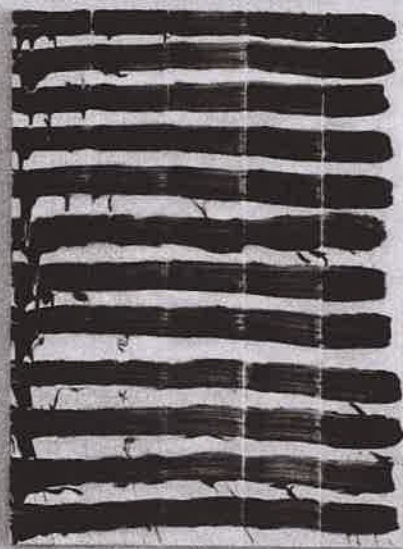


Painting Paintings (David Reed) 1975



**Edited by Katy Siegel
and Christopher Wool**

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**Katy Siegel
and
Christopher
Wool
in
Conversation
Part 1**

Katy Siegel: How did you react, Christopher, when you saw David Reed's show of brushmark paintings at Susan Caldwell's gallery on West Broadway in 1975?

Christopher Wool: It was somehow an important show when I saw it. It's stuck with me for a long time. The paintings haven't been shown much since then so I've always wanted to see them again. I was at the New York Studio School for one year, fall 1973 through spring 1974, and I must have known about David, he'd been at the school before me and was considered a founding student. I was nineteen years old, just starting to see shows, when I saw that show.

KS: Was Caldwell a gallery you went to routinely?

CW: I think so, yes, the mid-'70s were in general a time of sculpture while Caldwell was known as a painting gallery. Joanna Pousette-Dart was showing there and I knew of her from studying with her father, Richard Pousette-Dart, at Sarah Lawrence.

KS: So why did the show stay with you all this time?

CW: I thought they were extraordinary paintings. Now that we've been able to see them again, that's not a misremembering—they're very strong. They also capture something for me—going through all this, I think you and I have discovered that they were quite unique in a certain way. David was investigating certain Post-Minimalist things that were of the moment for sculptors but that not so many painters were able to address: the idea of process becoming image. I guess the one painter who would stand out in that respect would be Robert Ryman, but David took it a big step beyond, I think, and with more of an emphasis on the process part. The other artist I think was close was Cy Twombly, his blackboard paintings.

KS: If you were describing the work to someone who hadn't seen it, what would you say was so strong about it?

CW: What's great about the paintings is that they are a visualization of how to both make and read a painting. You start in the upper left and then go left to right and top to bottom, the way you read a book. Twombly's blackboard paintings are composed somewhat similarly (and of course have their own reference to writing).

KS: People say that so often about Twombly but I've never thought about it with David.

CW: With him it's not so much a reference to writing, it's like, if you're going to cover a canvas, how do you do it in the most economical or least compositional way?

KS: So, two things: first, this makes me think of your word paintings, which I had never thought about that way, in terms of the relationship between the way you cover a painting and reading and writing.

CW: I hadn't thought of that, but I guess it's true. When I was doing those paintings, especially at first, I was trying to avoid pictorial composition. As paintings they were written rather than composed.

KS: And you solved the famous problem of the corners—how to make them part of the composition, or whether to ignore them completely.

CW: I don't know if I solved it but I avoided it. Clement Greenberg would have been aghast.

KS: The second thing is that a lot of artists from that time talk about making work in a sort of working class, hand-labor kind of way, like laying bricks or tile—making work in a really practical way instead of composing.

CW: That was particularly true for sculptors, working with the idea of truth to materials. Painters didn't really have an equivalent for the kinds of industrial materials that sculptors were working with.

KS: Both Vija Celmins and Chuck Close, though, working around the same time, have talked about building their compositions brick by brick.

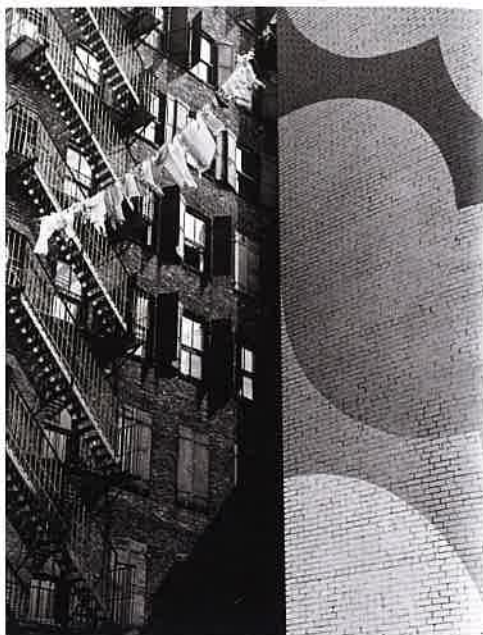
CW: Malcolm Morley, also, in that famous Pythagoras painting, where he misaligned the grid and didn't realize it until he was finishing. I think Morley painted his photorealist works upside down so he wouldn't see them as pictures. I was aware of this kind of strategy early on, since Pousette-Dart would paint with the students and would regularly rotate his paintings as he worked. He even showed specific works in different configurations—I've seen the backs of paintings with multiple references to which way is up, paintings from the 1940s with two different arrows on the back, one vertical, one horizontal. He showed the same paintings both ways. There's a painting of the 59th Street Bridge that is more often shown vertical than horizontal.

KS: Did that appeal to you, that interest in making something that wasn't fussy or pretentious or arty?

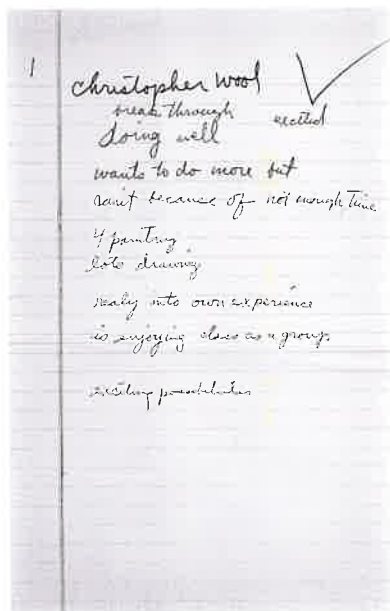
CW: Oh yes, of course. Though I'm kind of a stickler for paintings having a certain "right side up."

