



Jeff McMillan in conversation with Darian Leader

D: Before talking about your show at Peer, could you say something about how you first started making work?

J: If you want to go way back, when I was seven years old I won a blue ribbon in the county fair. I think it set up a whole chain of events, where I was encouraged and after that I always did a bit of art and drawing and eventually I went on to study art at university.

D: What had you made to win?

J: You know I haven't thought about it for years. I made a chalk pastel drawing of three trees, and a river and some mountains in the distance. In fact it looked like one of these paint-by-numbers landscapes! I did it in an art class in the community centre where I grew up in Texas. I drew a lot as a teenager and became very good at copying images and I took every art class that was available. But looking back, my approach was fairly tight and controlled and when I went to university I mostly did printmaking.

D: And your encounter with paint?

J: I never properly engaged with oil paint until my early twenties. In 1991 after finishing my BFA, I wanted to travel, so I worked and saved a bit and went to Europe and that included London where I visited the Tate. I saw a show by Gerhard Richter, and it completely floored me. In a way, I didn't even know what I was looking at. I remember staying in the show for hours, and going back and forth from photo-realist paintings to grey monochromes to those large squeegeed abstracts. I filed that show away in my head and went back to the States and applied to graduate school where I knew I wanted to concentrate on painting.

D: What do you think it was in those Richters?

J: Richter appeals to your heart as well as your head, there's something very sensuous about his work that I could identify with. He was finding valid reasons to make paintings in a world of photography. For me it was also about the realisation that a painting isn't just a picture. Once you've made that leap of appreciating a painting for its uniqueness, you can even appreciate the mistakes as well. I think it opened the door for me to look not just at contemporary painters in the art magazines but also at paintings by amateurs and self-taught artists. And it affected the work I was making. I had a collection of thrift store paintings and work by outsiders that I was accumulating before I moved to the UK.

D: Did the move affect your work?

J: Definitely. It was a big shift moving here from the US in 1998. I saw it more or less as an opportunity to start over. I wanted to be really reductive and to not begin with a white canvas or have to make a decision about what to paint. I didn't even want to use a paintbrush. I was thinking of putting an object directly into paint and I remember

seeing a box in my street and recognizing that it had potential. Once I splayed out the edges and put it on a wall, it immediately had a sort of elevation about it. Those works hover between painting and sculpture and reference high minimalist work like Donald Judd, yet they're also very low-fi, a totally inexpensive and a simple way of making a painting.



D: What is the process with the box pieces?

J: Once I had found a box with the right proportions and not too battered up, I would pour out a pool of house paint and press the box down straight into it then and lift it out as cleanly as I could. This process tends to make an envelope-type X-shape, I think it's something to do with the viscosity. It's not too mechanical, but it's not a signature brush style either, it's somewhere in between.

Patch, 2003
Paint on found cardboard, 78 x 98 x 12 cm

D: And how did that lead into working with found paintings?

J: Well, I have for years and years gone to thrift stores in the States and over here to boot sales and bought second hand paintings. A few years ago I bought a painting in a market in Battersea. It cost £5 and it was a portrait, probably from the 1950s, of a woman in a dress with a white set of pearls. She was like an attractive motherly figure.... This sounds Freudian doesn't it?

(Laughter)

D: Pearls are important! And with these works you avoided totally obscuring the underlying image?



J: I had worked out that there was a point of tension or potential where you could see the pearl necklace but not the face. The dipped paintings are about finding that line or that point, about how much of the original image you see, what colour sits on top of it, the quality of the paint that it's been pushed into. It is critical because there is just this single, direct action, which defines the work. After that, it is literally waiting for paint to dry. In the case of that painting, *Perla*, it took about 18 months because I hadn't used additives that make oil dry more quickly.

Perla, 2003
Oil on found painting, 51 x 40 cm

D: What does that process involve for you?

J: On the one hand it's radically altering another artist's painting, and on the other hand it's about creating an all-new picture. On the surface is what we all recognize as a painting, the image, and of course it's meant to go in a frame so it's white on the sides and the nails show. But by sticking it in a tub of paint, you shatter that and reclaim it as an object, and I love the idea that it is both things at the same time. It's also about collapsing history or merging two histories. It's interesting working in England because you come across paintings from the early 20th or even 19th century. If you dip a painting from a certain time, you add to it a monochromatic field that is very present, and at least for now what we might call 'contemporary'.

D: It's very interesting, the idea of merging two histories, and presumably that's also a part of your painting by numbers works.

