraction.

In 1994, in a correspondence with editor Melissa Harris published in *Aperture* magazine, Mann described a shift occurring in her work: "The kids seem to be disappearing from the image, receding into the landscape...I have been ambushed by my backgrounds. *Emmet, Jessie, and Virginia*, of 1992, is exemplary: It seems to catch the moment just when the characters are exiting the stage."<sup>5</sup> Her work from this point on became increasingly focused on the landscape, to the exclusion of portraiture. This pivotal moment was motivated by issues both personal and artistic. The overwhelming success of the family pictures had placed a pressure on her work that she needed to elude. Working in a new genre allowed her the freedom to experiment, make mistakes, and rediscover the fertile creativity of naive vision.

"The landscape is teasingly slow to give up its secrets," writes Mann.<sup>6</sup> As a genre, landscape is relatively un compelling; it lacks the engaging human interest of portraiture. This project gave Mann a new set of aesthetic problems around which to rally her strengths as a mature artist. Of the scenes she photographs, Mann writes

They beckon me with just the right look of dispossession, the unassertiveness of the peripheral. These are the places and things most of us drive by unseeing, scenes of Southern dejection we'd contemplate only if our car broke down and left us by the verdant roadside.<sup>7</sup>

These horizons, bland with over familiarity, provide Mann with the raw material to demonstrate her formal and technical mastery.

As a "woman-artist," this transition had a kind of poetic resonance for Mann, mirroring the natural progression from domesticity into the outside world. In the separation between parent and child, both parties gradually move out of the intimate circle to find interest and inspiration from other sources. Mann felt that the photographic work that had so closely bonded herself and her children would be intrusive as they entered their teenage years. The images in the *Immediate Family* series probed the biological, psychological complexities of childhood, offering iconic tableaux for the range of human experience. On a larger scale, the recent transition across her body of work as a whole functions as a metaphor for the severe shifts that recur in the cycle of life.

The force of Mann's photographs is their engaging reverence: the close attention paid to a delicate shoulder blade or an overgrown corner of a Georgia forest. In an art-age reeling from postmodern skepticism and new technologies, such as digitalization, that undermine our understanding of the basic tenets of photographic reality, Mann has re-engaged traditional aesthetic concerns, producing universal, classically harmonious, even humanist images. To the natural beauty of her children and the landscape she brings to bear all of the evocative power of photography to reveal the oblique, half-hidden qualities of the natural world.

Sally Mann's landscape pictures seem almost to be unpeopled portraits, so intent is she on demonstrating the unique character of her subject matter. Rather than relying on mystifying abstraction to aestheticize nature, she presents a clear and recognizable chunk of the world, highlighted by meticulous formal composition and the play of broad areas of light and dark. In an act of romantic constructivism, she transforms through her poetic vision scenes that might otherwise appear mundane. As Robert Adams wrote

Landscape pictures can offer us, I think, three verities— geography, autobiography, and metaphor...taken together, as in the best work, the three kinds of information strengthen each other and reinforce what we all work to keep intact—an affection for life.<sup>8</sup>

The photographs from the *Virginia* series, like all of her previous work, are executed with a smooth and technically flawless surface. The *Georgia* series represents a departure from her usual mode of working, and a greater level of experimentation. Mann used a variety of vintage cameras and lenses, and allowed "accidents" in the developing process to leave their mark.<sup>9</sup> The resulting effects reveal more explicitly the physical processes of the medium, recalling images from the nineteenth century, when the techniques of photography were still being perfected. Many of the *Georgia* photographs have a strong "pinhole" effect, others show spots and imperfections from the negatives, and a few even have lines running across the surface, as if printed from a cracked glass negative.

Like a Civil War photographer, Mann is able to pack history into her photographs: affording a vision of the Deep South, literally, through the lens of another era. In an Untitled work of 1996 that was shown at the Edwynn Houk Gallery's "Mother Land" exhibition, Mann reveals the walls, gates, and landscape of a Southland plantation. What we notice is how little it seems to have changed. In the *Virginia* landscapes, nature stands incontrovertible, monumental. As if the Live Oak in *Virginia #6* has been blazing in a hot high noon in that meadow, uninterrupted, for an age, and will continue to long after we have turned away from the photograph and forgotten it.

Mann's reverence for the objects of her attention lends them an integrity that extends across time, and beyond the frame. The trace of their presence inflects other nearby images. As Mann writes, "These landscapes belong with the family pictures; they provide the background and the history and the scale. They give them dimension. If the family pictures are flashes of the finite, these landscapes offer them residence in the languid tableaux of the durable."<sup>10</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 Sally Mann, *Still Time* (New York: Aperture Foundation, Inc., 1994).
- 2 Sally Mann, *At Twelve, Portraits of Young Women* (New York: Aperture Foundation, Inc., 1988).
- 3 Sally Mann, *Immediate Family* (New York: Aperture Foundation, Inc., 1992).
- 4 Minor White, *Mirrors, Messages, Manifestations* (New York: Aperture Foundation, Inc., n.d.), 106.
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# Malcolm Morley

Scott Budzynski

Malcolm Morley's 1965 work, *Cristoforo Colombo*, appears at first glance to be a postcard, or a photograph of one. In reality, it is a painting of a postcard. With works such as these, Morley became known as the leader of Photorealism, a term he rejects in favor of Superrealism. This term, Superrealism, reveals the true nature of Morley's work as a whole, as he consistently plays upon the concept of reality, or more accurately, the visual reality of the picture plane. His investigation of painting has taken his style from realistic looking works like *Cristoforo Colombo* to a work like *Holiday in the Azores*, 1994, which integrates the implications of both Expressionism and Surrealism, but in a present day context.

A consideration of Morley's work at this moment is particularly relevant. Critics, artists, and scholars have raised questions as to the direction art is taking as we begin the twenty-first century and as to the viability of traditional media, like painting. The eighties saw the evolution of pluralism and the nineties has been witness to the Information Age. How can painting still provoke artistic discussion in this age of profuse technological gain? Examining this artist's work and technique in relation to his critical break in style with *Racetrack* of 1969-70 gives light to these questions.

Key to Morley's mode of operation has been his use of the grid. The grid holds a key position in modern art;<sup>1</sup> Cézanne began by breaking up the picture plane into geometric forms which Picasso later developed into Cubism. Picasso's breakup of the canvas does not exactly conform to the grid, but the work of painters following him does, e.g., Paul Klee, Piet Mondrian, Juan Gris, and Robert and Sonia Delaunay. Morley takes the grid a step further. While the modernists used it as a visual breakdown of the picture plane, Morley uses it in his painting process to re-create visual stimuli.

In creating his early photorealist works, Morley started with a photograph, or postcard, which was cropped. The canvas was then equally divided. On a gridded canvas, each square of the photograph was copied to its corresponding area. Even the white frame around the postcard images was duplicated, attesting to the identity of the source. Regardless of the medium copied, Morley's brushstroke was tight and he worked with acrylics. Morley denied the importance of subject matter itself, instead emphasizing the technique: "I accept the subject matter as a by-product of surface. I work against the theory of constancy, i.e., the grass feels green when walking in a park at night."<sup>2</sup>

Morley actually saw these works as abstract wholes composed of fragments. In this way Morley explored the process in which human subjectivity unifies segments of the visual world. His process demonstrates the position of the human body as a moving "camera" in the world of objects. This exploration relates to Morley's interest in the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty,

whom he cites as his favorite philosopher.<sup>3</sup> In his writing Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the body as a subject which only becomes aware of itself through its reaction to a world of objects. The body is able to assemble the fragmentary world into a whole, which has a direct impact on the consciousness.

Another well known Photorealist who shares Morley's philosophical concerns and painterly technique is Chuck Close. Although Close turned to Photorealism slightly after Morley, he also works using the grid technique, concentrating mostly on faces taken from Polaroids. While Morley has explored the philosophical limitations of Photorealism in more depth, Close has concentrated on the method itself, stating, "The only way that I can accomplish what I want is to understand not the reality of what I am dealing with, but the artificiality of what it is."<sup>4</sup> His statement sheds light onto the intellectual implications of well crafted mimesis in Morley's work.

