

Interview

New York City, November 26–28, 2007

Brooks Adams: Do you remember the first art you saw as a child?

Phillip Taaffe: One of my very earliest memories was going with my father into Manhattan to see a show of Winston Churchill's paintings, I think it was at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

BA: And how did you like the paintings?

PT: I liked them all right, he was a Sunday painter. I saw a van Gogh exhibit as a child, and my mother said I was quite taken by it. That was probably at MoMA in the early nineteen-sixties.

BA: Did you know you wanted to be an artist at that time?

PT: I was always the class artist. The nuns in grammar school used to let me teach art class. I was so excited I always stood up when I worked. They tried to get me to sit down but I never could. I remember my first big hit—I drew a profile of Abraham Lincoln when I was four years old. I recall my mother having lots of Celtic souvenirs around the house, because she was Irish: tea towels with Celtic interlace designs, which impressed me very much. As an early teenager when I first started to gain some consciousness of modern art, I encountered Cy Twombly's *The Italians* at the MoMA. That was the first painting that really blew my mind—I guess I was twelve or thirteen years old.

BA: How did you end up going to Cooper Union?

PT: I went to Parsons School of Design first, after high school. I started out studying graphic design, drawing, and color theory. They didn't have a fine arts department until the year I entered. Larry Rivers was appointed head of the department. Much as I enjoyed him, the school was too much about commercial art, so I applied to Cooper Union as a fine arts transfer student and they accepted me.

BA: You studied with Hans Haacke. Do you remember the kind of projects you did with him?

PT: Quite vividly. It was an advanced sculpture class. I was doing installation work. I remember one performance-oriented project where I made a sculpture out of firecrackers I'd bought in Chinatown. I lit the long fuse and left the room. I guess I was trying to make an impression. Those were the days when one did that sort of thing.

Brooks Adams



BA: Did you get into trouble?

PT: Not in that case. There was another instance, though. I'd met Joseph Beuys. Hans was friendly with him and we went to see him. I was immediately influenced by his ideas. I found a crawl space in the sub-basement of the school, a tomblike space. I unscrewed the light bulbs and plugged in an ultraviolet lamp at the very end of this narrow passageway, which turned off into an alcove. The viewers had to follow the light. There was a hissing propane blowtorch, and framed pictures of fruits and vegetables leaning against bricks on a sandy surface. I hung latex gauze running behind the food groups with images of rats scampering behind. That was my sculpture. The trouble resulted when other students began exploring similar spaces that were off limits. I think it became an insurance liability issue.

BA: I'm interested to hear that you had vegetable imagery in your work that early.

PT: Yes, food groups. I was doing many things. I was making animated films, sending away to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers because they would send films to institutions. I had access to a lab where I would re-edit the army films and project them. I also filmed color images of Luther Burbank's fruit hybridization experiments, the hybrid fruits and vegetables he created. I animated these images so that one fruit would mutate into another, in a loop. I called them "Fruit Loops."

BA: The term appropriation first arose when you were at school. How did you feel about that concept?

PT: I was first exposed to these ideas through Hans Haacke's class; we were in communication with Sarah Charlesworth and Joseph Kosuth who taught at the School of Visual Arts. I attended one of their classes and people were sitting around in a circle reading aloud from Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as if it were Holy Scripture. Sarah and Joseph were editing *The Fox*, which I read from cover to cover. Appropriation was coming out of conceptual theoretical cultural critique. It was a questioning of private property and control of the industrial media culture, a kind of hegemony that we were all struggling against. They thought that painting was a joke compared to what mass media were doing to our lives.

BA: Did you feel a part of that?

PT: For a moment, yes. I felt this was really gripping stuff that needed to be said. That was Hans Haacke's influence, again. But he really demonstrated a profound negativity towards painting.

Of course, I took that attitude to heart and then decided the most radical thing I could do after having been under his auspices was to paint. That's what you have to do—you somehow have to kill the father figure. In order to survive you have to kill the authority figure by inventing something new. Even though I still respect his teaching methods. I knew that painting was truly the thing for me. I felt within my bones that this would always be an inexhaustible activity that I really wanted to be involved with.

BA: In your early work it seems to me that you are often taking on modernism as a religion. You were serious, yet there was this wonderful light touch about it, that was essentially post-modernist. Now modernism has once again been redeemed as a positivist concept, but back in the early eighties it was brave to critique it from within.

PT: I think it had to do with discovering, in my case, my artistic identity, while at the same time questioning the modernist constraints we had inherited in the twentieth century—the succession of styles, always one thing supplanting the next. The moment one movement was consumed, the next thing would come along and take its place. In order to break that syndrome, appropriation was a good antidote. It was a way of standing up to these formal commands of constant rupture. It was a way of saying: Let's just stop and look at art history again. I don't like the word *appropriation*, but in the end appropriation was a way for me to have it both ways. I could paint *and* be critical.

BA: Do you remember seeing the Beuys show at the Guggenheim in 1979–80?

