

ARTPULSE

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RON JOHNSON

An Archaeology of Seeing

Ron Johnson's paintings create tensions. Oscillating between landscape and abstraction, positive and negative space, translucency and obscurity, his paintings encourage careful looking and emphasize the importance of visual experience. Johnson's most recent body of work, which he debuted in 2015 at Reynolds Gallery in Richmond, marks a significant transition in his oeuvre away from square canvases to shaped panels. For the artist, this move more accurately translates Johnson's experiences driving out west each summer, absorbing the crags, rolling hills, and vast plains. In our conversation, we touch on the state of painting today, the American landscape, Johnson's concept of the "archaeology of seeing," and betting sports with Michelle Grabner. He is represented by Reynolds Gallery, Richmond; Duane Reed Gallery, St. Louis; and Angela Meleca Gallery in Columbus.

BY OWEN DUFFY

Owen Duffy - I'd like to start this conversation off by hearing your thoughts on the state of painting today—and in particular abstract painting—to provide readers with some insight into how you see your practice fitting into the broader network. Painting-as-commodity seems to dominate a lot of discussion today, perhaps pointing to our sustained anxieties about the medium's purpose and function in the contemporary world. From a painter's perspective, in the thick of things, are you registering the same sort of uneasy dialogue?

Ron Johnson - I'm an optimist. Painting is always growing, so I think that painting is always, and in particular abstraction, in a better place. Thinking about painting as commodity or art in general as commodity—I think this is a tough thing. I never think about selling work, I think about making it, but sometimes those two aspects have to cross paths to sustain each other. But I know artists who are only thinking of selling, and philosophically I don't get that. And I think you are correct about an unease in dialogue or maybe a distortion of dialogue, because conversations will often turn to questions like: "How much are you selling your paintings for?" and "What materials are you using?" There is a lack of curiosity about the idea. Personally, I would much rather sit around all day talking about the why's than the how's.

Regardless, look around and see what is out there. It's still really kind of mind blowing to think about what is being created today. That isn't to say I love everything, but I do respect the process artists take.

O.D. - Speaking about why's and how's, can you elaborate on the importance of the road trips out west you take each summer to your practice? Why do you take them, and how do these experiences figure into your work? The act of driving always reminds me of the minimalist sculptor Tony Smith's midnight epiphany on the New Jersey turnpike. Illegally driving down the unopened highway, without street lights or road markers, the ride, for Smith, was something that could not be described—it was simply a matter of experience.

R.J. - The trip is very Zen for me in terms of my relationship to the landscape, and I am talking predominantly about the Western landscape. I leave from Virginia and drive. There is no real destination in mind, just West. What I start engaging with is the vastness of the Dakotas, Wyoming, Colorado, etc. The experience of engaging with this vastness is what I like to call an archaeology

of seeing. I like to relate this experience to when you were a child and you were in the back of your parents' station wagon and you would look at the moon and think it was following you. The vastness is very much the same. I'm looking at a mountain or some land marker, and I drive 50 miles or so and the mountain appears to have never moved. Or maybe it seems to be following me. In my mind I know it has shifted, but still. So when I bring it back into my work this archaeology of seeing, a continuous echo of the visual field is the response to "how" the drive plays in my work. It's funny because I do think about the Tony Smith relationship a lot. That kind of feeling or experience of the trip is very private. Not that the trip has to be private, but the experience certainly is.

O.D. - I'm particularly enthralled by the notion of an "archaeology of seeing." It's an idea that implies work—digging, if we are perpetuating the metaphor—on the part of the viewer and the artist. So how does one of your more recent shaped paintings, such as Maybe You Would Understand specifically relate to an "archaeology of seeing?"

R.J. - It really relates to all the works in the way that we see. I originally started thinking about this concept after learning about the Hubble telescope. I remember hearing that they hypothesized that the Hubble might one day be able to see the Big Bang. To me this is an archaeology of seeing, a looking into the past, so I applied this concept to the landscape, particularly that of the west, where the landscape is so vast that you can see for miles, with the shaped panels, they are really moments pulled from the landscape. But when I am there, I can always see moments marked by trees, mountains, whatever. So the shaped work is really a positive space or moment pulled from my visual field. The shapes have always been there, you can see them in my panel works, but now I am allowing them to exist as the ground.

