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ALAENA TURNER INTERVIEWS RICHARD ROTH

...as hierarchies worldwide are increasingly being challenged, painting could only benefit from shedding its privileged status. Hey, painting is great, just as it is. It doesn't need propping up.

Alaena Turner: For over a decade (between 1993-2005), you moved away from a studio-based practice and focused on the act of collecting. Looking at the examples of your collections of everyday objects and images, which are available on your website, I can see how certain categories could be said to have a connection to painting. For example, make-up compacts, paint charts, shooting range targets, bureaucratic forms – these could all be approached as reductive forms of geometric composition, maybe like a readymade painting. And there's also a conceptual angle here, in that, they all hold potential for a form of mark-making, so that act of applying eyeshadow, or firing a gun, or writing on a form, are set up as potential equivalents to painting. The one collection out of the grouping on your website that seemed like an anomaly to me was your collection of newspaper cuttings which show photographs of people following traumatic events, which doesn't seem to have any obvious connection to painting. How did you decide what to collect and how did you go about this?

Richard Roth: Most of my collections originated from my interest in visual form. Like so many artists, I clipped and

saved images that related to my painting and inspired me: source material. My interest in minimalism and my reverence for 'ordinary' objects were bridged by collecting. Initially, I looked for artifacts that were formally interesting (but avoided those already considered 'collectible'). I tried to keep the presentation of the collections as unmediated as possible – no transformation of materials, no clever juxtapositions, no artiness, no 'art'. The collections weren't about me; they were about the world.

Collecting became my practice. It wasn't planned. It just crept up on me. And, as you note, I was fascinated by the many resemblances between the practices surrounding the artifacts in the collections and the practice of painting. For example, the relationship between the compacts and portrait painting. Both involve a ritualized activity in which pigment on a palette is applied with a brush. Makeup and portraiture are meditations on beauty and identity created in private for exhibition in public. *The Forms* collection is a good example of how my interests changed over time. At first, I was smitten by the beauty of the forms (miniature Agnes Martins!). I saw them as a vernacular take on modernism and its paradigmatic structure – the grid. But, alas, they also constitute a chilling portrait of contemporary life in the post-industrial world. They represent the matrices that govern and discipline. When I began, I only collected forms I considered to be in dialogue with modernist abstract painting; later I included forms that didn't conform to that standard. If it was a form, I included it. I increasingly began to see myself as an anthropologist displaying cultural values.

The Grief images were of a different typology. They, above all the other collections, demanded to be brought together and displayed beyond their momentary lifespan. A dark lexicon of human gesture, these images related in surprising ways to figurative painting



Opposite:

Red River Valley
2021
Acrylic on wood panel
30.5 x 20.3 x 10.2 cm

Courtesy of the artist



(often with striking correspondences). And *The Grief* collection was not the only non-formal, image-related collection. There were other newspaper clipping collections, collections of faux food (life-size, 3D, polychrome realism), exercise equipment (my only virtual collection), rock-climbing handholds, and more.

AT: How did this period of collecting inform your studio practice?

RR: My painting always flirted with popular culture and material culture, but after the collection years, that tendency was amplified. I came to understand that my work had more in common with a modernist chair than a Baroque painting. I now aspire to make paintings that engage with the community of objects that includes West African fabric patterns, Zulu baskets, Navajo blankets, early American quilts, Day of the Dead masks, bird decoys, Shaker furniture, Indonesian bamboo fish traps, Prouvé chairs, George Ohr pots, Carlo Scarpa glassware, Japanese rice boxes, Luis Barragán houses, Raf Simons fashion, Cervélo racing bicycles, contemporary Ghanaian coffins, street fashion, and monster trucks. Despite this frame of mind, I haven't forgotten that one's work can't escape the history of all the paintings and artworks that ever existed – a thought that can drive one to distraction.

Another way collecting has informed my studio practice is that I've come to see my complete body of work as a collection. I've become hypersensitive to the fact that each painting represents a unique typology in a finite series.

AT: In your recent body of work made from 2003 onwards, you seem to have set a fairly consistent format. The works are relatively small scale, with the image wrapping the surface and a controlled colour palette often using two to three high-contrast colours which have a slightly institutional/utilitarian feel. Do you work in a systematic way when it comes to determining the actual

compositions? Or is this process of placing line and arriving at shapes more intuitive?

RR: I begin the small 3D polychrome paintings by working on panels that are identical in size and shape to the final paintings: these are essentially prototypes of paintings. I develop ideas as quickly as possible, and the prototypes change repeatedly. I use paint and colored tape to alter forms: whatever's fast – things get messy, and I usually paint only one side and the front, just enough for me to understand the painting in space. There is nothing systematic about the process. I follow ideas as they appear. Most get painted over, but it's pure joy when I'm totally surprised by where the painting has taken me. I photograph every stage in the process and have a large archive of the work in various stages – configurations I don't yet like or fully understand but may return to. When I find the painting – when it's right – I repaint it carefully on a new panel. I don't love this final part of the process – re-fabrication – but I believe it is necessary for the idea of the work to be read clearly and without any kind of interference or nostalgic patina. The first step of the process is the party, the second step is what the painting demands.