In 1968 Morley painted *Vermeer, Portrait of the Artist in his Studio*. This is a copy of a reproduction of the work Vermeer did of himself painting. Here we can see Morley's method as a metalanguage, that is, the subject matter of his work is a dialogue about the act of painting itself. It seems no accident that he chose this particular work to appropriate. Writing of Morley, Kim Levin noted the phenomenological complexity of Vermeer's perceiving himself as simultaneous subject and object, "Vermeer pulled back the curtain and exposed behind a transparent picture plane a big space that could contain even the artist, but he left the viewer a voyeur on the other side."<sup>5</sup> Morley complicated the role of the viewer by repositioning the object one step further in repetition and reproduction. Because Morley made this image his own through the painstakingly accurate process of the grid technique, the viewer is left to consider his or her relationship to the original. Levin's statement implies that Vermeer himself might be further removed as an object when the images are mediated by the hand of another artist. Close, too, is fond of this Vermeer and took special note of it while studying in Vienna, before he turned to Photorealism.<sup>6</sup>

The early period of Photorealism both culminates and implodes in the painting from 1969-70 called *Racetrack*. This piece depicts a very realistic looking scene from a racetrack in South Africa, but across the canvas is printed a monotype of an "X." It is ironic that the "X," which is very expressionistic and appears to be painted on the canvas is a monotype, an image made by spreading ink onto a metal plate and pressing it against a surface. The scene itself, which has the look of a photograph, is painted directly on the canvas.

After this work, Morley continued in what is still referred to as Superrealism, painting from photographs, but allowed the painted surface to break up and reveal its true nature as a series of brushstrokes. Morley sees the breakup of his tight brushstrokes as inherent even in his early Photorealist works. Morley also saw this stylistic breakup as a critical break from the early works because he was now emphasizing the nature of the medium rather than the philosophical problems of reproduction. Morley describes the drive behind this change of focus and style, "The idea of a release of painterly temperament through and engagement

with temporal space. It's just as simple as that. Of course it's much more complex too. I began to fear there was a loss of an erotic sense because of the separation from three-dimensional seeing on a two-dimensional plane."<sup>7</sup>

Morley's break from his surrealist works had a negative impact on his career. No longer painting in his signature style, he fell out of favor with collectors. This disfavor was furthered by an episode in which Morley took a watergun filled with paint and sprayed the word "fake" across his piece *Buckingham Palace with First Prize*, 1970, when it was up for auction in Paris. Although the action was viewed unfavorably, doesn't it directly correspond to the printing of a red "X" over the painting of South Africa? Rather than doing damage to his own work, spraying "fake" across it may have been better seen as Morley's way of updating it.

In 1971 Morley painted *At a First Aid Center in Vietnam*, a combat scene from a magazine. There is a white border with page numbers and a caption. Even the crease down the center of the picture, which was printed on two pages, is reproduced; the brushstrokes are very loose. Much of Morley's expressionistic work contains violent subject matter. It is as if the work tears itself apart both through the images depicted and the style of painting. Other war paintings are copied from scenes created by Morley with toy soldiers. In this fashion he engages temporal space, painting from a three-dimensional scene rather than a two-dimensional reproduction. In reproducing his "scenes," Morley still operated using the grid, viewing his subject matter through an open one.<sup>8</sup>

Morley's formative years as a child were spent in England in the midst of World War II. He, like many others, was a first hand witness to the violent manifestations of technologies which "advanced" during the Second World War. Under psychoanalysis, Morley remembered as a child living in London, waking, "to see one of his favorite toy models, of a boat called the H.M.S. Nelson, being blown to bits during the Blitz."<sup>9</sup> In fact, it was Morley's house that was blown to bits, including his model ship inside.<sup>10</sup> Although he never knew his biological father, his mother's second husband was a sailor in the merchant marines. Morley himself worked on ships as a boy before spending time in the reformatory and three years in prison where he started painting.<sup>11</sup>

We find then that the subject matter of the ship is in itself significant to the painter. The ship remains throughout Morley's *oeuvre*, appearing in *Age of Catastrophe*, 1976. But what has happened to it in this work? It seems that Morley has copied a scene from a photograph of a ship in harbor, perhaps in New York, but the picture surface has broken up and there is an airplane superimposed and crashing into the vessel. In addition to this new element, there are branches painted across the upper register of the canvas from which hangs both a bird (upside-down) and a toy submarine tied to string.

Morley continues after *Age of Catastrophe* to paint canvases containing seemingly incongruous elements, creating his own hybrid expressionistic-surrealistic landscape. Recently, Morley has begun painting outdoor landscapes in watercolor which he later transfers through his grid method into oil paint, juxtaposing many of the watercolors together, often adding staged scenes. 1994's *Holiday in*

*the Azores* is one such work. A vacation beach scene with airplanes is combined with a beach scene of warships and planes. These airplanes are taken from Morley's models which he has been creating since the nineties. The models sometimes are incorporated on the canvas, denying the medium's two-dimensional limitation.

The painter's early works are often looked at in the context of Pop Art because of their literal representation of mass media objects. Morley, though, is not a Pop artist, rather, his work is a dialogue on the literal depiction of objects and their limitations on two-dimensional surfaces. I referred to his earlier work as fragments making up a whole, but the later works deny the unity of such fragments. Scenes are juxtaposed thus creating an expressive dreamscape and these objects, appearing out of his consciousness or subconsciousness, take on definite personal significance. Individuals often direct their emotions outward onto the visual world, while at the same time integrating objects into their psyche and attaching values to them. For the painter this process is relived on the two-dimensional canvas surface. Morley later acknowledges the personal relevance of his subject matter: "I like my paintings to come out of what I've actually seen and experienced in one way or another. In a sense, they're about being in the physical phenomenological, man-made world and then retreating from it."<sup>12</sup>

Morley's work can be seen as exposing "realities" behind the unified representational depiction of objects. He also strives to reveal visual reality's three-dimensional nature. Contemporary society has been raised with a photographic understanding of the world, i.e., we live amongst a pastiche of images. Morley first offered those images back up for viewing, supposedly attaching no significance to the actual object. His work then opened up upon itself, self-destructing and revealing its true character: a charged image taken from the mind of the artist and painted on the canvas.

## NOTES

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# Jules Olitski

William V. Ganis

It seemed a shock to the art cognoscenti that Jules Olitski had begun in the past few years to paint figurative landscapes. This surprise came from an association with Olitski as *the* Modern abstract painter of the late twentieth century. Indeed, Olitski has worked on the formal issues of abstract painting for the past four decades, working at first expressionistically, then as a stained canvas painter, later with his famous atmospheric sprayed works, and finally with several series composed of increasingly impasto swaths. In the sprayed work, like *Juno* of 1968, one sees suggested depth in the work caused by the chiaroscuro effect of the red, magenta, and violet sprayed paint surface. The viewer though, is forced into an awareness of the work as an art object and not as an illusionistic window, thus the viewer focuses on the color, surface and flatness of the work, as well as the barely perceptible physical texture compared with the vivid visual texture.

The magenta color in *Juno* rests on the optical boundary between receding cool colors and advancing warm hues. The "neutral" magenta echoes the physical flatness of the surface, which, paradoxically is only broken through the illusion of advancing reds and receding violet which become obvious at the edges of the work. At the edges, these illusions implode as they call attention to the painting as an object. The peripheral strokes of paint further heighten the illusion and disillusion of the painterly sprayed effect by being bold definers of the work's plane and further stating the work's obvious function as pure painting.

In continued work with formal problems over the decades, one can see that Olitski kept working in the illusion/disillusion dichotomy created by impasto texture and chiaroscuro spray color application. Through the seventies Olitski's peripheral brush strokes became more impasto and gradually became "allover" surface. Like his contemporary, Larry Poons, after exhausting the possibilities of eminent flatness Olitski exploded the physical picture plane to explore painterly texture and illusion. This interest in physical texture followed Olitski's forays into polychromed sculpture where he explored similar problems of illusion in physical space. In works like *Cleopatra Flow* of 1990, the expected play of shading seems to be canceled out by the modulation of intense colors over the surface. Highlights and shadows are displaced by complex layers of paint and multiple surfaces.

So how do the recent figurative landscape works fit in with such abstractions? From a strictly formal standpoint, they are made up of painterly gestures and experimental (for Olitski anyway) use of oil sticks, pastels, oil sketches, and watercolors. Olitski's interest in intense color and the optical effects of the juxtaposition of such color are still present in these landscape works. Many of the figurative elements in these works seem tenuous, as if they could easily metamorphose into pure abstraction. Moreover, there are limited visual cues that make these works perceptible as landscape. In a given work, the only mimetic devices

given to the viewer are one compositional element suggesting a tree or horizon in combination with seemingly natural, yet still intense, color patterns setting off sky, land and water. These works are an inclusion of the marginally figurative rather than a rejection of the abstract.

The illusion/disillusion dichotomy-paradox at work in Olitski's earlier paintings and sculptures remains active in the new figurative renderings. The image, simultaneously legible and abstract, easily separates into empirical space or disintegrates into flat abstract pigmentation, thus the viewer again is confronted with the plane being a medium which acts like a window and an illusionistic space which collapses back on its support.

