

TURPS



PAINT- ING MAGA- ZINE

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Steve DiBenedetto interviews Robert Bordo

Marcus Harvey interviews Basil Beattie

Paul Robinson on Ultramarine

Robin Footitt on Canaletto

Stuart Elliot on Simon Callery

Mali Morris on Robert Welch

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TURPS 

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Editors Marcus Harvey and Peter Jones
(editorial@turpsbanana.com)

Sub-Editors Dan Coombs,
Sarah Douglas, David Leeson,
Harland Miller, Colin Smith,
Lois Stonock, Neal Tait
& Annabel Thomas

Development Helen Hayward

Development Assistants

Katie Hetherington Bakewell &
Debbie Lowndes

Art Direction & Design

Studio Gpop – Geoff Moore

www.studio-gpop.com

For further information about the contributors contact

editorial@turpsbanana.com

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ROBERT
BORDO
IN
CONVER-
SATION
WITH
STEVE
DIBENE-
DETTO
FOR
TURPS
BANANA

Robert Bordo has been exhibiting in New York and Europe for over twenty years, most recently at Mummery + Schnelle, London. Bordo and Steve DiBenedetto have had a dialogue about painting ever since DiBenedetto taught at The Cooper Union, New York in 2002, where Bordo runs the painting department.

SDB: I am constantly coming back to this phenomenon of slippage that is always going on in your work. At any given moment, each painting or body of work has a certain relationship to a definite sense of place, but also a sense of slipping through or passing through, or evaporating, but it also got me thinking about how many different qualities 'location' has, especially in a landscape, like weather.

RB: An ecosystem?

SDB: Exactly. And then you have the fact that, when you put a viewer in the system the situation changes even more. A Heisenberg uncertainty principle comes into the picture.

RB: It's landscape, somewhat abstracted, it's not landscape particular. It's in between - it might resemble an abstraction, but then it also has clues towards representation, and then it has atmospheres and emotional terrains. Then of course there's the process of finding the picture and knowing when to leave it alone. You know, allowing

for all the contradictions between something that looks like it could be very determined, but which also appears to be falling apart.

SDB: Exactly. You have to arrest the process at some point. I remember we had a chat about you not being very fond of too much scrubbing or scraping, and the issue of leaving too much evidence of procedure as part of a final painting.

RB: I choose to show what I'm going to leave. Revealing the underneath is really something that I like to determine. When a painting gets to be too funky and ugly and has too much pentimenti, I still doggedly go after it, because I love the look of crazy overwrought paintings.

SDB: Accumulation, or 'barnaclising' as I call it sometimes.

RB: Evidence of touch. Yeah.

But ultimately not a lot of those paintings really make it for me. Somehow it's hard to keep them fresh and when they turn into barnacles they have their own narrative, right? That's when the narrative of the process of making the painting takes over, and whatever intention or syntax you're going after has to take a backseat to the unconscious thing going on.

SDB: I just think of the marks that occupy the more recent works - there's just a really unexpected, eccentric energy at work that feels full of surprises. You have a painting called *Com*. I was going to ask you about this title, because I think you use parentheses, or quotation marks?