PT: Yes, I thought it was amazing. Although the difficulty I had with Joseph Beuys was that while I thought he was a great teacher, the personal mythology always bothered me. You had to take everything or nothing: you had to accept the self-mythologizing, the costume, and the teaching. I wasn't entirely enthralled by it, and I was surprised that Hans was, given his dislike of certain tendencies such as the cult of the artist's personality I think he was attracted to Beuys's interest in how society was a system and how art functioned within that system, and how it might affect or change the system. Art is not only about the art object.

BA: In that respect, do you feel that your art has a moral thrust?

PT: In a paradigmatic sense it could. I always thought that Mondrian's paintings had a lot to teach us about how to organize our lives in society. My point of view is that a painting is a one-on-one experience and that it can have a transformative role in how one person's life is affected by it, but



paintings don't have power to change society en masse. What's there is transmitted in a very personal way.

BA: David Moos wrote in an essay (published in the 2007 Gagorian Gallery catalogue) that Glyphic Brain (1980/81) is a depiction of an actual brain. An interesting observation.

PT: That work and others like it were ambivalent in that respect. They were made in a very automatic state, late at night, with colored paper tape used for picture binding and book repair. I actually thought of these as walled medieval cities. The importance for me was the scale of the line and the points of infinitude within the network of straight lines; also the fact that they were enclosed. One image did look like the cerebellum, the woven structure of the cortex or brain matter, so I titled it *Glyphic Brain*.

BA: I was reading a book by Gerald Hüther called *The Compassionate Brain*, and he was discussing the evolution of the brain in the simplest forms of life. And suddenly I said, Wait a minute, Philip's whole oeuvre is a depiction of the brain, of intelligences, loosely described; intelligences on all levels, intelligences in nature, in ornament . . . and here is the very first work of yours, this early image of the brain.

PT: That continues right up to the present. The most recent painting here in the studio is called *Exploded Ganglia* (2007).

BA: What is ganglia?

PT: *Ganglia* is an interesting word. For me it has to do with built-up forces of energy. Shall I get the dictionary?

BA: Sure.

PT: I think it's an important choice of word . . . Ganglion: a gray mass of nerve tissues, existing outside the brain and spinal cord. In pathology, it's a cyst or enlargement, usually at the wrist. But the third definition of ganglion is determining: *a center of intellectual or industrial force or activity*. The title came to me from one specific form in the painting, which reminded me of the first image of a brain you see on a sonogram of a fetus. Stan Brakhage always said vision began in the fetus.



BA: Following a strict chronology, the next work after *Glyphic Brain* and the *Picture Binding* series is *Color Field Painting* (1983).

PT: I was using found paper scavenged from the industrial waste-paper disposal bins at the local printing plants in Newark. I was roaming around in my broken-down '57 Chevy: an artist, a beatnik. I was exploring the industrial zones of the Passaic Valley, beloved of Robert Smithson, of Allen Ginsberg—the New Jersey Turnpike industrial zone, all the romance of that place. I was in the bowels of it, searching through mountains of disposed printed matter. Some crane operator would be sitting there smoking a cigarette, and I'd go up and say, "Mind if I look around?" And he'd say, "Go right ahead, kid." I'd discover things, put them in my car, and bring them back to my apartment. *Color Field Painting* was started at seven in the evening and finished at five-thirty the next morning. I used to stay up all night in those days. It was the first large-scale collage painting I made immediately following the *Picture Binding* series. It was a very automatic process. One day I just said: That's enough! No more picture binding! This was before the *Martyr Group* painting, before the optical works.

BA: What did you have in mind when you were making *Color Field Painting*?

PT: I was thinking of Hans Hofmann and his push/pull theories of composition. And I guess I was thinking of sabotaging Gene Davis, creating something that's completely fractured and then mended and put back together. It's also paper on paper, so it has that kind of distended surface. I stapled some of these large sheets of paper to the wall and began cutting strips of paper and pasting them onto the painting. Like the *Picture Binding* series, the composition was very automatic. I had all these little pieces of paper on the floor and some purple indigo paint that I was just throwing behind them, staining these little pieces along the way. After I completed *Color Field Painting* I took a walk downtown—Jersey City was very different back then than it is today—and I had such a feeling of liberation and accomplishment that morning. It was predawn and springtime and I walked down to the docks where they repaired ferry boats. I passed through the grasslands by the tugboat terminals as people were heading to work. I'll never forget that walk. The feeling of complete ecstatic exhaustion, and a sense of destiny ahead of me, almost an orgasmic release of energy, having made that work, and then going out into the morning.

BA: There's no imagery on this painting, is there?

PT: No, there's no imagery.



BA: Why do I have a feeling of shimmering skyline?

