

Robert Bordo in conversation with Cameron Martin
Brooklyn, New York, December 2012

CM: Just before we started recording, you were saying that in relationship to your previous work, these new paintings have a quality of being "loaded."

RB: What I was referring to is how the paintings have become more figurative, or developed through imagery. The new paintings came from an interest in looking back and also thinking about the current painting revival and interest in Abstract Expressionism. I've been thinking about that and re-reading Beat poetry, especially Ginsberg, who meant a great deal to me as a young gay man, and Kerouac. I've been thinking about both "On The Road" and "The Road," Cormac McCarthy's desolate novel from a few years back. These thoughts were sparked by driving back and forth from upstate to the city, being on the road, taking in those highway vistas. Driving is time for me to reflect and imagine what I will do in the studio when I get upstate, and what I've done when I leave.

The first painting of this series, *Rear View* started with the thought of using a mirror to look backwards, a kind of retrospective looking, a way of compressing time, and also as a metaphor for experiences in my life and in my painting. I liked the idea of looking backwards into a landscape of an abstracted field in the rain. It coalesced as an image for some ideas about landscape and memory that have been the underpinning of my project for the past 25 years.

CM: As much as I see these new paintings as a departure for you, I don't feel that imagery or representation is an entirely new phenomenon in your work. I have never thought of you as being exclusively an abstract painter. You have had a relationship to landscape for quite some time, and there has regularly been a kind of push and pull between figuration and abstraction. Maybe with this new work, you have embraced representation more explicitly, but it's not entirely novel.

RB: No, it isn't. I think that the previous paintings were much more measured about how and what representations could come into the pictures. Actually, for the past 10 or 15 years, the paintings have been a hybrid of abstraction and representation. They've also been charged with metaphors about ecology, weather, location and climate, both social climate and psychological climate. But somehow these new paintings were structured through images, and they became more explicit and personally revelatory.

CM: This past summer I felt a political charge in seeing some of your new work, something that I hadn't necessarily picked up on before. That feeling was informed in part by seeing the wall of drawings that you had done, studies for what became... sorry, I don't remember the name of the painting...?

RB: Oh, well, actually we called it all sorts of things, but it's now called *Mogul*. A mogul in ski language is something that usually has snow on it-- it's a lot of fun to ski over, but when the snow melts, it's actually a manmade sculptural protrusion, almost figurative. I was thinking about the pile in the painting as a kind of naked cartoon landscape. After all, the palette is brown and green and you don't see a lot of brown and green, except in English painting and maybe in Persian painting and Indian miniatures. I was also thinking a lot about the heaviness of the social and political atmosphere that we've been living since 2008. So *Mogul* refers to a rich man and also to a pile of mud, to a morass. The limited dark palette based in greens and browns is a subjective palette that's been reduced to basic signifiers of landscape.

CM: How do you feel the color refers to a social climate?

RB: Well, because I think green refers to nature and is also commonly used in the culture to signify various local food movements, ecology and environmental groups, etc. I do live upstate after all (laughs)! Brown is the predominant color of fall and spring, and in the most obvious way brown refers to mud and shit.

CM: Dirt.

RB: --and to dirt, and to a morass and to a place that most artists do not want to be in. Working in the mud, painting muddy paintings, dealing with the emotions surrounding muddiness... to me, those became metaphors that I wanted to work with because I was feeling a tremendous amount of anxiety coming from the outside world into the studio-- the recession, the election, even the situation at Cooper Union-- now that's a morass! I was working upstate last year in a kind of isolation and with cabin fever - things became exaggerated and heightened, which is very useful for making expressive paintings (laughs)! I was watching the news and reading newspapers and blogs online about this dramatic polarization in the country, and I was reminded of the repression of the '50's and the beginning of the New York School. Even though I didn't experience it, certainly my parents' generation did. I kept hearing in the language of the conservative media an echo of the strident, threatening language from that earlier period. It was also provocative to me how the current abstract painting revival seems to be promoting a mediated, reduced design version of what was once deeply felt. So I kept coming back to the basic idea of digging in the mud of painting, painting and scraping in relation to the metaphor of the earth and to an existential landscape, sort of like a Beckett stage set.

CM: Can you tell me about this other painting with the X?

RB: I called it *Joy Ride* because I see it as a reckless painting on some level. The X through the surface of the painting is quite teenage-- it felt like a drunken joy ride through the painting.

CM: Were you negating the painting with the X?

RB: Not really. The X was a freeing, funny and satiric gesture. The stop signs in the painting are six-sided, which I did in a completely unconscious moment. I thought, "Oh, I should put a stop sign in this painting," and instead of putting an eight-sided stop sign, I just did whatever came to mind. It was very childlike and kind of embarrassing, in a way. I drove to town a few hours later and noticed (after 30 years of driving) that the stop signs had *eight* sides. It was a kind of strange revelation that I had put a six-sided stop sign in my painting. Then I looked online to see if there were any six-sided stop signs in the world, and the only place I could find them was were in Manitoba, which is kind of strange...

CM: ...given your Canadian heritage....

RB: ...but I've never been to Winnipeg or Manitoba.

