

SAMUEL JABLON & STEFAN BONDELL
In Conversation with Bob Holman

BOB HOLMAN (RAIL): So which came first, the painting or the poem?

SAMUEL JABLON: I started off in poetry, and the painting started about the time I met you, Bob, which was at Naropa University, like 10 years ago. And it started evolving into: How can poetry change? How can it move outside of just a poetry reading? How can you really bring it into different environments? It was becoming these performance projects that were way out in the street, or more guerrilla-inspired, and then they sort of moved into sculptures and then into paintings.

RAIL: How did you start painting?

JABLON: My mom was a painter, so I had grown up in studios since I was 5. At one point I wanted to have one practice. Instead of a poetry practice and an art practice, I wanted to combine them. So that was the beginning. How can poetry become more in the art world, more of an installation or more of a painting, more of an experience?

RAIL: Do you remember how that got started? What were your first paintings?

JABLON: I guess it was in grad school. I was working a lot with Vito Acconci and Archie Rand at the time, and—

RAIL: “Working with them” means?

JABLON: Just talking with them. Having conversations about taking poetry into a different medium. Or how you can start off somewhere and end somewhere completely different. That’s kind of where it started. For the first painting, I started taking bits of mirror and glass and glued them onto a canvas—making mirrors and glass create the words and language. The mirror also pulls in everything that’s in the room, so it’s really reflected and really hard to read and becomes this visual thing that grabs an entire room and brings everything that’s in front of you right into the painting.

RAIL: So you actually started off in poetry and then moved into painting. Was it the same progression for you, Stefan?

STEFAN BONDELL: No. I would say I’ve been writing poems and making paintings since I was a baby, and in some ways I don’t think I really ever started because it was something I’ve always done. Like I’ve drunk water my whole life, not to be cliché, but I really don’t remember even when I started writing poems and making paintings, and I still have a lot of my childhood paintings in my possession.

RAIL: Sounds like Mrs. Picasso.

BONDELL: Some of my best work is from when I was 10. [Laughs at 10-year-old self.] I made 4-by-4-foot

paintings at the age of 10, at camp. That seemed so large to me based on the size of my body, and all I wanted to make were big paintings when I was a kid because at home I was only allowed to work on little pieces of paper. It’s funny because when I look at my 10-year-old works—I took them out maybe a year or two ago—they look very much like the work I make today. You can see the path hasn’t changed that much.

RAIL: So describe one of these early works for our viewing audience.

BONDELL: Well, one I made was sort of pixels, very textured, and there’s brown, white, and green pixels, and they form a grid. And then there’s this confusion of the pixels within the pixel. I made a similar one that mirrors that—it’s cyanotypes printed on canvas. It’s two breasts on a body, a body of pixels. I had this suicidal roommate at camp and once I told him to stand at the edge of a cliff and stick his arms out like an airplane. Just stand there. And I photographed him, then photocopied the prints, and then photocopied the photocopies and arranged them into the shape of his body with his arms out. It had spray paint in the background, and acrylic. The palette is very similar to what I do today. When you take it out and you think, wow, I did this at 10. I mean, in some ways I was just as complex, or more complex, than I am today. And then I read my poems that I wrote at that age, and they’re also not that dissimilar from what I’m writing today. I still used homonyms and rhyme, wordplay. There’s still a darkness to it, whatever that is.

RAIL: Do you ever put poems into the paintings?

BONDELL: I only put the poems in in the way of title. The paintings are sort of like poems, and the poems like paintings. That’s all I can say about that. Where our work has a connection is that I read my poems and have people read their poems, in front of my paintings. I organize subject-oriented performances that have relationships to the paintings, and often the ideas that are in the paintings lead their way into the poems and the ideas from the poems lead their way into the paintings. But the practices themselves are not melded, if that makes any sense.

RAIL: Yeah!

BONDELL: These are two channels I have inside of myself that I can’t really separate. They exist every day. I’m thinking of poems while I’m making paintings and thinking of paintings as I’m making poems.

RAIL: Could you talk about that? Words in paintings, painters and poets working together, the tradition of New York being a place where Frank O’Hara



Sam Jablon, “Beckett” (2014). Acrylic, glass tile, mirror, fused glass, 24k gold tile on wood, 62×52”.

