

A conversation between Lawrence Rinder and John Zurier

LR: I want to start by asking you something about yourself and your childhood, and your childhood experiences with art. Do you remember the first time when you realized what art was and how it was different from other kinds of experiences?

JZ: I grew up with art. My father was a collector, and he had some great things: Dove, Hartley, Nolde, Alfred Leslie, Norman Bluhm There were Diebenkorn drawings over my crib. I remember telling my father when I was about ten that I didn't think the Hartley was finished.

LR: And what did he say?

JZ: He said that if the artist thought it was finished then it was and that I should go look at it some more When I was a teenager I worked at the La Brea tar pits as a volunteer cleaning dire wolf skulls—

LR: What's a dire wolf?

JZ: It's like a saber toothed tiger. I was cleaning tar off of fossil bones. It was a pretty boring job, but it was next door to the LA County Art Museum, and I went there on my lunch breaks. I can't remember now what works impressed me, but it was more the feeling of solitude, of silence, of being by myself in the museum looking at the work, and my emotional relationship to the work that was important. That isolation was very powerful. So, I don't think there ever was a time that art was separate from my experience.

LR: When I walked into the studio today, it suddenly struck me that this work has an almost Moreau-like baroqueness to it, which was a total surprise to me. I wonder if that's something you can relate to in making these paintings because they're constantly referred to as minimalist, and I wonder how you think about that term in relation to your work.

JZ: It's actually a very difficult term for me, because, like all descriptive terms, I think that it does serve a purpose, but I don't think of myself as a minimalist. I think of myself as a painter; and yet my paintings are minimal to a certain degree. They are very pared down, very quiet, and the kind of activity that's happening in the paintings isn't always overt. I think what I'm doing here is very much involved with the brush stroke and the idea of how to make a painting where the brush stroke is actually a structural element. But it's not predetermined, and so each painting is extremely different.

LR: Yes, I've noticed that. The difference between the brush strokes there in the bluish-gray one [Laughlin Way #1] and the yellow one [Was Gilt], architectonically, they're each doing completely different things, really radically different. If there was a way to foreground that, aside from the color, which is very apparent, they might not even look like they were done by the same person. I'm really interested in that. I'm interested in these variations, what I call architectonic variations, or to put it more simply, just different uses of the brush stroke. You're creating different architectures for people's imaginations, for their reflections.

JZ: I think it's important that all these paintings are very different, and I deliberately try to do that. Each painting has to be very, very natural and have its own plane and light to it, and its own composition. The brush stroke is about finding what's enough, and what's exactly right. Like in Japanese gardening, you want to allow some leaves to remain when you're sweeping a path so it will feel natural.

LR: What you're describing is an organic process. You're trying to find a method where the painting emerges from the conditions of its own creation; and yet, I wonder if you are at all inspired by the world outside? And if so, what are the ways in which the world inspires you and how does that inspiration make its way into the work?

JZ: Absolutely. Like the way light falls, and water, and some of the paintings are inspired by specific things, and a lot of times I will see something and make a note for it—

LR: A written note, a description?

JZ: Just a word or two about the color or a reference to it, but it's always accompanied by a drawing. I don't take them into the studio and then stretch up the canvas. They get put into a pile somewhere and it's just a way of registering something that I've seen. There's usually a gap between when I've seen something and when it turns into a painting. For example, this painting I've called Arno. It's very directly related to my experience of seeing the Arno river when it looked like caffè latte after a rain, but it's not just a painting of that experience, other things are involved, and it was titled after I finished the painting. It has to do with the difference between the way color is out in the world and the way color operates in a painting— they're very different things! This painting, the large one, Soundings, and the other big one, Boom, there was a direct inspiration for these: the Tarkovsky film, Ivan's Childhood. In the film there's a beautiful gray silver light and all the emotion in the film is under the surface.

LR: I'm very interested in how you describe your process. You've said that you paint each layer, and I know some of these have many layers, as if it were the last. I think this is probably different from how many artists work, with an intention of reaching someplace. They probably know more or less where they're going. So how do you know when you're done, if every layer is supposed to be the last?

JZ: To paint each layer as if it will be the last, well, that's really more of an attitude, a kind of focus. And you're right I don't really know beforehand what the painting will be. I'm searching for a color tone in the painting, and also a certain kind of emotional tone, and light, and there's the brush stroke . . . and all this has to look like it happened simultaneously. I start with what I hope is the clearest way, the most direct way of finding this. And when I find it, it's done. Sometimes it happens in one or two layers, like in this painting [Ghent], but usually it requires more. LR: It seems like you've stopped using the vertical stripes with this work. Is that the case, or are they still in there somewhere?

JZ: One of these, actually, Phosphorescence, began with the lines. In these paintings the structure is more about color, one color on top of another, so the color relationship is different. With the vertical line paintings, it's about paying attention to the drawn quality of the colored lines and their spacing, and it's more about drawing and erasing than adding layers.

LR: They do have to my mind a very different character. The drawn line pieces have color in them but they also have this vertical structure so there's really sort of two parameters there. You've just taken the line out of them, making them less controlled in a way, which allows the color, I think, to really fill out and be more itself, more full of possibilities. It's that lack of linear structure that makes them seem baroque or like Moreau, who I mentioned, or perhaps Redon, even more so. Odilon Redon is someone who comes to mind, who never would have if there were vertical lines coursing through them.

