THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

WEBEXCLUSIVE

David Reed In Conversation with Phong Bui

by Phong Bui

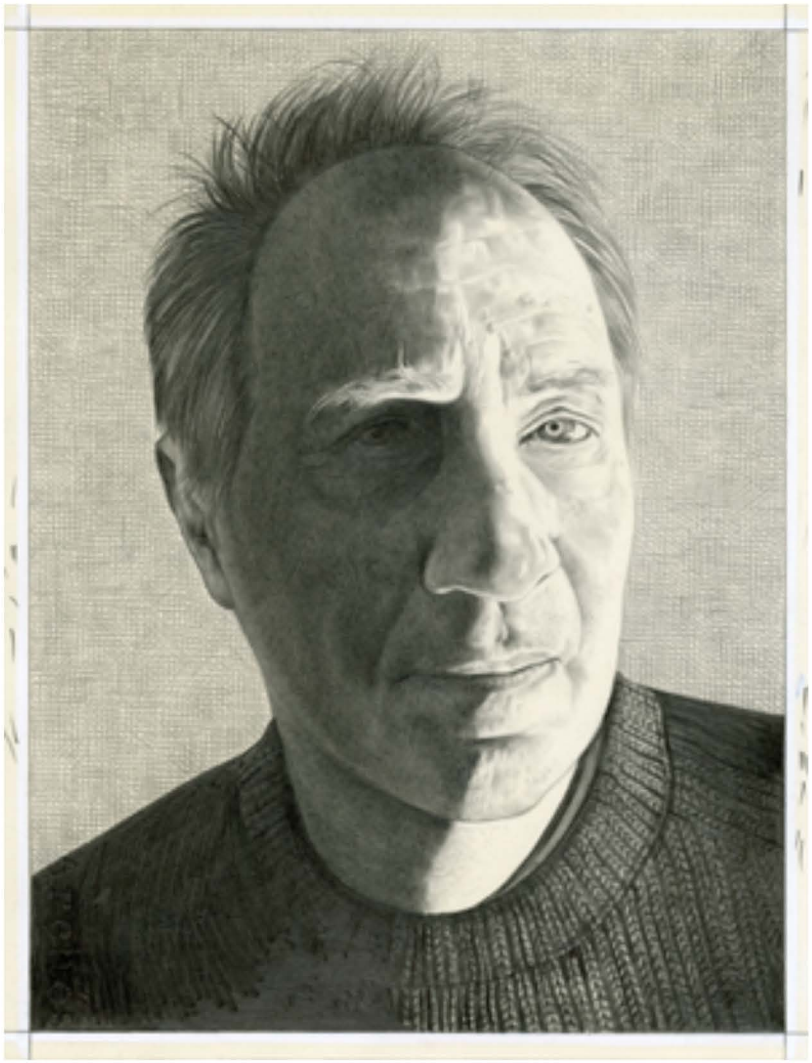
In addition to the artist's other interview with Art Editor John Yau about his then current exhibit of working drawings and color studies at Peter Blum SoHo (January 13-March 6, 2010), David Reed stopped by Art International Radio to talk further with Publisher Phong Bui about other issues concerning the growth of his paintings.

Phong Bui (Rail): Nicholas Wilder, the gallerist from Los Angeles, once said to you that collectors of John McLaughlin, a vastly under-recognized Californian painter, would install his paintings in their bedrooms, thereby enhancing the sense of intimacy between them and the paintings. Somehow that remark had an incredible effect on you as far as how you wanted your painting to be perceived in a similar way. My first question is, did you have any intimate relationship with McLaughlin?

David Reed: Yes, when Nick Wilder told me about bedroom painting, I realized that this is my ambition in life. That's how I want my work to be seen and experienced. The first time I met Nick was when Susan Caldwell, my New York dealer at the time, brought me to visit his gallery on Santa Monica Boulevard. McLaughlin's paintings were sitting out on the floor along all the walls. I studied the paintings while Nick was talking with Susan and then told him how much I loved them. Nick slowly looked me up and down–this happened before we were introduced– and said, "Of course you do, your uncle was the one who discovered John McLaughlin." He told me the story of how my Uncle O.P. Reed, a painter and gallerist in Los Angeles, had seen a painting by McLaughlin in an art supply store in Dana Point. He asked where McLaughlin lived and visited his studio. This led to my uncle showing McLaughlin's work in Los Angeles for the first time.