It might be well to propound that these vistas deliver new insights into Olitski's abstract works of the past few decades. With the knowledge that Olitski has situated his studios in scenic locations, and that he has often taken hints from nature in his works, it is now not such a far stretch from the abstract to the figurative. Indeed, when juxtaposed with these new works, it is the elements of the abstract paintings that often seem to be on the verge of metamorphosis into the recognizable. The sprayed surface reads as atmospheric haze. The "signature" edge drawing reads as scenic framing of the picturesque, much as trees or horizons are placed at the edges of the new landscapes. The impasto makes Olitski as much a topographer as a painter, especially as earth tones prevail in those works. The abstract works capture the essence of landscape as much as the new landscapes exude abstraction. Olitski has voiced several times the continuity of process and vision in his painting career which, incidentally, began with landscapes. Because Olitski responded to his environs throughout his career, this seemingly new landscape theme is best seen as redefined, rather than revisited. A juxtaposition of recent and past works does not pronounce that the abstractions should be read exclusively as landscapes, nor does it deny the primacy of formal concerns, rather all these works maintain that the forms are distilled through the artist from the environment.

## **AN INTERVIEW WITH JULES OLITSKI**

### **Introduction**

Jules Olitski has been one of the artists who defined Modernism in the twentieth century and who affected a generation of painters in the 1960s and 1970s. During this time, Olitski was championed by a group of critics who followed Clement Greenberg's investment in the importance of formal values. At the height of his career, with his sprayed surface works, he represented America in the 23rd Venice Biennial and *Dokumenta 4*, took prizes at the Pittsburgh International Exhibition of Contemporary Painting and Sculpture (now the Carnegie International) and the Corcoran Biennial. Olitski was the first living artist to have a one-person exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Since this time, Olitski has painted

in large impasto swaths combined with sprayed surfaces.

As of 1995, at seventy-three years of age, Olitski began rendering small expressive landscapes. In the summer of 1996, these works debuted at Keene State College in New Hampshire, where they were a huge success. Thirty-one of forty works sold in just a few weeks. Olitski has found similar success in recent exhibitions of these landscapes at André Emmerich Gallery and Long Fine Art Gallery in New York. There seems to be a critical moment in this radical shift to working figuratively after being an abstractionist for four decades. The following interview outlines Olitski's interest in and rendering of the new landscapes.

Telephone Interview of Jules Olitski by William V. Ganis, March 25, 1997

Ganis: You have been a bastion of Modernism and you were really one of the few painters who fully maintained ties to painterly abstraction. I'm wondering do these new landscapes represent a departure from the strictly formal issues and "progressive" aspects of Modernism? Is there any thought at all as to these works being any way related to what's going on in postmodernism?

Olitski: Let me take the last part, related to anything going on in postmodernism, which I'm not sure how I would be relating to that. What do you mean? Because the kind of art that for the most part I see called postmodern has largely to do with ideas that don't have much to do with art as such. Indeed I see it almost as a deliberate lowering of the values traditionally that we have held towards art and is part of a lowering of almost everything in the country—like all these causes and political emphasis—so here is art now being debased. I see it as a debasement that hasn't to do much with art, if with anything, or even as I was implying a deliberate step to debase art, as if that were an elitist thing, whereas I have always felt whether I was painting what came to be regarded as Modernist art, what was always important to me and continues to be, that it be good as art, that it be beautiful and say something within its own context as a vision—a visual vision. That was true to my sense of what would make a work of art speak. Now to make a work of art speak politically or to have something to do with the various -isms that are going on in our world today—Fine! If you can make a work of art that is good as art, that is, that is beautiful and true as art, fine! Goya did that with the *Third of May* that I saw in the Prado more than once. French soldiers shooting, murdering peasants, yes! That was a political statement, but I'm sure when Goya—I would stake my life on it—that when Goya stepped back to look at the painting and throughout the making of it, he looked at it in terms of "does it work as a painting?" The cause is long forgotten, the picture remains great because it's a great work of art, the same I'm thinking of Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*. We judge it as a work of art, and Delacroix as a supreme artist I'm sure did the same as Goya—and Picasso who was politically involved openly as a Communist when he made his political paintings, *Guernica* was the most known one, there were others. I'm sure he tried to make a Picasso, a painting. I've never been too certain that the *Guernica* is as

great as a lot of critics think it is, if I had a choice of Picassos to own, that would not be at the top of the list. That in terms of the latter part of your question, I think I've responded to that.

WG: Maybe it would be safe to say in summary that you think the formal issues have come first in all these historical works, that's why we still hold them up today.

JO: Yes! Now in terms of my art, previous and present, I bring the same, I think, spirit and passion and so on to making an eight by ten pastel on paper or watercolor or oil sketch of a sunset on the water. My concern is exactly the same as when I was painting an abstract painting which I might well do tomorrow. When I was a kid in high school, I remember my first real art experience was meeting an older painter (Samuel Rothbort) who was having a kind of an exhibition in the hallway of the art school and he was sort of Impressionist, and we became friends and he would take me out in Brooklyn to Sheep's Head Bay, and paint boats on the water. It was thrilling, and I did a lot of those. Unfortunately, my mother who was a rigorous house cleaner would give them away to the neighbors when I was out. I loved them and I've never stopped every now and then doing a watercolor when I'm in the country—water on a lake or wherever I am, but not the way that I'm doing it now in which I've become kind of possessed as I do when I'm working whether abstract paintings or the ones I'm doing now. I think it might be useful to give the specific origins of this recent kind of catapult into, or "switching gears" as I think you put it.

What happened was, wherever I am and I live in two places, about half the year in each and one here is on the Keys in Florida, and I see the sunset here in the bay side. In New Hampshire we're on the lake, on the big lake, Lake Winnepesaukee, on an island, and again I was facing the sunset from my window in the studios in the house. Now here on the Keys about four or five years ago, I was looking out there and thinking, why the devil don't I take a whack at that. I've never really worked in pastel or watercolor—oil I had stopped working with many years ago. But oil sketches and oil pastels and oil sticks I could work in that way. Okay, so I go out there, I set up a little studio outside, that is, a couple of crates and a chair, and went to work and did some sunsets. I'd bring it back in the house and think "Oh my God" my heart would sink—this is just—what I saw out there and what I've composed on paper here. One is beautiful, and this is just dreadful. So after doing maybe a half dozen of these I—there's nothing like truly feeling that—just truly failed work to make an artist, I'm sure any artist, depressed, seriously depressed. I mean as depressed as one can get. So I gave up on that. Those works may not have been that bad and I've been trying to find some of them ever since, if they still exist. But I thought no, what I'm seeing out there is so ravishing and trying to put it on paper—and I'm failing. So I sort of forgot about it or gave it up. It was not something that I was going to do all day in my studio. I thought, "what a lovely thing it would be to try to do this." You know, William, sometimes when I'm asked to speak at a university or museum or what have you, in the question

period very frequently I'm asked by someone in the audience, "Would you ever paint representationally?"

WG: But you have been during your whole career, in a sense, doing studies and academic drawings.

JO: Well, I never stopped doing life drawings from the model and trying to get them as well presented as I could—as art, but as what the model looked like. So my response has always been, "Yes! without an instance of reflection, I would if my vision turned in that direction, of course I would," but I always said that, I don't think, giving it a moment's thought, that it would happen, so okay, I'm moving along comfortably in my work and painting has taken many turns, its remained essentially what's called abstract. I never quite understood what that means, but *recognizably* what they call abstract, but its taken many different paths, wherever I've been lead by—to use a word, I don't know what people think it means anymore, but I'll call it inspiration. That had to do with my visual vision, wherever that will take me I will go there, and try to exploit it, work it out, follow it. But here was this other thing that happened. We had gone to the—I had a show in Paris, and I spend most of my time—when I'm in a big city I spend most of my time not at my show, which I'll maybe turn up at the opening, but I've made it a practice rarely go to openings, but at the museum, in Paris, it's largely the Louvre. So we'd go there every day and I was looking a lot at El Greco. I had gotten seized by El Greco in Spain, I'd been there about six or seven years ago and I saw paintings by El Greco at the Museo Santa Croce, I think it was. It was the *Ascension of the Virgin*, a tall painting, and it just knocked me on my ass and when I got back I began painting directly out of El Greco, from reproductions and they'd come out looking like Olitskis as it happens, but I was copying El Greco. I became obsessed with this vision which I felt was at that point close to the kind of paintings I was making. So, at the Louvre, they don't have that many El Grecos, but without my being aware of it, my wife, Kristina, had bought these postcards, these wonderful postcards of paintings in the museum, and back here on the Keys sometime later, maybe a year later, I was walking through the house and I passed my wife's desk, and there was a postcard with a reproduction of a sunset on the water, and the painting I realized, after turning the postcard over to see who had done it, was a Delacroix, *The Sea at Dieppe*, a smallish picture, I think, and it wasn't hanging, I'm sure, when we were at the museum, but there was the postcard and I came to not recognizing who the painting was by, but I was seized by this painting and somewhat like the El Greco, it knocked me on my ass. I didn't start painting out of Delacroix as I had with El Greco. Somehow it gave me heart that I could do this. What I was seeing that seized me so was a kind of clarity of values. This is a very old fashioned thing in art. I remember saying to a friend of mine who is a landscape painter, but very much a Modernist in his ways of seeing and thinking, a very good man, a very good eye too, and I was trying to describe to him over the phone what I was doing, because that started me doing these sunsets, landscapes, and I said "the values," and he said "Values?" astounded, what a dreadful thing to

say, like I'd said "*Merde!*"

