

R E Y N O L D S
G A L L E R Y

Chris Gregson, Interviewed



The following is the transcript of an interview between artist Chris Gregson and Paul Ryan.

Paul Ryan is Professor of Art in the Department of Art and Art History at Mary Baldwin College in Staunton, Virginia and a contributing editor for Art Papers Magazine since 1990. His articles have also appeared in Sculpture Magazine, Artlies Magazine, and the New Art Examiner.

PR: In a recent e-mail to me, you described your paintings as existing on a “continuum,” with “no beginning or end point.” This seems to open your studio practice to, in some ways, incorporating anything you see and respond to. This is freeing in many ways, but I can also see it as frustrating. Which is it for you; and, how is this so? What do you let in and what do you keep out?

CG: My open-ended approach can be frustrating because I don’t have a strict formula. The sub conscious and intuition lead me through a series of challenges. I always work on multiple projects simultaneously. Each project could have 10 to 20 pieces as part of the series. I slowly sort the images into groups and things move forward from there.

One frustration I have overcome is disposing paintings that I could not resolve. Now, I’m able to rework surfaces so the pieces have a deep history. Some paintings take as long as five years to complete. What I let in are the impulses feeding my immediate physical, intellectual and emotional world. What I keep out is a planned agenda, signature style and pre-conceived painting formula. For me it is about problem solving and that moment of inspiration.

PR: Your work is clearly attached to various aspects of modernist painting – particularly those associated with abstract painting before World War II or Abstract Expressionism. For example, you recently told me of a recent visit to the Paul Klee Museum in Bern, Switzerland, that was quite profound for you. How do you make your attachment to high modernist abstraction relevant to making art in 2011?

CG: I brought along sketchbooks on the Switzerland trip. I ended up going to a lot of museums in Basel, Berne, and Zürich and got the impulse to draw items I saw on display. I started at the Rietberg Museum in Zürich mimicking the contours of India bronzes and copying details from Indian miniatures. I am using those drawings to create a whole new series of images. I know the images from the sketches will not be recognizable in my new work. They will act as the starting point.

I have a romantic, nostalgic interest in high modernism. These artists were the trailblazers. Having been involved with the development of the outsider art movement in the 1980s, I know that excitement when a handful of people get together to organize exhibits, build collections and share ideas to define a genre. Early modernism was like that I suppose, artists would gather around people like Alfred Stieglitz and things happened. On the other hand my interest in early modernism is akin to the way A. R. Penck takes Klee's stick figures to a new place. I sometimes use the visual language from the era, disregard the original dogma, and integrate the forms as part of my visual vocabulary.

PR You seem to employ the element of narrative in your paintings in a way that is not dissimilar to Thomas Nozkowski's approach to incorporating aspects of what he sees/experiences every day. Describe your own use of narrative...it seems to be one in which, as I like to say, "form leads the way." How has this been affected by your earlier professional experience in the theater – especially in the area of stage design?

CG I studied at the New York Studio and Forum of Stage Design. It was a progressive school that emphasized conceptual based design. Lester Polakov, my instructor, studied art with George Grosz so he had an art orientation. I had been taught to think in terms of three-dimensional space. My designs were about creating settings in support of the playwright's narrative.

I was doing a lot of independent study at the time and found that stage design and the visual theories in Paul Klee's "Pedagogical Sketchbook" to be similar in many ways. I began to experiment with watercolors using Klee's "Sketchbook" to guide my personal work without the leadership of a playwright's script. Klee's teaching described the use of color, angles and weight of the line all carried a dramatic tension similar to what I had learned in stagecraft.

In the early 1990s, Thomas Nozkowski shared with me his process during a studio visit. He told me he was taught by the Abstract Expressionists. I was fascinated when he said his work was rooted in his personal experiences. But I just could not understand how his everyday experiences led to his images. At first, I painted landscapes and people I knew. Gregory Amenoff reinforced my direction when he said to me it's all about water, earth and sky. That sounded fundamental and something I could grab on to. I understood what he was saying. I knew automatically that the external world, in particular, the landscape was something he internalized and reinterpreted in visual form through his emotion and spiritual filters. Over time, natural, figurative and structural forms emerged as part of my narrative in an ever-increasing freewheeling way.

What I do now is use my personal experience – the thought, the feeling or a specific image - as a starting point. The mark making process slowly transforms into the final image through a series of decisions and

challenges I establish along the way. There is always the possibility of one more challenge. That is why my paintings are always a point in time.

PR: Some of your paintings, for example, Constructs (a211), (J511), and (6211) seem like a visual index of your formal vocabulary, or “group portraits” of personal forms you employ. You seem to consciously overdo or overfill the picture plane, setting up a visual competition among the various elements that initially seems somewhat disruptive, but “grows” on the viewer, and eventually works. Talk about this structured jamming and semi-disarray of shapes, lines, and textural relationships

CG: The works are collages of my exterior and interior worlds. Sometime, there are multiple layers, segmented sections and forms merging together. I think of my work in terms of hybrids - merger of forms in space, repetitive forms that vary slightly, forms that morph into something new.

The paintings you referred to are visual ambiguities first and foremost. The Cubist had this idea of seeing form from multiple angles. One of the things that reoccurs in my work is the forms have multiple connotations. I draw heavily from a world of visual clutter. Look around you'll see a complex network of textures, objects, light and spatial relationships. So I mix the ambiguity and real space into my images to offer something that can exist on its own as one more impression in the visual world.

PR: Along with Sally Bowring, you are a co-founder of “Constructs,” an

artists' collective that peripherally examines some of the roles of contemporary abstract painting through a series of group exhibitions that change and evolve. There used to be a very strong and influential “culture” of abstract painting in the 20th century, culminating with Abstract Expressionism. In some ways (for better or worse), it even extended into the postmodern decades of the 1980s and 1990s. But this doesn't really exist anymore, except in the realm of nostalgia or the practice of reactionary painters. Where do you think abstract painting is today? And, how do you fit in?

CG: The Constructs group is about being part of a community. The group's mission is to present abstract work to the public in the form of exhibitions, public programs and publications. Since you are a member, this interview is part of the Construct's mission. Community is important to me. One of the great things about the Internet is the way you can construct your own virtual community. Amy Feldman, Jacob Duval, Ernst Caramelle, Steve Cushner, Don Crow, Suzan Frecon, Jasmine Justice, Steve Karlik, Chris Martin, Woong Kim, Andrew Masullo, Anne Seidman and a bunch of other artists are in a file of artists I follow. Anytime I want to go to a New York art opening I go to the James Kalm Report on YouTube. “Brooklyn Rail” magazine and a number of blogs are available all the time for criticism and exhibition reviews.

There have been a few recent shows, articles and publications that focus on abstract painting. Raphael Rubinstein wrote about a recent form

of abstract painting in Art in America defining it as “provisional painting.” I think this type of authoritative article is just harder to get everyone’s attention because there are so many experts out there. There are other shows and articles focusing attention on current abstract paintings. One group of painters is categorized as the “New Casualists.” I identify with their concern of casting aside rigid fundamentals, freely referencing earlier art historical styles and abandoning strict art historical dogma for a more freewheeling expression.

While my work is based on subjective experiences, I use abrupt visual shifts, often a lack of formal cohesion and an off balance approach that I think is reflective of our times. I have always lived in the moment and my narrative is based on that. I fit into the arts community as one artist that knows his best most honest, communication is through his work.