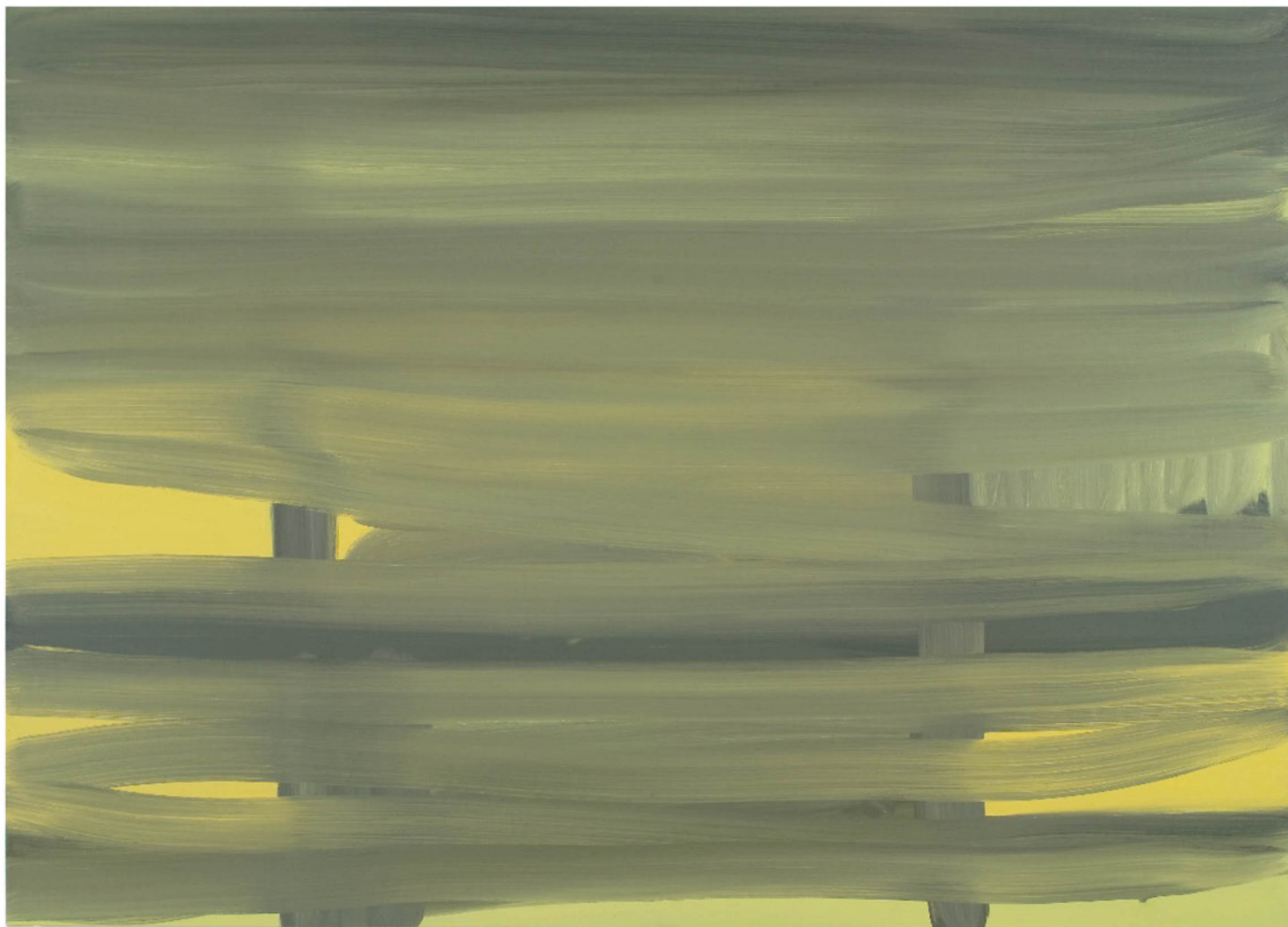
RB: Yes, "*com*" and it's corny, referring to that all-over brush stroke. It can also appear as a field of tall grasses infested with little black marks, like ticks. It's a bit like a horror movie, you know, running through the field but the field happens to be an abstract painting of a certain generation: wet-into-wet. So it's kind of visceral, funny, and cinematic.

SDB: Someone looking at your work could see your paintings as fairly oblique. Very little comes right out and is announced. But then you read

**Coast Columbus**

1987

Oil and dry pigment on linen
(81.3 x 121.9cm)*Courtesy of the artist and Alexander and Bonin, New York*



Heatwave
2008
Oil on linen
(89 x 124.5cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Alexander and Bonin, New York

some of the titles and realise that you are into a certain amount of playfulness and goofiness. Like *Skid Row*. That's pretty funny. I don't know what the reproduction colour scheme is like in relation to the painting.