It's been noted that Olitski is a Modernist, plus an associate, a friend of Clement Greenberg which indeed I was. Clem had a great eye, and a very affirming eye, for me when he thought the art was good he was very affirming which is, I feel important, because you would do your work alone pretty much, I always thought that I had a sense of isolation, but maybe that's not an important character. Anyway, but whatever it was, it gave me heart to feel that maybe I could do this. So I began doing it and almost immediately it was like an adventure, now doing what looks like traditional art, a sunset, like "Jeez, Olitski, what are you doing?" I don't give a rap about that, I think over the years I've developed, as a child, a thick skin. I'm not too concerned about how—I don't think most people can see art anyway—maybe something that they are prepared to see, but not what's in front of them, but aside from that—I went for it, it was to me almost like an adventure into the unknown. In a sense it's not too different from the way I've always worked. I always begin in a kind of terror that I can't. Can I make something worthy as art? So, I never really was—I don't was to dissociate myself from Modernism at all, but I've never been too involved in theory and I don't think I really ever understood what, or was that interested, in what was meant by flatness. I understood always about surface and it had something to do with what Manet had introduced in bringing the image to the surface and getting rid of deep space. I was always trying in one way or another, when I was doing what was called "empty center painting" or "flat painting," was trying to introduce some way of—that had to do with chiaroscuro, not in terms of dark and light and values, but in terms of something going in and out and coming forward and going back. In that sense it would be more related to Hans Hoffman's famous thing about "push and pull," that that's what goes on in works. Somehow, I can understand that and relate to it. I remember once trying to express this, that what happens on the canvas whether it's flat or whatever has to do with this, what Hoffman was talking about. I never knew Hoffman, I met him once and shook hands, but I'm a great admirer of his and his work especially his last works of '65—a very strong major artist. But I never felt bound by any art theory, I just try to get into the work and let it in some intense way be made. I think that for me, and this sounds kind of nuts, I remember once a friend of mine, an artist, who was having a block about painting—he'd gotten sort of paralyzed and I said, "Well, you can do anything in art as long as you're not doing it," and I don't know if he knew what I meant, and I don't know if I could explain what I meant, but I found that when I'm working—what I'm saying is not unique in any way, Pollock said in that famous statement of his, "When he's in the work, he doesn't know what he's doing," my experience is that when I'm in the work, once I start the terror goes and then one thing leads to another. I am lead into the work and afterwards it's as if I wasn't there. I think that is the most wonderful experience and probably why I go back time after time to make art. Because it's a very, it's an ultimate being—of being out of one's self, truly out of myself. Matisse also says that in his writing he said that, I won't quote him exactly, but in his collected writings, Jack Lam did a book on them, he says that "Something happens that some kind of energy, he does think that he knows, that he himself would not

by himself would be able to do.” Now Matisse was not, at least for most of his career, a religious person, or to use that word “spiritual.” But that’s apparently what he talking about—that there is, I don’t know what you call that, an energy force that surrounds us, or that you can step into and let it take over. I know when that has happened to me. This is like the very opposite, William, of self-consciousness, and which can be the most crippling thing, the most dooming thing in making art. Self-consciousness or concern about anything whatever except the making of the thing and the intensity that goes along with that thing, a kind of being directed. I don’t know how else to put it.

WG: Jim Yohe related a process to me that you use for making these landscapes—that you actually observe usually the last hours of daylight, and then when you are making the work reflect on that.

JO: I do, and I’ll take photographs as well and put it together in that way. I’ll begin with what I’ve seen and I feel it’s probably—landscape people will raise their eyebrows—but I feel free to change the composition, the motif, the structure, add a reflection of the sun in the water that was not there. I’m composing, trying to make a picture that is beautiful and may come out not really quite like what I had seen. The picture has to be free to be made, to become a work of art, and be moving as such, be expressive as such. That’s my goal. I believe that when I look at what I’ve done I don’t think that an artist that is too happy with his or her own work—I’ve never been quite happy with my work sometimes I’ll feel “Yes, it’s not bad, not bad,” but I think that if I got too pleased with it, that wouldn’t be very useful. The great thing is in the making of the work, what goes on before, concerns about, “Oh, can I support my family? Do they appreciate me?” The life that we live is before making the work and then there is after making the work. “Oh, is anyone going to look at this? Is anyone going to hopefully buy it?” You have to make a living. “Is any one going to really see it? You always dream when no one was interested at all, of someone who would really see your work, then you learn that few people can really see art anyway.

WG: You must have been very pleased with the outcome of the Keene State College show. Were you actually surprised at the great response to your works?

JO: Yes I was. There seemed to be a real delight, maybe because I was doing it, that it became acceptable to look at a landscape. Landscape has been put down, it’s part of a tradition, there’s always this hunger for the new, the new, the new, not whether it’s any good, but whether it’s new. This has lead in part to the debasing of our culture.

The response that I observed watching people who may not have known that I was there or who I am, and what I was told by Kristina, my ears frequently, and eyes, everything else, the genuine responsiveness. I felt that something was being tapped here. It’s continued, a genuine responsiveness to these works...

WG: ...and at André Emmerich and Long Fine Art.

JO: Right, Dodie Kazanjian said in that *New Yorker* piece that they were “unabashedly gorgeous,” “unabashedly,” to put it that way was exactly right—yeah, why not? Poussin said “the goal of art is delight,” that has always seemed to me true. I don’t go to art to become depressed, I can go to SoHo for that.

WG: We have the latest Whitney Biennial here.

JO: Yeah, that would do it. So, I want in music and literature to be lifted, my spirit, not to be put down, always lowering, low, continuing low.

WG: That may be some of what you were getting at too, when we started this conversation, in the current scene being first political and the formal issues going out the window.

JO: I’d want to add to that, that I’m not making a statement here, and I’ve never intended with my art to make statements. I’m not taking any position. I’ve never felt that abstract art had to be defended. I wasn’t doing it for that reason. I was doing it because I found my way into it, in a very circuitous way, a very ass-backwards way, but it lead me into abstract painting. Before that I had been doing very representational portrait painting and old masters style painting. I’m not now doing these landscapes to take some sort of position vis à vis abstract art. I said somewhere that I don’t make any distinction between the abstract and the representational. If it’s good that’s all that lifts me up and is good as art.

WG: I suppose that one of the things that keeps striking me is that although I believe there is still some “gear shifting” going on here, what impresses me so much is that there is very much continuity between the abstract works, even those from thirty years ago and what you are doing today.

JO: Yeah, I absolutely feel that, I’m glad you said that.

WG: At first I thought, “What an incredible switch. There must be some, who knows, traumatic event, that caused this change.” But, the more I educated myself about your works, the more I realized that this is very much a continuity.

JO: I’m so pleased you said that, I feel exactly that way. The way I found my way into abstract painting was completely by a kind of fluke. I was in Paris on the G.I. bill after the Second World War and studying sculpture with Ossip Zadkine. I quit that and started painting by myself. I began to feel something unsettled about the work I was doing. My only art training was as a student at the National Academy of Design, back when I graduated from high school many, many, many years ago. In Paris, being alone there, and pretty much not speaking the language—hardly at all. Being completely away from my background, my family, the moor-

ings that I had had. I began questioning myself in a way that had to do with purpose. Why was I painting like this? What I had learned, and I had a certain facility—What did this have to do with what had brought me when I was a kid to a commitment that what I want to do is be an artist—when I grow up that's what I want to be? What did this painting have to do with this child, this kid that had that vision, and I decided to see if that child still existed. So I did this experiment which I kept very secret because I thought that I could be determined to be certifiable. I thought, "Well the way that I could find out, I know how to pretty much paint what I see in front of me, but I don't want to see, I want to see if there's something else," that—I hate to talk this way, it sounds so silly and it leads to the child within and all that goop. In the sense that was what it was, an identity crisis as Erickson would call it. I thought, "Well, I'll blind myself, so then I can't see what's in front of me and see what I paint without being able to see." I wasn't about to be Oedipus and tear my eyes out. I set up paint on a big piece of wood and set a up canvas on a chair, and brushes, and bound my eyes with a towel wrapped around my head and I began to paint blindfolded. I did that for some time and then I peeked and looked to see and of course it had to be abstract and pretty pure color, but it looked very exciting, very lively. It didn't occur to me that this was art, but I felt "Yeah, this child, something is here, still." So, I did that for some months, painting that way blindfolded. Finally, after I don't know how many months, I felt, "There's something here." It was that, that led me sometime later into abstract painting.