Rail: So, you were exposed to his paintings quite early on.

Reed: I saw McLaughlin's paintings for the first time as a teenager, when my family stayed with my uncle and aunt in a house they rented on the beach in Malibu. I remember a black and white painting that was on the wall next to the bunk bed where I slept.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on Paper by Phong Bui

Rail: McLaughlin died relatively late. He was born in 1898 and he died in 1975. And you were born in 1946, in San Diego?

Reed: That's correct. McLaughlin is especially important to me because his work reminds me of that moment of progressive culture in California, when there was a sense that the world could be changed for the middle class through modernist design, architecture, and painting. This is something very different from my experience in New York. I grew up in a beautiful mid-century modern house designed by my other uncle, John August Reed. My parents weren't particularly artistic or wealthy but we had a few paintings by my Uncle O.P. and Aunt Rosemary hanging on the walls. My fascination with Nick's bedroom idea–art that you live with–may have been generated from my early upbringing. It's art that's not special or separate from ordinary life but is a part of daily activities.

Rail: Still, it's rather advanced for a teenager to be exposed to McLaughlin, considering his paintings are quite unsettling and highly refined in their formal austerity, in terms of their geometric forms as well as sparse coloration.

Reed: Of course, as a teenager, I didn't really understand them at all. Nor did I understand my uncle's and aunt's abstract paintings. But there was a sense of comfort and family connection that convinced me, somehow, that I knew more than I did [*laughs*].

Rail: So the fact that your uncle was a painter and you were exposed to paintings in your youth somehow encouraged you to become a painter from early on?

Reed: I think so. My Great Uncle August Biehle, who lived in Cleveland, was also a painter. My father now says he would have been the best of us if he had had the opportunity.

Rail: [*Laughs*] It's never too late to become what you may have been. That's what George Eliot once said.

Reed: I'll tell him that.

Rail: Why did you study at Reed College, instead of an art school?

Reed: Well, the other side of my experience in southern California, is that San Diego, where I was growing up, is a conservative, military town. These glimpses I got of modernist painting and architecture seemed to me to be the way out. This was clearly something different than the general culture in San Diego. Reed College appealed to me because it was an intellectual school. The Beat poets, including Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, and Lewis Welch, had

studied there. The meeting meant to introduce you to the school was a party on the beach with guys and girls on motorcycles. I heard that no grades were given. My decision wasn't made for practical reasons.

#1, 1972, Oil on canvas, 76 × 38 inches

Rail: You graduated in '68, but you had spent one year at the New York Studio School in 1967, and the previous summer at Skowhegan. How did you discover both schools from Reed College?

Reed: I saw a brochure from the Studio School in our geodesic dome studio classroom at Reed. I was intrigued by the connections of the teachers there to the Abstract Expressionists, and by the fact that it was student-founded–a rebellious, breakaway school. That was the kind of school I wanted to go to. I was told about Skowhegan by my teacher at Reed, Willard Midgette. He had gone there during several summers. I was one of those difficult art students who give their teachers a hard time. I told Midgette that I couldn't draw with modeling, gradations of black and white, because I didn't see the world that way. I said that I only saw lines. Midgette, a figurative painter, let me get away with it, giving me other exercises instead. When I tried to behave this way at the Portland Museum School, I was thrown out. In those days there was a joint program in art between the Museum School and Reed College. Midgette organized it so that I could graduate from Reed with a major in art, the first time that that was possible. Through Reed College I got a Rockefeller Fellowship that allowed me to go to the Studio School. It was the height of the Vietnam War. Very few men attended because there were no draft deferments for going to an art school. I was an exception because I was officially still going to Reed College.

#90, 1975, Oil on canvas, 76 × 56 inches

Rail: How did you survive the Studio School's dogmatic ideology?