KS: Where did that come from for you, do you think, that sort of horror of fussiness? You're much younger than those artists.

CW: Well, I'm naturally fussy, much to my own horror. Fussiness kills, and the Reed paintings are a great example of an artist refusing to be fussy, which of course creates



Christopher Wool, untitled photograph, Houston Street, SoHo, New York, 1974



Richard Pousette-Dart, notes on Wool as a student at Sarah Lawrence College, 1973

all this pictorial tension that is so much a part of this work.

KS: You'd only just come to New York—were you aware of things like “This person's a third-generation Ab-Ex, this person's Color Field, this is another kind of artist”?

CW: Yes, I think so. I read art magazines, mostly old ones. I was learning quickly. It's the art world, not rocket science.

KS: When you talk about painters, were the ones you're thinking of older, like Pousette-Dart and Jack Tworlov, or would they be younger artists, like Brice Marden?

CW: It was conjecture, because I didn't know many artists. It was something I picked up on. I have to separate what I can remember thinking at the time from what I've thought over the past forty years.

KS: One of the greatest things about this project for me has been to see what's alike and what's different for you and David in what you remember from the time and what it looks like to you now. How do you separate those things, or how do they fit together?

CW: I haven't spoken to David about it so much since then.

KS: So who were the painters? Where did this painting thing come from? We can see who the sculptors were.

CW: When did that issue of *Art-Rite* on painting come out?

KS: 1975. So you were aware of it?

CW: I had that *Art-Rite*, so I was reading stuff. I think I somehow had a pretty good handle on issues but I certainly wasn't yet able to realize much in my own work.

KS: I don't think of this as a great time for expressiveness, so I wondered if David's paintings looked expressive to you as well as literal and materialist.

CW: They did, but I don't think the issue of expressionism was so important at that time. And formalism was also something to avoid—“Kill the corners.” That's what was great, those paintings had both. I think that's what people were seeing in them. That's what I saw in them—they were some of the ideas that painters might have been thinking of but he was also capturing what some of the sculptors were doing in terms of process, someone like Barry Le Va, or Richard Serra with his thrown-lead pieces. Would you use the word “expressive” in talking about Serra's thrown-lead piece?

KS: I think people don't, but maybe we should.

CW: I think I do. It's a step beyond Jackson Pollock in terms of getting away from image, but it's still expressive in the same kind of way. And you know, I'd studied for a year each with Pousette-Dart and Tworlov and they both—if not in supermuscular ways like Serra—but they both were deeply involved with the process of making a painting.

KS: One thing I've always been interested in is how wrong art history gets the relationship between Abstract Expressionism and later artists. There were lots of things about the Abstract Expressionists that bothered or embarrassed younger artists—overheated rhetoric or what seemed like ego or whatever—but it's so interesting to look at Pousette-Dart's notes and see how much they're about the experience, the journey, the voyage.

CW: Oh my God. There was no one quite like Pousette-Dart. He was unusual, especially at that time, maybe even a little anachronistic.

I studied with him when I was seventeen and eighteen so I was not aware, I could not have possibly been aware, of any anachronism there. It rang true for me. I had no trouble with it.

KS: What a great thing for an eighteen-year-old to be with someone like that.

CW: Yeah, and it was completely by chance. I was just very lucky. Pousette-Dart believed that the experience of making a painting was more important than the painting itself. That's a different notion of process from what the Post-Minimalists were doing, but it is again a focus on the act of making a painting as opposed to the image. So is that then "expressionism"?

KS: I think people forget how much the Abstract Expressionists were interested in the experience rather than in something finished. That sort of hardening of signature style came later.

CW: Yes. From Pousette-Dart and the New York School to Serra and the thrown-lead pieces, a lot of art is talked about as one generation rejecting another and moving on. I think it's more of a continuation.

KS: Maybe that's something you can see better from a distance. When you're right in the moment, all you see is how you're different from the people a little older than you, but from a distance you see continuity and similarity.

CW: I think David has spoken about Pollock, Pollock was important to him. I don't know what Serra feels about the thrown-lead piece and Pollock—I would assume he acknowledges a connection.

KS: Yes, Serra has said that the idea that the form in a painting like *Autumn Rhythm*



Top: Malcolm Morley, *School of Athens*, 1972, oil and acrylic on canvas, 67 × 94 ½ inches (170.2 × 240 cm).
Bottom: Detail showing misalignment of grid

came out of the process was important to him as a student. The difference might be that the rhetoric around sculpture like Serra's is that it's antiexpressive, it's to do with pure material and a kind of impersonal action, whereas the rhetoric around Abstract Expressionism and that older New York School is more personal, it's an expressiveness that includes emotions as well as physical feelings.

CW: I guess I would agree with that, but probably less than what it felt like at the time. If you look back at David's 1975 paintings or the thrown-lead piece, they seem less different from their predecessors than they might have back then.

KS: Looking at those paintings, now that we're looking back, do you see a lot of variation in the work? Does each painting look individual?

CW: Yes.

KS: Does it look serial?

CW: It was a consistent body of work, but I don't think serial. David was even changing the color of the white background, and doing many more experimental things than you realize at first. There may have been a little feeling of seriality, though, in the fact that they were either red or black and that he combined them in the show. I think that was a typical Post-Minimalist strategy.

KS: To reduce the number of factors.

CW: Yes, for sure, and exactly what David did so successfully in these works: he reduced color to monochrome, reduced illusion and pentimenti, and made composition nonpictorial by literally covering the canvas.



Richard Pousette-Dart, *Bridge Horizon*, 1950, oil on linen, 6 feet 3 inches × 47 ¾ inches (190.5 × 121.3 cm)

KS: So the thing that came out most was the variation in the material and how it behaved in different paintings.

CW: Yes, the process of making the paintings was the subject of the paintings, and the materials had to be handled appropriately. But ultimately these paintings are pictures as well. I was aware of that right from the beginning, and that's what was exciting. The Studio School was really about painting as pictures, so I would guess that was its influence on David. I think it was the same lesson I picked up on from Marden—it seems obvious now, but to a nineteen-year-old the idea that a monochrome could be a picture, even a picture that might relate to nature, was something I had to wrap my mind around and was both exciting and liberating. I remember Marden's Guggenheim show in 1975. He'd done a half-day seminar at the Studio School that was important for me, I think it was my first direct contact with a younger artist who was doing something particularly of the moment. Here was an artist who had actually discovered something new, that seemed to offer all kinds of possibilities. I wasn't immediately able to take it anywhere myself, but the idea that focusing on process could be the way you create a picture became quite important to me.

