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KATIE PRATT IN CONVERSATION WITH JONATHAN LASKER

This is a long body of work but I do think, if you look at it, that it keeps on renewing itself. Even though there are the same principles that I've been using throughout almost 40 years – a new vocabulary and themes continue to come in.

KP: It's almost impossible to talk about your work without talking about language because you have a certain kind of grammar, a structure that you keep referring to and your own forms that keep creeping back in. But at the same time they're all different. And I was thinking about a regular grammar and a vernacular – how things turn out in usage in your work. What are the constants and the variables?

JL: There are recurring themes. There is a recurring vocabulary. Yet, they're always put in new discursive dialogue with one another creating a new image, which is also a new dialogue

KP: When you look at these two paintings they have distinct elements in them that are isolated from each other. They're not even touching. And it gives a sense of a lexicon of elements that come together to mean something that could be reconfigured to mean something else in a very linguistic manner.

JL: It's almost a glossary. You could see it in that way. The major painting of this series, *The Universal Frame Of Reference*, was featured in a lot of reviews of my NY show. It was one of the ones most often discussed and each writer referenced it a little differently. There was a visual conflict in the early paintings, which interested me and one could regard that conflict as dialectical. In that sense, I was seeking to find something of a language within the paintings. I wasn't thinking so much based on critical theory... I'm not really a dedicated follower of critical theory, although a lot of people think I am....

KP: I would have thought you were.

JL: Peter Halley, who is a contemporary of mine (I showed with him in a lot of exhibitions), I don't think he *founded* his work based on French philosophy, but I think

that he found it a convenient vehicle to explain his ideas and what he was doing. But I did my paintings first and then inferred what they meant afterwards. So I came to some of those ideas through the paintings and through other people's readings of the paintings. I got attached to the idea of language in visual art through it being very much a theme of the moment in the 80s and my work conveniently lending itself to that reading. Prior to that I was thinking of my work much more in terms of a spatial reading. **That reading is a thing, which still concerns me, where paintings can be understood as both literal abstracts** but also have figure/ground pictorial relationships and depth. However, I always did think of my work as being dialectical. And if it's dialectical, then it's linguistic.

KP: I've always thought that critical theory is a tool, there to be used if it helps, but it's not the reason to make a painting. It might be for some people – I use it as a tool. But I wouldn't want to be illustrating it.

JL: Exactly. But I think in Art College theory has become so stressed that things are at a point where the word people have gained hegemony over the image people. And I do think that in painting that's wrong. I think that the image should precede the word. Certainly in painting – that's my view. How can imagery be freely created if language is dictated to its maker?

K.P: Do you find that you are peripatetic between New York and Munich? How does that operate?

JL: I do the large paintings here in New York and I just work on ideas over there. I like that division between the mental space there and the actual making space here. But that puts me under more pressure to produce here. Which is difficult. If you talk about the act of painting, most of my paintings are extremely difficult. I actually fully enjoyed making the new paintings with the ghost shapes. They are relatively less

demanding and have a less exacting way of painting. But the one here in the studio – the upright one with the picture within the picture, from the “Universal Frame of Reference” series, which I love now it is finished – the actual making of it was very painstaking and arduous, Each of those red, yellow and blue forms took about four days in a row of, like, fourteen-hour days. And so that’s very exhausting and I dread getting into them. The thing is that the subject of these paintings is the picture itself and not the act of painting. I mean there is an act of painting involved, but it is rather excruciating and exacting. They’re not intended to be the opposite of “action paintings”, but they kind of have to be in order to be what they are. So when I’m in Munich, I’m a lot more at peace.

KP: When you come back to New York ready to go, do you find that there is a renewed intensity to your practice?

JL: Yes, it’s a feeling that I have to now set to work and make my paintings and get them in the world.

KP: One of the surprising things about these works is how specifically drawn and measured out they are. Do you scale up from the studies quite precisely?

JL: If possible, I stay close to them in scale. There is, however, variation and subjective decision. It’s largely a scale transference, however the forms themselves are somewhat reworked from the studies. The thing is that the paintings are not copies – they are always originals, which are done as versions of studies. They are really like re-enactments of the image, a little like an actor re-enacting a part. Each performance is unique. I also anticipate the scale differences in going from the two dimensions to three, because the density of the paint in the small 6 x 8 inch studies is much denser, much thicker, much more physically pronounced than it can possibly be even in 30 x 40 inches and certainly not as in a really large scale. So I have to anticipate that and

look at the study and try to think how big could the mark be? And I base the largest size version of that study on how big I think those marks can translate. How much scale can they carry?

KP: I think it's very interesting that you start with a study but there is an inevitable slippage or shift from the study to the painting because the materiality of paint scales up. It's always been one of your hallmarks – as if you manage to get paint as big as it will get. Because oil paint, has a maximum size before it literally falls off the support.

JL: Right I've had that! I've had that happen.