Reed: It was a bit less dogmatic in those years. I studied with Milton Resnick, who was very important to me. Morton Feldman was the dean at the time. But I shouldn't deny that I fell for the belief system completely. When I go to lectures there now and see a paint-splattered, dazed-looking student, listening in for a moment from the back of the room, I think: that's me.

Rail: Was Philip Guston there?

Reed: I went back to Reed College for a year to finish and, to my embarrassment, graduate. Then between '68 and '69 I returned to the Studio School and Mercedes Matter, one of the founders of the school, gave me a job organizing the library. It was then that Guston came to teach.

Rail: These were crucial years for him.

Reed: Yes, very important years, and I was very lucky that Mercedes said that I could bring work to Guston's first

group crit and then invited me to be in Guston's seminar.

Rail: 1967 was a year after two major exhibits: *Systemic Painting*, curated by Lawrence Alloway at the Guggenheim, and *Primary Structures*, organized by the formidable Kynaston McShine at the Jewish Museum.

Reed: I saw those exhibitions, and many others, including the de Kooning retrospective at the Modern, the Kline retrospective at the Whitney, both in 1968, the Newman exhibit, *The Stations of the Cross*, at the Guggenheim in 1966 and later, Newman's retrospective at the Modern in 1971. I looked hard at the New York School painting and also at the experimental abstraction by younger painters in the shows you mention. But I didn't just look at art. These were political years, and I was also involved in anti-war politics–everyone was. I was in the Tombs for a few days for putting up the now-famous "And Babies?" posters designed by the Art Workers' Coalition.

Rail: Irving Petlin, Jon Hendricks, and Frazer Dougherty were the ones who designed it.

Reed: I didn't know that! I was amazed when recently I saw the poster in an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. My friend and I put these posters up late on a Saturday night. My naïve strategy was to make the posters visible to visitors on their way to the Metropolitan Museum of Art on Sunday morning *[laughs].* We glued one to the wall of a building between Madison and Fifth, unaware that it was the Lebanese Embassy. Police cars came down the block from both sides and we were arrested and charged with a felony–"attacking a foreign embassy."

Rail: That's amazing. By the way, those posters are now very rare, even though I know at the time they were printed in an edition of 50,000.

Reed: There must have been a thousand of them in my Volkswagen, which was just sitting uptown collecting tickets while I was in jail.

Rail: In your recent interview with John Yau, you spoke of abstraction as being the condition of losing the contours of one's own body.

Reed: Like having sex or kissing.

Rail: Right, which brings us back to the classic reading of Cézanne's work, where the contour of the figure is opened up, loosened up, or broken down. But, at the same time, when it breaks down, it tends to find its figural equivalent in another object in nature. There was a similar reading among the surrealists, which fed right into Abstract Expressionism, especially de Kooning's landmark *Woman* series, which signaled the return of the figure.

#113, 196/2005-2006, Acrylic on polyester, 8 x 110 inches (3 stretchers)

Reed: Yes, sometimes I think I may fall through some kind of strange back door and end up with a figure in my painting again, one that has nothing to do with representation, but instead with gesture. I do embrace such figurative connections when they occur. Cézanne's bathers have a lot to do with his memories of adolescence, when he felt at one with the world and comfortable in a way that he didn't later. At least that's how I see it.

Rail: We spoke similarly, the last time I saw you, about Gorky's paintings in his retrospective in Philadelphia.

Reed: Yes, I've not made that connection before. Gorky also had memories of an idyllic childhood, a time of oneness with nature before a fall. I wonder what the psychological connection is between these memories and the painting lesson that Gorky learned from Cézanne to leave some part of the painting unfinished: to leave it open, not closed off. Matisse learned the same lesson from Cézanne. It's not what I learned about Cézanne at the Studio School.

Rail: And one senses in your paintings that you don't particularly denounce Abstract Expressionists' gestures per se, nor do you embrace the Minimalists' absence of hand. But, as far as considering yourself a bedroom painter, where both states of being awake and asleep are infused, this can be seen as a parallel to periphery vision that de Kooning spoke of in his essay "Content as a Glimpse," for example, when a person walks into a room, and is introduced to someone and in the corner there sat another person, whose appearance is not in focus. And that was what de Kooning wanted to paint–that frozen glimpse. And while we're talking about de Kooning, I wonder when you began your door painting series in 1972 whether you had in mind de Kooning's door paintings of the mid-60s to early-70s, like "Women Sag Harbor" (1964).