PT: That's what I used to look at: the New York skyline. I used to see the World Trade Center Towers from my window. It was right across the river, shimmering in the watery light. I could look out my window and see the Statue of Liberty at the end of my street. It was the top floor of a cold-water railroad flat, a water heater in the kitchen. The rent was eighty dollars a month, which gave me a lot of free time to paint. I worked in a small living room in front. Robert Mapplethorpe visited me here and bought one of the Picture Binding works. He was my first collector. My friend Curtis Anderson was working at a frame shop, making those pentagram-shaped frames for Robert. Curtis was also framing one of the Picture Binding pieces for me, and Robert saw that and asked who made it. Curtis said: "He's a friend of mine who lives in Jersey City, would you like to meet him?" Robert had just come back from a trip overseas and he had all of these traveler's checks with him. He paid me eight hundred dollars for a piece called *Forest Lantern*. He simply filled out his traveler's checks and I was extremely appreciative.

BA: I want to ask about some of the explicit Christian imagery in your work. Martyr Group is a crucial image. What were you looking at that inspired Martyr Group?

PT: I was looking at all kinds of things. In a book I discovered some Moldavian Valley frescoes painted on the outsides of Romanian Byzantine churches, and the organization of the saints impressed me. I also thought of it as a class or office photograph, with people standing on bleachers having their pictures taken. It was a combination of the idea of the Romanian exterior fresco and the contemporary corporate group portrait.

BA: Where did you buy those targets?

PT: I found them in the same waste paper disposal plants in Newark. They were clearly made for the police academy for target practice.

BA: Today they're always retrospectively read as early AIDS martyrs, people who were just beginning to die. Were you thinking about that kind of thing at the time, in 1983?

PT: I was starting to, yeah.



BA: Did you make other work like that?

PT: No, that was it. After *Color Field Painting*, the first Bridget Riley pieces that I started carving were also printed on found paper—some light-bulb packaging paper that I had found in the dump. I liked the fact that Riley’s ancestor had worked with Thomas Edison on the invention of the light bulb. So I knew about that connection and thought that was sweet.

BA: You were researching Bridget Riley at the time?

PT: Oh yes, researching and dissecting the paintings, surgically taking them apart. Just completely breaking them into sections and putting them back together again. The first optical work was actually a similar format as *Color Field Painting*, made with thin gray stripes. I have no idea what happened to that work, but these two paintings led to the linoleum carvings. In order to make the wavy lines, I decided to create a template and print the sections from linoleum carvings. I found discarded rolls of battleship linoleum, probably from a hardware store on Canal Street, or maybe some old flooring store in Jersey City. These early works had a lot to do with salvaging. I couldn’t afford expensive materials, so I was using what was at hand.

BA: So you made the first relief prints for the Bridget Riley appropriations. Did you make the plates yourself?

PT: Yes, I drew them on the linoleum and carved them myself.

BA: Did you have a day job at this time?

PT: The last job I had was at *Artnews* magazine in the layout department, gluing up the ads. Afterwards I’d have the money I needed to paint. My expenses were very low.

BA: What led you to choose a mechanical means of reproduction in these paintings, rather than just picking up a brush and painting them by hand? Why was this distancing factor introduced into the picture? It seems to be a very late-twentieth-century, Warholian phenomenon.

PT: I think it feels more real, or it gives one a greater sense of connectedness to the material circumstances in which we’re living. Perhaps it offers a look of greater authenticity, or seems more authentically mediated. But having a loaded brush and having a screen with oil paint on it is not so different, especially the way I use them. Often I work with solvents and melt the image for a watery

effect. By using printing techniques I could see things more immediately, more palpably. It's more exciting sooner. Also the fact that I wanted many of them—the idea of the pulsating field of imagery. One print would be slightly more deformed or degraded, then one would be perfect, then the next one would be terrible.

BA: The technical means seem to be tied into the zeitgeist of the moment, the age of mechanical reproduction.

PT: Actually, it feels very old-fashioned to me now. Silkscreen has become a very quaint medium. It's turned into an old-master technique.

BA: I was looking at Block Island (1986) in your library just now, and I suddenly realized the relationship between the wave shapes in the painting and the Bridget Riley undulation pattern. I'd never gotten the fact that the Bridget Riley undulations might be waves as well. I'd just never seen this before. That's a real constant in your oeuvre—that undulation.

PT: I suppose I've internalized that by now.

BA: It's not Bridget Riley's anymore?

PT: I suppose not. I can't say I've done it more than she has, but close to it. It's just been something that I've been very attracted to, something I felt was iconically significant, getting back to this idea of the liturgical reenactment: doing something again and again. It can be a very useful process. I've used this metaphor before as regards the progress of my work: as a wheel moves forward it also turns back on itself. I have a similar attitude toward the progression of my own work. I have a very retrospective approach to finding new material, or to examining the needs of a painting. I will often refer to earlier concerns, or just by accident they will come out at me. This has to do with what I call the concept of the *epiphanic* painting. I have all this material and I'm looking for a character to complete the story, to flesh out the narrative. Unexpectedly, something unanticipated comes out at me. It appears suddenly and I trace it to its origins and then bring it forward.

BA: This happens while you're working?

