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David Reed *interviewed by* stephen ellis, 1989

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David Reed: When I was supposed to paint a still-life setup while ignoring everything else in the room, I couldn't do it. I hated it—I wanted to paint the space between me and the still life and everything behind it. It was the first time I'd lived in New York, and I felt confined. I missed the spaces of the West. In the middle of a snowstorm, I got in the car and drove south to the Grand Canyon, "the home of American painting," to paint landscapes. I had read that Jackson Pollock was a road surveyor at the Grand Canyon, and I was convinced that the experience of a space too huge to comprehend would lead to what interested me in painting. I ended up near Monument Valley. Sitting beside my shack and looking out, I felt like I was on the moon or in the center of a huge void. I pretended that I could see ideas floating in from the East or West Coast. They came out into this desert void and expanded like balloons until they burst.

Stephen Ellis: It sounds as if you're describing a painting. Although one tends to read painting in terms of an iconography of objects, of nouns, something also happens that's like a verb. Painting communicates kinesthetically, like dance. It doesn't matter whether it's representational or abstract: when you look at the Creation of the Planets *on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, where God is flying through space like Superman, you inhabit his body in your imagination. The drama comes from a physical identification with the mass and velocity of his body. Gestural abstraction is like that, except that you feel the movement of the painter's body making the mark. I've often thought about this, looking at your paintings. They're not theatrical in the sense of an exaggerated dramatic effect; they're theatrical because you transfer yourself into the action of the painting.*

Reed: I think that's true. There's a real equivalence between identification with the gesture of the figure in baroque painting, for example, and with the gesture in abstraction. Both figurative and abstract painting can cause identification, can act as a mirror for the body

page 183:
Number 261 *(detail), 1987–88, 25 x 102 inches*
page 184:
Installation view of first one-person show, Susan Caldwell Gallery, New York, 1975
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Number 72 *(detail), 1975, oil and alkyd on linen, 76 x 57 inches*
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Number 187-3 (Hollywood) *(detail), 1982–84, oil and alkyd on linen, 24 x 96 inches*

looking at the painting. Sometimes people say that the marking in my painting looks like drapery. But I've come to think of the marking as more like the billowing cloaks that cover the figures in baroque painting. In my paintings the strokes are draped very loosely. They've either just flown off the viewer's body into the painting, or they're about to fly off the painting onto the viewer. The movement is what is important. It reveals the gesture of the body.

Ellis: It's also a trace of the body. Viewing the gestures in your paintings, one imagines the actions that made them and reads the meaning of the painting through that physical identification.

Reed: The Carracci had a theory about how to express the emotions, the *affetti,* in pictorial terms. They had books illustrating certain hand gestures that had specific meanings for them. Their goal was to make the viewer feel particular emotions through the language of the bodies in their paintings. I hope to find some equivalent for that effect in abstract painting, which deals with forces and relationships rather than objects. The specificity of the gesture identifies an emotion.

Ellis: In Norman Bryson's book Vision and Painting, *he uses the word* deictic *to talk about this "verb effect." It's something that has always been a fundamental part of oriental painting, where, in contrast to most pre-Romantic Western painting, the trace of the movement of the artist's hand was always valued. In contemporary painting, the idea of the expression of forces or ideas through the gestures of the body has unfortunately become bound up with a narrow, melodramatic reading of Action painting.*

Reed: Yes, not only has that narrow vision limited how painting is seen, but its future possibilities as well. There are new combinations of surface and gesture to be tried.

Painters discover in the process of working that painting itself is a kind of nonverbal thinking. This kind of thinking is difficult to describe—often it can't be expressed in language for a generation or two. What can't be verbalized is unnerving. When I first started working abstractly, part of me would identify with the painting, as if I were inside it working through the forms. Another part of me would stay outside and watch what was happening. I felt split in two. I was afraid that I couldn't come back together again. In some of my first stroke paintings, the idea was to work so quickly that I knew I could get the two parts back together. Finally, I decided that this experience of being split apart was necessary to make a painting. I learned just to grit my teeth and take it. Then in Tom Wolfe's book *The Right Stuff,* I read about a similar experience. When the test pilots for the X-2 got up to the edge of space, they reached a point they called the "break off." The pilot was no longer in his body but saw

himself from above and behind at the same time. He felt at one with the plane. He belonged in space, not on earth, and could do anything he wanted—then he crashed. I still have to go through that break-off point with each painting, but now I know it's part of the process.

