

in conversation

Raphael Rubinstein WITH JOAN WALTEMATH

On May 5, Joan Waltemath met with Raphael Rubinstein at his loft in TriBeCa, where he lives with his wife, artist Elena Berriolo, and their two daughters, to talk about *Reinventing Abstraction: New York Painting in the 1980s*, a show he curated at Cheim & Read (June 27 – August 30).

JOAN WALTEMATH (RAIL): Between the '70s and the '80s, post-structuralist philosophy became a dominating influence in the arts and people started to use it more as a way to generate art than as a language to talk about art. One of the things I wanted to ask you was whether the painters you chose for *Reinventing Abstraction* were more involved in a phenomenological or purely material approach? Were they involved in the whole post-structuralist wave that hit New York in the '80s, or did they come from somewhere completely other?

RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN: What you have to remember is because there are 15 artists in the show, there are 15 different stories. I'm focusing on a generation, people born between 1939 and 1949, so they emerged before the rise of theory. Still, in the 1970s many artists were trying to deconstruct painting, both philosophically and literally. In some ways, a lot of 1970s art was closer in spirit to the structuralist and post-structuralist philosophers than the work of the younger painters who cited them so frequently in the 1980s. There was a lot of this deconstructed painting in Katy Siegel's show *High Times, Hard Times*. The transition from the '70s to the '80s is a big part of what I've discovered in doing *Reinventing Abstraction*. Around 1980, a generation of artists who had been involved in the radical strategies of the '70s rediscovered the possibilities of painting on stretched canvas, and working with oil paint, figure/ground relationships, applying paint with a brush instead of spraying or folding or pouring or staining. They also acknowledged and sought out relationships to art history. In the '70s there was still this idea that you could make an absolute break with the past and start from degree zero. In the early '80s that began to look not only like a naïve fantasy but also like a formula. Suddenly, it became a lot more exciting and adventurous to reconnect with art history. There was a rediscovery of history—not as something to escape, but as a source of new content.

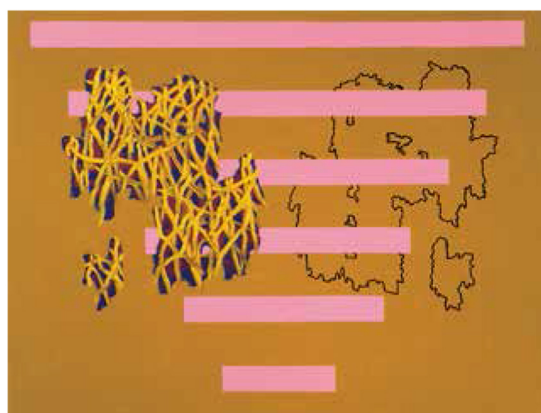
RAIL: The 15 artists that you brought together for *Reinventing Abstraction*—do you see them as participating in the kind of thinking and community, or culture, that's represented by the *High Times, Hard Times* show?

RUBINSTEIN: Absolutely, it is the same community. One of the things that inspired my show was David Reed's notion that there's a "street history" of painting that painters share with each other, a set of references and concerns, and a sense of where they've come from and where they're going. This street history almost never gets into official versions. Art historians and museum curators don't seem to have much interest in it. The other thing that really hit me was an *Art in America* review by Carrie Moyer of the last show Stephen Mueller did before he died. She wrote that Mueller and a number of other painters were the "generation that essentially reinvented American abstract painting in the 1970s and '80s." I knew immediately that this must be true, especially because it was a painter I respected who was saying it. I also realized that this was a history that hadn't been told. Even though most of the painters in my show are quite well known, they've largely been left out of the official histories of the 1980s because they don't fit into Neo-Expressionism or Appropriation Art or Neo-Geo.

RAIL: What strikes me is that the official history of the moment is pretty much what goes on in the market: who gets bought and sold. Artists, for the most part, know who's making interesting work, where something is happening, whether the official version is able to accommodate that, or is interested in it, or not.



Stuart Shave/Modern Art Provisional Painting 2011. Featuring Julian Schnabel "Lampshade," 2007 (left), Richard Aldrich "Untitled," 2011 (right). Courtesy Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London.