KS: I'm sorry to press on this, but the relationship between process and picture, and process being a way to get to the picture—what is it about that that's important to you?

CW: That's difficult to answer because it seems so obvious to me. . . . the fact that you can make a picture without trying to make a picture seemed very liberating. I guess it's a picture-making strategy for an abstract painter. To rely on process is to make a painting without relying on the usual

formal considerations that were supposed to define a successful painting. You're making a painting by pretending you're not, in a way, though pretending isn't the right word.

KS: Do you fool yourself?

CW: Sometimes I try. . . . It's not about fooling, though, it's just about focusing on something else. I would have a painting with certain elements and I would paint over the black images in pink, say, and that would create a shape, a shape created not out of compositional necessity but simply out of the process of overpainting the image, and that shape would become its own picture. It could only be that picture by going through that particular process. I think David's the same. He had this idea of horizontal brushstrokes covering the canvas from left to right, and that became a kind of action picture. I haven't read the *Art-Rite* piece in a long time but doesn't he talk about it like jumping off a cliff? This kind of imagistic and experiential description?

KS: Yes, and it's funny because it draws out a problem basic to very different kinds of artists. In response to the same question, the Pop artists say, "We don't want to worry about what to paint so we're just going to pick these stupid figurative things and copy them."

CW: Yes, that's a similar strategy in a way. I don't like the word "strategy" but that's a strategy to make a painting without caring about a certain part of traditional painting. David was doing something similar but with a different set of factors. And here I find similarities to what Josh Smith has achieved with his name paintings and his palette paintings and Wade Guyton with his use of the inkjet printer.

KS: Maybe that's a continual problem after the 1940s: how do you make a picture when

there's nothing you have to do? Barnett Newman said something like, "We make pictures without relying on any known shape. We don't use geometry, and we're not European, so this is a metaphysical act, because we have to make it all up from ourselves." So without a theory (which all of those people were against), and without an academic set of standards, what do you do? Relying on materials, or setting up a situation, or saying that action is enough, are ways to go.

CW: Yes, and Andy Warhol asked Brigid Polk, "What should I paint?" He wanted other people—

KS: —someone else to tell him.

CW: Yes, and that was his liberation. I think it's similar, and I think it's a post-New York School thing.

KS: Despite that continuity, though, it feels to me like you and David are right on the cusp, an intermediate moment. The painters five years older than you I don't think contact that, and I feel like you do.

CW: It's hard to pinpoint but yes, I think we were the cusp generation. What we haven't talked about is that 1975 is shortly before this quite particular moment when postmodernist thinking and examination start. Was Pop art the end of modernism or the beginning of postmodernism? Punk? I have my own particular ideas about what freedoms postmodernism offered.

KS: Do you want to jump to that moment?

CW: It doesn't matter to me. Historical linearity is so twentieth century.

KS: I feel strongly that David's paintings in that show were not just the end of

something but the beginning of something. You can see that in the painting he showed in the 1975 Whitney Biennial.

CW: Which I must have seen.

KS: This is a single painting with two panels and the second is a version of the first. So the first canvas is process that becomes a picture and the second one is almost all picture, or at least a very different kind of process—remembering rather than inventing.

CW: Exactly. Robert Rauschenberg's *Factum I* and... *II* [1957] play with that relationship, as do a lot of works by Jasper Johns.

KS: Around the same time, in the mid-to-late '70s, Jack Goldstein is making his early films like *Shane* and *The Jump*, which take an action that turns into an image and repeat it over and over again. And the mid-'70s are when Cindy Sherman is starting in Buffalo. I feel like David belongs to that context as well, there's a connection to the early Pictures generation.

CW: Richard Prince's early work.

KS: Yes, Prince and some of the others coming out of the kind of narrative work that was being shown at the John Gibson Gallery, but Sherman comes in specifically in how performance turns into a picture, how it becomes an image, relating to someone like Eleanor Antin and even Carolee Schneemann.

CW: I did not see the *Pictures* show [at Artists Space, New York, in 1977, curated by Douglas Crimp] but I was starting to be aware of some of those artists. There were different aspects to what was developing



Steven Sloman, *Untitled (767-1)*, 1975, acrylic on canvas, 8 feet × 17 feet 6 inches (243.8 × 533.4 cm)

in postmodernist thought at that time. One had to do with narrative and pictures and real life; that was not where my interest lay. The part that was important to me was the notion—again, though, we’re getting back to painting—that the modernist idea of the masterpiece was either no longer possible or no longer necessarily an objective. Where the Abstract Expressionists had still been wedded to the modernist concept of the masterpiece, postmodernism suggested that there were alternative ideals and possibilities to the Greenbergian idea of the perfect painting. So if you didn’t want to deal with the corners you didn’t have to. It was a little like the Baroque in relationship

to the Renaissance: perfect geometry is one thing, but geometry in motion or stress is interesting too. Those were the issues in what was being discovered then that were important to me. I think in a way they were expanding on something that was already there in Post-Minimalism: Minimalism is a bit like the Renaissance, Post-Minimalism is a bit like the Baroque. Borromini in relation to Renaissance architecture is a bit like what Johns thought: “Take an object, do something to it, do something else to it....”

KS: I agree with most of that. The one difference is that with the artworks that are considered Post-Minimalist, like the work

in *Anti-Illusion* [at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, in 1969, organized by Marcia Tucker and James Monte], those artists really aren't so interested in image. And the thing that what people used to call postmodernism adds is that while, yes, there's the sense of the antimasterpiece, there's also an interest in imagery.

CW: It actually went further: there were many who ruled out abstraction. When they talked about painting, especially with Thomas Lawson's essay ["Last Exit: Painting," published in *Artforum* in 1981], it was about painting as picture. Abstract painting was not thought to offer any possibilities.

KS: Without belaboring that "end of painting," I guess one of the things that interest me about that work of David's, and it's the same thing I see in yours, is that it holds together the abstract and the pictorial, the process and the image, in a way that I also see in Georg Baselitz and other people.