PT: Yes, I ask myself, "What do I need to complete the story?" Oh, I know. It was such and such a vehicle or an element and then I'll go searching after that and suddenly I realize that it wasn't that element but another that was close by, and that's the epiphany, that's what gets brought forward.

It's an important method for me and it's why I keep everything on hand. And if I can't find the printed material then I always have the means to reproduce it once again.

BA: In your early images of flora and fauna, such as the Pine Columns (1988), it didn't announce itself as nature imagery at the time, but there it is.

PT: Pine cones invoke the idea of Dionysian energy, they are a phallic Neapolitan symbol of regeneration.

BA: It was around 1996 when suddenly plant and animal forms started creeping into your work and it seemed very surprising at the time. But then in the late nineties the work just blossomed into paintings of snakes and ferns. And now you're exploring the archaeology of naturalism, with the Garden of Extinct Leaves (2005/06), for example.

PT: What I'm attracted to in the natural sciences has to do with the fact that if you imagine nature and the natural world five centuries ago, ten centuries ago, it was unknown: primordial, mysterious, unfathomable in its complexity and density, and how gradually, year after year, century after century, we are slowly able to identify and learn and describe and draw pictures of this natural world. I love early natural-history books for this reason. There is something so poignant about early depictions of animals. Then you get more detail in the nineteenth century with the behavioral studies, plant studies, the understanding of pollination, of ferns. Think of the people studying this day by day, and writing books full of detailed depictions of this infinitude of life on earth. It's breathtaking. If I can delve into one small aspect of this, and if I'm able to focus on something I've found and have a personal connection with, and I can make a work out of it, that's something important for me.

BA: The projects of these early scientists display a beautiful optimism.

PT: It's mystery and science combined. I think we've lost a lot of the mystery. I'm disappointed that a lot of scientists feel so negative about theology. That's not true for all scientists, but I don't see why theism and science can't coexist.

BA: Did you love nature as a child?

PT: I remember the weather. I loved snow and rain. I loved the sun and the trees and playing in the grass and digging in the earth.



BA: Did you have a backyard with flowers?

PT: There were flowers, worms, animals. I had a simple, normal relationship to whatever was around me. I spent a lot of time outdoors.

BA: Do you remember when you first saw an Islamic ornament?

PT: I knew about it from my childhood education. I used to go to the public library in Elizabeth, New Jersey and pore through the picture collection. I used to spend my entire Saturday in the picture collection of the public library. I would look at pictures of everything. As a child I would go to the Ritz Theater to see movies, that was a beautiful old Beaux-Arts Islamo-Orientalist opera house—and other movie houses as well. That sort of elaborate Islamic detail was not unusual in theaters from that period. My aunt Sheila once took me to see Muhammad Ali at the Audubon Ballroom in New York, I used to idolize him. There were a lot of Black Muslims there. She was fearless, the way she took me backstage so I could shake his hand. Later, when I was a teenager, my father was making business trips to Iran and Saudi Arabia and Lebanon, and would bring back souvenirs.

BA: What business was he in?

PT: He was the export sales manager of the General Mills Company. He would go over there and make these contracts for the flour, things like that.

BA: There's a painting from 1989 called Ahmed Mohammed. Is that Kufic script?

PT: Yes, it's a Kufic monogram, taken from an old calligraphy instruction booklet I found in Cairo. There was a whole section on Kufic monograms and it reminded me of wrought iron, because they were so rectilinear. They had arabesque in them but they were gridded, so I thought that it was an interesting structural device that could be brought to another kind of Western pictorial situation.

BA: Often your titles evoke places in the Arab world: Old Cairo, Samara, Kharragan . . . Are they meant to evoke real places?

PT: I think what I do is I discover specific salient features that belong to a geographical or historical monument or place, some fragment of a place, and I use that as the central riff or the central anchor for how the work gets elaborated. That theme may eventually become submerged but it remains as the theme of the painting. Therefore, I apply the title, the designation, as the originating

impulse behind the generation of this image, although there are often other layers that ensue from the originating principle.

BA: For instance, where is Kharraqan?

PT: That's in Iran. There are sepulchral towers there constructed from incredibly elaborate relief brick formations. They're fairly straightforward but all-enveloping, and they keep shifting focus in a linear way, like a woven pattern. They'll go up as a diagonal, then they'll become vertical, then they'll shift again, and it's all done with brick. So this tower construction became the inspiration for the central part of that painting.

BA: Looking at your work, there's a complex, layered take on Islam. I see Islam filtered through the Gothic Revival.

PT: That's my favorite thing actually, where Islam meets the West. I encountered that early on in my travels, in Seville, and in Palermo at the Capella Palatina: that particular merging of Arab and Western concerns. Well, more specifically, Arab and Byzantine concerns.

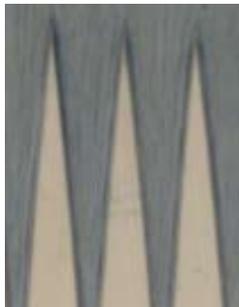
BA: How many times have you been to Morocco?