O.D. - So, do you think I would be off in left field if I contextualized your paintings as landscapes cloaked in abstraction? To me, that frames the paintings within a discourse about the duplicity of vision. For instance, what we see through a telescope, or even through the naked eye, for that matter, is never really what is actually present—that utterly immanent moment. Rather, what we perceive is always the past, operating under the guise of an illusory present.



Ron Johnson, *Lost and Found*, 2013, acrylic on panel, 48" x 48". All images are courtesy the artist and Reynolds Gallery.

R.J. - That is absolutely a perfect description. I use and need the landscape for my work, but the landscapes are abstracted and my interpretations of the moments. They aren't supposed to be landscapes, but ideas of moments of landscapes. And you totally get this idea of an archaeology of seeing. Looking is a visual dig, whether it's the literal layers of objects or the vastness of a landscape that goes on for miles. We dig through space to get to the so-called moment or moments of objects. The light we see from a star is millions of years old, but how different of an experience is that really from seeing a reflection in the desert from miles away? One is on a grander scale, but it is a visual dig either way.

O.D. - *I like this concept of visual digging, that in your paintings not everything is given away to the viewer, made easy for him or her. I think some of the best art makes you work through looking—it really underscores the fact that seeing is a fundamentally active experience. Could you speak a bit in regards to how the production process of your paintings lends itself to the visual dig?*

R.J. - I think what you're saying about not getting a read immediately, or ever for that matter, is what I am also getting at; that slowing down of the viewing process. It really, in some ways, mirrors my making in that it is slow and laborious, and also quite Zen at times. There is absolutely a meditative component to my making, which I compare to my drive out west, looking and experiencing. So you are right that there is a real cohesion between seeing and making with my work. I sometimes think of Bill Viola's video work, and how he physically slows down the viewing process.

O.D. - *How do the materials of your paintings contribute to these kinds of viewing experiences? The first time I encountered your work—I think it was back in 2012—I couldn't help but think you were working with a semi-transparent wax. There was an ooze, a perceived stickiness to the surface that I found somewhat perplexing. I really, really wanted to commit the ultimate faux-pas, which we all have done at some point, and feel your work.*

R.J. - [laughs] People tell me that all of the time that they just want to touch my paintings, which of course I am fine with, but the galleries not so much! Most people think that my work is encaustic, but it's not. I think my materials are important, but I really don't want them to be an overriding factor where it becomes all about that. The medium allows me to control (for the most part) this idea of translucency which in turn allows the viewer to access my work in layers. So viewers are literally able to see the archaeology, or experience my thoughts in an archaeology of seeing.

O.D. - *It would seem, then, that a constant in your work for some time has been your materials, notwithstanding the landscape and the act of looking. Why, I must ask, did you feel compelled to move away from the square format to new, shaped, biomorphic paintings? Besides the obvious formal changes the work has passed through, what is different about these paintings?*

R.J. - It is something I have been working out in my head for four or five years, and I have done "shaped" experiments going back as far as maybe fifteen years. The shapes have always been in my panel



Ron Johnson, *Maybe You Would Understand*, 2014, acrylic on panel, dimensions variable.

works. I constantly would look at the forms in the landscape when I was driving and think of them as the painting itself. I would often talk myself out of moving to shaped work because of the relationship to other artists and getting compared to them. I guess in my head I want to think of things more like a scientist in terms of the approach. I eventually told myself this is *my* shaped work. It isn't connected to Elizabeth Murray or Stella, etc. I mean I'm not silly enough to think of originality; I didn't invent shape, but this is my way of dealing with shape and processing my visual response. But it took a long time because I wanted to be sure that this work was mine.