Reed: I loved those de Koonings that were painted on doors. Without consciously thinking of those specific works, I measured the door in my studio and started making paintings that size. The gestures in the paintings turned out to reflect the motions of going through a door. I was trying to find a way to open up the space of painting. In the middle of de Kooning's great painting "Excavation" (1950) there's a door that's slightly ajar, as if someone had just walked through it. The letters of de Kooning's signature on the bottom right make up the teeth of a skull. This skull is like all those skulls in crucifixions. The skull is Adam's, the first man, who is redeemed by the blood of Christ, the second man. De Kooning has discarded his former self as he walked through the door in his painting.

Rail: That's a beautiful reading. Elizabeth Murray, who grew up in Chicago and studied at the School of Art Institute of Chicago, told me how "Excavation" was a touchstone for her career as a painter. Instead of the stacking up of limbs and body parts in a compressed space as in de Kooning, in Elizabeth's work we see the similar cubist structures through more domestic objects. I think that painting meant a great deal to her.

Reed: I wish that I had talked with Elizabeth about "Excavation." In Jasper Johns's "Arrive/Depart," (1963-1964) Johns stencils his name as the teeth of a skull. The painting has a similar spinning motion with a "Fragile: Do Not Break" sticker in the middle of the painting. This suggests that if you go through a painting once, you can't come back. Perhaps Johns noticed what I did in "Excavation."

Rail: That's possible. About the brushstrokes painting, David, you had found a way of painting black and horizontal brushstrokes, on white ground wet onto wet on multiple canvases that were bolted together. The interrupted edges in-between create a flickering effect along the length of the brushmark, I assume because of the raised stretcher behind it. How conscious was that decision?

Reed: Yes, I wanted to interrupt the mark, slow down the gesture so it wouldn't become imaginary. I wanted the gesture to remain physical and related to a body. I had a hard time painting during that time. I felt myself split in two while I was working. One part of me was inside the painting, immersed in the process. The other part wanted to be aware of the whole of the painting, everything that was happening on the surface. To be aware in that way I had to be outside the canvas looking in. I felt that I was both painting and looking at myself paint.

Rail: You mean the Pollock/Newman crisis.

Reed: Chuck Yeager, the test pilot, described this experience as the "break-off." While flying he had to radio in readings from the cockpit's instrument panel and at the same time observe himself flying, looking out at the edges of the earth. I find this split consciousness to be very uncomfortable. Now I try to grit my teeth and bear it, but in those days I just couldn't stand to be split in this way. I tried to work as quickly as I could and get it over with. While a show of my door paintings was up in 1974, I wanted to do something that didn't take much effort, and I thought of using black and white, working exactly in the way you describe. I painted horizontal black strokes into pale wet grounds with the canvas in a vertical position, letting the paint run together. I started at the top and worked my way down. Then while the paint was still running, I would lay the canvas flat on the floor to stop the dripping. Looking at the first painting made in this way (#26), I realized that it was better than the other paintings that were in the show. This painting was 11 inches wide. I wanted to make a longer brushstroke–the longest I could

make in a single motion, standing in one place–so I put several of these 11-inch canvases together. I wanted to let the gesture itself determine the size of the canvas rather than fitting the gesture to the canvas.

Rail: The Chuck Yeager analogy makes sense to me. His story was made into the movie *The Right Stuff,* based on Tom Wolfe's book, directed by Philip Kaufman, and starring Sam Shepard as Yeager. It was quite good. But at any rate, how did your paintings get transformed from multiple brushstrokes into a single brushstroke, which seemed at times broken up by a flatly painted color panel in between?