WG: Do you mind if I might ask how that might relate to the drawing board paintings?

JO: The drawing board paintings took place when I got back to New York. I didn't stay in Paris as long as I had hoped, as I had a wife, divorced. I had a child, so I had to go back to New York with the child. Then I found my self living for a time, I brought the infant to my parents, and I had no money and I was living in Hell's Kitchen in a cold flat and I had very little money, very little to eat with and keep warm, way over in the West side, I wouldn't recommend it. Anyway, I had no choice at the time. I would go to art schools, like the famous one, the Art Student's League, and I would pick up tubes of paint from the floor that students had thrown away that were not entirely empty—pick up such materials as I could. I was looking at the drawing boards, and you know the way the edges become the part that were left, let's say someone had put paper on the drawing board and painted and then when they removed it there was an edge that went over the paper, and so after a time you begin to get a number of edges. That intrigued me, so I stole a number of drawing boards and I'm afraid I also stole some materials as well, and art books in book stores and so on in order to continue painting. So I set up the drawing boards as models as if I were painting a portrait. Most of those are gone I still have one or two or three, a lot of those got painted over as well. I lacked canvas. What happened with a lot of paintings that I did in Paris that came out of the blindfold paintings, when I felt secure enough I felt, "Yeah, I've got

something that I can exploit here, that I could explore. In this ass-backwards way, I found my way into Surrealism for a time, a kind of automatic painting, because I was letting images from dreams or fantasies, sexual erotic fantasies, nightmare fantasies—my former wife is still living so I won't describe the paintings I did of her, but it was Surrealism. I noticed in the French a very talented people and some of this talent—this is going to make it impossible for me to go back to France, what I'm about to say—but, at least in the time that I was in Paris, those two years or so, the French are very civilized and they have these pissoirs or they used to have them, maybe they've now become too civilized and no longer have them. In fact, I didn't see any the last time I was in Paris, but in my time there, in the forties, there were pissoirs and you could go and relieve yourself. We could use them in New York, in the big cities. So in the pissoirs you would see drawings on the wall, scatological of course, but very well drawn. I began making copies of the drawings and introducing them into paintings. This led me into a little show I had of these paintings somewhat scatological, but they had come out of the blindfold work, but now with images in the kind of color that the blindfold images had introduced. The CoBrA people found my work of some interest. Fortunately, I had to leave Paris. I think I might have gotten too seduced by the CoBrA people, Appel and some of the others. Then the Surrealism oozed out of the work and the painting took its course. In a way I'm narrating this because in my history as an artist I find one thing leads to another and none of it is forced, I have no strategy, I just go where I'm taken. Of course I close my eyes, falling asleep and visualize things, and think "Well if I did this and then did that, and then put this over it." and so on, I see some ravishing, wonderful beautiful vision of painting which gets me into the studio because then I can't sleep at all and then I have to do it otherwise I get very nervous, restless. Then I go and do that and invariably it doesn't work. It's like I've committed some terrible sin and this whole process that I envision becomes a real mess, and it's a good thing because then I have to find my way out of this mess and this leads to something frequently, just do it—like Emerson said, "Do the thing and you shall have the power," a very freeing remark when I came upon it.

WG: In my own mind I've been seeing these new figurative works as book-ending your career up to this point. You started out with the very figurative and you're working very figurative again.

JO: But I might. I've got germinating some paintings that I'll do when I get back to New Hampshire that may become abstract, I don't know.

WG: The continuity again?

JO: Wherever, just let it continue.

WG: I tend to see a lot of landscape in some of your most abstract works,

whether we're talking about some of the very atmospheric looking spray paintings.

JO: I agree! When I was painting, living for a time out in the country in a town called Northport on Long Island. The place I had was an extended garage that I used for a studio and there was this huge landscape in front of me, 2,000 yards of field and shrubbery and trees and sky.

WG: A very Long Island flat landscape?

JO: Yes, I'd go out and while painting I'd stop and go out and see if nature could maybe give me a hint, a color or something and frequently I'd find myself doing that, but the painting was completely abstract. I think I've always been aware, how could one not? When you're supposed to be making visual art? I've always looked and felt, I suppose, like any other human being open to nature, its colors and beauty. There's always something as if seeing for the first time, in nature. Always a new thing, like a child sees it.

WG: Possibly because nature is very complex and constantly changing?

JO: Of course! Yeah, it's wonderful, just wonderful!

# Larry Poons

Jason Paradis

*We have the possibility of choice, once we see clearly what is going on.*—Suzi Gablik<sup>1</sup>

Like the kid sneaking forbidden goodies, Larry Poons seems to repeatedly get his fingers caught in the cookie jar; he feels like he is “growing up in public”<sup>2</sup> and, like a child, has been scolded for disobedience.

Very early in his career, Larry Poons was pegged as one of the leaders of American art. His cool, calculated “dot” or “blip” paintings assured his place despite the short attention span of the critics. But Poons, an avid seeker of challenges, exceeded the limits set for him by progressive Modernism. He pushed, and the dots gave way to texture, the cool geometry changed to raw emotion; he became romantic. The new paintings were not seen as particularly bad but they were overlooked as unimportant, and Poons soon lost the attention that had earlier been lavished upon him.

Poons always pushes the limits of his own experience and is not afraid to give up what he has already accomplished. In a 1989 interview with John Zinsser in the *Journal of Contemporary Art*, Poons stated that:

The essential part of what you, the artist is, comes through if you don't try to be so overly protective of what you think is your way of doing things. I think you have to constantly relearn this in your working career—that what you think you can't do is what you already should be doing, and you're just putting it off. Simply because you're afraid to lose yourself. But when you lose yourself, that's when the art happens.<sup>3</sup>

Poons is always interested in the challenge. In fact, he could not be readily reached for an interview because he was racing motorcycles in California. To Poons, doing what one believes in, is more important than stardom; i.e., the excitement is in exploration. Too many artists' integrities have already fallen victim to the monopolizing art market.

So how does one categorize Poons's career? With his history, the inclusion of Poons in this compilation seems quite certain. First, he came into prominence around 1962 with his dot paintings. Gradually toward the end of the decade his paintings lost their coolness and became lyrical. Then, the dots vanished and gave way to texture. For the next two decades he threw paint against canvases tacked to the wall or floor and produced paintings that are extremely textural Abstract Expressionism. Stressed flatness turned into crevices and bumps with very thick acrylic paint. This “critical moment” is easy enough to pinpoint. Poons further defied stylistic classification in 1996, when he, the ever-re-inventor, stopped throwing paint and once again took the brush into his hand. To further complicate

matters, not only have landscape, architectural form and the figure entered the scene, but the dots and lozenges have returned! Poons has conveyed "the exhilaration of an artist in the process of reinventing himself"<sup>4</sup> yet again.

It is beneficial at this point to trace the path of evolution in the work of the artist who is constantly seeking to paint the best possible picture under the available circumstances. Poons began his early work by drawing dots in the separate squares of graph paper. He then joined them in sequential patterns which would be transferred to canvas and painted in. Having recently given up on becoming a musician and also dropping out of the Boston Museum School, Poons was uncertain that he could be a painter. He found encouragement in Barnett Newman's 1959 New York French and Co. show. Newman's works were large and spacious with an emphasis on expansive color. These paintings displayed solitary vertical stripes ("zips" as Newman preferred to call them) placed on monochromatic fields. Poons had abandoned his study of music insisting that he did not have what it took to compose. He felt more comfortable with his painterly hand than with his ear for music. In Newman's work, Poons discovered that big, simplified, abstract paintings could be successful with united color and surface. These chromatic spaces were brought right to the edges of the canvas.

Poons's early paintings lacked the openness and breadth apparent in Newman's work. Poons had to find a way to eliminate the extraneous elements in his own work. In 1962, Poons painted *Cripple Creek* that achieved this economy. Instead of connecting the plotted points, he decided to just paint them and eliminate the grid. He achieved "The possibilities for large scale and color...for what he had seen in Newman's pictures. The dot layout put the emphasis on the broad, continuous, monochromatic background."<sup>5</sup> By introducing a new simplicity, and by eliminating the web of elements, Poons could focus more directly on unifying color and form, elements which he believed to be inseparable in painting. The underlying grid, although not visible, was still implied and gave the painting structure; the dots were pushed to the edges of the canvas. The painting was reduced to its basic elements allowing color interaction to be more easily identified and explored. These new pictures would give Poons a place in the history of American painting.