CW: Or Sigmar Polke's '60s paintings. I don't think that work was well-known in the States at that time—certainly I didn't know it yet in the 1970s—but those paintings were prototypical postmodernist. He'd grabbed on to part of it, anyway, a lot earlier. Warhol possibly also.

KS: The problem for me is always when it goes to *all* image or *all* process. Those extremes interest me less than the places where they come together.

CW: Also, you can't see Warhol in any one way. I immediately think of the *Rorschach* paintings, though they weren't made until later. They're unusual for Warhol—he's not taking an image and silk-screening it, he's using paint, and there's a process in making them. And some of them are very material. The piss paintings are related too.

KS: The *Rorschachs* are a joke about finding images everywhere. But those *Oxidation* paintings really aren't about making an image, they're about letting loose.

CW: Yes, you're right, they're not compositional—but they do emphasize how the painting was made [laughs].

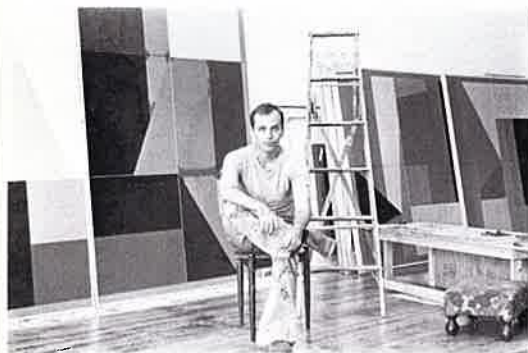
KS: One of the most interesting things for me in talking to you about all of this has been the very specific way you talk about process. Most people talk about it as if it's one thing, a single choice or way of working, a monolithic preference, as opposed to, say, representation or concept.

CW: Probably because they haven't made paintings. Warhol's early silk-screen paintings are related too—that is a very compositional process. The Jackie paintings are similar to David in that Warhol started in the upper left and repeated the screen across—really just a way of filling the canvas with the tool he had at hand. An even more interesting example for me is the Mona Lisa painting where they all have different sizes and different colors, and some are on their side, and they start to fill a canvas. And then of course Johns's crosshatch paintings. It's a filling of the canvas in a similar way.

KS: Are those works by Warhol and Johns like On Kawara's date paintings in the sense that they mark time as well as space? As David was marking time?

CW: On Kawara is marking real time. The painters we are discussing were marking "time," a more abstract idea of time. Marden, in 1975, in his monochromes with that unfinished breathing space at the bottom, was doing something similar. He described it as an entrance into the painting, like the unfinished areas in Cézanne. The *Unfinished* show at the Met Breuer meant

The Younger Generation: A Cross Section

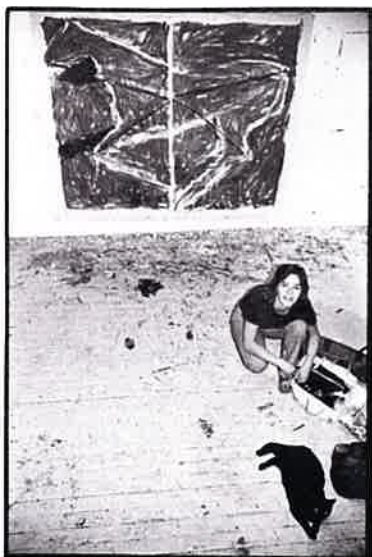


Bruce Boice. Born 1941, New Jersey. Came to New York City 1973. Exhibitions: Sonnabend Gallery, N.Y., 1976, 1977. (Photo Andy Grundberg)



Marilyn Lenkowsky. Born 1947, New York City. Exhibitions: Grey Art Gallery, 1975; Lowe Art Gallery, Syracuse, 1976; Fine Arts Building, N.Y., 1976. (Photo Andy Grundberg)

Temma Bell. Born 1945, New York City. Exhibitions: Bowery Gallery, N.Y., 1975, 1977. (Photo Allan Finkelman)



Susan Rothenberg. Born 1945, Buffalo, N.Y. Came to New York City 1969. Exhibitions: 112 Greene St., N.Y., 1975; Willard Gallery, N.Y., 1976, 1977; Jared-Sable Gallery, Toronto, 1976. (Photo Andy Grundberg)



David Reed. Born 1946, San Diego. Came to New York City 1971. Exhibitions: Susan Caldwell Gallery, N.Y., 1975; Reed College, Ore., 1975; Univ. of Rochester, N.Y., 1976; Nancy Lurie Gallery, Chicago, 1977; Protetch Gallery, N.Y., and Washington, D.C., 1977. (Photo Allan Finkelman)



Mary Hellmann. Born San Francisco.
Came to New York City, 1968.
Exhibitions: 112 Greene St., N.Y.,
1975; Holly Solomon Gallery, N.Y.,
1976. (Photo Arvid Grundberg)

These six pages of photographs portray 26 of the many younger artists living and working in New York. The captions indicate where they came from and how long they've been here—often a decade or less. As a group they reflect the diverse points of origin among New York artists, as well as the multiplicity of mediums and styles currently developing here.



Steven Sloman. Born 1943, Detroit. Came to New York City 1965. Exhibitions: Poindexter Gallery, N.Y. 1975, 1977; Gertrude Kase Gallery, Detroit, 1975. (Photo Allan Finkelman)



John Torrealano. Born 1941, Michigan.
Came to New York City 1968.
Exhibitions: Susan Caldwell Gallery,
N.Y., 1975; Bykert Gallery, N.Y.,
1975; Nancy Lurie Gallery, Chicago,
1977. (Photo Yuri)



Howardena Pindell. Born 1943, Philadelphia.
Came to New York City 1967. Exhibitions: S. H.
Onsild Foundation, Oslo, 1976 (video drawings);
Clarence White Fine Art, Chicago, 1977; Just
Above Midtown Gallery, N.Y., 1977. (Photo David Allison)

to examine that idea, but did it mostly through the eyes of the viewer, as opposed to the artist's intent.

KS: You care with David's work about how some of those paintings don't go over the edge.

CW: Yes, very similar I guess—David stopping his brushstrokes short of the right-hand edge is a lot like Marden's lower edge. It's not only an entrance into the painting but it also shows visually the process of its own making. I think this is an important point: these paintings not only visualize process but show you an explicit record of their own creation.

KS: So it gives you time, but not a linear time.

CW: Yes.

