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ON CONTEMPORARY ART

Pat Steir

PAT STEIR HAS BEEN AT THE FOREFRONT of American painting for a number of years. She seems ageless. Her role as female literal painter takes on epic proportions. And the fact that she has come to her own "drip" style is a challenge to the hegemony of Jackson Pollock. Steir is anything but macho; her intuitiveness as an artist makes her thinking keenly

subtle and penetrating. I'd been drawn to her Asian-inspired work for a number of years, to her sensual—elemental—form and color. Poet and art critic John Yau has written that Steir "tends to focus on time passing, its entropic power," and one feels that very palpability, the deep physicality of time as might be seen in the concentric rings of a redwood tree. Steir's aspiration has a dual quality that's tricky, however, because it's so vast (her reach to the cosmos) and acutely particular in its intention and detail and nam-

ing. Her titles are a provocative lure. Poems themselves, *Last Wave Painting* (*Wave becoming a Waterfall*), *Sixteen Waterfalls of Dreams*, *Memories and Sentiment*, *Elective Affinity Waterfall* and others seem to evoke, as the paintings do, an elemental paradise—Hokusai transplanted to modern or postmodern elementals.

Steir is incredibly down-to-earth, however. Smart, savvy, witty, with a penchant for common sense and the torqued remark. There's no fussiness or pretension in her identity. She's done the work for years. I visited her magnificent loft with its view of the Hudson way west in Chelsea. We fretted over the machinations of the U.S. government's bullying and how it affects our daily lives as I probed her Taoist-Buddhist sensibilities. We drank green tea while the sunset manifested a startling dance of color and light, displaying the drama and mutability of "scapes": of sky, of city and of our human fragility and strength. And we spoke of the trope of "escape" as well, as in the escape into "the work." What is the artist in these trying times? How

does she cope? How does one strike the gong so the work becomes plugged in, alive? What is the psychological effect of color? What is the role of spirituality, accident, allegory? How can poetry help a reading of

the works, since there has always been a link between visual artists and poets? We started conversing. And then we walked around the studio. The world of Pat Steir unfolded like the sky, modestly understating its range and beauty. Steir is incredibly at home in her life and work, with the rigorous canvases right there at hand, with her expert hand-eye coordination, with her grace and courage to inhabit what the adepts call "big mind," which is ordinary and luminous in the same breath.

