

R. H. QUAYTMAN, MELISSA GORDON IN CONVERSATION

M.G. I told you yesterday that I saw your show in San Francisco in 2010.

I remember going, and that it blew my mind. It was the first show where I'd seen work that was between somehow: work that wasn't just a painting. And it wasn't printmaking. And the way my eye or the viewers eye was confronted by patterns was disruptive. Also, the way you dealt with the pictorial and documents and information was really new—especially at that moment, which, as we spoke about, was when printmaking was literally the most embarrassing medium.

R.H. Right, you did not say you're a printmaker. That would be a no-no. Because it was already really bad to say you were a painter. Yeah, so to say you're a painter printmaker would be like, oof. So, you pretend you're not: we also are not printmakers. Well, we are, but we're not doing it the way a quote-unquote master printer would do it.

M.G. Maybe that's the question I want to ask you: how did you come to silkscreening or printmaking? Or how did it enter your practice?

R.H. At the time, I was interested in perspective. I assumed I would make abstract paintings but had a desire for content. I think I remembered or read that perspectival images were connected to the temporal. It was the one thing that was clearly and forcefully thrown out or abandoned in most abstract painting. I thought, that's like throwing the baby out with the bath water, because whatever it means to be contemporary it definitely seemed to involve perspective if only in the photograph or film. And so I did a lot of work about that, and finally made models of the exhibition space where the paintings were meant to be shown. And then in order to get photos of these models onto the wood panel I decided to try out silkscreen. It opened the world to me, when I realized could get photographs on a surface.

M.G. Because you were interested in depth.

R.H. Not depiction.

M.G. One thing you said to me yesterday is that you want to bring down photography.

R.H. Yeah, it's like war, battling the photograph and now the digital!

M.G. But I'm curious, because you were talking about deepness, and I'm also very interested in depth. I'm thinking about something that happens in the process of making something in which a depth appears, but it's not necessarily an illusionistic depth. But it's like a depth of another, I don't know, kind of fiction or material encounter.

R.H. Yeah, the sensation of looking at the far distance.

M.G. Yeah, and maybe sometimes that's even a distance in the dark, or not even in the light parts of something. I'll read this text. It's a work in the show. And it's maybe where our conversation started. So it's a motivation text, but also it's something that I wrote while I was making the work. And for me, it verbalizes a way of thinking: for example, one of the major questions in my work is not what to paint, but how not to.

R.H. Don't worry about what to paint?

M.G. Not what, but how to not... in manner that is still very free, or a manner that is open to... to not knowing. Yeah.

R.H. That space of not knowing. Exactly.

M.G. How to work in a space of not knowing, but then also make decisions, like editorial decisions. And so then I was thinking a lot about Jo Baer. So this text is Portals. (Gordon reads her text Portals, shown in its original form on page 1 of this publication)

R.H. Well, Jo Baer, I mean, she was a great woman too.

M.G. And she is way before many others in terms of thinking and radical painting practice of flatness and depth. I have some things I'd like to bring up, like windows, but I think I'd like to start with an idea of community: where the images come from in these paintings.

R.H. I thought it was very interesting that you don't want to paint an image.
I mean, that's radical, you know.

M.G. Is it?

R.H. Yeah, kind of.

M.G. I'd love to think so: I think of them as images of invasions of interiors.

R.H. So the image is in the photograph which is in the silkscreen. And that's what you would use the silkscreen for?

M.G. Yes, and to show that they are documents. And then that document is like a device

that frames something.

R.H. Like the way you would paint.

M.G. Yeah. Or also kind of like, maybe it's embarrassing to say, but that the content of the photos frame some form of non-form in a painting. Or, I guess there is this in-between, especially in painting, there is a dichotomy between the flatbed in which something happens on a surface. There's an action that takes place and some sort of process unfolds. But then there's also the flatbed of printing and accumulating.

R.H. I mean, I just think it's very hard in abstraction to figure out how to paint abstraction at all. You know, because one is often duplicating what's been done. I always come up against that wall of how can one possibly make an abstract painting after Abstraction.