RB: It's a little off. My paintings don't reproduce very well. *Skid Row* is a much redder painting – it is a brick red so it does refer to the street but it is also about other kinds of skid marks.

SDB: Well, leaving obvious marks on the painting surface is very Johnsian, even though it looks more atmospheric. To what degree can some of your pictures be seen as pre-Jasper Johns? You're willing to flirt with a romantic attitude about painting. I like the fact that you're trying to negotiate airlock kind of places, between polarities and not feeling like it's essential to embrace one end or the other in order to be accepted.

RB: The romantic stance is important to me because it's unpopular. It's something I have come to over the past twenty years as a kind of banner for myself. I really love the richness of lyricism, the kinds of things that, especially in the United States, are considered amateurish and bourgeois - art that's too involved with French painting. The material practice of painting leads me into emotional places that include that painting history. I don't think I'm romantic, somewhat more detached, but a lot of the tropes that I use, which have to do with gesture, or mark making, or atmospheric colour, are ways to signify that sentiment, and a 'psychology' is present as subject.

SDB: This reminds me of your history with Philip Guston. How do you think he processed a romantic attitude, especially having been a major participant in the ultra-romantic American painting moment?

RB: I studied with Guston at the New York Studio School and I experienced his melancholy as being both romantic and self involved. The way he so personally related to Italian painting,

to Giotto, Piero Della Francesca and Uccello. Actually, when I knew him, he rarely talked about his contemporaries. De Chirico was as close as he got to talking about anyone that was still alive (this was the early 1970s). In fact, all of his models were based in history.

In a sense, that passion for history is something that I came to share with Philip. He was willing to be scholarly and emotional which included at times self-conscious parody. His work had both cartooniness and sentimentality, and it shared psychological insights with Philip Roth, in the way that they both were using their own psychology as the subject in serious and satiric ways.

But I also spent my twenties wrestling with the influence of Guston and making a lot of confused work. So I needed Johns and Ryman in the late 1970s early 1980s to find a clearer place for myself. So the emotional tenor in my work is hard-won; the delicacy, the small scale, the intimacy, all of these different elements were actually about a new found gendered identity - wanting to make paintings that were sensitive and critical of the ironic paintings that were out there at the time. By the 1990s I was intentionally making paintings that almost disappeared because of their subtlety.

SDB: It's funny, I was looking at one of your earlier works, *Coast Columbus*, and one could easily associate this with a Marden. Except that in this painting, as minimal as it is, the bottom is so craggy and so mappish, it feels like a more incomplete painting. When Marden leaves the bottom of early paintings (like Nebraska) open, you read it as a logical kind of margin that reveals the mechanics of the whole thing. And he loves that the space of the painting is suggestive and atmospheric. But you turn it all inside out. It almost becomes a more antagonising picture. Is it enough? Has it just been abandoned, left alone? If we have anything in common it's an interest in resisting paintings having to make



sense. I cannot stand that in this day and age, paintings have to add up and ‘work’ in some proper manner. ‘Wrong’ is a relative thing.

RB: *Coast Columbus* is an important formative painting. In almost every body of work for a while now, I’ve made a painting that erases itself, with a cascade of paint leaving a margin at the bottom, usually a craggy margin which also sets up enough of a space and that hopefully takes you into an existential landscape. Marden was an early influence; but my interest in him had nothing to do with his late Modernist position. It had more to do with the sense that I got, that he was really interested in space, and that space had a duality for him. I once heard him give a lecture when I was a student and he was a younger painter, about Cezanne. He was

referring to his reductions, his touch, and the way he was creating the panels to be both objective and pictorial.

SDB: One aspect of the romantic is displacement. Marden really zooms in and makes these weirdly heroic, yet passive physical paintings that embody displacement. I think for Brice they’re trying to recalibrate a romantic impulse within the era of 1960s and 1970s super cool mindedness.