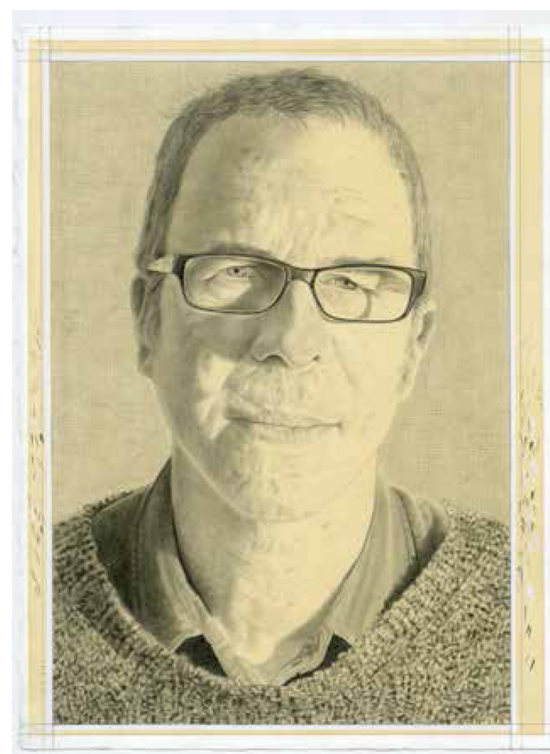


Jonathan Lasker, "Double Play," 1987. Oil on linen, 76 x 100". Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York.

RUBINSTEIN: Another thing running through my mind as I formulated *Reinventing Abstraction* was the fact that many painters I really admire are not at all engaged with what I've called "provisional painting," which has preoccupied me over the last few years.

RAIL: How did you come to the idea of provisionality?

RUBINSTEIN: It was a gradual process, the result of asking myself some questions, and having the time to answer them. In 2007, I left *Art in America* where I'd been an editor since the mid-1990s and started teaching one semester a year at the University of Houston School of Art. This meant I had more time to think, to write slowly, not under a deadline. One of the questions I was asking myself was: why had Mary Heilmann become one of the most important painters of her generation? Her compositions and paint handling seem so casual. There is no big statement, no virtuosity, no striking innovation, and yet there is something in the work that resonates for many



Portrait of Raphael Rubinstein. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

people. I began asking similar questions about Raoul De Keyser. His paintings are small, low-key, seemingly amateurish, but many artists look to them as a model of what can be done in painting. Then I turned to Chris Wool's erasure paintings and Michael Krebber's desultory works like "Contempt for one's own work as planning for career" (2001) and his notion of "unfinished too soon." I started seeing something running through all this work, and the work of a lot of younger painters like



Mary Heilmann, "Rio Nido," 1987. Acrylic and oil on canvas, 39 x 58". Courtesy of the artist, 303 Gallery, New York, Hauser & Wirth.



Stanley Whitney, "Sixteen Songs," 1984. Oil on linen, 66 x 108". Courtesy: team (gallery, inc.).



Stephen Mueller, "Delphic Hymn," 1989. Acrylic, raw pigment, and ink on canvas, 72 x 60". Estate of Stephen Mueller, courtesy Lennon, Weinberg Inc, New York.

Richard Aldrich, that I would eventually give a name to. At the same time I realized there had been such a big emphasis on high-production-value art, especially in art fairs where there was so much work that was professionally executed, often by assistants. It was like the return of Salon painting. Takashi Murakami, Jeff Koons, John Currin, and countless others were churning out such highly finished art. I think a lot of viewers and artists felt there was something missing. What I call provisionality, a sense of casualness and unfinished-ness in painting, was one way to reconnect with the foundational doubt of modern art that really had been lost in the marketing and professionalizing, in the technical slickness of the booming art market. I wrote my first article on Provisional Painting against the background of the financial crisis of 2007–2008. It's not completely accidental that my conceptualizing of provisionality and the recession coincide, even though a lot of the painters I wrote about had been painting for a long time in that mode. I believe it helps explain the enormous response the article received. This way of approaching painting made even more sense as the economy was collapsing.