JZ: There is an expansiveness to them. But that's interesting—Moreau and Redon? I haven't really thought about them.

LR: I know at one point you were very interested in natural pigments, stuff coming right out of the ground. Are you still? Where did that lead you when you started to use real earths as opposed to tube colors?

JZ: It was really about understanding the physical qualities of paint, how it works. For about three years I was grinding all my own pigments in oil and making my own acrylic paints from dry pigments. I've gone back to using tube paints mostly, except for a few colors, like hematite, which aren't commercially available.

LR: There's something going on in these pieces, in the layers, where sometimes what appears to be a brush stroke on the surface is not in the last coat of paint. There's a disjunction between the color I see and the brush strokes, which become more of a sculptural element.

JZ: There is a disjunction in some of them. For example, in this painting [Hematite #1], from a distance you see the strokes that

come down in front, but when you get close they disappear, and you're more aware of the horizontal movement. This also depends a lot on the kind of light there is when you're looking at it. There are times when what's underneath will come through to the surface, but I'm not trying to build up a sculptured texture. It's just a part of the painting's history.

LR: It [Hematite #1] has almost measured horizontal lines with these vertical brush strokes that float over them. I know in the line paintings you were doing you were using brushes attached to long poles. Are you doing that here?

JZ: No. It's done with a brush in my hand.

LR: Without giving away the secrets of the Sphinx here, if I indicate a piece could you just tell me little bit of the biography of the work? Like this yellow one [Was Gilt], which I like a great deal. These brush strokes seem very playful. I think part of the playfulness is also the color, it's very light, and then the brush strokes have a real lyrical quality.

JZ: It's interesting that you mention it has a lyrical quality to it. The title of this painting, Was Gilt, comes from a poem by Paul Celan. He wrote it after having a very intense conversation about doubt, and hope, and belief in God, with the poet Nelly Sachs. One of the beautiful images in the poem is about the reflection of light from the gold dome of a church across the river and this idea of belief being connected to light is what interested me. I started reading Celan at the same time I was trying to figure out what makes a painting lyrical. He helped me figure out that lyrical is about dialog, the necessity for an individual voice, and not about a pastoral quality.

LR: What about this one [Laughlin Way #1], which is one of my favorites?

JZ: The brush stroke is very fluid. I was up in the country when I started working on it. It was January, it was raining a lot, and I think I was affected by that.

LR: Tell me about this one. What's the title? It looks like you have two very distinct colors that are cohabiting in the brush stroke.

JZ: It's Windrose. It's a mixed green and pink that in its transparency carries both pink and green undertones. I like the idea that one thing contains two, without them completely merging or cancelling each other out. What I'm trying to do here is find the right balance of the two colors so that they're both still visible.

LR: And that relates obviously to the title which contains two words. Both keep their separate emotional resonances but create a new entity.

JZ: The titles of the paintings aren't arbitrary, but they do come after the fact. This one is from a Nelly Sachs poem "And We Who Went Away".

LR: What can you tell me about the brush stroke, the composition in this work? There's a very particular character, arrangement, it's not as overall as in some of the other paintings. There is more weight on one side.

JZ: It has to do with seeing the color of the stroke relate to the color underneath. I've also painted the edge on this one because the color of the painting is so delicate and soft. An edge that makes a sharp contrast would really change this painting. In all of these paintings, I'm thinking about the relationship of the surface to the edge, and also to the wall, and how the painting exists in space.

LR: In that respect, I'm curious to know about this blue one [Laughlin Way #1]. It's such a brooding painting, the edge is very stark. That's a tough contrast to keep, the mystery of the surface with those nails just sitting there.

JZ: You're now looking at it from one side, if you look at it from the other side there's a lot more of the orange/red, so it changes as you move around it. The edge really is part of the painting. I don't tape them off and I keep all the accidental things that happen. I started using the tacks after I saw a painting by Antonio da Pavia in Mantua,

which didn't have a frame, and the edge was so beautiful, so open. I'm using the tacks to heighten this sense of exposure.

LR: I've noticed that you use both copper tacks and black tacks. How do you decide which to use?

JZ: Sometimes it's a color choice. Some of the linen I'm using has a greenish tone to it, and the copper tacks work well with it. The starkness on the edge of Laughlin Way, I like that contrast a lot, I think the copper tacks contribute to that. I don't really have any rules for it, and some of the paintings don't have tacks.

LR: Let's go back to Celan, and the relationship of poetry to painting.

JZ: Reading Celan's work is always a very moving experience for me. Even though I didn't understand it when I first started reading it, I felt it on a gut level. Later, when I read his writings on poetry, he articulated exactly my experience in reading it. He talks about a poem being a dialog and a unique insistence of language, that it's like a message in a bottle thrown out to sea with the uncertain hope that it will land on the shoreline, the shoreline of the heart. This idea of the poem in the bottle is a direct reference to Osip Mandelstam's essay "On the Addressee" in which he talks about who the poet is addressing. He says it's not a known audience; a poem is like a last will and testament thrown out to sea, and that whoever finds it is the intended reader. And this is how I feel about painting.

From a conversation that took place December 2, 1999 in the artist's studio.