PT: Four or five times.

BA: Have you made art there?

PT: I've taken photographs there—when I worked on the book with Paul Bowles and Mohammed Mrabet, *Chocolate Creams and Dollars* (1992). I've tried to do drawings there, but I'm not good at working on things on the road. I'd much rather go to the bazaar and find some old pamphlet that's stuck under a batch of who knows what. I'm not one for holing up in a hotel room and drawing, unless I were staying for months at a time, then I would do that. I look for obscure things, visual artifacts of a place. I take pictures, I visit used bookshops, whatever seems interesting. The results often end up in my work. When I was in Damascus, just being in the Omayyad Mosque was enough inspiration for several works. There's an enormous mosaic depicting undulating waves, palms, architecture, with a strong Byzantine influence.







BA: The history of design is a constant subject for you. I don't know too many other contemporary artists who have implemented the history of design into their paintings. Was the history of contemporary design ever a field that fascinated you?

PT: No, I was always more interested in looking at paintings than at design, per se. And I always saw design as somehow subservient to painting, or how it might serve the needs of a painting. Design only comes alive for me when it becomes incorporated into a larger scheme of things, in a painting, in a pictorial fiction.

BA: How about your fascination for lesser-known artists, Paul Feeley or Charles Shaw? How did you discover Charles Shaw?

PT: Probably at Joan Washburn's gallery, or at the Museum of Modern Art, or at the Whitney Museum—he was an American post-constructivist thinker. A disciple of Jean Arp. I like discipleship. Carl Andre used to always say, "I'm a disciple of Brancusi. I'm merely an apprentice." I like the modesty of artists who become disciples of other artists: bringing the poetry of one's own personal life to the field of art history.

BA: Who are you a disciple of?

PT: (Long pause) That's a hard one to answer. Paul Klee, perhaps. Klee was a teacher, and I could be his student. He's exemplary in terms of his graphic experiments, his notations had an instrumental value for me when I was young. His analysis of nature, the influence of music, *The Thinking Eye*, *The Pedagogic Notebooks*, his travels in North Africa, the translucency of his colors, his imaginary cities . . . there are many similarities.

BA: I immediately thought of Klee when I saw the little insects in *Phasmidae*. Your work also operates on those disparities of scale—minute scales, too.

PT: I admire Klee's sense of pictorial fiction, the fantastic, and his wonderful sense of play. Also the constant change in his work: each thing is quite different from the next. He's good throughout. There are not a lot of artists who are good from start to finish, and I think he's one of them.

BA: By the year 2000, it seemed as if your aesthetic and your achievement were so pervasive, suddenly there were all kinds of things that looked like Philip Taaffes. It created a saturation that was disturbing.

PT: Well you know, Brooks, I do what I do as well as I possibly can, and I try to make paintings as powerful and complex and generous as possible, and I research them carefully. I make highly personal choices and I try to put everything I can into every painting that I make. But I recoil from the consequences of whatever they end up becoming in the world. My prospects for them and my sense of their potential in the world is always scaled back by my own sense of . . . I suppose pessimism is the word. I wouldn't call it nihilism, but I'm pessimistic. There's an anxiety that I feel about the subject. I've never been good with that whole side of things: what the world does to art. I guess that's why I'm trying for a more monastic posture. I want to be in an Alessandro Magnasco painting, in a refectory, listening to the pet crow . . .

BA: You are not responsible for it, but it has to do with the increase in popularity of contemporary art. The image culture will eat anything.

PT: The public side of art is important and I admit some artists are better at handling it than others. Some artists thrive on that kind of interface, it's part of their work. I've never felt comfortable with it. It's the frailty of whatever magic there is that I have tremendous enthusiasm for, but once I've finished and the painting leaves the studio there's a dissipation and then I move on to the next thing. What thrills me is being in the studio and conjuring up these things. Once they're out in the world one imagines they are somehow going to places where they would have an ideal life. But it's just silly to have those expectations.

BA: Were you attracted by the Dia Art Foundation idea in the nineteen-seventies, and what's become of it since? The one-man museum?

PT: I love the Cy Twombly Museum in Houston—that's wonderful. But it's hard to control these other outcomes.

BA: Brice Marden's recent paintings seem to be aspiring to a chapel installation.

PT: The work certainly deserves one. The *Cold Mountain* installation at Dia in New York in 1991 had a big effect on me. He's kept developing and doing extraordinary things subsequently. Another artist I deeply admire is Sigmar Polke. I first saw his work at Holly Solomon's gallery in New York.

It was much more interesting to me than American Pop Art. He was informed by their ideas, and yet he was able to cut inside of Pop Art in a way that was historically more broad, and more profound, perhaps because he was coming from a place that was further away. He exploded that everyday way of making a painting. The works were shorthand, like a code or cipher. They brought you to another place that was kind of Pop, but wasn't strictly about consumer culture. He's completely open—there is no sense of closure to his work. He can bring historical visual information to a painting and really make it his own. I love his use of found fabric, and found contemporary imagery. I like the labor-intensiveness of his work. He's able to synthesize a lot of disparate material and bring it together in one place. Polke is a painter who has incredible transformative abilities, and his graphic style is unique. He does it all well.