Reed: I started thinking that the number of the brushstrokes, stacked one on top of the other, was arbitrary, even though it was based on how high and low I could comfortably reach. I decided I would just make one brushstroke along a thin horizontal canvas. The brushstrokes I made standing in one place were about 52 inches long. I planned on four of these, with a little space in-between, so I made the canvas 8 inches high and 214 inches long. Guy Goodwin called it "The Baseball Painting": four times to get around the bases. Then I thought that instead of having the brush marks seem discrete, I wanted them to continue endlessly. I cropped the strokes so there were half-strokes at the ends of the canvas, as if when they continued, the whole world would be covered with one endless painting. Then I thought I could replace the central brush mark on these paintings with a panel of color. That would be the only part of the world that wasn't the painting. I wanted to turn painting inside out. That's how the juxtaposition of panels of color and brushstrokes came about.

Rail: When I think about that group of paintings, I can't help but to think of that wonderful show, *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967-1975* that you co-curated with Katy Siegel in 2006-2007. Would it be fair to think that the works that were selected parallel your own interests, your own chronology as a painter?

#292, 1989-1991, Oil and alkyd on linen, 28 x 116 inches

Reed: Yes, those were the works I was looking at as a young painter. For example, there are some Joan Snyder paintings from the early-70s, in which she releases and isolates brush marks. Ralph Humphrey's paintings of the late-60s hover between being objects and painted spaces. In the mid-70s, Ron Gorchov meditated on the space between gesture and his built shape. Guy Goodwin painted thick powerful marks that came off the white grounds of his canvases. A group of paintings by Michael Venezia, which are even longer and thinner than mine, weren't included in the show because of the space issue. But all of these paintings had a big effect on me. I love these works because they try to do something new, find new possibilities. I want to do that also: make a painting that has never been seen before.

Rail: How would you describe the shift from the black brushstroke paintings to the multiple panels–the innovation which embraced both Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism–to, finally, the group of paintings with subtle variations that you have been working with in the last two decades? Whether they're hung vertically or horizontally, the paintings seem to have both a sense of expansion, because of the brushstroke gesture, and intense compression, because of the planes being overlapped in such a narrow and long format.

Reed: Conceptually in the multi-panel paintings I separated the color from the drawing, putting them laterally next to each other. Now I stack the drawing and the color, one on top of the other. One can experience the layers separately and then over time become aware of the interaction between them.

Rail: And this aspect relates to a filmic alchemy that plays an important role in your paintings!

Reed: I wanted my paintings to seem to be about to move. This illusion of motion seemed to me to make a connection to a viewer–to get emotions moving. I wanted to make the physical processes used to make the paintings explicitly visible. It's strange that this desire led to a filmic surface, which in some ways disguises how the painting was made, or at least complicates the meaning of that process. I'm still struggling with what this all means. At first, I resisted when studio visitors such as Richard Stack, David Carrier, or my father-in-law at the time,

Irving Tennenbaum, described the paintings as photographic. It wasn't something I consciously sought and I argued with them. Now I realize that this photographic look is somehow in my hand, or brain. Our experiences of film and photography have changed how we see the world. Film and photography made new emotional experiences possible, which can now be a part of painting. As painters, we can help define the meaning of those experiences.

Rail: That makes sense. Thinking about how you make those paintings, David, which is a mystery to me–

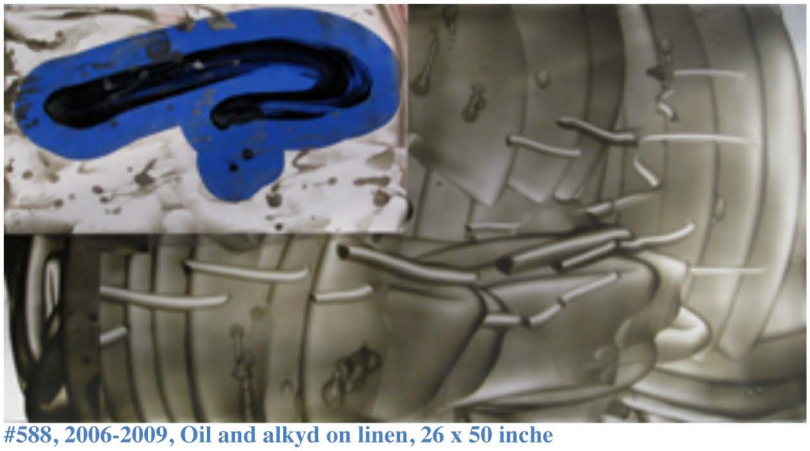
Reed: *[Laughs]* I'll tell you anything you want to know.