RB: But when you bring up *Coast Columbus*, and refer to it with Brice Marden, I could just as easily say to you, “Not Marden, but Caspar David Friedrich for that matter.” That’s the kind of transformation that I’m interested in. Going into an evocative monochromatic space, a touched space that has depth and nuance as well as total emptiness.



SDB: It's interesting that you mention Friedrich because his work continues to inform I think, because of the degree of caricature present in the work.

RB: So is that getting back to one of your observations earlier, about how my work is leaning more towards cartoon and caricature?

SDB: Well, yeah. But it annoys me that I have not been able to pin down how this recent caricature-ish approach of yours functions. It's both somehow more graphic and slippery. Maybe it has to do with your editorial approach.

RB: I see my work as being about shifts in painting language. So there is a tension between the physicality of the paint surface and the descriptive elements that counter it. I'm describing locations but only with indications, like marks and

edges – letting the painting slip into a place that is both formal and narrative.

SDB: But at the end of the day, you do end up getting a pretty decisive painting out of this. I think that's really impressive.

RB: Especially during the last ten years it's been a major impulse for me to push a painting to the point where it's quite precise and present, but also falling away, admitting to the possibility of its failure. And reviews of my shows have been about this, whether I'm pulling a fast one or pulling it off. Like, 'Who is he kidding? Does he think this swipe of paint actually looks like anything?' But I see that kind of question even in artists like Milton Avery. When I look at how awkwardly he depicts figures and landscapes, or how he invoked a strange Modernist idea of what a formal invention could look

Above: **Curtain Call**
2006
Oil on linen mounted on panel
(81.3 x 101.6cm)

Opposite Page: **Back Road**
2009
Oil on canvas
(60 x 71cm)

*Both courtesy of the artist
and Alexander and Bonin, New York*



like then. I'm sure if he were alive he'd disagree with me, but I see his paintings as sliding into places that are on the edge of amateurish expression with odd shapes that don't conform.

SDB: That's interesting, because I've never been able to get my head around Milton Avery very easily. But I like the idea of having to reconsider artists or paintings that seem hopelessly useless. Renoir, I guess, would be next on the list.

RB: Renoir! I don't go near.

SDB: There's no room for Renoir?

RB: No, I'm too gay for Renoir. I just can't. So many surprising painters will talk about Renoir, about his touch, and the way he handles paint.

SDB: I wouldn't be surprised if someone could conjure up a way of making sense of that material.

RB: Guston liked Renoir.

SDB: Is that right?

RB: He loved the way that Renoir made marks, and his brush work and the fact that Renoir had such confidence – to be that fluffy, to be descriptive and to just render away, or, not rendering exactly. But I do see his work as relating more to the kind of rendering that goes on in Nineteenth Century academic painting, but turned outwards onto the surface through Impressionism.

SDB: We did come out of school with a total lack of tolerance for the bohemian, or the romantic.

RB: So we're going back to romantic?

SDB: This manner of the artist, yeah.

RB: But doesn't neo-Expressionism look romantic now? The neo-ness was quotational and the fact that it was



framing itself in irony really pissed me off. I was more interested in the humour you were referring to earlier. I like the humanity of humour, and the idea that paintings can actually be moving and sensual, the way that paintings have an ability to engage the senses and the emotions.

SDB: Now that we're talking about that era, and all that stuff you encounter when you're getting a consciousness about who you might actually be, or like, or want to avoid, the antidote for us in the late 1970s was discovering someone like Palermo. Those odd, small, simple works – they never announced themselves in any grandiose way, but they took up a lot of space. They engage with the environment around them.

RB: Yes, seeing Palermo was important

– when I saw his painting installations I was really impressed by the poetics of his stance. It was around the same time I realised that I wasn't interested in making large paintings. I was working on walls and not on easels, but I wanted to make paintings that were modest in size but with presence and scale.