RAIL: It's the antithesis of surplus and excess.

RUBINSTEIN: Yes, and it also reconnects with a sense of failure and risk that we associate so much with Abstract Expressionism. One of the things that was lost post-Warhol is the notion of creative struggle—of the artist as someone trying to make something that resists attempts to achieve it. The classic expression of this struggle is James Lord's book, *A Giacometti Portrait*, where he describes Giacometti's endless, and ultimately failed attempts to achieve what it is he wants in painting. It's very existentialist and very Beckettian. In the 1960s artists became professionalized. Earning an M.F.A. degree is in total contradiction to the idea of the modern artist as existential hero. Another aspect of provisional painting, which is very multi-layered and diverse, is the quest to reconcile Henri Matisse and Marcel Duchamp. How can you bring together a desire to make a highly nuanced, visually rich painting, with the very strong tradition of anti-painting? How can you sustain painting as a viable and not simply backwards-looking medium? I have always been convinced that this is completely possible to do, but it's sometimes only possible by allowing into painting its enemies, its negation. The idea of negation is very strong in modern art and modern literature. To get that tension between the joy of the medium, and the antithesis of that, sometimes results in really great paintings.

RAIL: I was thinking about the reception of your first piece on provisional painting. When it came out there was such a buzz. My sense was that people were really grateful that a serious and coherent discourse on painting had emerged. It seemed like it had been so long since some kind of reasonable, or believable, position had been taken about painting. How would you characterize the difference between the artists you discuss in your articles on provisionality and the painters who are in *Reinventing Abstraction*?

RUBINSTEIN: There's not much overlap. The only artist who I wrote about in "Provisional Painting" who figures in *Reinventing Abstraction* is Mary Heilmann. I was completely surprised and excited by the response to my articles. It's the first time in my career as a critic that something I've proposed has taken on a life of its own. I think one reason there hasn't been as much engaging writing about painting recently is that a lot of the writers who are most involved in theoretical overviews are uninterested in painting. They see it as a fatally compromised medium. Too bad for them. You ask about the connection between "Provisional Painting" and *Reinventing Abstraction*. While there's been this ongoing, enthusiastic response to my writings on provisionality, I've also heard from a lot of painters who I know and respect that there's nothing provisional about their work, that their work is not about the "impossibility" of painting, it's not about the concept of the unfinished, or about de-skilling. This spurred me to think through another genealogy of painting, if only to make it clear that I would never want to suggest that modes of painting other than provisionality are somehow of lesser value.

RAIL: Which is often an assumption that gets made by virtue of an article being published.

RUBINSTEIN: The last thing I want to do is suggest that at a given moment there is only one acceptable medium, or one acceptable kind of content. The show also grew out of my interest in art of the 1980s. In 2011, I wrote a long article for *Art in America* about Julian Schnabel, probably the first serious reconsideration of his work in 25 years. Earlier this year I wrote another piece for *Art in America* looking back at the debates around Neo-Expressionism. The 1980s were the moment I began paying attention to contemporary art, regularly seeing shows. I published my first piece of criticism in 1986. This show has been a chance for me to revisit this period with a lot more experience, more objectivity, I hope—certainly more knowledge. Because I was just beginning as a critic in the 1980s, there was a lot of that I missed or misunderstood. I think the only artist in the show I actually met in the '80s was David Reed, and maybe Jonathan Lasker. It's interesting, if a little eerie and unsettling, to see a period you've lived through become historicized. You are forced to compare your memories of what it was like to the way it's being reconstituted in museum shows or art historical books.

RAIL: Do you feel that the work of Barry Le Va, Carl Andre, Donald Judd, who were all basically sculptors, but who initiated new kinds of subjects or parameters into abstraction in the '70s, were influential for any of the artists in *Reinventing Abstraction*? I'm thinking of the whole idea of randomness and chaos in Le Va, or the grid structure of Judd or Andre.

RUBINSTEIN: A number of these painters have spoken about how important process art was for them. During my studio visits, several mentioned Richard Serra's thrown lead works and I know that for David Reed and Terry Winters, two very different painters, materiality and process were important, as were post-minimalist strategies for getting away from conventional compositional

devices. And then there is Jack Whitten, whose motto is "make it rather than paint it."

