David Reed, interviewed by Jonathan Seliger,
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David Reed

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Jonathan Seliger: *Let's begin by talking about structure. How have you come to reconcile an all-over, gestural composition within a geometric framework?*

David Reed: There's something very profound about that all-over structure. The work of Pollock and Newman are examples. The problem for me, and I think a lot of other painters, is how to retain that basic all-overness and yet have a differentiation between parts.

The all-over structure is similar to Leonardo's invention of chiaroscuro at the beginning of the 15th Century. With chiaroscuro, Leonardo unified figures and the space of the painting in a way that had a powerful spiritualizing effect. But to get that powerful chiaroscuro unity, Leonardo had to almost entirely eliminate differences of hue in his paintings. The next generation's problem was how to use hues as well as chiaroscuro.

Our problem is similar now. Looking at a Pollock or a Newman, one always looks from

the part to the whole and then back to the part again. In my paintings I want the viewer to look from part to part and to struggle to make the parts into a whole. So in fact it's misleading to say that I'm reconciling all-overness and geometric divisions; the paintings don't explain themselves so quickly.

Milton Resnick, who I studied with at the Studio School, was crucial to my understanding of this all-over structure. He thinks about it, understands it, in such a profound way. In fact, to simply call it all-overness is an insult. Milton does not like what he called "leaks" in paintings. Often there is a leak at a horizon line or at a value contrasted edge. This threatens the unity of the painting. I can remember looking at Rembrandt paintings with him where often there were leaks, but in Rubens paintings there weren't.

JS: *The leak is an emotional runoff?*
DR: Yes, I see it that way, but I don't think Milton would put it in those terms. Looking at a painting, leaks would keep a viewer from retaining the emotion within that painting. In my paintings I like to have spatial breaks, threatened horizons and contrasted edges to create emotional tensions. Controlling the leaks in those places is the structure of a painting.

JS: *Fountains have water draining off and flowing in at the same rate in order to maintain a constant level. The emotional force in your paintings replenishes itself in a similar way.*
DR: That's a terrific image.

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JS: *Clement Greenberg codified the all-over approach to composition. Are the geometric divisions in your work meant to be Greenbergian, by reinforcing the frontality of the canvas and echoing the shape of your support? Or are you deviating from his strictures?*
DR: I've just read David Carrier's book Art Writing and I want to be careful not to attribute ideas which I hated to Greenberg when I really heard them from his popularizers. Greenberg had some good perceptions about art, but other critics and artists misused them to limit painting. Since I moved to New York in 1971 the climate of criticism has been against painting. People have always said that painting is dead. Greenbergians, Minimalists and materialists, all had rules to follow to make a painting. I wanted to keep painting and never believed that their rules could help. To survive, given the critical atmosphere, I've had to think of myself as painting after the end of painting.

So in answer to your question: no, I don't want the divisions in my paintings to emphasize the physicality of the support. In fact, I intended the divisions to threaten the unity of a painting. When I had my shows at Max Protech in 1977 and 1979 and at the Clocktower in 1980, painters would take me out to lunch or come up and tell me that I couldn't break the unity of the painting the way I did. My paintings at the time had a black and white stroke juxtaposed on two joined panels. In my studio they would separate the panels and say that one or the other part was better by itself. I hated the proscriptive rules.

I never thought that paintings should become

flat. I want my paintings to have depth and an active spatial involvement in the room. The brushstrokes should be regarded as a fragment of a larger whole that extends well beyond the edges of the canvas. I want light from color and from the destruction of materiality, rather than an emphasis on the physical properties of paint. I also strive for an extreme contrast of value as well as hue. Color Field painting holds value differences to a minimum in order to emphasize hue; their color is based on Impressionism. The same is true, by the way, for the bright hues and black linear structure of Neo-Plastic Abstraction. I want something more dramatic. In order to have a broad range of emotions in the work, I need strong value contrasts. Since we don't have to depict objects, we can use contrasts and gradations of both hue and value in ways that they have never been used before. As a result, there are new possibilities for color. We can solve the color problem which painting had after Leonardo.