Ellis: Here in New York you see a drama of experiences shattered into fragments: the rhythm of movement in the streets, the scale of people in relation to buildings, the quality of light. These shattered perceptions, reassembled in paintings, can create an image of this *time and place without actually describing specific objects.*

Reed: Painting can reflect our current environment. It has to be radically reinvented to be relevant to the present. I want my paintings not to be nostalgic or sentimental—that means they have to be about this moment. A corollary of that is that they should be an integral part of life, not separated in museums or galleries. Paintings belong where they can be a part of normal life, seen in private moments of reverie.

Ellis: But at the same time you feel this responsibility to the present, you're also obsessed with Italian baroque painting. How did that begin?

Reed: I'm glad you bring up the baroque in the context of the present. I love some baroque paintings, and I've been inspired by them (especially the color), but I can't use their compositions and figurative or representational devices. What they did has to be done again in a different way.

I first found out about the baroque through studying with Bill Midgette at Reed College. There was a rainy day and we couldn't draw. The light wasn't good enough, so he took us upstairs to show slides. He put up Rubens (I guess he's an honorary Italian). I thought, "Oh God, this is going to be so boring. How am I going to keep from going to sleep?" But his enthusiasm was so infectious that the paintings came to life for me. Fifteen years later, when I was walking through the Metropolitan Museum looking at those big, dark paintings you don't look at much, I noticed Guercino's *Capture of Samson* and stopped. The excitement that I got from Bill Midgette all those years ago helped me see the painting. Strangely enough, my entry into the painting was the way Samson's foot is crammed into the bottom right edge. It reminded me of a painting by Elizabeth Murray in which an abstract form is jammed against the same edge. Also, I missed Midgette, who had died a couple of years before, and seeing that painting established a direct communication with him again. I became obsessed not only with that painting but with others of the period, with trying to understand them.

This contact I've reestablished with Midgette is very important to me. It's helped me understand that painting is the discovery of something new. More

recently I've lost another painter friend, Nicholas Wilder. One of the last things he did was to take a trip to the Prado in Madrid. When he returned, he described each room to me and drew a diagram and located the paintings he thought I could learn from, especially Northern paintings, which I still haven't learned to see.

I don't want to be the first painter, and I don't want to be the last. I want to be part of a continuum. The image I have in my mind is of a conversation with the artists of the past. We agree or disagree but carry on a dialogue.

Ellis: But before your formal education as a painter, what were the things you looked at, the things you saw when you were growing up?

Reed: My first memory is of looking at the peach-colored stucco wall of my parents' house. I remember looking at the light moving across it while playing with some bright red, yellow, and blue beads. Much later, visiting my parents in San Diego, I noticed the drip pattern on their bathroom floor: a Jackson Pollock floor. It's all black and white and it's terrific. I sat down and suddenly I felt right at home. I realized I'd memorized those abstract patterns. After that, I started noticing the California environment—especially the stark contrasts of black and white that the intense light produces. If you think of the Spanish Missions, you imagine them in the starkest light. A light that strong is dangerous, so it's disguised with bright pastel-colored houses and signs.

The good California painters, like John McLaughlin, deal with a counterpoint of color and black and white. I'd love to have a collection of California art that was all black and white. I connect Californian and Neapolitan painting because Naples has the same light—and the same threatening undertones. I thought maybe I was exaggerating this until I saw Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, which is set in northern California. When the hero is deceived by the girl he's following, the scenes are all in flat, pastel colors. When he's pulled into the reality of the situation, the screen is crossed with black and white diagonals.

Ellis: The movies have become such a rich reservoir of visual ideas for every sort of painting. Painters don't have to deal with literal narrative anymore because the movies do it so perfectly. Why bother to compete? You can isolate the essence of the visual ideas and use them for your own purposes.