O.D. - *The "shaped" painting does have a long history, a history that goes well back to the Renaissance and before, with roundels and altarpieces, and so on. I think it's important to be aware of this history, and to know why one participates in it, but not to get burdened by the pressure of having to "innovate" and be "new." But with your mentioning of artists like Elizabeth Murray and Frank Stella, I have to ask, who do you see yourself in dialogue with, past or present?*

R.J. - I guess I think of that question in terms of the artists who have been most influential on me. Really there are a lot of individuals, but not all are visual artists. I think about sports, particularly baseball, and players such as Willie Mays, among others. I think about music and musicians quite a lot. But as far as visual artists it would have to be Piet Mondrian, Christian Bonnefoi, James Hyde and James Turrell. I saw the Mondrian retrospective at MoMA in 1997 or 1998. It was kind of a "wow" moment. I love the way the line vibrates in his paintings, as well

as his thoughts on nature and abstraction. I respect James Hyde for his guts and the rawness of his work, and Turrell for the mood and sensory awareness he can create. But probably I would say I am most closely aligned with Bonnefoi. He has this way of articulating the archaeology of painting, and I was lucky enough to study with him at The Ohio State University, and have been able to pick his brain ever since.

O.D. - *You don't usually see Willie Mays being discussed in the same paragraph as Piet Mondrian and James Turrell. Do you care to elaborate about this and the importance of baseball to you more generally?*

R.J. - I think about it in the simplest of terms, and trust me I could go into some deep philosophical ideas and connections, but with baseball and painting you come to a field or an empty panel with all of this knowledge. The knowledge is attained through practice or studio work, but you come to this clean slate, and you know how to play the game, but you never know how the game is going to be played out. It's always new, always unique. I also think about the connection between the infinite in baseball and my paintings' archaeology of seeing.

O.D. - *By the "infinite in baseball" are you referring to the theoretical possibility of a never ending game? To me, this is a useful analogy, not only for your paintings, but also for painting as a discourse and art more generally. How many times have critics, from Paul Delaroche to Douglas Crimp, prognosticated about the death of painting? If art is a game to be played, it is one that is never necessarily complete, and certainly doesn't die. Some artists, such*



Ron Johnson, *What I Did It For*, 2014, acrylic on panel, dimensions variable.

as Marcel Duchamp and Ai Weiwei, for instance, have played it better than others. Then again, Duchamp was an internationally renowned chess player, and Ai was a rated blackjack player who got tons of perks from Atlantic City casinos.

R.J. - The variables are infinite, and there has never been a game played the same way twice, and baseball has no clock, so in theory it could go on forever. I have always disliked this idea that something is “dead.” Rock and roll isn’t dead and painting isn’t dead. People die, plants die, but inanimate things don’t die; they just change. I do like the idea that art is a game, it is not always a good game but a game nonetheless. And then the game of baseball is, like art, so random. In baseball you can hit a screaming liner right at someone, are out, but in your next at bat you can hit one off the end of the bat and get a hit.

O.D. - *I think I’m coming to the conclusion that your paintings, then, speak to both aesthetic experience in a broad sense—particularly in the way that they ask important questions about the act of looking—as well as to the American experience. Baseball and the fabled “West” are critical to your art, after all. I don’t mean to suggest that your paintings are nationalistic or anything like that [laughs], but they certainly seem to be about these quintessentially American things.*

R.J. - [laughs] Yea, I would say so. It’s not necessarily an intentional thing, it just is. I remember being in a show in Paris a few years back and my friend Joe Fyfe happened to be in Paris at the time. He brought the painter Shirley Jaffe to the opening. She told him

something to that effect about my work, that there is something distinctly American about it, and I always remembered that. I’m not sure I really understood it at the time, and maybe I still don’t, but I always remembered that comment.

O.D. - *I’m happy to know I’m not the only one thinking that, but I have to agree with you—those kind of things, like events, just happen in the work. Sorry to circle back around, but I wanted to ask you about your color choices. They’re really quite vibrant, and unnaturally saturated, which seems completely at odds with the fact that your work is so rooted in the landscape. How do you account for these decisions, and what do they mean to you?*

R.J. - The color kind of came to me in a strange way. I was at Ucross, an artist residency in Claremont, Wyoming, and I remember going out of my studio every so often to gaze out at the mountains and hillsides. That red clay at first appears to be just so dull, but after looking at it for some time, it really vibrated and almost became fluorescent. Because of that experience, I really started amping up the colors—the more I looked, the more I became aware of what those colors really were, and the more everything intensified.

O.D. - *Before we conclude, Ron, I’ve heard from somewhere that you have a good Michelle Grabner anecdote.*

R.J. - I have two great Michelle Grabner works that I won from her betting on football. On two separate occasions, I bet that the Seattle Seahawks would beat the Green Bay Packers, and well, they did! ■