CM: That's funny.

RB: And then when I was having studio visits during the summer, people kept seeing the work as a funny resistance to authority. There was an expressive breaking of my own internal rules in the paintings. Not that the paintings are radical *per se*, but the logic in the paintings would break down and a voice of insolent protest or confession would happen, and I would let it stay.

- CM: Was that a resistance to rules that you had set up for yourself in previous paintings?
- RB: No, I think it's actually a resistance to rules that I've internalized over a life of painting.
- CM: I guess that's what I meant.
- RB: The paintings refer to touch and to space, and I was also thinking about Cezanne. It really surprised me when I realized that I had incorporated ideas of painting that were key to me as a student. But now those ideas appear as tropes of reduction, not so much about observing the physical landscape, but more about either internal space or a social landscape.
- CM: I think your use of the word "morass" is interesting. Talking about the mud-- to me, that's an indication of a murky kind of space that isn't necessarily entirely articulate.
- RB: Right.
- CM: And yet these paintings seem to be as articulate as anything you've produced within the last ten years in a way. By wading through the morass you ended up with something quite eloquent.
- RB: Even though I think the paintings are lucid, I have been really pissed off and worried about where painting is in our culture. So I hope they have a dark attitude about them to, along with a humor too. To get to these metaphors was hard. I had to go through some very difficult internal narratives to get to these paintings.
- CM: I can't help but feel that the *Mogul* painting serves as a kind of cornerstone, which grounds the rest of the work.
- RB: I think that's right. I'm still not done with these images. The drawings that I've been making to develop the paintings are a tremendous resource, constantly reminding me how deep the well of imagery can be. My work has always gone back and forth between paintings that seem to be signature, then off on a tangent, and then back again with a new version. I like to work with a whole ensemble of different images circling a theme.
- What I like about *Mogul* is that it's naked; it has a graphic quality but it's also very painted. This other painting, *The Hill*, is similar in composition but it's completely covered with a lush surface and brushstrokes, so I see it as clothed. The only thing menacing are the flecks of black. I painted it after the very first painting of this group, *Rear View*, as a simplified take on the field in *Rear View*.
- CM: I think the black painting, with its nearly all-over composition, operates in a similar way.
- RB: That painting, *Persian Lamb*, is like a wild tree that's being thrown around in a violent storm. It also refers to a vivid existential experience of a few summers ago, when I was painting on the west coast of Ireland. I kept hearing the sounds of crows at night as I was walking through the town of Ballycastle. The sounds that the crows made were like mocking sounds - a cacophony of language, babble, taunts and cries. It seemed to me to be social commentary in a Joycean way but also I took it personally as if the crows were mocking my painting and me. And so again, an image of an internal dialogue converted into a visual subject in abstract painting.

CM: You said something in a previous conversation about how you were interested in trying to articulate a kind of hybridization of the emotional and what you see as being the social. Is that a way of refiguring some of the possible pitfalls or clichés of Expression?

RB: Well, I don't see myself as an Expressionist.

CM: I don't either. But there is a relationship.

RB: I am an observer, and the observations that I work on get filtered through social commentary, politics and my emotional experiences. I can't really make work unless the imagery is sparked by some metaphor. Painting for me is a fiction, and my paintings reflect the current stories running around my brain. It's the relationship between the external and the internal, when ignited, a juggling act between material practice and metaphor. It's often triggered by something everyday. The drive back and forth from my house upstate to Brooklyn was a big cinematic narrative last winter, and being provoked by the media - watching Bill Maher, Rachel Maddow or TV news.

As an educator, I see a shift towards the removal of an expressive self from art, a shift towards an academic mediated identity. But I am interested in the argument between the responsible, conscious observing self and the subjective poetic visual self. There is an inner life that is constantly trying to negotiate existence, history, aesthetics, syntax, and most importantly for me, the language of the next painting.

CM: Many of these paintings potentially present a sort of barrier or impasse to the viewer- there's something that is being obscured, whether it's whatever is in the background of a landscape, or the X where we're really being told this is where it stops. Even the black painting, or a windshield wiper painting...one can't help but think that there is something behind whatever is being presented as this kind of scrim in the front.

RB: With the windshield wiper paintings, there is a going into and through the space. I think that's what you're referring to as the scrim. The other side is a place seen as a result of the windshield wiper revealing the picture plane.

CM: Right.

RB: The surface is a landscape that acts as a *mise en scene* or a set-up, so that a way to look is established.

CM: The windshield wiper painting, *Dial*, is a provocative painting to think about in terms of interiority and exteriority, because it's not entirely clear as a viewer whether you're meant to be inside the car or outside.

RB: Well, both, because the space around the windshield wiper contains the atmosphere, the torrid, funny clouds and shadows, menacing but comic weather, and black dots, which often refer in my paintings to rain or anxiety. Then the windshield wiper is a mechanism which works somewhat independently of this figurative logic. That's the way that my paintings are both psychological *and* imagistic, working abstractly as thought and as an almost cinematic event. I think a lot of them have two things going on, clarity and then also doubt and dilemma. In a way, I see the more abstract qualities of the paintings as the set-ups, where moments of clarity can take place.