BA: Have you ever visited him?

PT: No, I've never met him. He also has a monastic temperament. He's reclusive, so he's able to get a lot of work done. His work never feels glib to me. You would think that someone who was as prolific as he is would sometimes be glib, but he isn't. And the work has a Baroque scale, which I admire. His use of resins and weird materials—he's a great alchemist. He's walking a tightrope, performing all these great antics—a pictorial acrobat. There's a gymnastic quality to the work, it's vigorous. The reason he can get away with all these things and the way he does them is because of the strong intelligence behind the work. I like the intellectual rigor of it. Also his whole attitude toward photography is very liberating, wonderfully nonchalant. He treats photography as just part of our daily discourse. There's a certain preciousness to what I do, and that's why I like what he does—his lack of preciousness. He's a great teacher for me.

BA: How does that preciousness function?

PT: A more acute fragility. It just happens to be how I go about doing things. Maybe it has to do with the use of collage, the thinness of paper and fusing it with the canvas—you know there are a lot of tricks that I do that merge collage with the surface. I don't like a lot of debris in my paintings—they're smooth. I don't like a lot of texture.



BA: I sometimes wonder if you ever feel like a salon painter? You have this amazing labor-intensive process. Very gradually things are built up, sometimes for years, there are assistants involved. It's a bit like the assembly of the salon paintings: you're very much the author of a work, the way Gustave Courbet is the author of *The Painter's Studio*, full of readings and subtexts.

PT: I've always thought of myself more as a *refusé*. I don't feel an affinity for the salon, no. What you seem to be saying could be true, although I think it gets short-circuited along the way.

BA: How?

PT: I break things. I undermine my own best intentions. And they're improvised, as I said. They're unpredictable. I don't want to know how something is eventually going to turn out. They're more about process, and finding my way in this field of uncertainty. I'm not trying to please any particular group of people.

BA: And they're not illustrations either.

PT: No, but it's an interesting question. I've always thought of myself as being an experimental artist. I guess there was some experimentation going on in the nineteenth century.

BA: Not as much.

PT: I have a certain distaste for a great deal of nineteenth-century art. It's one of my least favorite periods in fact—with the exception of the people who began to break with the nineteenth century, like Cézanne. Or earlier in the century, the turn towards Romanticism. I'm also fond of Corot. But I really don't like those nineteenth-century academic paintings, I don't like them at all.

BA: But you like nineteenth-century decorative art. And nineteenth-century science.

PT: Yes, by all means, and the museum is a nineteenth-century concept.

BA: I want to ask you about some specific paintings that are in the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg exhibition. What was the source for *Mosaic* (1991)?

PT: It's actually a fragment of a Paul Feeley work. The double dentate shape in yellow that is arranged like a quatrefoil at the center of the painting is something I freely sketched from a Paul

Gustave Courbet, *The Painter's Studio*, 1854/55, 359 × 598 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris



Feeley painting. I took that form as the starting point and extrapolated all of the permutations from there. I cut out several of these small toothlike forms in paper and placed them face down on glass that had been prepared with rolled printer's ink, so the paper forms would act as masks. Then I placed a piece of paper down on the glass to take the impression of the external shapes. I would do that many times over until I had quite an inventory of printed pages and shapes and densities of ink. As the ink got depleted, I would remove the masks and put them again on another sheet of paper on the floor, and they began curling up. I put another piece of paper over the paper that had the curling masks, and I would repeat the process. Then I stacked eight of these large sheets and collaged them onto the canvas, and the whole thing was tinted. All the negative shapes were very important to me. It's an encyclopedic application of the single dentate shape. Everything emanates from that one shape.

BA: Then it was tinted?

PT: The whole thing was tinted, and then a mosaic formation was composed over the pages. All of these negative abstract shapes were like passageways or little compartments, and these figures are composed with respect to the liveliness of the negative shapes that are coming through, until I had a nice figure-ground relationship taking place.

BA: It has the appearance of symmetry but it's not, or it's natural symmetry?

PT: It has the effect of symmetry, but it's completely broken down. The central part looks like a Roman staff, the device used to parade around the emperor's standard—that is how I thought of it.

BA: In the painting *Matinee* (1991), what is that big black silhouette?

PT: It's an aperture, or a keyhole, as though one were looking at a partial view of a flickering image on a silver screen in the darkness of a movie house.

BA: I read it as a figure on a black ground, and you seem to be reading it just the opposite.

PT: It flips back and forth.

BA: There are many cinema references in your work, there's a Cinema Posillipo, Quad Cinema. You spent some time at the movies. What about Quad Cinema (1986)?

