

## *Conversations Between a Painter and a Writer*

*What do you regard as the ideal environment for one of your paintings?*

In one sense, I think a perfect viewing might take place out of doors, and out of the city, particularly say by the sea, under a pale moon, the painting lashed to the rocks and scrub pine. In this instance many of the questions that surround the nature of abstraction would drop away. I believe that the reading of my work would become easy, as a clear manifestation of elemental nature and its forces. Underneath all of the code of abstraction, the paintings are really and essentially landscapes, whether aerial, or marine, or macro focus. I try to capture a sense of the sweep of the sky, the trick of light, the hard resistance of rock and field, and the beauty of night. Of course this is presented through a language of mine which is greatly indebted to the history of studio painting as well, and so I rely heavily on metaphor and title to help guide the viewer to a place of acceptance. But it's really all about what Bachelard considers 'the poetics of space'.

I suppose practically speaking I also find a quiet meditative installation to be a preferred ideal environment, such as a room in one's home that is given over to contemplative living or on an expansive gallery wall, on a quiet day. In these instances a slow emergence of form, colour and structure will begin to take hold of the viewer, and a relationship to the painting will unfold. The paintings have a slow release, revelations in this case take time. My favourite moments with other painters' works have always been when alone with a painting, or so caught within the creation, that one senses a kind of 'slowness', communion or sharing, and is not aware of the bustling world beyond the visual frame. And for certain, within four walls, the painting, as physical object, has the chance of a great long life, whereas out on the rocks, nature's winds would obviously break it down..... Nature giveth, and nature taketh away. But isn't that the perfect cycle of manifestations? Abstraction, like Nature, is paradoxical.

*On the whole, if your paintings were pieces of music, what kind of music would they be and why? As a corollary, if they were buildings, what kind of architecture? If they were food, what kind of cuisine?*

A passion for music has been a part of my life all of these years. So this is a difficult question, but as music hath charms to soothe the savage breast.....let's say "A Love Supreme" by John Coltrane.... I search for balance too much to be fixed on a particular music type, perhaps my paintings look like Aaron Copeland sounds, or Morton Feldman. But within the soundtrack of music, I hear the voices of my family, the simple joys and resilience of wife and daughter, friends. All of these voices are present in my paintings. And the voices of all who went before us and imparted wisdom, their words. Is this the music of our lives? To take it one step further, maybe it is the music of waves crashing on a beach, thunder or birdsong, the natural environment. And is there music for happiness? This would be something I would like to believe one could hear from my paintings.

There is I think a specific relationship of scales in the paintings to music. That is to say, if the painting is for example small, and its scale restrained or nuanced, then the musical landscape relative to this work would be more like the chime of a bell or a single chord played pianissimo, perhaps the fleeting whistle in the ears from a gentle breeze. As one embarks on larger sizes, pronounced scalar relationships between viewer and object ensue...well then you have a condition of being enveloped, and a comparable music for my paintings specifically, might be something like the modulations of an orchestra, or the transcendence of a Hard Bop quartet in high gear. This, at any rate, is what I would wish for the viewer.

As a corollary, if they were buildings, they would be enclosures, temples, chapels or tabernacles, sanctuaries within wilderness, away from the madness of society. And if food,.....a tourtiere or hearty Bolognese sauce...but hey, you're asking me to trans-substantiate my painting into a baguette....c'mon now! Ok here is the simple answer, which I'll stand by. If my paintings were food, they would actually be a selection of the finest Cotes Du Rhone wines, the blood of the Earth.

*Does our attitude to visual art change in order to adapt to its new directions, or does visual art change in order to adapt to the social circumstances in which it finds itself? Or both?*

Attitudes and art are mercurial, or like quicksand, constantly at the ready to move, thus changing our perspective and our relationship. I think that what is interesting is the relationship between art and circumstance, and by this I am referring to prevailing trends in the art world, the art market. Where do these circumstances leave the individual artist who remains true to his/her practice? We have seen in the past how seismic changes in 'social circumstance' have laid waste to entire movements in art, where recovering a sense of appreciation took much much longer than the average human lifespan. The French Revolution decimated Rococo for example, and World War I was a brutal force against all 'high culture' in Europe, understandably. But some people survive and adapt. Artists do adapt and from destruction, seeds are sown, and retrieval becomes a mission. The quick answer to your question is 'both'. Understanding of course that these observations are only aspects of a much broader, more generalized condition.

*Is everything we see in a picture a sign, as in something signified by a signifier, or is it rather simply a formal carrier of energy? Or both?*

Everything we see in a picture has the potential of being a sign, inasmuch as it may be signified by a derivative, a context of meaning that has been applied to it. Otherwise the 'thing' is floating, open to negotiation or interpretation. Textual readings are I suppose, carriers of energy, though very possibly a different energy than that inscribed by the painter. A picture will be a manifestation of energy, that which made it, that which imbued it with life. As such all pictures are carriers, with numinous emotive qualities. At the end of the day, the painting remains simply the authentic object, while the derivative becomes the carrier and signifier.