M.G. I was telling you, I've been listening to a lot of podcasts of female painters talking about this idea of making a space and then letting loose within/around that. And then yesterday we were talking about it and you said that all looks the same.

R.H. But often it could look the same. In fact it's very hard to avoid. I mean mark making with art supplies.

M.G. But I don't want it to look the same. That's what I'm trying not to do, right? That it doesn't, that each painting doesn't look the same. Actually, that's very important for me.

R.H. Do they tend to look the same?

M.G. No, I hope they don't!

R.H. This looked different to me. But then the silkscreened mark is playing the role of a frame.

M.G. Yes. And I guess I was thinking about the window in painting (as frame) which historically is a major metaphor.

R.H. I mean, I'm kind of curious how you think of the potential of the window, especially in your work or how you think of the framing device. I mean, I used to make a lot of paintings before I started the chapters that looked just like an open window. They were painting on gesso of orthogonal rectangles and patterns pushed into one point perspective. I would place the vanishing point on the edge of the panel. I taught myself basic one-point, two-point perspective drawing after college. I liked teaching myself because you learn it doing it

and are forced to draw in a different way. I was so delighted with the fact that the space curves at the far edges. Since I was literally pushing the painting like a door into sharp perspective there ended up being a plane left largely empty or just with gesso. There is a lot of depth in empty space on paintings.

M.G. Is that something that's consistently present in the work: a vanishing point that's in the painting or in between paintings?

R.H. Often it's there. But yeah, sometimes I feel that I'm a landscape painter in a sense, that the accumulation over time is that it's landscape or maybe a map of some sort.

M.G. That's interesting. But maybe landscape in a way that's not like sitting and observing something, but maybe like an aerial.

R.H. I like to make different kinds of depths, you know, close, far, distant, open. The blank canvas can be the sky or the wall... But I don't know if I've consistently recently thought about it that way. But yes.

M.G. That's very interesting to think about your work in terms of 'open space' or non-information. I think we could talk a little bit about this in relationship to abstraction. I was motivated that the painterly aspects of this work would be as weird as possible. But when I say weird, I mean, specifically, a major reference in the show, the Mark Fisher book, *The Weird and the Eerie*. In which he talks about the weird...

R.H. Unfamiliar with that author.

M.G. Well, he actually uses a lot of texts that come from New England, like Poe and Lovecraft and a lot of stuff that you probably grew up with and I grew up with. But he uses those 'weird tales' as a way of speaking about this notion that the weird is a portal to an unknown, like a jump in time or a jump in space in which something unusual happens.

R.H. Right. And hierarchies are shifted.

M.G. And maybe hierarchies of space, of character or time, or time repeats, perhaps. But he's usually talking about, in the book, narrative devices, in plays or books or movies. So, I am interested in disrupting a narrative, but that painting itself becomes a possible jump to something that is completely unknown.

R.H. Yes, you were talking how you wanted to get to a place of freedom or the unknown, of not knowing what's happening in the process of painting, right?

M.G. Yeah, and then also to... It's an opening. And breaking illusion. I think that the painting is becoming something that's like oscillating between recognizability and unrecognizability. One thing we spoke about yesterday was the difference between deciphering something and depicting something.

R.H. You were saying that you associate the word feminism with the body or with art that depicts the body in some way or another?

M.G. I was saying that when I went to see Amy Sillman's show last week in Bern, I was looking at it and thinking: oh, wow, if you see these paintings in pictures, you thinking about shapes and how these images are assembled. But actually, when you see her paintings in person, it's like shape is an excuse or motivation to have a series of confrontations between painterly moments and material encounters, you know what I mean? And then thinking like, okay, that's perhaps a device that's used. And then I was thinking that a lot of feminist artists, or artists historically coming from a sideline position (although everyone looks at each other), often deal with mimicry, and you said, no, it's not mimicry, it's repetition.

R.H. We were talking about copying. Yeah, copying. We had an amazing conversation. I mean, that we don't even know we're copying. But, yeah, and, well, you used another word.

M.G. Mimicking.