RAIL: Is he in the show?

RUBINSTEIN: Yes, with a 1980 painting centered on three blocks of color that happen to be the colors of the Pan-African flag. Post-minimalist sculpture was important, but so was the rediscovery in the late '70s and early '80s of models that were particular to painting such as Philip Guston's late work.

RAIL: There's an interesting twist between the coldness of Judd or Andre with his metal on the floor, using a grid, and then the way Stanley Whitney paints his grid paintings. His presence while he is painting brings his humanity so much to the surface. I don't know if that's what you were getting at, but that's what your title *Reinventing Abstraction* made me think of when I was looking at Whitney's show a few days ago and contemplating our upcoming conversation.

RUBINSTEIN: I think what you're picking up on is that Whitney's grid doesn't come out of Minimalism, it comes out of his experiences looking at ancient walls in Rome, and visiting Egypt and seeing the pyramids. That structure comes out of a very historical, very ancient, and very weathered kind of grid where things are not diagrammed and fabricated according to some conceptually distinct model, but are the result of happenstance, accumulation, experience, momentary decisions, and lucky accidents. He reminds us that the grid is not always a sign of industrialized consciousness, but is also a fundamental human structure, which you find in traditional cultures around the world—that history of abstraction that the Museum of Modern Art so blindly failed to remember existed when they titled their show *Inventing Abstraction* as if it had never been done before.

RAIL: As if the seminal argument Tom McEvilley had with William Rubin and Kirk Varnedoe never happened.

RUBINSTEIN: Exactly! Twenty years later and MoMA doesn't seem to have made much progress. I should just say here that I didn't intend the title *Reinventing Abstraction* to be a response to the MoMA show. I actually came up with the title before I knew about the MoMA show. Once I saw the relationship I decided to keep it, but it's not an intentional response.

RAIL: I love what you're saying about where Whitney's grid is coming from and it intrigues me because I'm a grid painter, so it's an important subject for me. Whitney's

grid is able to recall all these other grids for us because the generation before really put those terms into the artistic vocabulary in a way—like in Minimalism—in a new way that was undeniable, especially after Rosalind Krauss’s notion that a “grid is an undevelopable form.” I love how Whitney turns that statement on its head.

RUBINSTEIN: As does Mary Heilmann, who uses grids and evokes more directly than Whitney the modernist abstraction format.

RAIL: Could we reflect a bit on the ’90s, after the period *Reinventing Abstraction* covers? What were you looking at and what were you reading during that period that was influential for you? There was a big shift at the beginning of the ’90s, belief in the market waned for the first time, there was a skepticism among artists who had been promoted, whose prices had been inflated, who didn’t achieve them in auctions, and suddenly they couldn’t really do anything because they had gotten a vote of no confidence from the market. A whole different mood was ushered in at the beginning of the ’90s.

RUBINSTEIN: I’d been living in Italy from the summer of ’89 to the end of 1992. One of the first things I did when I returned was to curate an exhibition on the influence of Jean-Luc Godard on contemporary art at PS1. The show was called *Postcards from Alphaville*, which is also the title of a book of autobiographical prose I published in 1999. It traced allusions to Godard from Pop Art through conceptual art, performance art, abstract painting, and beyond. There was work by Al Ruppersberg, Mel Bochner, Barbara Bloom, Günther Förg, Philippe Parreno, Mary Weatherford, and many others. When I came back from Italy, I was trying to put together a show of European Pop Art, which never happened. In retrospect, one of the things that swung my attention away from Godard and European Pop Art was meeting Norman Bluhm. In the middle of my years in Milan, I came back to New York for a long stay. This was in 1991, and one day John Yau arranged for Norman and me to meet at Napoli, an old-style Italian place that used to be on the corner of Spring and Sullivan in SoHo. I quickly became very involved with Norman’s work. Three artists who have been really important to me—Shirley Jaffe, George Sugarman, and Norman Bluhm—were all so-called second generation Abstract Expressionists: all Americans who went to Paris after the war, all artists who were trying to find ways to move beyond the stylistic modes that their generation was practicing, and all artists whose work is yet to be fully appreciated, despite the efforts of me and other supporters.