SDB: There are poetics buried in a lot of art of that time. I always think of Bruce Nauman, but what lets those works live beyond their self-imposed rules is that the resulting product of the conditions he sets up always have an unexpected poetic dimension – he's not afraid of the scent they might be giving off.

RB: They're also really intelligent.

SDB: But intelligent, meaning an inclusive kind of intelligence, not a

Above: **Peace Garden**
2006
Oil on linen mounted on panel
(63.5 x 91.4cm)

Opposite Page: **Buddy**
2008
Oil on linen
(81 x 101.5cm)

*Both courtesy of the artist
and Alexander and Bonin, New York*

reductive, surgically pared down intelligence.

RB: Your work has a scent to it too - as well as a specific Pop currency, but it also has a tremendous narrative in it that you have to pay attention to. For your work to be categorised simply, and for people to look at your work in relation to the more superficial signifiers, is a disservice to it.

SDB: Thank you. I am so seduced by the idea of, in this day and age, what does a failed painting look like? I just really want to see one. We all know that certain paintings out-and-out suck. But a bad painting is not necessarily a failed painting, and a failed painting is not necessarily a bad painting. I'm intrigued by the energy that comes out of 'wrongness'.

RB: Now that you mention it, I wanted to ask you, when we've talked about my shows, you've often referred to 'wrongness' in my work. I've liked that and want to know more about what 'wrongness' means to you.

SDB: It seems to me that when I look at these paintings, they're not overly composed, if at all. In this pink one, *Castaway*, what is this transition? Some people might look at this and say, "He's really got to work that out." The transitions between the smeary stuff on top to these blocky things - all right, but you are really in some awkward, interesting place. To me this is all incredibly positive stuff. What the hell is going on here? Where am I, what is that? The way it's taking place is not very certain. There is no certainty as to how that shift is occurring.

RB: You mean there are two uncertain spaces colliding.

SDB: Yeah. This one, I do not understand for the life of me, but I love that it's in your oeuvre. This kind of crazy grid layout with these awkward... put it this way, it doesn't really add up. These coded elements should look more jovial or upbeat.

RB: You know what they are? They're Tibetan prayer flags, peace flags - in this case glimpsed through a thickly painted green grid. It's called *Peace Garden*.

These paintings all have narratives. For instance, this one is called *Stoned*.

SDB: This is another title that needs to be discussed.

RB: Well, it's both 'stoned' as in stoned, but I was reading something about adulterous women and homosexuals in Iraq or Afghanistan being stoned on the street. So that painting had a lot to do with the atmosphere of the period we are living in. It's an ecological cartoon painting - all this crap is coming down from the sky, giant boulders, stones, snowflakes, rain, and of course, worries. This painting and *Castaway* for that matter, are about these forces and intended to be awkward and ill at ease, somewhat pushed together. But the way these sensations are taking place, with a kind of skewed lyricism, that it's pretty and sort of fucked up at the same time, has a lot to do with the weather narratives that I've been working on. Although every painting does have a specific subject and logic I am really interested in creating paintings that open up for the viewer with a range of emotions and humour.

SDB: There are certain motifs you use that impede ones ability to enter the space. I mean these white, splotchy elements in *Piece of Cake*. To me, these white shapes are about a sense of erasure, or deletion. Something was there.

Ruscha did paintings at some point in which he put bars over where we would assume there were words. They could look like exaggerated glare, because you do have a landscape thing going on.

RB: You're getting close. *Piece of Cake* is a landscape seen through the glare of a T.V. screen. In my work, a landscape is a simple thing. It's a big empty ground, a sky, an atmosphere, or it's divided in three, or divided with some sort of horizon, or a compression of planes. And