Poons began his new work by saturating the background with colors like orange, yellow, red, or green. He used acrylic paint because it could be more easily thinned down to spread evenly to the edges of the canvas. He lightly penciled in the grid and placed the plotted points in the corresponding boxes. The dots were then painted in a color of high or low contrast to the ground. These contrasting colors produced an effect of optical vibrancy.

In these paintings an after image was perceived by the viewer which incorrectly linked Poons's work with the Op art movement. Even though he was included in shows which involved Op artists such as Victor Vasarely and Bridget Riley, Poons admitted that the afterimage was as much of a surprise to him as to anyone else.<sup>6</sup> Poons even tried to eliminate the connection with Op by painting in the afterimage with another color thus producing second or third color systems in the works. It is important to note that for Poons, the interaction of color was of

more concern than the optical effect. This focus put him in a different category than the Op artists who were primarily concerned with producing optical sensations.

As the relationships became more complex, Poons would have to alter full successions of color to create harmony. He could not alter one dot without changing the full arrangement. Because he worked with progressions, these paintings are often compared with music and Poons's earlier musical endeavors are endlessly noted in the literature.

The works of this period reflect a calculated approach but not necessarily one of total control. Critics have confused his placement of dots on an "invisible" grid with an obsession with order. Although his methods allude to order—music and Euclidean geometry—it is more correct to say that the paintings are calculated rather than controlled. Poons declared:

It's just not true that I've been involved in control—whether for control or against control. It's a misnomer to assume that if someone paints a painting the way my first paintings were, i.e. very sharp delineated edges, not scooped-up color, that that's a more controlled kind of painting than say a painting that has a lot of color differentiations, lots of shading, etc. There's not any less control.<sup>7</sup>

The evenly painted surface, lacking gestural activity, does not necessarily imply that precision was an issue. Instead, the real issues of space and color were important. These fundamental compositional problems lead Poons to abandon his dot pictures in an effort to challenge himself.

Poons was irked by a statement made by an acquaintance at one of his shows at the Green Gallery. In response to Poons's concerns about what to paint and do next a fellow said he "Shouldn't have to worry, he was Poons."<sup>8</sup> This concept of not worrying because of his art world presence was against Poons's nature. If he couldn't make the best, most challenging work possible, Poons wouldn't paint it. How could he not fully challenge himself and get what he was after?

For the next two years following 1967, Poons's dots changed to ovals in order to convey further the dimensions of space. These paintings took on more "lyrical" colors and a loosening of technique. He began to paint the ellipses free hand and an interesting component entered—texture. The repainting of color combinations with the thickening acrylic paint already evoked new spaces. The influence of Jules Olitski gave Poons the excitement of a "freer, less bogged down"<sup>9</sup> approach. This helped Poons conceive of abstraction as having a "Great deal to do with attitudes and painting procedures and nothing at all to do with preconceived or preplanned graphic systems."<sup>10</sup>

In 1969, Poons, always considering his art to be about painting, took to tacking canvas directly to the floor. With the dots and ovals eliminated, the paintings became just saturated color. By pouring layers of viscous acrylic paint, "elephant skin" textures (a remark made by the critic Michael Fried)<sup>11</sup> resulted. With

these textures new depictions of space and form were implied. Now instead of standing in one spot and getting an optical sensation, the viewer had to move around and nearly stalk the painting to see the depth. To Poons, this was a truer manner of stating process, while still uniting color, space and form. The Op Art link could now be left behind in favor of the object-ness of these works. With this new leap, Poons would also leave behind the paradigmatic interests of the formalist critics. Nevertheless, Poons made the choice to proceed rather than monopolize on "worldly" success.

While visiting Poons' studio, the critic Clement Greenberg noted that on the polyethylene protecting surrounding works from the splashes of paint coming the floor, there were areas more pictorially alive than what was on the floor.<sup>12</sup> Poons decided then to mount canvases directly to the wall. The poured paint was now thrown and cascaded down the vertical format. The paint could find its own path and form on the canvas. This new way of "drawing" stressed the process of the painting itself. Unification could be made between painting and form.

From the early seventies until the early nineties, Poons embraced the throwing method. For more than twenty years Poons painted "in an arena."<sup>13</sup> He tacked large prepared canvases on the studio walls that surrounded him. While standing in the middle of the room, he could throw in a continuous arc the different mixtures and thicknesses of pigment. These paints ran down the length of the canvases and coagulated at different rates depending on what gels or mediums were introduced. Poons could alter the effect by varying the force and trajectory of the throw. Over the years he has perfected this method, creating desired effects with incredible precision.

From this giant accumulation of cascading paint, Poons would then look for the paintings within the whole canvas. By cropping, he found numerous paintings or perhaps only a few. He might extract one painting and then attack the rest of the setup with more layers of paint. The cropping procedure allowed Poons to not only bring a painting to its edges without compromising style at the periphery, but to suggest that the dynamic patterns of paint venture well beyond the work's dimensional limitations. The space, therefore, is not contained but expansive.

During the late eighties and early nineties he has introduced bits of material to his canvases ranging from Styrofoam and rubber to clothing and foam rubber balls. He affixes these to the canvas before throwing the paint in order to direct its course. These objects may remain visible or may be completely submerged in the thickness of paint. Not only have these inclusions created a more complex surface, but they determine it. The under-"drawing" of affixed materials has also given way to a new change in Poons's work.

Just when one might perceive that Poons borders on limiting himself to the structures of his own creation, perhaps maybe even becoming stale (after two decades of thrown paint) in late 1996 one sees yet another stylistic break occurring. The under-"drawing" still acts as a starting point, but now is used to construct rather than direct. Images surface along with Poons's signature dots and ellipses. Lately, the drips have vanished and the work is painted entirely with the brush. As these new works evoke his past, the "radical" changes seem less critical.

Whatever the circumstances surrounding this new change, there remains one constant issue: Poons has never ceased to leave his options open. He exemplifies the mythic artist's insatiable need for challenge. Whatever he feels will push his creative limits, one can be assured he will take up.

## NOTES

- 1 Suzi Gablik, *Has Modernism Failed?* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 19.
- 2 From an interview between John Zinsser and Larry Poons in *Larry Poons: Paintings 1963-1990* (New York: Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, Inc., 1990), 23, reprinted from *Journal of Contemporary Art*, Fall/Winter, 1989, vol. 2.2.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 23.
- 4 David Ebony, "Larry Poons at Salander-O'Reilly," *Art in America*, January 1997, 95.
- 5 Kenworth Moffett, *Larry Poons: Paintings 1971-1981*, exhibition catalog (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1981).
- 6 Laura Suzan Griffith, *Larry Poons and the Evolution of Stylistic Diametrics* (Cleveland: Department of Art History, Case Western Reserve University, 1983), 16.
- 7 Zinsser, *Op. Cit.*, 20.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 21.
- 9 Moffett, *Op. Cit.*
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 Daniel Robbins, "Larry Poons: Creation of the Complex Surface" in *Larry Poons: Paintings 1963-1990* (New York: Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, Inc., 1990), 16.

**AN INTERVIEW OF LARRY POONS BY JASON PARADIS**  
MARCH 1997

Paradis: One of the things that I wanted to ask you about was Op art. Now I don't see you in any way attached to Op art except purely surface maybe, but every source I read puts you down as a leader of Op art, except for one

Poons: What am I supposed to say to that?

JP: I was wondering how you felt about being linked?

LP: What the fuck is Op art? What are you talking about, Vasarely? What the fuck do my paintings have to do with Vasarely?

JP: I have no idea.

LP: What do you mean you have no idea? You've got to look at things and evaluate them with your own mind and your own eyes.

JP: Well that's what I'm saying, I don't think that they're anything to do with Op art.

LP: Well there you go.

JP: I wondered what you felt about that. In the catalog it actually cites you as a leader of Op art and I was just wondering why.

LP: Don't ask me, ask the shmuck who wrote it. Look, there'd be nothing wrong with being the leader of Op art if any of the art were any good. That's the problem with it. People who can't see painting see an optical thing and that's what they assume. That was a door prize. They just happen to do that—not because of any theory or anything.

JP: I didn't think so. I just wanted to find out from you, actually.

LP: What is Op art to you? What does it represent?

JP: To me personally?

LP: Well, that's the only way it can mean anything, if it's personal to you.

JP: Well, Op art is purely about optical effects and I really don't think that's what your work was about.