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KP: What seems to have happened recently is that you've retained the scaling-up but returned to some of the pre-1985 imagery and ways of using paint, like translucency. Because in a lot of the works, either there's no paint or it's very opaque and sometimes very dense. And we are seeing these layers and ghosting – which is reiterated in the titles – shadows, ghosts, layers underneath...

JL: Right. *The Remnant of Spirit*.

KP: Yes: remnant and spirit!

JL: It gives me a chance to recapture a different way of painting that I had largely abandoned for a length of time and now I'm really enjoying getting back to. But I can't say there's really a break from one part of the work to the other. They coincide at the moment.

KP: They are all part of a practice. I read this about your work – 'abstract painting both heralds and mirrors social developments'. A title like...

JL: ... *Democratic Beauty*. Right. **Nothing's less democratic than beauty!** (laughing).

KP: Do you still keep a book of titles?

JL: I do keep a book, yes.

KP: Do the titles come at the end of the work?

JL: It's at the end of the work. The work's finished and I look at it and then I look at the title book and see what I feel comfortable with in regards to what the painting feels like it can carry as a title. Sometimes the painting does suggest a title not in the book to me. Then sometimes I find something that seems fitting in the book. It's sort of my one line shot at being a poet. I often seek to create titles that are oxymoronic because the work itself is ambivalent and has contradictions in it. So if I come up with a term that seems to have that kind of quality to it then I can usually construct a title that seems applicable to almost any of my paintings. So *Democratic Beauty* could've been

applicable to a number of different paintings. *The Remnant of Spirit*, which also has one of those spirit-shapes in it – that shadowy shape –, was specifically used because there was a cross in it. So it was the idea of the remnant of what that signifies or had signified to mankind as we're entering into a more agnostic age.

KP: I'm very interested in using abstract painting to think about other things. And when I look at your painting I try and unpick minds. I try and unpick using the process, I try and work out the process and use it to apply knowledge. And that's part of the joy of abstract painting to me. One of the paintings in that recent show is – *The Plus Sign at Golgotha*. And I thought that was very funny, actually – very witty. I was particularly interested because in some ways a 'plus-sign' should be game for abstract painters, but at the same time it's so loaded. Of course, when you combine it with 'Golgotha' it's definitely a crucifix and the form in the painting is like a crucifix.

JL: It's a Calvary scenario. (laughs) Yes. Let's say I think my images can be thought-starters. I don't think of them as narrative but I think there are ideas shaping in them. And I quite often find that any of a number of different people will read them differently. But that's in a way allowable and okay. Stephen Westfall wrote on my work in 1985 or so in a review of a show. And he said that these paintings ask of *John Q. Public* what does *John Q. Public* ask of an abstract picture? Namely, what is that supposed to be? So they ask that question back at the viewer – what is that supposed to be? It's trying to get the mind of the viewers working on thinking about what is in front of them and how that provokes images in the mind, which is where images always are.

KP: Yes. Your paintings deconstruct in front of the viewer. They **tell us** that abstract painting can have a cross in it, like after Malevich, or it can have gesture, or it can have line and colour... And you lay all the tools out and arrange them in various

configurations. And we're acutely aware of that in your work because things are isolated as well as certain relationships set up.

JL: ...Also coexisting. Things are each in their own discrete space – but they're **also** not. And they have to come to terms with one another, and they often don't do it so easily. So If you want to see a paradigm that has to do with the social state of humanity in this time and age in a world that is having trouble becoming one, perhaps you could see that.

KP: You gave me a copy of the catalogue from '97, from your museum show in Bielefeld, in Germany and also St.Gallen in Switzerland. You were talking to Hans-Michael Herzog about violating the rational order of a geometric background with a gestural form. I think this was in relation to earlier work. Would you still discuss your contemporary work in those terms?

JL: Not quite – the dialectic is not quite so sharply defined as it was then – whereas it was this against that. But there is a way of things imposing themselves on other things. Now things are more imposed on other things, in those days it was almost like a violation.

KP: You've spent a lot of time in Germany. Obviously you are there part of the time now. So the culture – or maybe the art – do you think it had a strong bearing on how your painting has developed?

JL: I think that there was lot of great work happening in Germany in the 80s, but I can't say that any of it was really extremely influential to me. Actually, there are a lot of English painters that I feel probably more sympathetic to. I like Howard Hodgkin. I'm very impressed by his work. Although I can't say they necessarily relate directly to what I do, but I like the work of all those David Bomberg artists such as Auerbach – the students of David Bomberg – Kossoff. Also Euan Uglow – I find him a really

interesting painter. There's something really interesting that's both abstract and figurative in that work. You have a lot of really oddball painters in England, particularly in the 60s...

KP: When I was asking earlier about Germany and the access to western Art History whether it has had an impact on your practice, It did occur to me that some of the German artists who you might have been in contact with – people like Lüpertz or Baselitz – had a very generous use of paint, using tools that were much larger than we were used to. And some of Lüpertz's marks are very dense and broad. I wonder whether, just in terms of mark-making alone, that may have contributed to your vocabulary?