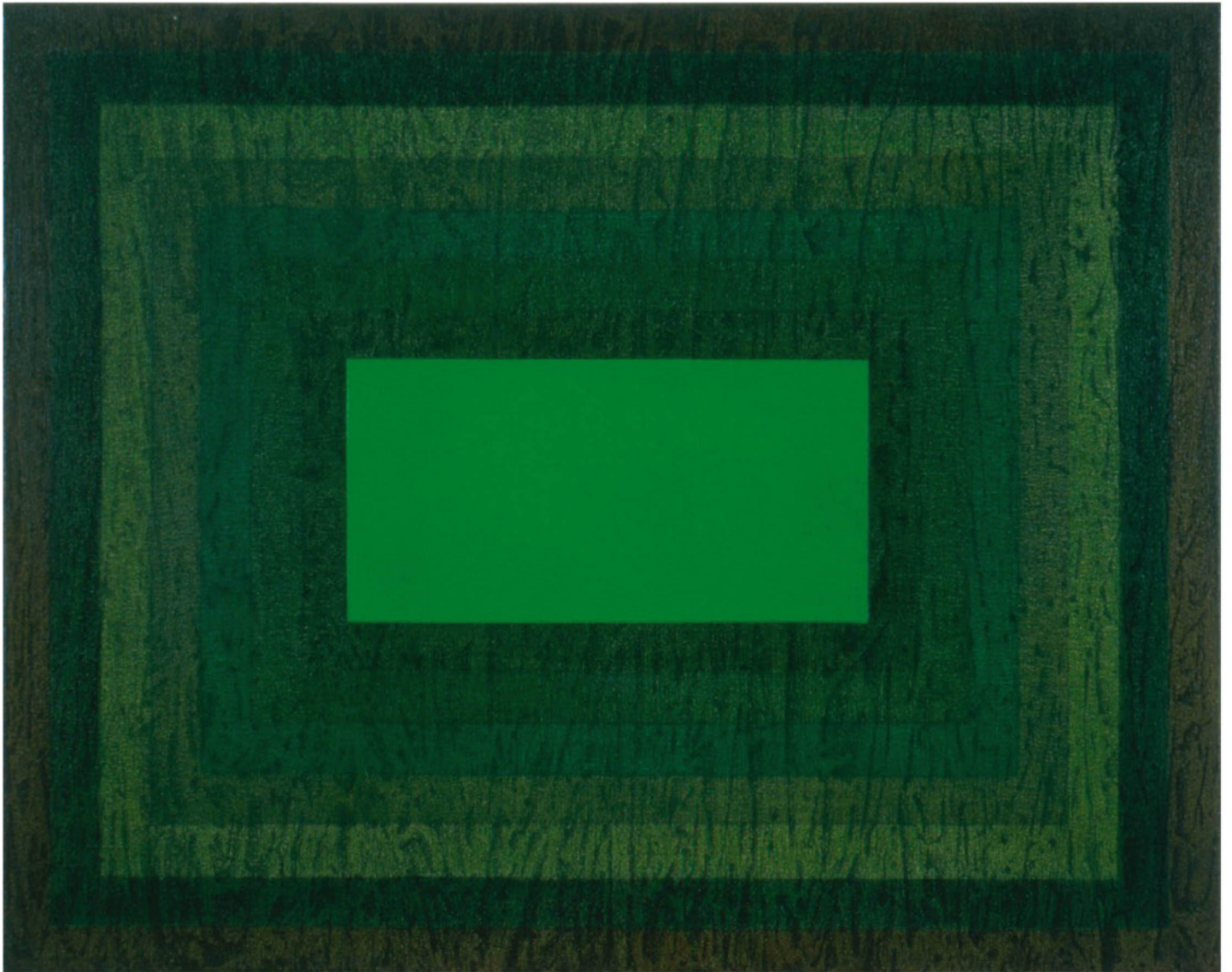


Above: **Soliloquy**
1995
Oil on linen
(53.5 x 53.5cm)

Left: **Open Sky**
2008
Oil on linen
(91.5 x 114cm)

*Both courtesy of the artist
and Alexander and Bonin, New York*





His Perfect Lawn
1996
Oil on canvas
(48.3 x 60cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Alexander and Bonin, New York

this one, *Curtain Call*, refers to the end of a performance, when the whole act of making the painting has taken place, and the curtain is descending, one can still see the little bits and fragments of performance peeking through. But here it's also a dark ominous sky that is coming down and a white snowy ground is coming up, it's squeezing out the more beautiful colours of summer. The painting has three planes like a sandwich and it's a about the landscape that I experience in my studio in upstate New York.