Reed: When I was painting landscapes near Monument Valley after college, I worked out a lot of the visual ideas I still use. I always thought the ideas came straight from nature. Then last summer I saw a series of westerns in CinemaScope and realized how much those films had influenced my work: my preference for long horizontal canvases, extended forms, and lateral compositional movements. The directors using CinemaScope thought it suited the way the eye actually sees, more than the square format of earlier films. I think they were right.

We're used to seeing images in a different way now. Our eyes scan information in a different way than they did in the past. We're used to seeing images move on a flat screen. We expect them to move and look for ways to get them going. We're used to watching images change over time, and movement suggests this change—that's why I'm interested in the brush mark and the gesture.

Ellis: What about kinetic art?

Reed: No, I mean implied movement. Attempts to make a painting move mechanically are too simplistic. When you look at an isolated part of any of my long horizontal paintings, the other parts, which you see out of the corner of your eye, seem to move, because peripheral vision is especially sensitive to movement. But when you look directly at the movement, it stops, and peripheral movement starts somewhere else. I can reinforce this effect with paint—some areas are blurred like out-of-focus photographs, and others are rendered sharply. I'm very interested in the sense that one event in the painting leads to another in a process that happens in time, as it does in a film. I want to put time back into abstract painting so that you have to go through a decoding process in order to understand what the painting is about.

Mondrian and the other pioneers of abstraction wanted to make abstract painting timeless. When you look at a classic Mondrian, you perceive it all at once. Even when you look at a single part, you are still so aware of the whole that you don't get any sense of looking at the painting in time, at one part after the other. But now this desire for timelessness seems nostalgic. I'm surprised there hasn't been more recent abstract painting interested in time. It's not that I want to eliminate this awareness of the whole. I want to test it, stress it, to see how far it can stretch.

Ellis: That reminds me of one of the most interesting devices in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italian painting, the simultaneous narrative. By representing scenes occurring in different moments of a story all together in the same pictorial space, the artists injected a sense of time into painting that it doesn't otherwise have.

Reed: There were several examples of that in the recent show of Sienese painting at the Metropolitan Museum. The one that especially struck me was *Saint Anthony at Mass* by the Master of the Osservanza. The artist wanted to portray a religious awakening, but how do you represent something as nebulous as a moment of sudden insight? Saint Anthony is shown once as a boy kneeling before an altar, then as an adolescent listening to a priest read the Gospel, and possibly a third time as an older monk praying in the background. When similar shifts of time are implied in an abstract painting—through the changes of focus I was talking about, through overlapping sequences of gestures—they can create several temporal orders. Also, color has its own tempo. It moves at

different speeds depending on whether it's interrupted or flows smoothly throughout the picture. The combined effect of these color movements produces pictorial light.

Ellis: The light that makes a container for the abstract events in the painting.

Reed: Exactly. During the Renaissance and the baroque periods they had a wonderful religious light that always came from above. Now we have a technological light, the light of a TV or movie screen, which is directionless—homogeneous across the screen—and increases the intensity of every color. Since we see this light on or through machines, it seems beyond the human, even immortal. To that extent it's similar to the divine light in the older paintings. Technological light can be suggested in an abstract painting, but made more sensual and material than it is on a screen or in a photograph.

I insist that my paintings have a wide range of light and dark, as well as a wide spectrum of color. Greenbergian formalist painting suppressed value contrast in order to stress the flatness of the picture, and by doing so it eliminated a lot of the expressive possibilities of abstraction.

Ellis: Using contrasts of value and hue contrapuntally creates a much richer expressive range than either one taken in isolation, almost an orchestral range. Together they pull you physically into a deeper, more ambiguous space.

Reed: It's always been a challenge for painters to integrate strong contrasts of value and hue. The artists who followed Leonardo wanted to combine his subtle way of veiling forms in shadow with stronger local colors, but it turned out to be a surprisingly difficult problem. The darker tones of the shadows obscured the bright local colors of the drapery, for instance. Having to describe objects limited the ways they could use value gradation and color intensity together to create space and light. Abstract painters don't have that limitation: we can solve the problem they couldn't.