Rail: We figured out one thing: they're mostly painted on fairly thick linen.

Reed: They were, for a long time, painted on thick linen, but in the last few years, I've been painting on polyester. I found out about the polyester from Bernard Frize, the French painter.

Rail: Another vastly under-recognized painter.

Reed: I agree. I wish we saw more of his work here in New York. The polyester is tougher, and it doesn't expand and contract as much. I've always preferred a smooth surface. This requires many layers of acrylic and sanding. I then use alkyd and oil paints on top of the acrylic ground.



#588, 2006-2009, Oil and alkyd on linen, 26 x 50 inche

Rail: But what about your manipulation of light and dark. You allow a certain kind of chiaroscuro effect?

Reed: I hate Greenberg's rules for painting. He thought light and dark, the values of the colors in paintings, should be even, so the color could be focused on hue difference. It's a strategy from Impressionism. I want strong contrasts of light and dark, as well as contrasts of color temperature and hue. The one property of color that I wanted to keep even is the intensity. This lets the light move and flow throughout the painting. That's another reason my paintings seem filmic. That's my innovation in color: to hold intensity even while varying the other aspects of color in extreme ways.

Rail: Where do those colors come from? I know that you love Italian painting, especially Mannerist painting.

Reed: And the Baroque.

Rail: As well as proto-Baroque. All of those painters that we know: from Correggio, to Caravaggio, and going back to Beccafumi.

Reed: Yes, I love Beccafumi. He's a great colorist, a very strange colorist. He has strange reflected lights in his shadows, which he uses to connect the colors of objects in the paintings. It's like the reflected light in California. I'm also from California [*laughs*]. I didn't realize how important that Californian light was for my paintings until I had a show at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego. If you squint in bright sunlight, the color you see is magenta. It's internal, the residue inside your head. And that's a color I've felt is special to my paintings. It's an unusual color for an abstract painting.

Rail: As far as keeping the surface of your paintings uniform and smooth with such spatial compression, I am reminded of the whole discourse about non-relational painting that Jack Whitten had developed by 1970. He broke with de Koonings's abstract expressionist control of his hands by taking Ad Reinhardt's idea of non-relational painting, and thereby creating this huge T-square that spread the whole painting surface in one single gesture. I mean, this is before Gerhard Richter developed his abstract paintings.

Reed: It's amazing to me that Jack was consciously thinking about his single-gesture process as being related to photography. For a number of painters this emphasis on process led the paint, whether sprayed, liquid, pulled, or scumbled, to somehow absorb the look of film and photography. I wonder if this would have happened at any other time. Jack called the T-square tool he used to make these paintings his "developer." I was slow to understand the relation of my process to photography.

Rail: Cool. It's what he called "molecular perception." In any case, as far as the whole process of making a painting in general, I want to come back to where we left off earlier: the fact that you rehearse your gestures, or brushstrokes, brings us to two possible working methods. This process could be seen as one that reveals or embraces all kinds of revisions, like that of Picasso's "Guernica," or it could be closer to the opposite example, one which shows none of those revisions, like, for instance, Matisse's "Pink Nude"–

Reed: –which hides all the effort that goes into it.

Rail: Exactly. So where do you fit in?

Reed: I'm on the Matisse side. I try to hide the effort. I want to reduce my visibility in the painting. It's hard to describe this strangely ethical issue. I want to leave myself behind.

Rail: You mean you don't maximize your puritanical work ethic? [*Laughs.*]

Reed: I wish hard work would make a good painting. Unfortunately it doesn't! [*Laughs*] Painting is very resistant. You know this as well as I do. A lot of what one hopes would make a painting better doesn't help at all.

Rail: Nor does talent!

Reed: Talent doesn't help. Being a good person doesn't help. Trying to do the right thing doesn't help. Even being smart doesn't help. It either happens or it doesn't. It's been very interesting for me to have this drawing show up, because people get a chance to see how much effort goes into the paintings. Maybe I fooled everybody a little too well. And now that they see that there's more going on, they may reconsider how they perceive the paintings.