PT: It was made in small sections, just partial radii that I collaged from the center out, then I painted out the center in black. See how the radii of one circle continue into the next when the circles touch? That was important to me so it was done first. In that way they would be continuous. It was a very measured work. The black dots are sort of like spores waiting to maneuver themselves into a vortex.

BA: I get a Roto-relief feeling of Duchamp from this. A non-New Yorker might not know that the Quad Cinema is actually four movie houses in one. It's a very literal place. Is this a place painting as well?

PT: Yes, it's another place painting. It has an everyday feeling. I like the fact that Duchamp first introduced his Roto-reliefs under the auspices of a trade show, sitting amongst other inventors who were demonstrating their new gizmos. If you spend time with the painting, it takes on an almost masklike quality. It turns into something else. It immediately strikes one as being about opticality and geometry, but then all of that seems to degrade and break down into something more primitive, having to do with eyes, perhaps a figure carved into the canvas in a very direct way.

BA: When did you begin with the marbling process?

PT: Frequently when I paint, I pour liquid color onto raw or gessoed canvases and use mops as paintbrushes to push the paint around. I've always been fascinated by the way the rivulets of paint look as they move and blend. I never know what's going to happen until the following day when it all settles and dries. So it occurred to me that I should learn about this marbling method, because it could be an extremely useful drawing medium. I wanted to explore liquid on liquid. I knew that marbling involved floating color on the surface of a liquid, but I didn't know the technique, so I began to research the subject from books. Before long I realized I needed to find someone to give me a tutorial. I located a lady named Iris Nevins who had written a book about Spanish marbling—it was self-published and it was beautiful and interesting. She was a very intelligent advocate for this particular art form. I telephoned information and found her number. I called her up and I said, "I read your book, I would like to visit you. Do you teach, can you help me?" She said, "Yes, certainly, come out to see me." I drove out to her farm in the far reaches of northwestern New Jersey where she lived with her husband, who was an early jazz vinyl collector and a very close friend of the artist R. Crumb, who is also a great record collector. The husband was a weird man, very

unfriendly to me, but she was as nice as could be. A gothic-looking lady, long black hair and slightly severe, but gentle and very nice. She took me into her workshop and we proceeded to marble. I spent the day with her and she turned me onto other books and other schools of paper marbling. She was friends with Nedim Sönmez, a famous paper marbler from Turkey, whose books I'd read.

BA: What type of work did he do?

PT: Marbleized miniatures, a little more precious than what I was seeking, but very good. There's a whole marbling community out there who earn their living by providing endpapers for fine-book publishers, and they produce every style imaginable. One thing Iris Nevins would not reveal was any of her formulas for making the paint. She showed me how to mix the carragen moss, a viscous liquid that you put in the tray and throw the color onto. She showed me how to manipulate the paint, she explained how the alum fixes the colors to the paper, she told me the right amounts of ox gall to make the color spread—every color has its own weight and chemistry which determine how it reacts to other substances and colors. But the one thing she would not do is give me any of her recipes for pigments. There's a lot of information out there now that one can research, but before the twentieth century there was absolutely nothing, a complete secret. There was a kind of Masonic stricture against passing on these recipes. But at least after my tutorial I knew where to begin.

BA: How long did it take you to master the process?

PT: I haven't mastered it. I worked on it every single day, for weeks and weeks. I had to stop everything else, I was lost to this technique. I understood how alchemists became engrossed. Suddenly things began to happen. It's fascinating because you really get to know the chemistry of color. I drew on the surface of the water with droppers of inks and styluses. It was a very trancelike, mesmerizing process. Eventually I made an enormous marbling pool here in the studio, about six by eight feet, with a plastic liner. I started using oils and enamels. By now I've used everything imaginable.

BA: Did you encounter any other contemporary artists who used this technique?

PT: After she saw some of this work, Bice Curiger told me about a wonderful Swiss artist named André Thomkins, a Fluxus-type artist, a colleague of Dieter Roth and Daniel Spoerri. I found out about his work and even managed to acquire one of his "astronaut" drawings done by marbling.

I made contact with his widow to find out what paint he was using, but that turned out to be a dead end. So I proceeded on my own.

BA: You were marbling on canvas also?

PT: Yes, but that's hard to do. Because of the weight of the canvas you tend to get blank areas that don't get inked, because of air bubbles—it doesn't work so well. Also, paper is a much more responsive surface.

BA: There are no second takes in this process?

PT: Yes, there are. Sometimes I go over a drawing again with two or three applications, one acrylic, one oil, it gets really wild. If a drawing doesn't work out the first time you can try to recycle it by reworking it again in a few days. Later still, I began mixing marbling with collage.

BA: Is there a lot of editing involved with these results?

PT: Yes. Just imagine the entire studio filled with blotter paper and wet sheets of marbled paper, thirty, forty, fifty sheets of paper, day after day. And this is going on for weeks. One builds up a certain momentum. It's like making a film, you're exposing footage, and at the end of the day you study the dailies—get rid of this, go in that direction . . .