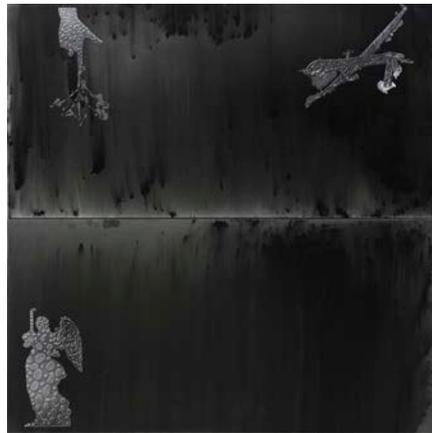
says, if there’s a New York School of Painting then there should be a New York School of Poetry. So we actually have O’Hara, Ashbery, Koch, Schuyler, Guest—a New York School of Poets, which started as a joke, as usual.

BONDELL: It came to me that since my poems and my paintings were about the same things, why not do readings in front of the paintings? Of course the secret agenda was to have people look at a painting for a long time. This “Justice” reading at the Bowery, I hope gets gravitas from my painting on the poster—the actual painting has been on display at Ugo Rondinone’s window on Bond. The first reading I organized was in the Marble Cemetery with my painting “Pax Americana.” Rene read, Bernadette Mayer, lots of poets. Rene Ricard was a person I’ve known since I was 13 years old. I saw him putting words on canvas in a way that was truly poetry, more than painting, I would say. Not that they’re not great paintings, but they still really work and act as poems. John Giorno is another inspiration. I always feel inhibited when I’m putting words on paintings because it takes so much of the composition, and when I put a poem or a word into a painting, I try to make it as part of the shape itself, and form. I don’t know how you work it, but that’s what I try to do.

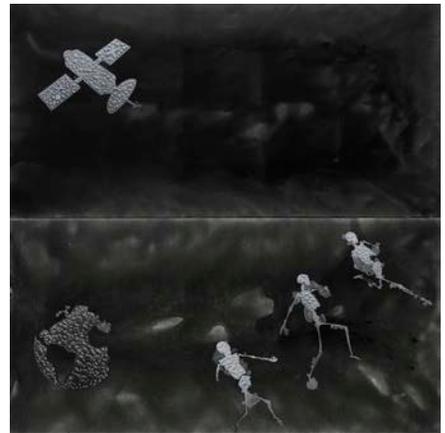
JABLON: The letters are just like a mark. When I make a painting, it’s like the words almost have to dissolve, like they’re always there, inside the painting somehow. But when you really look at them, you have to choose: Do I look at it as a painting or do I read it? If you are just looking at it then it exists more in the realm of painting.



Stefan Bondell, “BROKEN LINES” (2013). Oil and gouache on canvas, 10×10’. From *Black Box*.



Stefan Bondell, “DIRTY WINGS” (2013). Oil and gouache on canvas, 10×10’. From *Black Box*.



Stefan Bondell, “EYE CELL YOU” (2013). Oil and gouache on canvas, 10×10’. From *Black Box*.



Sam Jablon, "Poet Sculpture," DUMBO Arts Festival, Vito Acconci, New York, 2013.

BONDELL: Recently I've been painting these sort of gravestones, or tombs—epitaphs, with words. I've done two or three paintings in the last year that have these markers, and the words are shifting and melting into liquid form, so they're sort of hidden, but they're there. One I did was "Privacy": PRI, and then VA, and then CY. Another one I did was DI, AS, PORA, so the words melt into each other.

RAIL: What are some words that you've used, Sam? I like that PRI, VA, CY / DI, AS, PORA. Give us some spelling!

JABLON: Sometimes I like to rip-off people. One that says MUST GO ON, but all the letters and the words blur.

RAIL: Beckett!

BONDELL: Are they on the same plane?

JABLON: They're on a different plane. Some are back, some are really painted, really built up.

BONDELL: Are they geometric? Or how do they work?

JABLON: Think painting, but there's tons of bits of mirror and glass stuck into all the painting, so it's really reflective. And they shift.

BONDELL: So that becomes a way of pronouncing the word in the painting. See for me, the way I was describing the liquid, the liquid becomes a way of pronouncing the work. DI-AS-POR-A. It has a different tone to it.

[They begin to sing an aria of words melting.]

RAIL: Do you read paintings? Do you read paintings whether there are words on them or not?

BONDELL: I decode them.

RAIL: Decode? You sound fucking digital.

[Laughing in background robot.]

BONDELL: Oh, I am. *[Laughs lustily.]* I'm the pinnacle of digital. A big influence or whatever, a big hero of mine has always been Cy Twombly.

RAIL: Ahhh, Twombly! Now there's poetry in motion!

BONDELL: He is poetry in motion, and he brings an action and a pronunciation through the shapes to the words that he often puts on the plane. There's something that is very powerful about decoding a Cy Twombly painting.

RAIL: Do you think those scribbles are really words? You can read them?