When I first began making the box-like paintings, I was immediately excited but thought “*They are so small, so reductive, I will make five and run out of options.*” What resulted was quite the opposite – every new painting suggested a dozen new ideas. My self-imposed limits released a flood of new and unfolding opportunities.

Despite their size and stark vocabulary, I see these paintings as playful and anti-heroic. They tap into the expansive 3D polychrome universe – product and package design, nature, architecture, popular culture, custom cars, and fashion. Over the years I have vacillated between the force fields of Mondrian and Duchamp, closer to one

Opposite:

The Deep End
2023
Acrylic on wood panel
30.5 x 20.3 x 10.2 cm

Courtesy of the artist



One Size Fits All
2021
Acrylic on wood panel
30.5 x 20.3 x 10.2 cm

Courtesy of the artist

sometimes, closer to the other sometimes. Now I want to be fearlessly retinal!

AT: You have recently written and had published a novel called *NoLab* in which the central character is a male artist who teaches. There seem to be some similarities here to your own career. For example, he makes abstract, minimal paintings that are described as ‘severe and reductive’, which seems to correspond with the geometric nature and limited colour palette of your recent work. This fictional artist is also returning to painting after a period of making a more conceptual body of work, and although the practice here is quite different to your own (i.e.

the fictional artist makes perception-altering pills whereas you developed a practice of collecting everyday items), there is still a parallel in the sense of taking a break and returning to painting. This makes me wonder, to what degree is the main character based on yourself?

RR: I do share a number of experiences and core beliefs with the main character, Ray Lawson. We both had conceptual practices and returned to painting later in life. Allowing Lawson and I to have certain commonalities enabled me to understand him better and helped me to get his feet planted firmly on the ground. However, Ray Lawson was not intended to be *me*. He doesn’t have my temperament. We are different in far more ways than we are alike. If I attempt to analyze this aspect of *NoLab*, I’d have to say that various aspects of myself have been dispersed amongst the characters: I share the director of *The Institute*’s belief in the significance of vernacular culture. I share the *NoLab collective*’s impatience with the status quo. And I probably have more in common, personality-wise, with the angry, buffoonish, sentimental co-protagonist, Victor Florian, than with any other character in *NoLab*.

AT: What motivated you to write a novel?

RR: It all started quite innocently. I taught at art schools and universities from 1979 to 2015. Much of my teaching involved working with postgraduate art students, and a number of those students incorporated aspects of performance, conceptual art, and relational aesthetics into their work. I must admit that I enjoyed and encouraged some of the more extreme student practices. Occasionally, an especially iconoclastic student would come all too close to performing an unethical or illegal action. When that occurred, I wondered what would happen if a student went too far – I mean *really* too far. This recurring thought was the inspiration for *NoLab*. In my imagination, I played with possible

scenarios for many years before I saw it as a novel and began to write.

Before *NoLab*, I’d written nonfiction: I co-wrote two design textbooks and co-edited the book *Beauty is Nowhere: Ethical Issues in Art and Design*. In 1999, I was invited to contribute an essay on critiques to the *Art Journal*, a publication of the College Art Association. I don’t know exactly what compelled me, but I wrote a satirical one-act play about a painting critique in lieu of the expected essay. It was titled *The Crit*. When it was published, it got a lot of attention, far more than any academic paper I’d ever written. It made me aware of the power of storytelling, and I suppose provided some motivation, almost two decades later, for my attempt to write a novel.

AT: The protagonist of *NoLab* describes his return to painting in a way that closely echoes the way you have spoken about your own return to painting in recent interviews, which I understood as enabled by a shift in your perception of the status of painting – like a kind of de-elevation or re-scaling of painting – that allows you to look at painting as a subculture.

Can you explain what you meant by the phrase “*subculture of painting*,” and expand on what might be necessary for a mode of art production like painting – which seems fairly mainstream due to its high cultural visibility – to realise a subculture or subcultures?

RR: Ray Lawson, speaking in this passage from *NoLab*, describes a bit of his history that is pretty much identical to my own:

“...I was deeply involved in theory and extremely critical of painting. Painting just couldn’t live up to its exalted status. I was a devotee of every other discipline: product and package design, architecture, custom cars, cooking, fashion, whatever. It now seems absurd to me that the one culture I flatly rejected was my own, the one I labored in for so long and knew so much about. Theory turned me away

from painting, but ironically, it also brought me home. Taking the anthropological view, I came to understand painting as just another practice, not the supreme human enterprise I once thought it to be. Yes, painting was just another subculture! Somehow, that little kernel of an idea became an incredibly liberating realization. It allowed me to return to painting and to fully embrace it, unapologetically, and with no holds barred.”

With a revitalized interest, fueled by conceptualism and informed by postmodern attitudes, I too, returned to painting.

I’m sure I’m guilty of distorting the definition of ‘subculture’, but basically, I use the term to describe the thousands of cultural activities available today (I mean culture in the anthropological sense). I see these activities as units, sub-units, or subcultures, all under the expansive umbrella of culture at large. And as hierarchies worldwide are increasingly being challenged, painting could only benefit from shedding its privileged status. Hey, painting is great, just as it is. It doesn’t need propping up.



Alaena Turner
Afterparty
2022
Acrylic and Jesmonite
on wood
20 x 30 x 5 cm

Courtesy of the artist