Rail: On some occasions the drawings are made during the process of painting.

Reed: Yes, they are.

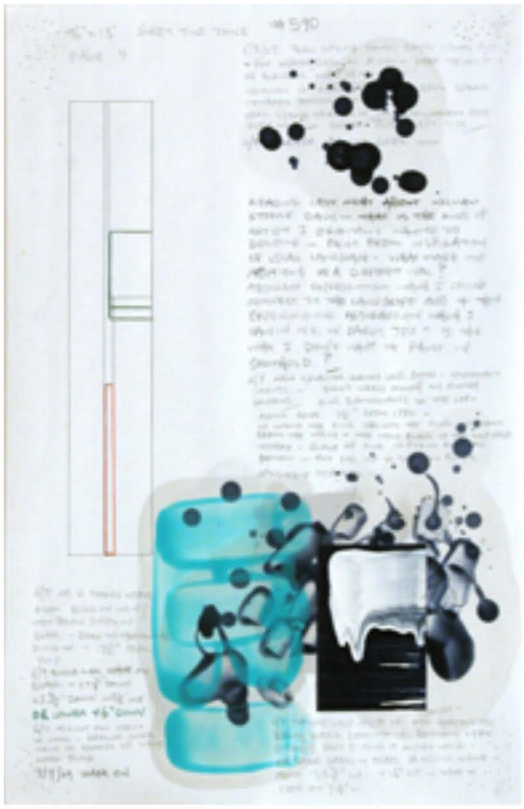
Rail: And some of the color studies are made afterwards.

Reed: Yes, that's right. I do them afterwards if I want to further explore something that happened in the painting. And sometimes the color studies are in process while working.

Rail: Some of the drawings trace the contour of the form in the painting while many display different whimsical interplays of diaristic notations, where everything is included: color samples, measurements, your telephone conversation with a friend, comments of someone who came to visit your studio, or the "yes" or "no" notations throughout all the pages.

Reed: Whatever you don't see in the final paintings, you'll find in the drawings.

Rail: And from the very beginning, what was behind your indexical impulse to number your paintings?



Working Drawing for Painting #590, Page four of five pages, 17 x 11 inches each page, Mixed media on paper, 2009

Reed: The numbering was a lucky idea. I didn't understand all the implications when I started. It was just a practical solution, a way of keeping track of each painting and a way of finding out how many I finished each year. Now, I'm very interested in how my paintings develop from one to the other. But this sequence of relationships is mixed up and has many possible branches and gaps. I love to go back and re-work paintings. The first two drawings in the show at Peter Blum, for example, are paintings that were finished around 1990 and then were re-worked for three or four years each, ten years later. I bought one of them back from an auction house. Each painting was changed quite drastically. I sometimes think that I've done only one painting my whole life. Well, since there are several different formats, I guess it would be three or four paintings. But this isn't completely true. There are some paintings that I don't want to rework, which I would be afraid to rework for fear of losing something. These are the paintings in which I made discoveries.

Rail: That's what we call "Ryderesque syndrome." I'm not so sure it's healthy.

Reed: *[Laughs]* It sure isn't.

Rail: I would advise against it. One last question: you're well appreciated among artists of the older, younger, as well as your own generation, mostly because of your generosity, but why do you think your paintings are more understood in Europe than in the U.S.?

Reed: I'm an artist who loves art and admires other artists, especially those who are doing something quite different from what I do. I don't have the kind of ego that thinks that only what I do is worthwhile. But, I am ambitious. I want to make something unique, a new kind of painting, the kind of painting that is said to be impossible. Almost everything that is good that has happened for me in Europe goes back to one person: Rolf Ricke. He is my former gallerist in Cologne who now lives in Berlin. Rolf has no patience for the traditions of painting. He only likes painting that breaks new ground. My work, with its artificial, impersonal surface, doesn't look like painting. He says that my work is very American: no European could make the paintings I do. I'm lucky that he sees my paintings the way he does. Because of his support Europeans have recognized how radical my paintings are.