R.H. Mimicking, and I thought that was not a good word, because mimicking sounds like tease. Yeah, that's interesting.

M.G. So it's copying.

R.H. Copying. Or reproduction.

M.G. Do you feel like it's an important aspect of your work, too?

R.H. Copying is super important, yes. I love to copy things. I really do. Because the copy is always different. I always learn something and find it freeing, weirdly, to copy something, because I don't do it exactly. To reproduce, because I feel like we're doing it anyway, so.

M.G. And you have a relationship, oftentimes, to the stories and the documents that you collect. I remember you gave a talk at KHIO where I taught, online, and we got to see into your studio, and it's a bit of chaos! It's full of images, and, you know, and then it made me think, like, is there a kind of editorial brain

that's collecting, and then what's the impulse to copy? Like, what's that thing of the transference of an image?

R.H. Well, I think it's sort of an anxiety about the subject, basically. Yeah. I need to find, well, I realize, like, usually I have a noun somewhere that I can say easily, what's this painting about? Oh, well, it's a cuff or a bat or an edge, or it's a this or it's a that, like a noun. And that lets me off the hook of what it's about. There will always be the noun standing ready, like a soldier, to answer that question. I think there's a lot of freedom around that noun. So, the noun here would be the window or the studio.

M.G. Yeah, I mean, or maybe the noun in this show is 'gift', because I think of all of the images that have been taken or sent to me as gifts, by my friends. I think it's really a depiction of a friendship. Although then I say in the writing, I'm not depicting that, ha. I don't want, and for me, that's like a very important part of it, that I don't feel that the friendship or comradeship is content that I need to represent or illustrate or whatever. It's a parenthesis within which the freedom of both practices, theirs and mine, is perhaps happening.

R.H. And you're showing also your reference or your focus. I like it because it's so clear, the setup. And it's sort of funny to make a window painting because you're not supposed to paint a window anymore on one level. That's what photography does now.

M.G. Is that why you're trying to bring photography down?

R.H. Yeah. It's just I feel that painting is interesting to me because it's not a photograph basically.

M.G. You called the motif of windows 'bullets through art history.'

R.H. I did?

M.G. I thought that was a really nice way of putting it. I was always thinking that the window in painting is sort of like a site in which many artists have sort of set up moments in which the painting happens there. In a lot of Matisse's windows, it's like there's an indication of a room and then once you're out that window it's like pure material color. And then also with Mondrian's work, as soon as the surface becomes a screen, actually the materiality of the white takes over and there's a sort of oscillation between the material and the ground. A painting that could never really be an illusionistic painting because it's too materially present. And then you oscillate between thinking it does or does not have depth.

And I think that's a very interesting sort of way of thinking through potentials of abstraction and representation rather than kind of, does it look like something? Does it not look like something?

R.H. But I do also like things that look like other things, You got to get ahead of the viewer. You've got to see the mistakes they're going to make looking at it in a way. I mean one thing that occurs to me, I remember reading a report card in which my teacher complained because "Becky's always staring out the window and not paying attention." I definitely stared out the window a lot in school and maybe you're not paying attention. I'm not paying too much attention. You're wanting to go outside.

M.G. That's very interesting—we all need to escape from the image? I read something in preparation for this talk, because these big terms like photography, painting and printmaking, which are present in both our work, also we make them behave in ways they are not supposed to. So I read the Vilem Flusser book *Gestures*. There are essays in it on the gesture of photography, but also of, like, the gesture of smoking a pipe and destroying. In the essay on photography he speaks of photography as something that mirrors an active subject. So that all photography is a record of a relationship.

R.H. Right, and the viewer isn't present to it.

M.G. No, not necessarily.

R.H. Unless you're peeping.

M.G. And then he says painting is an intentional gesture from the present to the future. So, he talks about painting as something that's like a conscious act of making that adds to a conversation. Perhaps every mark you make is like a relationship to another painter. But then we also started this discussion talking about printmaking, and this is actually something that is radically different than photographing and painting because it's so much about touch and contact. And you were also saying yesterday how printmaking for you is interesting because of how it changes the way an image is.