JL: I haven't thought that much about it. But I do like early Lüpertz's paintings a lot. I like the plaid suit paintings. That's a wonderful body of work. Basing a series of paintings on men's fashion – it's a cross between fashion illustration and fine art that does really strange things. Lüpertz is a bit of a dandy in his style of dress, something I'm a little into myself. And the *Dithyrambic* paintings. And early Baselitz I think is really great. But then also Eugen Schönebeck. He was painting at the same time as Baselitz in Berlin. They knew each other from Dresden, but I think it was in Berlin – you can see there's a definite parallel between early Baselitz and Schönebeck. The thing that was compelling was being in Cologne in the 80s. It was a much more exciting art scene than today's Berlin, because it was a much smaller city, which made the art scene much larger. This was distinctly post-war Germany. The Berlin wall was still intact and that forced each of the provincial cities to play a larger role than they normally would. In a way it was a model for solving the dilemma of dominant super cities such as New York or London. Simply take all of the cultural and commercial

components of a capital city and distribute all those industries such as finance, advertising, publishing or art, one each to a provincial city.

KP: You work with assistants. Are they technical assistants or administrative assistants?

JL: Both. But, regarding painting I draw the linear elements and then it gets traced out in paint. My hand is everywhere, and my hand is certainly in any of the elements where the trail of the brush is critical in relationship to the hand – the thick elements, the background colour even. But when it comes to the linear elements, definitely the thin lines, that's very mechanical. It's supposed to be affectless and mechanical. And that's the idea. You go from the impulsive, random doodling, which is my drawing – and then the hand gets done a second time very consciously. That's assistant work. And it should be, because if I do it, I might put too much affect in it. It's supposed to have that removed feeling to it. It's intended to be alienating.

KP: I've always felt very strongly with your work that there is tension between the handmade and analogue technology, re-registration and the mechanical...

JL: Yes. And there is also a lot of repetition in the work. And in a way I try to use repetition as a virtue rather than a vice.

KP: I don't think it's true to say that there is repetition in your work because I suspect that each of your forms is slightly different. But have you ever made the same original generate more than one work?

JL: I do, all the time, because I can scale up and I am pretty much a master of scale. I can start with a small study and then I can do a medium-size painting and a large-size painting. And each one tells me about how to get up to the large-size painting. So usually I go from the study to a small painting then to a large painting and each step of the way prepares me for the large painting. So that's very common.

KP: Is it possible then that that one might generate other versions? Are there different configurations?

JL: This drawing became the painting, *Commerce & Darkness*. It started it. Then it became a study. And if you look at that composition, it is echoed here. This mark will be in maroon red on the right, but that form will be like that yellow over there. So it regenerated into something else. Sometimes the same composition will find new expression.

KP: Do you think that makes any particular special relationship between the works? What does that do for the discourse between the works?

JL: Well I might, for example, exhibit *Commerce & Darkness* next to this larger painting here. I could picture that. But I think that doing that would be a little bit heavy-handed. Here there's a grid, and there the grid falls away. So you have these shapes... What I would say is interesting about this is that I have always based everything on a patterned ground, and then I work forward from the pattern. In this one that pattern, the grid, falls away. And these shapes have carried the surface. So it was an exercise at finding yet another way of using this composition but to also do something that I hadn't formerly done in a painting. So there is no special relationship – it's just that this one led to that one. That's kind of it. But they should all relate to the other works as well. So there are little sub-themes. I could maybe picture exhibitions being done based on just little sub-genres in my work. In the 80s and even now today you can see these sub-genres in the works. There are these bar-shapes in my paintings. Like this one, this green painting, it has bars as right-angled framing devices. And here in this painting – the rectangles within the picture are bars. And then there are early paintings, things like *To Regain Virginity*, which was from 1986 or 1985, that has bars in it. I've been doing them since around 1981. I conceive of that as being a sub-genre,

which continues to expand over a length of time. So there are certain things, certain elements, certain formal elements, which are then conversant with other pictures in that sub-genre. In a way, mine is a regenerative system of picture making.

KP: So you can look at it as a detailed exploration – as really looking at something specific and how that operates in different contexts.

JL: Right. When you repeat, you do get the chance to make that analysis.

KP: ... but also to stop and think about it because it's disengaging a certain aspect of your brain, which gives you a space to really meditate on the value of what you're doing.

JL: That's true.

KP: Do you make your own paint?

JL: No, I buy tube paint. Various brands, depending on what I think is best at that moment.

KP: It is just wonderful to see paintings in progress and I do feel very privileged because they're meant to be seen as finished works and there's a vulnerability about seeing too much of the genesis of something. What is it that makes you want to finish a painting? Why do you make the next work?

JL: I do keep wanting to see the next work – And this last show in New York got such generous reception that it gave me a whole bunch of new energy. This is a long body of work but I do think, if you look at it, that it keeps on renewing itself. Even though there are the same principles that I've been using throughout almost 40 years – for about 37, 38 years – a new vocabulary and themes continue to come in. The work renews itself when you do a new picture that is different than the other pictures you've done. And so that's why I guess I want to see the next picture.