KS: You began to see Joel Shapiro's work right after David's show.

CW: Yeah, around the same time, mid-1970s. And I worked for Joel in the early '80s.

KS: I know the work that's most familiar the way most people do, so it was a surprise to go back and see how much it was about filling a space. In his first show at Paula Cooper, for example, in 1970, he lined up shelving all the way around the room.

CW: Process was important too.

KS: Yes—I think it was *600 Blows* where he hammered on pieces of metal that many times and then the work was the shape he ended up with, how thin it got.

CW: Yeah, so you go back to process and what I call image, and that's Joel. If you

take this piece of metal and you hit it a hundred times, you have a sculpture. He had a similar but different piece from 1970, I think it was a magnesium bar that was six feet and a lead bar that was six inches, and they were lying next to each other as a form, but each weighed seventy-five pounds. It's a nice piece, substituting weight for process.

KS: Dealing with the properties of this material.

CW: It becomes an image—it becomes a sculpture just by how large that piece has to be to weigh seventy-five pounds.

KS: I always think of that 1973 Shapiro, too, where there's a painted spray that absorbs a form and also the wall it hangs on.

CW: It sure is a good example of the Johns thing, you know, do something, do something else to it. He made a wall relief and then he spray-painted it.

KS: And it's figurative, it's a horse and a rider (who's riding backward). And then with the paint over it, it just becomes a blot on the wall. This seems to me so related to early Pictures art, which would start coming in the next few years: the thing and a picture of the thing come together.

CW: Yeah.

KS: I wonder if you remember when you started to see images come out in work that had been more process oriented, that sort of doubling with Shapiro and other artists of the time.

CW: Yes, you could see Joel's work as parallel to music like the Ramones, which is direct and physical but also has some really simple narrative. That's an odd thought—

he insisted that his sculptural chairs were all about scale but they weren't possible without the chair being an image. I got that immediately. I was very excited by those shows of Joel's.

KS: Here I want to say something about David's interest in the *Anti-Illusion* show: he loved the work and he loved the materiality, but he was ambivalent about the critique of illusion, the fantasy that you can do away with illusion altogether. He wanted to remain entirely in the present moment and the act, but he always felt split, seeing himself from the outside, seeing the painting as an image.

CW: That's interesting. I suspect I'm just enough younger than David that I don't remember being forced to think about illusion or illusionism. Or more likely I probably simply didn't understand the issue in its full complexity.

KS: So you never had to get over it?

CW: No. Can't get over it if you don't get it in the first place. And it's one thing for a sculptor to be anti-illusion, it's a little different for a painter. Are David's 1975 paintings anti-illusionist?

KS: In those works he tries to get rid of illusion, to be entirely materialist, and fails. And that's what those paintings were for him, realizing, "I'm going to try to do what they're doing," but the gap always opens up. Later on he points to Richard Shiff's distinction between *illusion*, which is an inevitable part of human perception, and *illusionism*, which is deliberate deception. Illusionism would be using a set of conventions, like one-point perspective, to deceive, to make something look three-dimensional. Illusion is different, it's physical and perceptual, in the sense that black and

white value contrast make space. Illusion isn't fake, it's an effect of the way we see.

CW: Maybe we're back to the modernist/postmodernist idea. Postmodernism pointed out and reminded everyone that there are no absolutes, and that the modernist idea of the absolute was ridiculous in the end. There were no perfect paintings. What was dying was the idea of the masterpiece, not painting as a practice.

KS: Artists thought that anyway, which is why I think postmodernism was in many ways an argument among critics, at least in New York.

CW: I know I wasn't reading the stuff, I wasn't super interested, but the discussion did ring true for me.

KS: When I learned this material in grad school what seemed strange to me was, it was a critique of abstraction at a time when so many of the abstract artists of older generations were already completely aware of the problems of academicism and repeatability and style, the dilemmas we were talking about earlier.

CW: And of course there were New York School artists who were already on paths outside of modernist prescriptions—Ad Reinhardt, Barnett Newman, and again Pousette-Dart.

KS: Yes. Discussions like that were showing up in *Artnews* by the late '50s. As early as 1952 Harold Rosenberg warned that signature styles turn into trademarks, and I feel like Pop art comes out of that awareness that Ab-Ex turned into habits. So I think people were aware of it early on. It's a problem for everyone who lives long enough.

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**Katy Siegel
and
Christopher
Wool
in
Conversation
Part 2**

KS: You came to New York when you were eighteen or nineteen?

CW: My experience was a bit unusual compared to the normal path these days, where artists go to both college and graduate school. I quit college when I was eighteen and just started painting.

KS: And you went to the New York Studio School.

CW: Yes, just for one year. Steve Sloman had a seminar at the Studio School for advanced students—I wasn't in it, but I became good friends with quite a few students who were. And I was sharing a studio with Joyce Pensato, who was in that seminar.

KS: So were they like you? Were they different from you?

CW: I was the youngest person in the school, so I was a kid.

KS: I think people think of the Studio School as conservative, and as strictly a painting school.

CW: It was the same then. I wanted to go to art school in New York and it just never dawned on me that you have to apply in advance. I had been rejected by every art school I had applied to and the Studio School was the last school in New York to start classes. Mercedes Matter, who had founded the school and was still teaching there, had been a student in Hans Hofmann's school and started the Studio School on that model. So in some ways it was a bit of a conservative place aesthetically, but in other ways—like its focus on “work”—it was not. Mercedes was a quite amazing character and she believed deeply in art and artists.

KS: Were there other strong voices there?

CW: Philip Guston of course was the godfather of the school's aesthetic. He was still on the faculty when I came, though he only did a one-day seminar that year.

KS: He was one of David's teachers.

CW: It was in 1974–75 that he was really hitting his stride with his late work. The shows at McKee in the mid-1970s were spectacular.

KS: Did you see them?

CW: Yes. They would print these little pamphlets with color reproductions and hand them out. I still have them. And McKee was such an odd place, being in the Barbizon Hotel.

KS: It didn't seem weird that he was doing figuration? That didn't make him uninteresting for you?

CW: I don't think we thought that way. I always tend to see paintings more abstractly than they necessarily are anyway, but I understood what Guston was doing completely. The fact that some people took such offense to those paintings seemed ridiculous to me, I just didn't get that.

KS: Because you were so young, you didn't have to worry about illusion—

CW: No, nor about figuration.