SDB: *Curtain Call* also implies, "That's that!"

RB: That's all! Yeah, I don't think it's cynical, it's just a Woody Allen kind of shrug. The shrug is important to me. I guess I'm conflicted about the role of mastery in my painting. That's why I like De Keyser so much. I think that he has a real sense of himself in terms of how he relates to syntax, and also the temperature and climate and emotional state that he's willing to show. In another one of our conversations you said, "You're willing to show something. But you're not willing to show something else!"

SDB: I don't know if I've thought this up or read it, but there's this membrane factor in painting, and it's exactly where Marden comes in, and it's just like skin. There is this business where the surface of a painting is just like the surface of a body. It's just this place where the world meets internal environment. Ultimately that's the landscape - that painting just kills me. Just kidding, it's genius.

RB: You mean *Head* - it's the top of our bald heads!

SDB: That's exactly what I've unfortunately concluded. What that painting reminds me of, which I wanted to bring up earlier, even though you have a painting called *Stoned*, is one of the qualities your stuff has that I think gets misunderstood. It almost has a stoner quality. And not with the stigma of the

stupid hippy stoner, but it's more like you are, someone who just looks at the world a little too much? You know who impressed me the same way is Tony Feher. Getting to know Tony the little I have, this guy is on a wavelength that's not only about the preciousness of those wonderful little arrangements, it's really just staring at stuff and seeing that stuff, like, did that move?

RB: It's cool that you bring up Tony because I got to know him in the 1990s when painting was supposedly dead, and most gay artists were either in ACT UP or were making politicised work. Tony was working at Paula Cooper, and I used to hang out on the street with him and I remember going to his first show and I felt a tremendous kinship towards his work. One of the things I loved the most about him was that he was this totally out gay man who was making extremely sensitive work all about looking at things, materials, juxtapositions - the early work was so minor, just a penny on the top of a pop bottle.

SDB: With you and Tony, and there are others, I'm sure, but there's a shared sense of feeling very strongly about having a gay identity, but the work is not announcing this in any way. The work is not an outgrowth of an activist agenda.

RB: I'm gay, I'm out, but I've never been interested in making work that is for a specific group. I also hope that, if my work is seductive and sexy at times it should be open to anyone looking at it. I'm still the person who made it, who happens to be gay. That's what I love about Jasper Johns. His work has never necessarily been out, but his imagery is coded in a deeply personal way.

SDB: But you're not opposed to artists who are more overt about having varying degrees of identity politics. You're just thinking it's not for you.

RB: No, I encourage my students to involve themselves with identity and with politics. 'Identity Politics' is now for me a parenthetical term to describe the



Drifters Escape 2004
Oil on canvas
(45.7 x 61cm)

Courtesy of the artist
and Alexander and Bonin, New York

way that curators, critics, and journalists categorise artists. The fact that we may slip into a specific context at different moments in our lives is when we land in those categories. I'm one of those artists who seem to slip in and out of painting circles. Some painters like me and others don't. Maybe it gets back to the dumbness and sophistication issue. Paintings that are really genuine often look dumb, but they can also open up into the possibility of having a complicated worldview.

SDB: I don't know if this has been discussed in the past, but you do have a pretty serious involvement with this place (Cooper Union). Do you think you're having an impact here? I mean you're designing this place. Do you feel you've helped engineer a certain way that information is getting across?

RB: Yeah, I guess so, the fact that I'm teaching here, along with many others – all these serious New York painters teaching undergraduates. If I've engineered anything, I've helped to fashion a community that extends out into New York City by bringing a range

of painters into our program. But it's the sophistication of the artists teaching here and these wonderful students that creates this great energy.