LP: It doesn't have anything to do with whether it has to do with painting trees or optical effects—what it has to do with is “Was it any good?”

JP: Was Op art any good?

LP: That's right, that's the only issue. All paintings are about something maybe not about something but you can ascribe—these are paintings of trees, these are paintings of spheres, these are paintings of squares, these are paintings of dung—so what? “Are they any good?” is the only god damned thing that means anything. You're talking about paintings—if you're just talking about what are the various objects that painters have painted over the centuries—well, you know, you name it, it's been painted—so what? It's so general as to be meaningless. If you're talking about what are the different subjects that people have written books about—it's endless. Well, what's the issue? Which are the books that are worth reading, i.e., any good, regardless of what they're about, what they use as subject matter. People don't seem to realize this.

JP: Right, that's a good point.

LP: Well, it's not a point, it's self evident meaning—it's like people who don't understand the game of baseball, who don't have the slightest clue of what baseball is about—so therefore when they talk about baseball all they do is talk about uniforms. It's that stupid. Except when it comes to art everybody all of a sudden thinks that kind of mentality is somehow smart, and it's just as stupid as to think well, we're talking about baseball now, and you listen, and you listen, and you listen, and all the person is doing is describing uniforms, and you say, “now what about the game?” They don't have anything to do with the game, they can't see it, they don't like it. That's why people talk about uniforms, that's why people talk about optical effects, because they can't talk about the art, or it's too difficult for them to talk about art—and why shouldn't it be? It's very difficult to talk about music—it's very difficult to talk about poetry—it's very difficult to talk about specific things, and it's easy to talk in generalities.

JP: Right, when one tries to get specific, that's when it becomes complicated.

LP: It's not that it's complicated, but it requires that you be George Bernard Shaw if you want to write about music. It requires that you're a good writer. It's like someone walked up to Brahms after a premiere and told him, “Oh, I think I heard some of this and that, a little bit of Bach, a little bit of Hayden.” Brahms just looked at this person after he was finished and this person asked, “What're you thinking?” Johannes said, “Any asshole can hear that.” That's the point—any asshole can see that that's a painting of squares, but that's not telling me anything.

JP: No, that's uniforms.

LP: Well it's not telling me anything about the music, it's not telling me anything about the art. Say "There's a show of Robert Morris, and all the felt is hanging off the wall." That's not telling me anything about the art. That's not telling me anything, but that passes for criticism, that passes for art writing. Any jerk can hear that—any jerk can see that—any jerk can see if the painting has an optical effect—so what?

JP: So, it was about painting—about you stating that you always try to make the best painting possible under the circumstances—I think that's what you're doing instead.

LP: Well, is there any other reason? If you have to put it into words, like "What are you doing?" You're trying to do it well, better than well, you're trying to make a painting as good as Elliot's *The Wasteland*. Okay? You're trying to make a painting as good as *The Odyssey* by Homer. You try to make a painting as good as anything that you think is good, regardless. You're trying to make a painting that's as good as a painting as Abdul-Jamar is as a basketball player. If you can make a painting that as a painting is that good as a painting, you've done something. That's what we're inspired by—we're not inspired to make a painting as good as shit. You're always trying to make something that's that good—that's what you're aspiring to. If you're just aspiring to sell a painting then that's what you're aspiring to. You're aspiring to please somebody out there to sell a painting, and if the painting is sold then that's the end of it. It doesn't mean it's going to be a bad painting, either, it can be a wonderful painting. Any reason to get you going to paint is a good reason. There are no right or wrong reasons to make a painting. The only thing that matters is the painting itself, what comes out of it. Give me an option—is there any other choice?

JP: No.

LP: That's what I think—there isn't, it's obvious. It's obvious that you can blow all the smoke in your face that the traffic will allow, and then some, but finally do you really give a shit about Jasper Johns's early mysterious life? Who gives a fuck? Are the paintings any good, or are they trying to give the paintings an added aura that the paintings themselves unfortunately don't have? Everybody's not sensitive to music. Everybody's not sensitive to art. Unfortunately that doesn't mean that people don't make careers of those things.

JP: The problem with music and art is that it's in the public where people seem to want to understand it.

LP: Look, a long time ago, somebody realized that if we can sell music to people who don't like music, we're going to make a lot of money, because there's more of them out there than those that really are sensitive to music.

JP: Same with art.

LP: That's right. You have your pop music, you have your pop art, and that's the industry, that's where the money is, because that's where the numbers are. Shit, my father can't see his way out of a paper bag but he understands Warhol, so therefore he thinks he understands art. You know, he understands shitty music, because he can't tap his foot in time anyway. Like music that has no subtlety to it, he understands that. The slightest bit of subtlety in music nowadays is just lost on some people, which doesn't make them bad people. Jesus Christ, there's plenty of things that I'm not sensitive to, it probably makes me a bad person but it doesn't have to. There's popular art in the industry just like there's a popular music industry. How much of it is worth listening to? Hardly any of it that you hear on the radio, not that there aren't people out there making wonderful music, there are, but you don't hear them on the radio. You don't see the same people's paintings in the museums—it's the same thing. You see, it's like as far as the art of our time, there are the top twenty on the AM dial and that's it. Pop stuff, so what, if we can sell art, if we can sell prints to everybody who doesn't like art we're going to make a zillion dollars and they have, they really have.

JP: When do you think this started?

LP: It's always been there, our time didn't start it, except with the proliferation, the reproductions, it's a different industry, El Greco had to go from Greece to Spain to see the fucking shit—that took years, but I mean he wasn't looking at a postage stamp reproduction—even if he did he was smart enough to know how to do the same thing anyway. There isn't that much good art made in recent years anyway, and so you couldn't have an industry if it only dealt in what was really good. One, because hardly anyone would like it, and two, you could hardly even find it—the stuff that might possibly be that. You always have those two things working against you—today you see the same show in Barcelona as you see in SoHo. It looks like the same fucking art. And even really wretched painting can look better in reproduction than it looks like in person, and the question of scale and the question of it working as a painting versus working as a high class reproduction—they're two different things. People think they know Barnett Newman, but they know it from *ArtNews*. “Oh yes, I know Clyfford Stills's painting,” until further questioning you realize they've never seen anything outside of a catalog or a book, it's like you don't have the slightest idea what it's all about. If you think you know what Mondrian looks like by looking at the books, you're crazy. I've never seen a bad painting that didn't look well painted, you see, that's the quality that bad painting always has. It's like it's always well painted. A painting that is not well painted might not be a great painting but it doesn't have to be a bad painting, it can be a failed painting but not a bad painting at all. Bad painting is the real thing. Bad painting is always well painted, but people don't realize that.

JP: By bad painting you mean?

LP: A painting that stinks.

JP: But it lacks something deeper?

LP: Look, if the music doesn't sound good, it's no good. If the painting doesn't look good, it's no good. I mean, maybe you'll hear the same music a week or a year from now and say "Jesus, I didn't hear that, it's beautiful," and it's the same thing with art. Art can get better or it can get worse after the first time you see it—it can go either way. But if it's bad you have to say "That's bad." It doesn't mean that next week Bartok can't sound wonderful to you. If you're doing the right thing, if you don't have a problem telling what you like and what you don't like. If there are people playing guitar that have no business playing guitar, and there are people making sculpture that have no business making sculpture, then that's not the case. It's like I have to be told that a formula is interesting because I'm not a mathematician, but to a physicist looking at the same bunch of circles, it's beauty. They're sensitive to that shit. It's the same way when you walk into a room and say "That's great" and somebody says, "How do you know it's great you only looked at it for a second?" That's all you need.

JP: That's so true.

LP: All you need is the corner of your eye, you see it out of the corner of your eye that it's good.

JP: Right, it's something that you don't necessarily have to explain either, it's something that may come along later or never will, it's a gut feeling. I have all these questions to ask you but they don't seem to be important any more.

LP: Well, like what? You could be wrong.

JP: Well, I could be wrong. You talked about your reference to music and I read about who you used to be—you wanted to be a composer.