KS: So you were open to the process and handling of Tworlov and Guston in a way that older artists may not have been.

CW: Guston was one of the most articulate voices on painting I've ever heard. I have a very vivid memory of the day he visited. It was a long day of group crits, and by the time he got to me—I was last—he'd had enough.

He took one look at my painting and said, "I don't know what to say about this. Maybe you should show it to Jasper Johns," and walked out.

KS: That's so funny.

CW: It was this incredible dismissal—"You're not doing anything here." But what was revealing was what it showed about how he felt about Jasper Johns.

KS: And Johns, of course, admires Guston.

CW: It's shocking to me that that's how Guston saw Johns. I think he was saying Johns is not a painter but a conceptual artist, with total dismissal.

KS: Even though those two artists, in retrospect again, seem closely related.

CW: Yes, of course Johns's work now looks much closer to Guston than it did at the time. But I learned something from hearing all this.

KS: What did you learn?

CW: That I didn't need school. Also how my painting appeared to someone like him: really terrible. I was young enough that I had very little ego involved with what I was doing. I'm still not the most confident artist in the world.

KS: So what were you painting at the time?

CW: I was basically making work where someone would have said, "This guy's a student of Pousette-Dart's and Tworkov's."

KS: [laughs] So small gestures on a large field?

CW: Yes. Both those guys employed that, though to very different ends.

KS: Where were you living?



Wool's loft in Chinatown, New York, with, from left to right, Tony Whitfield, Patricia Seybolt, unidentified person, Tony Porcelli, Andrea Belag, and Robert Bordo, 1970s



Andrea Belag, *Untitled*, 1978, enamel on canvas, 7 feet x 41 7/8 inches (213.4 x 105.7 cm)



Christopher Wool, *Untitled*, 1975, encaustic on Masonite, 48 × 72 inches (121.9 × 182.9 cm). No longer extant

CW: I was in the neighborhood, around the corner from the Studio School, down in the Village.

KS: Were you mostly in the school or were you more...?

CW: I was eighteen, it was 1974, and I really hadn't discovered New York yet. There was a lot going on—I was kind of unaware but starting to meet people. The Studio School had a general suspicion toward contemporary art, so going out to see shows was a little bit like going to Sodom. I was doing that on my own.

KS: That's funny. So it was not open to New York in the way that schools are now?

CW: No. Open to New York if you were going up to the Met to copy a painting but not if you were going to SoHo to see what was at Paula Cooper.

KS: But *you* were there, and not all of the students can have been like that—you met Joyce Pensato there. So there must have been some different kinds of people, or did you guys both start out sort of clueless and conservative and then turn into...?

CW: Yes—well, not conservative but clueless. We were art students, clueless by definition. But to state the obvious, not all the students were like Joyce, she's about as unique as they come.

KS: So how did you find the city? And how did you end up going to Connecticut, and then what happened when you came back?

CW: Connecticut was about going to the country. The summer I was finishing up at the Studio School I started busing tables in the West Village and then I really started meeting people. Then I went to Connecticut, to this little artists' community that really didn't turn out to be much more than a woman with a farm and a barn that people did work in. I was there a year and a half, and when I came back to the city there was so much going on. I got my loft in Chinatown in 1976; shortly thereafter the club scene and then the city generally opened up in quite amazing ways. You couldn't live there without knowing about it.

KS: So did you feel like a different person by the late 1970s?

CW: Well, I was growing up so I'm not sure it was anything unusual, it's what anyone would go through, or what anyone *could* go through, between nineteen and twenty-two or whatever. There was a group of us from the Studio School who stayed in close touch and were friends for quite a number of years, everybody did work as either a carpenter or a waiter or waitress and I myself did both at different times, so we were all connected. David though was older, I didn't know him personally at that time.

KS: What was happening to your work? What were you doing in that year in Connecticut?

CW: I just continued what I was doing at the Studio School but it went from prototypical student work, modeled after my teachers, to opening up and starting to find things for myself. It wasn't accomplished work but it was the beginning of trying to find myself.

KS: You were doing those encaustic paintings?

CW: I was working with encaustic on Masonite in that barn and I went to Chicago for the holidays. When I came back it was twenty degrees below zero in the barn and all the encaustic had fallen off the Masonite and was in piles on the floor in front of each panel. I think that's when I got in my VW bus and went back to New York.

KS: I'm interested in those paintings—they're geometric but they're not hard-edge, you can see the process in the drawing, they have that handled feeling. They seem to me like the beginnings of mature work.

CW: It looks that way but in the end it wasn't. There was a long period between then and what I consider really finding myself. I worked most of those ten years on my own. So it was only a beginning. What I think is significant in them is that the process of finding the geometry was part of the process of painting. That's very close to what the Studio School ideal was, and in a certain sense I think David's 1975 paintings were also tied to the Studio School ideal, his in a much more complicated and advanced way. I assume it was that connection that made David's work so attractive to me at the time.

KS: That's funny, that ideal of finding a form or an image through process—that also relates to Pousette-Dart's sense of experience, or to the earlier, nonfigurative New York School. And it almost ignores the division between figuration and abstraction.

CW: The Studio School and Pousette-Dart were entirely different but they both believed in the importance of the process of making a painting. Pousette-Dart was not so interested in formal things like composition, which was almost everything to the Studio School. But the process of finding a painting was important to both.

KS: That sense of finding a painting through process goes across things that are normally kept separate but that were all happening in New York at the same time: late, third-generation Ab-Ex painting by artists who still believed in process, Studio School life drawing, and then the *Anti-Illusion* sculptors, like Le Va and Serra.

CW: Yes, I suspect David and I were similar, we saw those connections. There was also the typical school situation where you were supposed to learn your craft before you could take on something—

KS: —conceptual.

CW: Yes. And I just had no patience for that. And no craft [laughs]. So I did it kind of in reverse. I found what was interesting to me and managed to learn enough craft to get by.

KS: Do you feel like all of this has any connection to your work now?

CW: Yeah, that's what I meant to get to: what's interesting in those early geometric paintings, the process I was going through, the drawing process to make a painting, is very similar to what I was doing with the gray paintings a few years ago.

KS: Do you think it's a set of preferences that just came through again?

CW: I wasn't thinking about those things when I started the gray paintings, it was

completely organic. The first of these gray paintings did not have drawing in them, it was more about erasing, but erasing demands drawing.