CM: Maybe the barriers I was thinking of before come out of an emphasis on foreground in the paintings.

- RB: The emphasis on the foreground is to set up pictorial space in relation to an insistent frontality. The surfaces are dimensional, but also, quite tightly calibrated and spatial, in relation to the grid, and closely attuned to the surface of the picture plane
- CM: When you say "tightly calibrated," do you mean "tight" in terms of what's actually being pictured? How do you mean tight?
- RB: Well, a good example is evident in the *Persian Lamb* painting. The blackness of the painting creates a volume, and yet the volume is also very flat. The only way that you can get to see the volume is through the slight, very small green reveals at the bottom of the painting. If I were to move the paint all the way off the edges, it would be a color field painting, but that's not happening. The black surface is threatening to take over the surface completely and the reveal of the green plane underneath creates an almost naturalistic horizon, or the sensation of lying under a tree as the wind pummels it. There's a tension between something that one can see in nature and one can experience, and then also, something that is the phenomenon that abstract painting is really all about, the making of space in a very tight configuration, a two-dimensional space.
- CM: What you just said seems like it is the essence of what you're after right now.
- RB: I like when the paintings appear really simple and disturbing and then they open up and deep space is evident That's something that I'm continually interested in. I like the tension between a deep space and a very, very flat space. I think that they all have that on some level.
- CM: Maybe that's a different way of stating what I was talking about with this idea of a barrier or blockage. There is a sense that there is volume that's created, but in many of them it's with the barest indication. So while there is volume, you're also confronted with something that is completely frontal.
- RB: Yes, frontal, that's my modernism (laughs)! Frontality for me is having a painting really function through two places of structure, something that's spatial and even representational, and the insistence that it come back to the flat space of the picture plane. But when you say blockage that kind of makes me think the paintings are blocked.
- CM: I mean "blocked" more in the sense of what's not entirely available, what's hidden, rather than "blocked" in the sense of being stopped up. I think that the fact that there is something under the surface is actually part of what makes the paintings psychological. There is something that is being obscured. That might be how that kind of interiority and exteriority bounces back and forth in your work.
- RB: Well, that's maybe why they're not expressionistic... maybe they're very formal or really repressed (laughs). I'm not sure, but I do think about the way that abstraction represses representation. Abstract painting generalizes or edits specific representational meaning, and compresses spaces and surface into visual meaning. This is incompatible with literal, expressive, representational content.
- CM: When one talks about something being psychological, it seems that there's inherently a level of repression that's at play there.
- RB: Yes.
- CM: Your intonation suggests that you are interpreting that as slightly pejorative, but I don't see it that way.

- RB: I think repression is often meant as a pejorative.
- CM: The way you're talking about it, it sounds like you're a little afraid of copping to having a repressive aspect to the paintings, but I think that's part of what gives them the charge we talked about earlier.
- RB: Maybe it's because I've been building an argument for some time that repression is a way to instrumentalize meaning in painting.
- CM: Can you explain?
- RB: I think that repression is actually a great old fossil fuel, an internal fuel, especially if you're working through poetics and practice. The repression of an image and the pushing of it through these kinds of reductions, to the point where it becomes internal to the logic of the painting—that is really what I'm after. Like in the windshield wiper paintings, the rear-view paintings or the mounds, I am revealing my motivations by how and what I'm looking at-- literally thinking about looking backwards at life and my painting history as I'm getting older; this is an autobiographical part of my life that I can't help but turn to as a reason to make paintings. At the same time, I don't really want make paintings strictly about a narrative of that, but rather *around* it, the *sensation* of it. And so, in a sense, I'm repressing the explicit narrative to arrive at a more abstract meaning, one that is evocative and charged, but open for the viewer to complete.
- CM: I'm glad you're not scared of repression.
- RB: I've been thinking about repression mainly because I've been so interested in abstraction. I see abstraction, especially historical abstraction, as being a language of compression, a language that gets rid of narrative and more figurative meaning. I happen to love certain figural content in painting, especially Hartley, Soutine and Beckmann, but I equally love the reduction that takes place in American Modernist painting. I like those two tendencies so much, in a sense I try to create a tension between them. I hope it's a tension between a kind of emotional content and a reduced philosophical delivery system. Repression is very important in this process. I don't feel that it's a negative thing. I think it's actually a platform for sublimation, which is something that I think works really well for painters-- to be surprised when something pops out and demands to take center stage in a painting, I really do think that is the fire in the belly for many great painters. I mean, Guston went to extremes, but still he holds back. He creates in his paintings a metaphoric screen that prevents an out-and-out confession. Though I like the confessional.... I think that's pretty important too.
- CM: A trace of the confessional.
- RB: Yes, maybe a trace of the confessional. Despite our supposedly total, unbridled freedom, the confessional is one of the things that we're very afraid of in contemporary art. Most contemporary art is extraordinarily repressed-- though it freely uses text, popular culture, media, and photography as its mode of representation, all the various norms of insane American society, the spectacle of American society-- it's still somewhat repressed.