At the time when Color Field or Minimalist ideas were in power, I knew that by not following the rules I appeared, dumb, romantic or even dangerous. But I've seen each of my dissents lead to new possibilities in my own paintings and those of others.

***JS**: You don't agree that those brushstroke paintings from the Clocktower show were quite flat?*

***DR**:* Even when people said that paintings were flat, I thought of those paintings as having quite a bit of space. Making them I was very involved in the layering of surfaces, but the paintings were acrylic and seeing that

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show, I realized they were flatter, more planer, than I had planned. They made me look for ways to put more space into the paintings.

***JS:** An emphatic brushstroke has distinguished your work from the start. How did you first incorporate this isolated mark into your work?*

***DR**:* I always felt divided. A part of me wanted to identify with the painting, to be inside the painting. Another part was outside observing what was going on. I found the split painful. I decided if I could work fast enough this wouldn't happen. Now, of course, I've come to realize that the swiftness of execution doesn't help: to make art you have to grit your teeth and bear it. But then, the solution I came up with was to concentrate on a series of gestures, painting quickly—wet into wet. The marks seemed to be removed from materiality, as if they were an emblem of a stroke. The gesture, divorced from a context and isolated that way, gained significance rather than becoming less meaningful, which is something I would never have expected. My model for it—after I'd seen it happen, that is—was an event at the end of Kafka's The Trial; K. sees a figure gesturing from a window but can't tell if she's waving to him, trying to stop the execution or merely hanging out the laundry. It's just an isolated gesture.

***JS**: What's noteworthy about your gestures is the way they're highlighted, and to me, that peculiar light is related to photography.*

***DR**:* I never try to make them resemble photographic images, but this photographic look keeps reappearing in various ways. I

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look for a sense of movement in my paintings, a jump that causes a connection to the viewer. We see paintings in a different way now because of film and video; we spend so much time watching moving images on flat screens. It has to affect us. When we see a still image now, it's easy for us to continue the movement. Connecting with that jump of movement is a way of keeping the emotion in the present rather than letting it become nostalgic.

Along this line, I'm also very intrigued by the new artificial pigments that are being introduced. They make colors which don't yet have specific emotional connotations. I like the confusion between the organic and the man-made that can be created with these colors.

***JS**: Your use of color and your brushstroke frequently lead people to conclude that there is a connection between your work and Pop Art.*

***DR**:* Regardless of what critics might say, my brushmarks have nothing to do with Lichtenstein's; his brushstrokes are reproductions. They ironically refer to other brushstrokes. Mine are more emblematic. They want to flee materiality—even join some idea of the brushstroke, but they don't refer to other brushstrokes. They may be distanced but are not ironic.

Rauschenberg criticized the originality of the Abstract Expressionists by duplicating the same painterly gesture twice in Factum I and II. As I understand his criticism, I don't think he's right. In a painting I'm working on I have two gestures as close as I can make them to each other. I want them both to be meaningful. It's how it fits in the painting that's important, not the fact that it's repeated.

"Warhol's indifference made me care even more."

On the other hand, my paintings have a lot to do with Warhol. When I was a student in Oregon, Warhol came through on a speaking tour. I had seen one of the car accident paintings and rather than making me feel detached, his repeated images had an emotional effect on me. His indifference made me care even more. I was going to stand up at the lecture and say that I was the real Andy Warhol; then I was going to describe my reaction to his painting. I couldn't go to the lecture but I always wished I'd been able to carry out my plan. On that tour Warhol sent a surrogate who pretended to be him. I would have been the real Warhol. I'd like to do for abstraction what Warhol did for media images and figuration: he caused a questioning and deep self-reflection. His formal devices, even distancing effects, cause emotion, self-aware emotions, rather than cancelling it out.