KS: That's some of your best work. Those are really good paintings.

CW: Thank you [laughs].

KS: You're welcome.

KS: I was thinking about how you said earlier that your text paintings are related to the Reed and Twombly paintings—something to read, line by line. Later, but before those gray paintings, you began using layering. That's such a different way to build up a picture.

CW: I took composition out in the text paintings, and that ultimately left me hungry for composition. The same with the pattern paintings—I felt the limitations of that work, of staying on that grid.

KS: I wonder about the layering you do with silkscreens—where you don't quite know what you're going to get as you work, adding images of marks, and then you find out all at once. That feels so different as a process from the gray paintings, where you're drawing and erasing into the paintings and you see what you're doing as you work. The two kinds of process feel very different.

CW: Yes and no. There's the same kind of discovery in both, and emphasis on both process and composition. It doesn't look so different to me [laughs]. I'm still kind of amazed that Joyce and I met so long ago, shared a studio in school for a semester, and have both continued to work in similar veins related to the Studio School.

KS: Funny, no one would guess it, looking at your work, that this short time at an art

school, and this kind of painting, was such a strong and constant presence in your work.

CW: On the other hand, the late 1970s were this incredible period of creative explosion, where the do-it-yourself aesthetic was so strong and propulsive.

KS: Is that the more immediate context for your first mature work?

CW: It was in the background. Seeing James Nares's work in the later 1970s was important and his work presented a whole other alternative. He had a one-person show at Cable Gallery right before my first show there, in 1984, and I was a big admirer of James's paintings, performance, and film stuff.

KS: Did you like the toughness of his films? Their straightforwardness, their directness?

CW: Wow [laughs]. Eric Mitchell, with James Nares, Becky Johnston, John Lurie, and a few other people, started a Super 8 cinema on St. Marks Place, the New Cinema, where they showed each other's films. This was one of those moments where a bunch of young artists collaboratively were not only doing accomplished work, they were doing something that felt new and exciting. They were connected to the so-called No Wave music scene and there was just a lot of energy and creativity going on there.

KS: What about the formal aspect?

CW: It was narrative, not structuralist. It was post-Warhol film. Very influenced by the later Factory films.

KS: With more pop-culture stuff mixed into it?

KS: That's something else that may be true of your work—when you emerged in the 1980s, there were elements that were formalist but then there was also pop-cultural stuff mixed in, which marked it as happening at a later moment. Did that come out of the punk, D.I.Y. music, and film that you liked?

CW: That whole thing was extremely influential for me, not in terms of what my paintings looked like but as an attitude and a model. Nares's masterpiece *Rome 78*, for example, was made with a cheap Super 8 camera and he did a lot of the editing in camera, so you would get these extreme pops and glitches. Similar to Warhol leaving outtakes at the ends of reels but in a much more aggressive, in-your-face way. It seemed pretty radical at the time to leave in the "worst," what one normally wanted to get rid of soonest. It made it that much more "real."

KS: Was it permission to have a different relationship to the work that you saw?

CW: Exactly. In a certain sense, David's 1975 paintings embraced something similar: the fact of taking this wet loaded brush and dragging it across the canvas was a real statement about doing something.

KS: It's that sense of directness that someone older, like Newman, has too. What's different for a younger generation is that you do it but you become aware that it's turning into a picture. So when you look at the punk and the No Wave stuff, it has a layer of figuration, of referentiality—reference to cultural myths and figuration and stories, even if it's all fragmentary. It's already an image. Doing something always makes a story.

CW: There was a lot of crossover back then between film, performance, music, and ultimately painting, with Jean-Michel Basquiat, the first painter to really publicly come out of that world. It's hard to talk about because you have to end up using words like "scene," but they were really rich times.

KS: What did you feel when you looked at Basquiat's work?

CW: There were two responses to Basquiat's work, either awe or a mistrustful dismissal. I knew Jean-Michel before he started painting seriously, after he had become known for the SAMO "writings." For me it was exciting to see what he was doing, I was intimidated by the immediate level of accomplishment. Basquiat was kind of born making brilliant paintings, like Picasso. SAMO was one of those specifically New York moments, people were awed by it before they really knew what it was. If I remember correctly, 1977 was also the summer they caught Son of Sam and the summer of the blackout.

KS: Do you feel like that level of ambition, and the relationship to the urban setting—

CW: Oh, I was blown away. And it was hard, I was very insecure at the same time.

KS: That's typical. Do you feel that work is a continuation of some of the issues from the 1970s?

CW: I do, I do. I feel that way strongly about Jean-Michel's work. I think he's the perfect example of an artist coming out of that world, and the sense of possibility.

KS: Why do you think it took so long for you, and David, and Joyce—you all took years, years where there's little work that survived, where there's not much work you were happy with? I don't know many other artists who

started and then for so long just worked, and worked, and worked, and threw things out, and threw things out. It's unusual now for someone to do that.

CW: Truth be told, I had so little natural talent that I had to work through things in the most laborious way.

KS: So why the early 1980s for you? What was going on?

CW: I'm not sure it was anything more than that I was getting close to thirty. Basquiat was starting to have shows and he was seven years younger than I was, and there were other younger artists, like Keith Haring. I was in my late twenties and I met a Whitney curator who said to me, "Wow, you're almost too old to have a career" [laughs]. It was clearly said in jest, but...

KS: [laughs] So one moment you're nineteen and the next you're too old. Not so long afterward, in 1986, you showed the *Rorschach* drawings at Cable Gallery, works you reused in those very large paintings this past year. It's clear to me how your own work has picked up on a lot of these ideas, but I'm curious whether you see them in work by artists a generation younger than you. There's so much process painting everywhere, but I'm not sure if it is engaged with the same ideas.

CW: I can only think of a few painters whose work might be seen as following Reed's '70s work. Josh Smith with his palette paintings has in my mind done something quite radical in terms of creating a way of making paintings in the least formal way possible. He simply takes a small blank canvas and uses it as a traditional palette while painting other, larger works. He never considers it as anything but a palette while he's working, so what accrues on the palette

has nothing to do with a normal painting process, or if it does, it does so only secondarily, as it follows the main painting's process. A painting is finished when it can no longer be useful as a palette. The process is not about creating a picture, yet a picture is its by-product. The transformation of a by-product to a picture is simply accomplished by the change in what it is considered. A palette becomes a painting simply by the artist presenting it as such.