Ellis: Ultimately, what you respond to in painting—more than the formal invention or the intellectual argument—is the moral quality of the decisions involved. I mean moral in terms of the risks the artist takes, not in terms of conventionally good or bad behavior. In fact, the formal and conceptual aspects of a painting are really only traces of those decisions. You sense their character immediately; they give some paintings, which otherwise are trivial, their power. Confronted with Les Demoiselles d'Avignon, *you're overwhelmed with Picasso's courage in the face of a total loss of meaning. That quality of risk is the most important thing. With it, painting is meaningful; without it, it's nothing.*

Reed: You'd think the moral universe of painting would be simpler, that it wouldn't have all the complications you have in life. In fact, it's filled with *all* the ambiguities and moral complications one experiences in life. It isn't different. It isn't separate.

Ellis: Part of the reason people become artists is a fascination with that risk. The studio becomes a kind of moral laboratory, though it's an artificial one compared with real life because the stakes are lower—after all, a painting is only a piece of cloth. But once paintings go out of the studio, they become symbols of a specific moral vision, of what's meaningful and what isn't—at least, that's the way I understand Gerhard Richter's dictum "Painting is a moral act."

Reed: Painting is high risk because you can't get back to an earlier state as you can in some of the reproducible media. In writing, film, and photography, for example, you can return to an earlier version if you screw up. With painting, you can't; you're lost if you want to go back. I was reminded of this recently when looking at a landscape by Annibale Carracci with another painter, Guy Goodwin. Several men and women are in a boat in a kind of swamp. There's a city in the distance. The sun is setting; it's about to get cold. One man is pointing the way and talking to the oarsman. They want to get home, but without realizing it, they're going in the wrong direction, away from the city. We had the melancholy feeling that they were never going to get home. The most striking formal device in the painting is a tree in dark silhouette going across the whole foreground. The oarsman is pushing his tiny oar against this huge tree. Nature is going to overwhelm them, just as a painter can be overwhelmed by painting. You can get lost and never get out again.

Ellis: It's true, the impossibility of returning to a previous state in a painting is an unalterable condition. You have to become the person who can make the paintings you want to make. You may admire something—like these marvelous Italian paintings—and think you'd like to make something similar. But you can't just make a work that superficially looks like the thing you admire; you have to become a person who acts with the same consequence or breadth as the artist you want to emulate. You have to hold the stage of your own theater with the same authority. To do that, you intuitively design your persona as an artist over a period of years, and that construct is your ultimate creation—the art just renders it concrete. The idea of Cézanne isn't tables tilted up toward the surface of the picture or asymmetrical jars, any more than the idea of Picasso is gluing newspaper to canvas, or the idea of Beuys is stuffing forlorn objects in vitrines. The idea of Cézanne is an unbelievable rigor of perception, and of Picasso of courage in the face of the chaos of modern life, and of Beuys of the redemption of nature and history from the abuses of power. If there's any ideal in being an artist, that's it.

Reed: Perversely, it's possible for an artist to realize the idea in his work when it's nowhere in his life. Caravaggio was a horrible person—he killed a man over a bet on a tennis match. In life, he couldn't control his violence, but in art,

where he could view violence dispassionately, he investigated it with more conviction than any of his contemporaries. He wasn't repelled by parts of life that would disgust other artists. He painted to explore the forbidden.

Ellis: That certainly yanks him out of the museum.

Reed: Yes. As one of my favorite art historians said about another seventeenth-century artist/murderer, "He was neurotic, even bizarre, but undeniably distinguished" (laughter).

Ellis: Finding something useful to contemporary painting in the baroque Italians is a real act of recovery.

Reed: People think of Annibale Carracci as some kind of academic hack, when really the work is wonderfully relevant today. It can be brought to life again. I'd love to be part of that.

You know, I just understood something about Annibale Carracci. He had a patron, Cardinal Farnese, who had an important collection of Greek and Roman sculpture. He hired Annibale to invent new "Greek" frescoes to go with his sculpture because all the ancient paintings were lost. At the time, scholars were saying that art history was over—painters could only imitate the antique and Michelangelo. But Annibale's vision was so compelling; it not only recovered the past, it opened up a future for painting.

The point of the story is that we're not controlled by the past any more than Annibale was. We're not in a helpless position. We define the past for ourselves, just as we do the future—which, anyway, always opens up in the least expected place.