*You have characterized abstraction as "the factual language of the invisible" which I think it clearly is, however is there some manner in which a Vermeer or a Chardin might also be a vehicle for documenting that domain? If so, how?*

If one thinks about Vermeer for example, to characterize those paintings as an inherently 'factual language of the invisible' may be perhaps a worthwhile consideration, inasmuch as there is content in those works which lay under the cloak of time. We are no longer privy to the meaning of some of the visual tropes employed by Vermeer, and assimilated by his contemporaries. In this way, there is a semiotic structure which we have adapted, and only partially understood as it may have been in his time. But the real difference here, between what I am getting at, and something like a Vermeer, has to do with representation and intent. To make it more clear, perhaps think of his paintings as figurative mimetic representations of daily life within his personal environment. And I should indulge for a moment and say exquisitely painted representations they are. And yet, that is a different state from the one I am concerned with. "The Factual Language of the Invisible" is a term I have coined to address specifically painted abstraction. Now yes, you could say that there is a degree of this quality within the works of Vermeer or Chardin, and if you get in close for a look, it becomes apparent, you would not be wrong. But as I am considered a 'conventional abstractionist' I am trying to come to terms with the considered readings of an obscured vocabulary, that which I employ.

The codification within each painting is evolved from, and as I said before indebted to, late 19th and 20th Century advents or advances in studio painting, movements within Surrealism and existential automatism, abstract expressionism and in general, a modernist ethos. But again, if you carried one of my paintings down to the beach and set it up against the shoreline and the sky, the reading would become natural, easy. The language would become obvious and clear, the fact made visible. The term also suggests of course, the presence of unknowing, of mystery. But this is another strand. Really, I think the problem is that we engage with these things through an urban scrim, but are looking for something so far beyond all this. That thing is embedded in the work. It may take a while to be received.

*Is there an inner idea in your work which persistently struggles toward visualization? and how much of that struggle do you see as a balance between the visible and that which cannot be represented?*

Yes, most definitely, and people do not necessarily like to accept the idea. It is that security is an illusion, and that is OK! We are going to be alright. I try to connect people with something much more profound than our little lives.....I want them to have a glimpse into the darkness and come back out with the realization that life truly is beautiful, that it's ok not to have the answers, in fact to be as open as possible is our best option. This is precisely why I am moved by abstraction.

Because of its great elemental and numinous condition, we are reminded and humbled by the big MYSTERY. It is only the questions that matter, that keep us alive. I wouldn't give you much for an answer to these things. That is a speculator's market, a fool's podium. My pictures are a collision of sorts, between the conjuring of elemental landscape and the prospect of the mirror, the image of self, a portrait of my thoughts.....the search. Can that be represented successfully? I think so. History has given us many examples over time.

*Can anything/everything be re-presented if we define paintings as carriers of energy which merely make use of forms in order to express something which could not be expressed otherwise?*

If I understand the question, then in the most generalized sense the answer is yes, there is the potential for anything/everything to be found within the 'world' of painting, as paintings are carriers of any possibility. But more accurately; to pull this sweep back into a specific context, one has to consider the reality of one artist/one painting and the interdependency of that relationship during the act of making a painting. Then my response becomes more stringent. There are of course many layers to the reading of a work, but for the painter there is fundamentally only one thing being represented in the painting, and that is a true, even if unintended, representation of the artist creator. First and foremost, paintings are mirrors, and reflect their maker.

This is why when for example, we look at a Morandi, we do not think initially about Italy, or what the bottles were in a previous incarnation, what pigments were available or what Morandi's position was with regard to modernism. We think about Morandi, we wonder what he was like. And there is a part of us that believes that these small gems hold a soft light on the man himself. And one may consider, how purposive is that? We are present within our painting. We cannot escape our hands' work. It is the artist who cannot otherwise express him/herself.

*One painter, Helmut Federle, characterized yours as a profession in which you attempt to channel energy in a meaningful manner. Is that a good job description?*

I'm not sure that it defines the job description accurately. Federle is a fine painter and I think he would stop for a moment and consider this. The 'Laws of Thermodynamics' have something to say about energy. It is forever present, channeled and transformative. And so sure we are in a sense channelers, and perhaps even channelers of meaning. I think that for serious painters, there is a sense of wanting, trying to transmit or elucidate meaning through the paintings. In this way I believe a painter would like to be able to go to bed at night, having contributed something to the meaning of life in this world. But this is somehow more a question of faith. All bets are off when it comes to certainties. Like everyone else, painters are just trying to figure it out. The one difference about their job description, is that they have in their possession a Rosetta Stone, and that is the history to which they owe everything, and with which they may change the way we see the world

*You've stated that, "The formal vocabulary of abstraction and the elements of composition combined in my work both attempt to render visible a metaphor for all that which eludes us: the infinite and our relationship to it." What would you say is our relationship to the infinite?*

We have an awareness of our own unknowing, a beautiful irony, a plague that makes us special. Perhaps we are the cause and the result of the infinite, neither at the beginning nor the end, we are lost, and like life itself we contain the mystery. We are the children of God and God is our illusion. Reason is constructed upon a myriad of social contracts. Reality as we perceive it, is based upon the conservancy of these contracts...civilization is the overview. But if you could somehow travel far beyond the distant stars, which we see and know are out there, all of the artifice of what we hold to be real and true, would crumble and fall away. I think we should find some humility when it comes to the infinite. And gratitude. We live in protection from the void. There seems to be some form of mercy at work here, that allows us to preoccupy ourselves with ourselves. So our relationship with the infinite I would have to say is precarious, and precious. Also I would like to say for the record, that we should not be afraid. The meaning may elude us, but there is great reassurance in the astonishing grace and beauty of it all.