KS: Does he really do it blind? There's a vein of that in postwar painting of course, Willem de Kooning and others, not to invoke chance but to break habits, and to rely on touch rather than sight.

CW: I wouldn't say blind. I doubt Smith closes his eyes, he simply averts them, but what he's looking at is his palette, not a painting. It's not random but its production has nothing to do with what is considered the "normal" painting production. It is this nonformal framework that allows for the "new."

KS: Yes, the *feel* of the thing, coming from the context, might make a difference more than the literal composition—Steven Parrino said, "Content can be derived through situation and attitude." But that sense of repetition or doubling begins to seem important in and of itself. It starts to come together with technology, whether that's just invoked as an effect or actually incorporated in painters' work, with people like Jack Whitten and Laura Owens.

CW: Yes. Or another, similar example for me is Guyton, with his work with inkjet printing, which may be the most similar to Reed's '70s work—in effect he's simply substituted the jets of his printer for the brushstrokes of Reed's paintings. The inkjet printer covers the canvas by passing

from left to right and top to bottom. As with a hand holding a wet loaded brush, it has imperfections: the drips of a brushstroke are the same as the glitches in the inkjet's printing.

KS: And of course then in David's own later work, that's true as well.

CW: If you could ask David what was going on at the time that influenced him to make those paintings, would he connect it to these later issues, to what came afterward?

KS: He's talked about a lot of the things we've talked about, trying to avoid illusion, but feeling pulled apart—he was trying to be present in the moment and realizing he was always looking from the outside, always split.

CW: Yes, and it's interesting you say that in relation to what was being taught at the Studio School—being concerned about avoiding illusion, he was pushing the Studio School thing to the next level. And in a sense what I've done with my gray paintings is gone backward. I guess you'd have to say that his work has gone backward also, in the same sense: he's working with illusion now and so am I. Sometimes you have to step backward—one step backward, two steps forward.

KS: You could see it as forward as well as backward....

CW: As soon as I said that, I wanted to take it back, because I don't believe in always moving forward. We move in circles.

KS: Yes, I think he's circling around these issues.

CW: He's working through them, and that's what artists do.



Eric Mitchell

KIDNAPPED a film by **ERIC MITCHELL**
The NEW CINEMA production (app. 80')
DIRECTOR—Eric Mitchell
WRITER—Eric Mitchell
MUSIC—Cantonians live, Teen Age Jesus

CREDITS:

and the Jeka record, various tapes and radio
CAMERA—Sein Tinet and Michael McCleard
STILL PHOTOGRAPHS—Cristino Lotta

CAST—

Eric Mitchell
Patti Astor
Gordon Stevenson
Anya Phillips
Stephan Hurdlek
Duncan Smith
Steve Mass

SETTING:

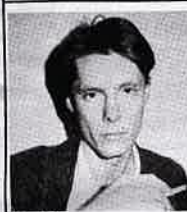
Eric's claustrophobic apartment

STORY SYNOPSIS—KIDNAPPED is a 1960's underground movie happening today. The film is based on the sexual and political angles between characters on an amphetamine day in an East Village apartment.

DIRECTOR'S COMMENTS—It sure was a blast to be with such groovy cats.



Patti Astor and Anya Phillips in Kidnapped



James Nares

ROME 76 a film by **JAMES NARES**
The NEW CINEMA production (app. 90')
DIRECTOR—James Nares
WRITERS—James Nares and Kristian Hoffman
MUSIC—James Nares (alto sax & drums)
CAMERA—James Nares
STILL PHOTOGRAPHY—Tina Lhotsky
COSTUMES—Painted Roman period costumes and the characters were

CREDITS:

asked to dress in their interpretation of Roman

CAST—

Caesar—David Walker McDermott III
Metellus—Eric Mitchell
Empress—Lydia Lunch
Kruvian Hoffman
Bradley Field
Anya Phillips
James Chance
Tina Lhotsky
Patti Astor
Lance Loud
Pal Place
Jim Sulich
Milton Goulet
John Lurie

SETTING:

Outdoors—Various Impressionistic settings around NYC
Indoors—Sil-view sets

STORY SYNOPSIS—This black comedy is a simple story set in ancient Rome of people plotting to kill Caesar. The characters who retain their modern day habits and personalities battle it out in a constant power struggle. This series of little vignettes, with love affairs and hate affairs, concludes with almost everyone getting killed.

DIRECTOR'S COMMENTS—In many ways the story is secondary to the interaction between characters. I had final control behind the camera and in the editing. I didn't want to impose a role on the characters. Essentially what I did was set up the situation, extract their personalities, and let their chemistry take over.



Eric Mitchell and David McDermott III in Rome 76



John Lurie

MEN IN ORBIT a film by **JOHN LURIE**
The NEW CINEMA production (app. 45 min.)
CREDITS:
DIRECTOR—John Lurie
WRITER—John Lurie
MUSIC—John Lurie
CAMERA—James Nares
STILL PHOTOGRAPHS—John Lurie
COSTUMES—Two motorcycle helmets and silver jumpuits

CAST—Scientist—Bob Wright
Doctor—Bill Young
Wife and Mission control—Mary Jean Fogarty
Mission control—James Clorby
Mission control—Michael McCleard

SETTING:

Alto Lindsay
Eric Mitchell
John Lurie
Richard Morrison
Becky Johnston

Mission control—Mary Jean Fogarty
James Clorby
Michael McCleard

Mission control—John's kitchen with video monitors, various digital apparatus plus a few broken TVs. Capsule built from cardboard with a car seat painted silver, video monitor, and a bunch of wires.

STORY SYNOPSIS—This farce is a story of two unlikely astronauts who go through the motions of a simulated orbital flight of the Earth. They spend 5 days in space functioning in the confines of a capsule, following orders from mission control. The "trip" becomes more and more hectic and indulgent until by the end of the flight the astronauts disobey mission control and fail to return, continuing their flight indefinitely.

DIRECTOR'S COMMENTS—I had this this way (I wanted the movie to look like I wanted to capture this event, create the situation and the tension of being thrown together in the confines of the capsule, tripping on LSD. We really felt like we were in outer space.



Eric Mitchell and John Lurie in Men in Orbit