BA: There's a kind of ombré psychedelic effect too.

PT: Yes indeed.

BA: Are you a psychedelic artist?

PT: I wouldn't deny it!

BA: One painting that mixes marbling and collage is *Lizard Music* (2001). What attracts you to reptiles like lizards and snakes? Do you see them as friendly?

PT: Oh yes, I think they are. They're very protective, you know. I like the fact that they participate in both worlds, the world of the sinister and diabolical, and then depending upon a certain cultural relativity they are divine, they are to be worshipped. Initially I was drawn principally to their calli-





graphic potential. I would look forward to seeing them and using them—just irresistible. I knew I wanted to make them part of my vocabulary.

BA: Somehow your whole approach became much simpler in paintings when you were working with snake imagery.

PT: I get to the point where there's so much density and buildup and so many layers that I feel as though I can't do anything else and then I just let go. These snakes occurred to me at such a moment when I had reached that point of oversaturation and I needed a simpler approach to line and shape and a means of getting there with greater immediacy. I'm starting to reach that phase again, I can feel it.

BA: You came full circle recently. In the mid-eighties you were appropriating Barnett Newman, who wrote on the Kwakiutl. Then in your 2004/05 work, you began appropriating Northwest Coast tribal forms. Did you read Newman's text on Pacific Northwest Coast art when you were younger?

PT: Yes, that was a very important text for me. It gets back to the concept of the sacramental. It's very important to understand how these tribes can inform our understanding of religious principles and the psychology of nirvana, or of the ecstatic, and how these belief systems operate and are manifested.

BA: I see you are working on a new Cape painting. The paper cut-out heads are visual aids?

PT: They're proofs, for locational purposes. Later I will silkscreen those heads directly onto the canvas. This is following a course of buildup. The heads are a combination of Coptic and Byzantine faces, and some are coming from Central Asia, eastern Persia, and into Afghanistan. A crossroads. They're a cast of characters, and they need to be a certain size in order to accomplish this drama. The painting at this stage consists of tangents, and proximities, and gestural overlays. I'm working out the specifics of how all the elements will relate spatially. I'm laying the groundwork for what is to occur. The painting has to be kept vigorous and complex—and it will be undermined and sabotaged in ways that are hard to see immediately.

BA: Do you have a sense of what the final form will be?

PT: No, it's completely improvised. I like the idea of having a working rhythm. It shouldn't be planned out, because all the little accidents which accrue along the way are what make the painting.

BA: In your 2007 Gagosian exhibition in New York you had three paintings named for capes: Cape Sinope, Cape Vitus, and Cape Zephyr. What fascinates you about a cape?

PT: I like the idea that it is a promontory, a terminus point, an extreme end of something. I used to go to Cape May, New Jersey as a child. I've always loved coastal charts and guides, and I've always liked the idea of the cape as a point of navigation. As something jutting out into the ocean, a cape is very attractive, romantic. Usually the cape is where the lighthouse was, so it became a summoning point for seafarers, a nautical demarcation point, bringing them home to this point of land, finally going into port. The cape is about finding one's way. Those paintings stemmed from my involvement with the Pacific Northwest Coast imagery and the fact that there are more capes in that part of the world than in any other. I started researching capes. I consulted nautical charts and made lists of capes from all over the world. Then I realized that it didn't have to be an actual cape. For instance, *Cape Sinope* is not a cape at all, it's a town on the Black Sea, the birthplace of Diogenes. *Cape Vitus* was named after Vitus Bering who discovered the Bering Strait.

BA: That's at the end of Alaska.

PT: Right. Bering had quite a lot to do with discovering these channels. So I called one *Cape Vitus* and then *Cape Sinope* and the third one is *Cape Zephyr*. Zephyr is the god of the west winds.

BA: How do you see yourself when you are working on a painting—as a navigator, an explorer?

PT: Maybe I'm the lighthouse keeper. I named a painting *Pharos* after the famed lighthouse in Alexandria. I love lighthouses. They're symbols of exploration.

BA: You told me yesterday that you've arrived at a new realization of yourself as an artist.

PT: It was absolute torment for me to go through this. At the end I realized: What is going to liberate me from this process of self-inquiry? What can I say that will make me feel I'm straightening things out for myself and getting to the heart of the matter? For the first time, I declared myself a

sacramental artist. I had never said that before. I believe painting is a sacramental act. I know there's more to be said on that subject, but I thought I'd make a declaration, because it's the kind of thing I've always been afraid of. Those are deeply personal values and I always felt they had to be stated in an apophatic way. Apophatic philosophy takes a negative approach, where you define something by declaring what it is not. I feel as though I'm moving away from this. I want to speak of what I feel most grounded by, what most interests me. What I look for in a work of art, in painting, is that it offers some healing power which can protect us and strengthen our sense of what we most love about being alive in this world. That's what a sacrament is. It's an affirmation of life.

BA: It's constant renewal.

PT: That's what painting should be.