BONDELL: Often I can read the words and other times I know I'm not supposed to read the words and other times there's a great silence.

RAIL: Well, when you're not supposed to read the words that's probably when you read the words.

BONDELL: Absolutely.

RAIL: How does a poem "work"? Lets talk about that. That's a really good one.

BONDELL: So much of the poets' power is being able to break up the line, and break up the sentence—not just on the written page, but when we read as well. And that interplay exists in painting, but it exists in a completely different way, wouldn't you say?

JABLON: Ummm, yea. And no.

BONDELL: I look for unity. I look for either breaking it all up, or unity.

JABLON: But you can have something totally broken up that's unified. Which can exist in painting, like this painting. There's a unity to that but it's also breaking apart.

RAIL: We are pointing to Elizabeth Murray's print, actually, called "Shack," on the wall.

BONDELL: That's so unified to me. *[Laughs. Falls down.]*

RAIL: "Shack" happens to be printed on 19 different pieces of paper, layered together.

JABLON: Her work is all about breaking up the unity. She's the queen of that.

BONDELL: Let me just say that my favorite paintings are poetry. Poetry becomes a painting. I mean that's a very cliché thing to say, but the poetic is not something that you can detail, describe, quantify. It's a magic that exists in the great paintings.

RAIL: When you started writing poems, did you know that it was going to be tied to your practice of painting?

JABLON: No, when I first started off they were very separate. When I met Bob, they were very separate.

There was a painting practice and a poetry practice. And for a while, I didn't think words had a place in painting, which was what everybody told me, too. Like in grad school, people hated it when I put a word in a painting. It was really out of necessity that I started doing it. And then I really liked the sculptural quality that it created. I got tired of having two different mind-frames—like, oh, I'm going to make a painting; oh, I'm going to go make a poem. I wanted to have one mind-frame and see what would happen when you made a hybrid thing of them.

BONDELL: See, I don't know. Maybe for me—because I never went to grad school or anything and I dropped out of college—it's always been an organic process of writing a poem, making a painting. It comes when it comes; the idea happens when it happens. I think you kind of work similarly, Bob, don't you? You don't ever have a rigid format of "I'm sitting down. I'm writing a poem."

RAIL: I wish I could catch all the poems, you know? But I catch as many as I can. It comes through me—that's a poem. I'll say it to people when we're talking, "That's a poem." And then you take the poems from the air and you write them down and that's the start of a poem. Or the middle of a different poem, who knows. And then it could be a long, long time—like you, Stefan, or what Sam does on his iPhone—of collecting what you've caught and allowing it to work back and forth over time. I think a lot about how Ezra Pound wrote "In a Station of the Metro"—start with three pages of poetry and end up with two lines. And a title. "Appartitions of these faces in a crowd / Petals on a wet black bough." Essence of Imagism.

BONDELL: And then certain lines are just a poem by themselves. The other night I was at dinner with Ugo Rondinone and John Giorno, and Ugo said—they were talking about his beard—and he said, "Every man should see their own beard at one point in their life." And I just thought, that's a great poem. He didn't mean to make a poem.

RAIL: That's how it works. You catch them.

BONDELL: I would like to ask you one question, Sam, because I'm editing this piece for next week and it's always hard with fresh work. Don't you find editing a poem on paper and on painting completely different processes? That's one thing I see as very different in the two practices.

JABLON: Totally. I think they're really different. I'll use the computer when I'm writing poetry. So when I'm editing a poem, I just delete the line and there's no trace of its existence at all—it's totally gone. But in a painting, there's always a trace. There's always a history. If you move something around or edit something in a painting, it's always there—every mark, every gesture.

BONDELL: Completely. But that trace and that memory is sometimes in the poem in a way, too. Sometimes when I read back an edited version, the old way I read it slips into the new version. The beat is there, the spacing, the commas, something's there. But the difference is when I'm editing a painting, it's a constant process. I never stop editing it—from the first stroke to the last stroke. And when I'm writing a poem, sometimes I just shit it all out, and then I clean up.

JABLON: And that's sort of why I like editing. If I'm just writing, that's where I like the editing process, refining it. How do you really clarify it? But in painting, it's a whole different world for me. It's just like what you're saying, where it's beginning to end. When you get to an endpoint, you realize you're at the endpoint and you go to something else.

BONDELL: It's strange having such an intimate conversation the first time we've ever met. *[Laughter like birds.]* It's like those first dates you go on, and then you tell them about your whole life and you never see them again.

JABLON: It's a lot like that. ☺



Stefan Bondell, "PYRAMID" (2013). Oil and gouache on canvas, 10 × 10". From *Black Box*.