LP: Well I don't think that you can be taught how to do anything on a high level. I don't think you can be taught how to be Sir Isaac Newton, I don't think you can be taught how to be Ludwig van Beethoven. Nobody's going to teach you how to do this. So, like if you're crazy enough or inspired enough or ambitious enough—use any word that you want to choose to want to do anything that well—you know that there's no way that anybody can ever teach you that. Meaning what you have to do is do what you're good at, no matter what it is. It might only be basketball, it might only be raising children, it might only be selling groceries, but whatever you're best at is your only chance to be talented—do you understand? You have to find what you're best at—regardless, if you're best at killing people then that's what you ought to do, if you're ambitious. If the thing that you do best

is gamble then that's what you've got to do if you want to be talented, because you're not going to learn—nobody's going to teach you to be talented, which on the very basic level is what you have to be in order to do anything well. It doesn't matter whether you want to be an artist, a writer, a bus driver, a motorcyclist—it doesn't matter but you have to find it. You can be very successful monetarily if you have no sensitivity to painting by just following your nose—I don't think we're talking on that level right now, on just being successful and all that. To be successful in the sense that—I'd like to play guitar as well as blah blah blah does—well Jesus man if you don't have any talent for it then stay away from it, unless you want to be supremely disappointed with your life. You understand, a lot of people are. They think they can be taught things. Unfortunately, people in academia build their whole lives around the fact that it can all be taught and understood. Meaning, “Hey man the art doesn't mean anything unless you tell me what it's supposed to mean,” and then we'll talk about that, and then after talking about it we'll decide whether the art is good or not—or relevant—what bullshit. But that's what I would have to do if for some reason I had to pretend—I'd damned well better do that, because if I don't have the natural ability to do it in any other way, or not even to do it—to fake doing it. I guess we're up against that, in a big way the institutions have been taken over and run by people who think there's only one way, a way that I find to be dominating. Art people don't like that, i.e., the people who say painting is dead—well fuck you, painting's always been dead, there's only a couple of great painters every hundred years, so it's always safe to say on some level it's dead. It always has been dead in the sense that it's not commonplace. Its best moments are not commonplace. Without Pollock maybe painting would be dead. On a certain level, make the world safe for mediocrity, but you've got to allow excellence. Excellence really fucks that up terrifically. It says that everyone else can go home now. Like why don't you stop teaching art? There's nothing to teach, if your ambition is to be a great artist.

JP: I teach at the university and they all think it's something like...

LP: Like dentistry—it can be learned like dentistry can be learned.

JP: But it can't be.

LP: You could learn practical dentistry. You could learn practical art, i.e., the illustrator craft. All that stuff is teachable, but all of that stuff has nothing to do with what makes great art. That only exists when it exists, not because of an idea that comes through someone, it doesn't exist because of some theory. It only exists as the thing itself, and the thing itself if it's great, if it's extraordinary, separates itself out. Everything in Homer's *The Odyssey* is exactly the same as any soap opera you've ever seen, but what makes *The Odyssey* so wonderful? How come there's only five or six great Crucifixion paintings? There's the greatest content, greatest symbolism Western man can ever dream of. That means that every painting of the Crucifixion is good because of its content? Bullshit—so

much for peoples' theory of content and important symbolism—that's where it goes right out the window. You say Jesus, if that were true then why isn't every painting of the Crucifixion a great painting? For somebody who can't see, that's not a good argument. For somebody who can't hear music, that's not a good argument. A lot of people out there in important positions truly can't see and can't hear.

JP: And it influences art and other people? It's kind of like telling other people, "this is good" and they'll believe it when in fact it's shit.

LP: It can be—it doesn't have to be—but it can be.

JP: People have to be told that it's good before they'll actually believe it.

LP: If Pollock never left the shores of this country doesn't really mean anything. He never saw all the great masterpieces in Europe—so the fuck what? You have people who think "oh I can't be a good artist unless I go here and there." That's not true—but you'll go see what you have to see—that's what people do—you'll go see the right ball player—you'll be drawn to the right painter, to the right musician. That's what you'll like—it all comes from what we like, not what we don't like.

JP: Well, you're going to see what you like, right?

LP: You have to find out what you like. Like I said, you have to find out what you're good at. That's the struggle we have all our lives.

JP: Maybe that's something we should teach at universities.

LP: Well, it should be. People should not be encouraged to do anything except find out what they're best at and then decide at that point what they should be doing for the rest of their lives—what they should be looking at or listening to or reading—whatever.

JP: They'd probably enjoy life a lot more.

LP: Well, yeah—you have to go where your talent is—you may never go into a choir but that's your natural talent. You might never be that good but at least you have a fighting chance to get there, okay? That's all I'm saying—at least you have a chance to excel, if you're doing what you're good at.

JP: Newman played a big part in your development.

LP: He was very friendly.

JP: I was reading an interview that you had with John Zinser, and you said that when you lose yourself, that's when the art comes out. I really like that statement.

LP: Probably at your most unselfconscious moment, which you cannot will. Because if you could will it we'd all be able to do it. But probably, when you're doing it, which is different from thinking it, that's when it always seems to be the best, that's when it's right. Working to make a painting that looks like it has all the freshness of a sketch, but a painting that might have taken a lot longer than any sketch could ever take, is simply the piece working and working and working and piling up micro sections of the unselfconscious and being able to preserve those moments on the canvas and then taking out all those other self-conscious bullshit things, until finally the canvas ends up being just those moments that are not defined, and you have a wonderful painting. Matisse is a good example and so is Cézanne. I mean, how did Cézanne end up with such awkward looking paintings, that took him such a long time to do? The convention is that you start awkwardly and you end up smooth, right? But the reality is exactly the opposite, if you're a real painter. Real painters end up with paintings that look anything but smooth. Even the smoothest surfaces of an Ingres—that's not the smoothness I'm talking about—it's the moment, whatever you want to call it, it's that entirety of the painting that gets you, that is totally unexpected regardless of the fact that it took forever to get there—it doesn't look it. The trouble with de Kooning is it does look like it took him forever. That's unfortunately why I think he's not that good—not as good a painter as Pollock, not as good a painter as Mondrian. Those are some great painters. At least surface-wise, in an unimportant way some painters learn to look different but in a superficial way. Somebody who can't see painting will never see that in years. So therefore, they'll like Sol Lewitt. They'll think the Sol Lewitt is as good as the Mondrian. They don't have the eye. What they're seeing are the superficial similarities. What they're seeing is like what the person was hearing in the Brahms. All the person was hearing was a little bit of Bach—so fucking what? Anybody can see that. It Doesn't mean that Sol Lewitt has anything to do with Mondrian, simply because they both seem to paint straight lines.

JP: One other question. What made you pick up the brush again?

LP: It's not "again," the brush is just the same as the bucket, it's just the means to drawing. You draw out of the end of the bucket, you draw out of the end of the brush, it's the same thing. It's just that it's a means of drawing. All painting is drawing. All color is drawing and there's no separation between the two. You can't separate color from drawing. You can't separate drawing from color. These things are inseparable. You never see one without the other so therefore they are the same. That's why painting is drawing. Drawing and color are the same words—they mean the same thing. When you see a work of art that's good, you can't in your own mind separate the so-called drawing from color and still have some feeling of reality of what you're looking at. When you're looking at stuff like

illustration—that kind of art—you can always separate the color from the drawing—put one aside and still come up with the other. But can you separate the drawing from the color in Cézanne's *Bathers*? You can in the Playboy calendar. The difference between the art of illustration and the art of painting—can you separate the color from the Matisse and still feel that you have a painting there? But can you separate the color from the drawing in a Norman Rockwell illustration? You can separate the drawing from the color in a Jasper Johns—very easily. I don't see Jasper Johns's *Flag* disappearing if I take the red, white, and blue out. If Velásquez painted it, I couldn't do it. It's a mystery that if you have eyes—or if you have ears, you can't separate melody and rhythm. If the music is great—really good music—you can't separate rhythm from melody, or rhythm from harmony, meaning there's no music. In a bad piece of music you can do it all the time, but you can't do it with a good piece of music, meaning rhythm and melody, color and drawing in art are one in the same. They're bound. They are one element. In music that's great, they're one element be it blues music or Bach. If it's really good you can't separate anything out or you have nothing. If it's bad blues music, shit, you cut the bass out and you still get shit. If it's great it's fused, it's art—it becomes just music, or painting or sculpture. It's a mystery, but it's there. I mean that's why this shit is special. But it's special only if you are sensitive to it. If you're not sensitive then you have to take my word for it. If I'm not giving you the right word then that's it. It doesn't make any difference. You can be propagating really good art or really bad art but if you couldn't see it anyway it wouldn't mean anything anyway. We have plenty of shmucks saying that good art is good art, but that doesn't make them any less of a shmuck. They're repeating somebody else's ideas who happen to be right, but unless they experience and see it themselves, they're fucked when they no longer have that person to rely on for what's good and bad—when they die or when they deteriorate and they themselves no longer can tell—then all the satellites just fall to pieces, because they really couldn't see it anyway without being told first. Even people who were saying x, y, and z are marvelous and were right were saying it because they were told that by somebody who was right—so what? Now that that person isn't there anymore the people are fucked—they don't know what's good—they never did know what's good. The other person was the one who knew what was good, and they just followed. Give us a break—I don't have to get anymore specific than that. That's what happened in the last twenty years. Finally someone died, you know. Now on top of everything else, you need a whole new set of friends.



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