*You have mentioned that “The irony of my work is that if it were taken outdoors into the countryside, one would see it for what it really is: a picture representing mysterious Mother Nature and her infinite boundary, a picture with simple and perfect similitude.” Does this mean that Nature itself is abstract but we fail to notice?*

I think that it means that Nature itself is not abstract. Rather Nature is our baseline standard for everything we may ever hope to understand. Nature just is, right? We question it and our place in it. All abstraction stems from this questioning. But Nature has no questions, or answers, for us. Nature just is and will always be. The Nature of tectonic plates, a hummingbird’s wingbeat or an old growth forest, is one and the same Nature as that which wheels the moons around Jupiter or causes firestorms on the sun. There is no abstraction there. Abstraction is our mind at play; our wonderfully imaginative attempts to articulate the mystery of the infinite. And nowhere is this more in evidence than in the history of art. But ultimately, we are drawn to the infinite like some magnificent gravity. We have no choice. We want it and need it. My job, as a painter is to try to offer glimpses, set up portals, conjure journeys, celebrate the mystery.

*You have remarked that “The title “Post-America” is a riddle, as is “Zencrusher”, one which could mean life after America, with America sailing off into the sunset. I realize that there is a cast or complexion in my work which is subtly political by nature, and yet it is clearly not about politics or social issues, but it is about consciousness.” How should the viewer best interpret your titles?*

I use titles as triggers or wayfinders. And yes, many of my titles could be thought of as koans. But it is also like naming a child. If done with great care the name will easily inhabit the ‘haunts’ of the painting. The painting in turn will readily be accepted and addressed by its title. This is an act of serious responsibility, to name a painting. Some choose to leave works untitled, to name them ‘Untitled’, but I have no use nor little respect for this.

I prefer to give the viewer an entry point which is textual, in the written tradition, an assist if you like, to help them enter the realm of visual language. If my titles are the closest I get to poetry, then I am satisfied. For me, these names are the very words of a painting’s entitlement. Zencrusher is NOT ‘that painting over there’. It is Zencrusher over there! So they should be interpreted as declarations, seductions, navigational charts and introductions.....the inducements of poetry.

*We both appear to share the notion that art can reveal, or at least contribute to discerning the meaning of life. Does the meaning of life therefore change for a painter, or a writer, or a musician, or is the meaning exactly the same for all but is expressed either in visual shapes, audible sounds or linguistic terms?*

Meaning.....’meaning’ is the golden egg, nested high atop an Osprey’s tower. It is not ours to reach, The perceived complexities in life would suggest that life’s meaning must be a rather complicated affair, something that will undoubtedly take many years of research and service to comprehend. But I suspect that the ‘truth’ of the matter is actually quite simple, and in fact the truth is not revealed to us in the form of a carefully calculated response.



Rather the meaning of it all resides in the nature of simple questions that we've all had....."What are the stars?"..... no answer required. I think that the fact that we are filled with wonder, this is the tell, this is the evidence, this is alive. Like has always been said, it's not the destination, it's the journey!

In this respect, artists are no different than anyone else. Painters do not carry a VIP pass to the meaning lounge. But what painters can do, and this is, I believe, the highest order of calling for an artist, is to create moments when an individual, alone in this world, can find solace and comfort, or joy and reassurance, and especially a sense of belonging, a sense of understanding.....simply by having communion with a work of art. People Like Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko, or Robert Motherwell for example, believed that the essential purpose of all great art was to bring dignity to the human experience. Now that is a tall order, but one worth striving for. I think I would have to say that for the artist, and this is clearly not all artists, actually only the few.....I think that the practice of artistic engagement, especially over the long term, can bring a person very very close to the truth of life. To get back to an earlier question, this is perhaps what Federle was thinking about with the notion of channeling energy. And where would meaning be sought out, were it not for cultures, religions, the arts?

As an aside, I remember hearing something on the radio a few weeks back with regard to World War II and Winston Churchill. At the height of the Blitzkrieg, when London and its surrounding environment was being brutally assaulted, night after night.....well Churchill had gathered all of his Ministers into conference to talk strategies for survival. Many were suggesting, even demanding that all aspects of Cultural funding for Great Britain be drained from the coffers and redirected into supporting the war effort, this essentially leaving the arts dead and buried in England. After consideration of this dramatic proposal Churchill looked at his ministers and responded, "Then what would be the point?"

If our existence is the signified and the question of meaning the signifier, then together, and only together, you have the sign of life.