RAIL: There is a show up of George Sugarman now at Gary Snyder, right?

RUBINSTEIN: Yes, a show of the 1960s painted wood sculptures. I wrote a long essay for the catalog where I try to reconstruct George’s breakthroughs. Anyway, throughout the 1990s, I spent a lot of time with Norman, mostly looking at his paintings in Vermont. He and his wife Cary had left the city and were living on the top of a hill with a big studio where Norman was making epic paintings, the greatest of his career, I thought. So that’s one thread of “my” ’90s, following the work of a much older generation. I also began writing a series of articles on abstraction for *Art in America*, where I started working as an editor in ’94 that looked at painters closer to my age: Jonathan Lasker, Fabian Marcaccio, Lydia Dona, Richmond Burton, Stanley Whitney, and Karin Davie. Also sculptors: Daniel Wiener, Jeanne Silverthorne, and Jessica Stockholder. I also got very interested in contemporary French painting, especially Bernard Piffaretti and Noël Dolla. As the ’90s went on I felt there was something in current abstract painting that needed a voice, that needed examination and attention. I began to feel more and more responsibility as an art critic to address abstract painting.

RAIL: There was a sense at that time that abstraction was something that had been done already, certainly for geometric abstraction.

RUBINSTEIN: If you look at the 1993 show at the New Museum there is a bit of painting but it’s basically defining the period as not being particularly a painting period. What are the implications of excluding 75 percent of the kind of work that’s being made at a given moment? It’s as if to say that other work is somehow historically irrelevant. It didn’t speak to the kind of defining identity of 1993 or 1973 or 2003. Although there were some artists in that show whose work I wrote about at the time, Cady Noland and Suzanne McClelland, for example, I didn’t really recognize my 1993 in that show. My 1993 was looking at a lot of abstract painting from different generations, discovering amazing artists like Miguel Angel Rios and Charles Long, and reading two great books of the early 1990s, Greil Marcus’s *Lipstick Traces* and John Ashbery’s *Flow Chart*. I’m not saying that my 1993 has any better claim to importance than the New Museum’s 1993, but I think this shows the fallacy and dangers of these kinds of projects where you are imposing on a work of art the obligation to represent something other than itself. I hope I will avoid this with *Reinventing Abstraction*.

RAIL: I think we’ve reached a point where we are so used to art being burdened by the curatorial conceit, and it really affects the way we see the works themselves. I saw an exhibition that I was in at Le Magasin Centre d’Art Contemporain de Grenoble, France a few years ago of Olivier Mosset’s collection. Over the years he’s bought and traded work by many artists. The overwhelming impression for me was how liberating it was for those individual works of art to hang in a museum on their own merits, just because Olivier had acquired them. It created a completely ecstatic mood among the artists. It was the first time that I felt how heavy a burden it is for art to be shown in relation to a concept, or whatever is the organizing principle of an exhibition.

RUBINSTEIN: A major fault line in contemporary art is between curators and critics. It’s no secret over the last 30 years there’s been a kind of transfer of power from the critic to the curator. We need to ask ourselves, what does a critic do in terms of making choices and contextualizing artworks that is different from what a curator does? This is something I think about as a critic who sometimes curates exhibitions.

RAIL: Crossing the fault line.

RUBINSTEIN: In curating you really can’t know what’s going to happen until you actually put two works next to each other. When you’re writing, you can always rephrase, rewrite, delete, balance things—you really are in complete control of how a work of art is going to be presented and interpreted and understood. But when you’re curating a show you don’t know what’s going to happen until the last moment, at least if you’re allowing the work its autonomy.

RAIL: So what were the surprises for you in *Reinventing Abstraction*?

RUBINSTEIN: I don’t know because I haven’t hung the show yet! What will happen when I put Elizabeth Murray next to Stanley Whitney? Stephen Mueller next to Tom Nozkowski? Pat Steir next to Jonathan Lasker? There’s no way to know beforehand, which is a great reason to do this show. ☺