J: I think there are a few levels at play here. Painting by numbers were originally sold in the 1950s and '60s as a kit, where you got two pictures with a set of paints. I began to collect these because I noticed that if you put enough of them together you could build up a continuous epic landscape that might echo those massive 19th century American nature paintings, by painters like Bierstadt and Church. I had seen those paintings in the Tate a few years ago in a show called the *American Sublime*. But beyond the historical, I think it has contemporary analogies as well, such as how collectively these anonymous sources get put together to make a whole, which is basically how a lot of the Internet works, like Wikipedia. Digital photography is pixilated, and this work is pixilated too with hundreds of individual paintings. Even within one single painting, you've got all these very particular designated areas that are painted one colour, say number 13 yellow ochre...



The Possibility of an Island 2009, found paintings, installation view (detail)

D: When one sees the collection of painting by numbers works that you've made, one of the very moving things about them is the way that they embody the aspirations, even dreams, of so many individual lives. What had each of those works meant for them? Had they meant a step towards being a painter for some?

J: I don't know. I think a lot of the time they were made by older people, or possibly teenagers. You just get little glimpses sometimes on the back of them, where they lived or who they were. I originally collected them from thrift stores but now I get them on eBay and the majority come from the northern US or from Canada, cold weather places. It must have been a winter activity. You can imagine it, pre-internet and very limited television...

D: Can you say something about the way that you've organised these images?

J: The more I worked on them the more I recognized the eye seems to crave something that visually makes sense. But I wanted it to remain abstract and not become a simple landscape. The winter scenes are in the centre, so it's mostly white and there is a deadness at its core. But there's also a seasonal transition that happens as it stretches out to the right wall, to become much more green, like late summer, early fall. If you think of it as a landmass, it is like a continent of pictures with a narrow bridge from one wall to the other. The title *The Possibility of an Island*, which is an appropriation, like most of my titles, might evoke this landmass floating on a gallery wall, but also a kind of condition, a solitary person, an artist let's say, at work on their own. And I like the flip of it being the macro and the micro.

D: The flip is also at the level of abstract and concrete: you've made something very abstract from some very concrete elements, yet at the same time these elements are abstract in the sense of pure forms. It also has a sublime effect, yet created from the least sublime, humble starting point: small-scale, copied images.

J: I think that comes from the scale, the fact that it's almost panoramic. I realized some time ago that it would require a huge number of paintings in order to become significant, but it has taken a long time to come together. I probably got the first paint by numbers about 15 years ago in a thrift store, but I've been collecting very regularly for the last 4 or 5 years on the Internet.

D: Just as the paint by numbers works removed authorship, since one was just following instructions, here the installation questions the place of the painter. There's a kind of subtraction.

J: There is a conceptual line for me, which has to do with an ever more reductive approach. Years ago, I was using large brushes trying to get looser and looser. And that ultimately led to not using a brush at all, just putting the thing in the paint. It's like a linear progression. And at some point I was actually interested in seeing if I could do without even opening up a tube of paint. I am intrigued to make paintings, possibly really large paintings by simply selecting and editing existing paintings in a particular way.

D: The other works in the show use found paintings, but now with the image almost totally covered. Is this the same logic of subtraction?

J: It's curious, when I first submerged a painting in 2004 the idea of putting the entire face into the paint seemed like a step too far. But now I find it interesting. There's a kind of faith involved between myself and the viewer about what was there to begin with. I've called these paintings *Full On*, which is more or less a description of how the work has been made. The result is a monochrome, though technically speaking that might not be correct, sometimes a bit of the painting underneath is visible too.



Full On (Boy with Blue Shirt), 2009
Oil on found painting, 46 x 36 cm

D: These works establish a real dialogue with the painting by numbers piece, as if they were both forms of the sublime. What do they share?

J: Well, I think the sublime is a really interesting territory. I think if this works, you are taken in by this vast landscape. Maybe both the paint by numbers and the *Full On* paintings revert to a type. If you give in to it, you are giving in to the grandness of giant nature paintings or let's say the beauty of pure colour, then you have succumbed to a monochrome – though I think both of them have a built-in uncertainty.

D: So they both privilege the idea of a type, not just a representation but a representation of what representation is all about. By pushing the very artificiality of that, it gives you access to something even more real.

J: I think with both series of works, you're acknowledging something you already know, and yet you surrender to it. I think it's the same with the monochromes. You've seen Klein, and Fontana, and Ryman, so when you see another one, you are prepared, maybe even conditioned to revel in its pure colour or surface. And simultaneously, what I like is that it's not just a monochrome, underneath is a portrait of a man in a cricket jumper. It ruptures the purity and becomes more ambiguous.

D: It's not just a representation of nature, it's a representation of a representation of nature, or, in the monochromes, a representation of a representation of paint. So you've got a purity that's shared in both..

J: Both kinds of works are twice removed. And what's more they're both the same distance away.

D: Yes, there is a kind of beauty in its symmetry.

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