***JS**: What about your interest in Baroque painting. Do you think that had they been allowed to paint abstractly they would have?*

***DR**:* Yes, definitely. This is certainly clear looking at Tintoretto. Why else did he paint those heads so small? In the big crucifixion, why did he put Christ's face in shadow? He was aware of the problems caused by representation.

The Baroque painters were still stuck with that color problem from Leonardo which we touched on earlier: how to have value contrasts and hue in the same painting. Figures, and making those forms round, stood in the way of solving the problem. As I've said, we

can solve the problem now. Baroque artists introduced a lot of tactile qualities as a way of getting around the figures, to break them down and make them disappear as you look at the paint surface. Since I don't have the tradition of figuration hanging over me, I have the opposite problem: I need to bring back within the all-over structure a sense of variety of the parts. One of the conspicuous aspects of my work is the artificially smooth. I use it as a foil against the tendency of the painting to break apart. Most paintings have tactile entry; mine are peculiar in that the entry is eyes only. My paintings reveal themselves over a period of time. They are meant to be lived with in relaxed and intimate moments. It's awkward that they have to be seen in a gallery. I want to be a bedroom painter.

***JS**: Given the weight that Baroque art carries in your work, do you ever start a painting with a specific painting in mind from that period?*
***DR**:* There was an Assumption of the Virgin by Ludovico Carracci in the show at the Met that I keep thinking about. Mary is wearing a beautiful blue robe with green and purple glazed shadows. She floats in a strangely symmetrical composition. I'm interested in the emotional content of that painting. That's what I want in my painting. I try to use Ludovico's formal inventions, but usually they don't work for me and I have to try to get that feeling in my own way.

At times I've had perceptual experiences which relate to the content of older paintings. For example, one day I was sanding some white canvases out on the fire escape, staring at them in bright sunlight. When I came back

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inside the electric light and daylight coming in the window were a wonderful violet/rose-red. It was gorgeous, supernatural color. I thought of the desert saints who must have come into their caves with similar retinal fatigue. Seeing their lamp glowing red, they must have thought that God was talking to them. I wanted to capture this color and light in a painting. After I finished it, I called it Jerome's Dream, from a painting by Ribera. In the Ribera painting an angel blowing his horn startles Jerome from his sleep and asks: "Are you a Christian or are you a scholar? You can't be both. Faith or intellect?" I had been asking myself the same question. I wanted the red light in my painting to cause the viewer to ask it again.

***JS**: I see a strong relationship between your work and Caravaggio's. In no one work is this link more cogent than in Caravaggio's "Bacchus."*
***DR**:* The morning the Caravaggio show opened, I first noticed the sloshing of the wine in the flask that Bacchus had just placed on the table. As I was examining the wine I saw a reflection on its top surface: It is Caravaggio painting the painting.

I was astounded. There are many devices to draw you into the painting: Bacchus is offering you the wine, he's opening the belt to his robe, he's inviting you into the bed. But there are also distancing effects: the soiled pillow shows from under the white linen, the fruit is rotting, his fingernails are dirty. This Bacchus is wearing make-up and a wig. Nevertheless, one can't help but be drawn into the magic circle. Only Caravaggio is excluded; he has

created the illusions. He is too aware of the devices to take part. This is very wise, but it is also touching and sad.

***JS**: The image of Caravaggio in the reflection, in a position exterior to the painting, is that a kind of compositional model for you? Either consciously or unconsciously in your relationship to your paintings, which are both sensuous and immediate, detached and emblematic, almost as if they were flashlit like a memory?*

***DR**: I've never thought of my paintings that way, but I think you're right. That flashlit effect in Caravaggio is an effect that I want in my paintings: a sense that something has just happened, or is about to happen, and if you look carefully you'll be able to see it. Hopefully the changes that you notice in the paintings as you look at them over a period of time will be that event. The viewer and the paintings are the event, together.*

This interview took place in September, 1987 at Reed's studio, New York City.

David Reed is represented by the Max Protech Gallery, New York, where he is showing Jan. 16 - Feb. 13. His work was included in "Generations of Geometry," Whitney Museum at Equitable Center, New York, 1987.