R.H. I mean it does, yes. It's a squeegee pull for one thing. But also, it destabilizes the photograph. I always work ass backwards. I didn't even think of Warhol at all when I started using silkscreen. Then I began to realize, oh yeah, there's a whole kind of faction in painting that's coming out of the dot of a silkscreen. Or the pull, or the squeegee. But it has a radical flatness to it that a photograph doesn't have, which I like. Reproduction is underlined.

M.G. Because I think there's something that's interesting in that printmaking is this thing that's kind of wedged between painting and photography and has this physicality: it must always have contact. It must always touch physically to make an imprint. It's not something that derives from deciphering something. Always in painting you translate a subject through a hand, whereas in print you're translating through a tool. A screen. Or maybe just a touch or a dot line. Or a kind of broken printer. Mistakes are always there. And I think it sort of alters information into something.

R.H. Well, it makes the photograph abstract.

M.G. Yes, that's a very good point. In a way in which I think abstraction is not really spoken about very often. In terms of translating.

R.H. It's hard to even say that there's any difference anymore between an image, a depicted image and an abstraction. They've all become dots or 1 and zeros.

M.G. Yes, that's true actually. That's true, rather than what we used to have as photos luscious C-prints.

R.H. Or reality in a way.

M.G. And now all images are dots in AI. They just accumulate. Another thing I wanted to bring up, which I didn't bring up yesterday, but I wanted to touch on are these two drawings, actually, because they come out of thinking about the term speech acts, which your friend Andrea Fraser has written so much about. In short, what she talks about in her essay 'Performance and Enactment' is that a speech act was originally a linguistic term. I'm butchering this for anyone that knows this history, like you. Fraser describes the speech act as a linguistic term in which real actions result. I bring it up because I think it's also interesting in terms of thinking about relationships and how things affect each other physically and linguistically.

R.H. It's funny you mentioned that one show in San Francisco because the problem of that show was to put words into a painting. And I realized that words always win. They just overtake everything. So, it's very hard to put words in a painting and keep it equal to the image.

M.G. Yeah, that's something I recognize! Because it can also be uncomfortable when people want you to describe what you've done...

R.H. Yeah, they want the words.

M.G. The argument Fraser makes in her essay relates to how the concepts of speech acts and the performative, which developed out of philosophy of language with the work of J.L. Austin, became detached from its meaning as a linguistic form and from that very important and powerful idea of how language does things and has a real impact. And one of the things I think is really interesting when she talks about this idea of a speech act is like you say how it takes over, but then it actually imparts action in the world. It's not actually... orders, but they result in action nonetheless. I say this painting is a portal to another reality, and so another reality opens up? I guess one could think of something like Lawrence Wiener's work or whatever as being a kind of speech act. I don't know if it's technically a speech act, but I was definitely thinking when I was making these two drawings that they're almost like a kind of different voice or a different character that's cranky...

R.H. They're like the viewer.

M.G. Yeah, yeah. But it's almost like a voice telling the paintings, like: you will do this. Not describing them. We will not send this to Andrea.

R.H. Have you used words before in images or in painting?

M.G. I've been writing, making a list of these phrases for about three years.

R.H. These ones?

M.G. Yeah, and I've always had information in a lot of my works. Like there are small pieces of paper with writing often in my paintings. Or in one painting, I actually reproduced three or four emails between myself and my female friends that are acetone transferred. And so I have been struggling with how language comes into the paintings. And then these window paintings are so mute that I really wanted the words to be a kind of like cipher... You thought they're mute. I don't necessarily think so. Or maybe they're mute in the sense that they don't have anything depicted. You know what I mean? Like there's no information in terms of the painting.

R.H. I think it's clear. Yeah. I mean, it's hard to say what information anything is imparting in a word. But yeah, the only thing is they look like a landscape, the painting part. Which is sort of funny, you know, in a way. There's a funniness to putting the window around it as the frame of the painting the way you want. So it's almost like you want to paint that, but you have to put it outside.

M.G. Yeah. Exactly. That's the kind of embarrassing part of it. Or the original desire you describe to get outside!