SDB: Just as effective as teaching can be, painting is clearly your primary concern.

RB: Yes, but also on some level I must be proselytising for painting.

I'm also hoping that, by educating young painters I'm enabling them to be wide and generous and to have multifaceted responses, both intellectually and emotionally to painting. I'm investing in the future. Some of the things that we've been talking about I've learned from students and my interaction with them is inspiring and it makes me hopeful about the future of painting.

SDB: I agree. It's always hard to make predictions, but I'm inclined to agree. More complications are going to have to push the painting thing forward.

RB: I hope that's what we're doing.

SDB: Well, I've found that you have to believe pretty crazy things sometimes to get through all this. I like to use the model of, who's to say what really is going to work down the road, but, and I

even tell kids this, eventually you have to put your chips on something.

That, to me, is the key. What stakes are you willing to play for? What are you willing to get behind? Or, what can you avoid getting behind?

RB: Which leads me back to my thing with landscape painting. There's something great about the way the landscape is democratic, relegated to the low brow, the amateur, and so involved in popular taste, taught in adult painting classes – it's probably the most popular kind of painting. Yet it is suspect, which takes me back to when I was using Canadian maps and images of wilderness as my starting point – it was all about imagining a complex space that oil painting continually presents as an alternative place. Not necessarily as a landscape with trees and rivers, but as a location that one goes into to think and explore, a place to have strong feelings about, anxiety and wonder.

SDB: Yes landscape, painting surface, the brain, these are places that do get projected onto, or into. There's a sense that a landscape is a space, but it's available space. It needs something, or you could see it that way.

RB: I like that, available space, that's really good – so it's not really landscape at all, but head space with air and weather and lots of snow and rain.

SDB: It's also a real important gesture for anyone, anytime, to say fuck you! I'm going to say I'm a landscape painter, and you can't take that away from me.

RB: I haven't gone that far!

SDB: You haven't?

RB: I won't go that far - landscape acts as a continual link for me to get to the imagery in my work that is ultimately about painting.

SDB: We didn't really get into the Dylan business.

RB: Dylan is tremendously important to me. I would say he was probably the most significant role model from when I was young. And also, his crazy syntax!

The fact is that his songs are poems, and they never really made any sense while making total sense.

SDB: Well, he's as landscape a musician as there is.

RB: Definitely, the landscape is America.

SDB: But it's also his brain. So you've worked with Guston and you met Dylan?

RB: Yeah. I met Dylan when I was a teenager. I went to a summer art program at the Art Students League in Woodstock. I took a Greyhound bus to Woodstock from Montreal and my drawing teacher lived next door to Bob Dylan. This was around the time of Big Pink. He announced that there were some visitors coming to our class the next day. He chose three of us to display our work and then Bob Dylan and Garth Hudson of the Band walked in.

SDB: Excellent.

RB: And it absolutely blew my mind.

SDB: So you knew about Dylan, you were into him?

RB: Oh, totally. I mean, when I saw him, I was just speechless.

SDB: And this was when he was in his hermetic period.

RB: It was after he had recovered from a motorcycle accident, and he was up in Woodstock, and the Band was just getting together. It was the Basement Tape period. And there was Bob, and Garth. Bob didn't say much.

SDB: What a surprise.

RB: Have you been to any of Dylan's baseball stadium concerts? We went to one a few years ago on my birthday, to a junior league stadium in Montclair, New Jersey. We were so close to Dylan that we saw the whole act from about twenty feet away.

SDB: Playing keyboards?

RB: Playing keyboard, wailing away, almost hidden in the background. It was unbelievable, amazing streams of the latest Dylan genius – sort of like De Kooning's late paintings.

SDB: Just untethered.

RB: Yeah, untethered.



Gnostic Barbecue – Steve DiBenedetto

2010
Oil on canvas
(183 x 244cm)

Courtesy of the artist