ANNE WALDMAN

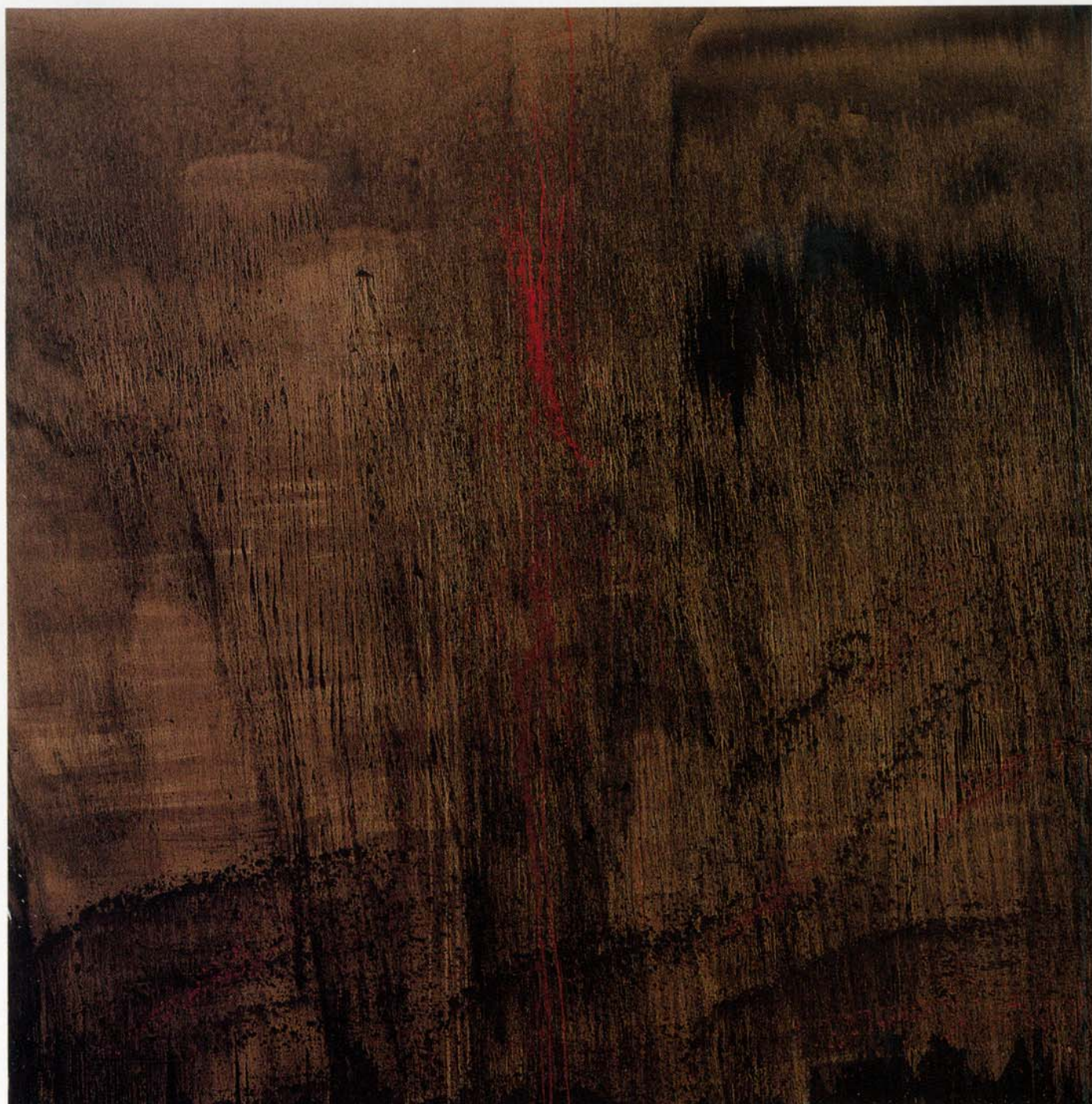


Pat Steir, 1990. Photo: Eric Boman. Originally published in *Vogue*. Courtesy of the artist and the photographer.

anne waldman Your work invokes various sorts of articulation, from Asian aesthetics through modernist and postmodernist poetic aesthetics. I can also read your work through more familiar vocabularies: for example, through Ezra Pound's phrase that in

the mind of the poet all times are contemporaneous. And certainly through the thinking of John Cage, who similarly brought together East and West as well as ideas of stillness and sublimity. I also think of Clifford Geertz, the anthropologist, who applied the

term *consociational time* to Balinese music, which has an orchestra—a gamelan—of many instruments, each following its own time cycle. All this occurs to me while looking at your work. Your passions seem to cross and leap through time, from Chinese



Pat Steir, *September North China Sea*, 1994–95, oil on canvas, 96 x 96". Courtesy of the artist and Cheim & Read, New York.

painting to Courbet: there is total gestalt within consociational time, a sense of being very present. In Javanese or Thai poetics the term is *ti bot*, which means sounding the gong or unlocking the seed syllable. You have, in fact, spoken of becoming less and less vain in terms of the painting itself, giving to the work without being ego driven. From an aesthetic, philosophical or spiritual point of view, the

process is like unleashing something, allowing the paintings to make themselves. You just happen to be the instigator, the inventor. This is a Taoist concept, and yet you're not a Taoist—it's already in you. What is your perspective on some of these aesthetic and spiritual sensibilities? Do they apply to you?
pat steir In 1985 I started doing this group of paintings, beginning with the wave paint-

ings through the waterfall paintings, which I'm still doing. In 1982 I had started a 20-by-16-foot painting called *The Brueghel Series (A Vanitas of Styles)*. It took me three years to finish it. I was thinking about the word *vanitas*, working in vain. Vanity in the sense of the temporality of life. Historically, vanitas paintings were flower paintings; each flower in a bouquet depicted a vanity, an

aspect of mortality, the vanity of life, the pilgrim's progress. I had been hearing architects use the word *postmodern* since 1978, and I thought, Postmodern! I haven't even gotten to fully comprehend modernism. (laughter) I did *The Brueghel Series* to try to discover if we were in the postmodern time. Not realizing that in fact the very question, and my way of investigating it, was postmodern. In fact all of the work I ever did is now considered postmodern because I have always tried to see everything, and all historical periods, at once. I remember with the earlier paintings people asked me if I did meditation. I didn't.

aw Well, not in the traditional sense.

ps I couldn't intellectually translate the idea of abstraction. It seems to me, when you put down a line, there is a line. How could that line be abstract? No matter what else it represents it is always still a line. But the idea of being a mediator, well there it is, everything is happening all at once. For *The Brueghel Series*, I gridded the canvas into 64 squares and looked at each of those 64 pieces. I tried to understand the space in each rectangle. For example, in one square the space looked like Rothko space, so I studied Rothko. I tried to understand and emulate each artist. The central part of the original painting was very flowery, so I had to go look at the Impressionists. While I was studying the Impressionists I learned that they had been looking at Japanese woodcuts. In fact when the Brooklyn Museum did their Courbet show, the curators came and asked me if I thought he had seen Japanese woodcuts. I was thrilled to be asked, and flattered.

aw So the work emerges from the Western tradition and its immediate predecessor Rothko, as well as from your clear affinity to Asian aesthetics. There's a Buddhist notion that all things are symbols of themselves. There is a kind of allegorical quality to your work that is, of course, subconscious. Your paintings are physical, your body is very much involved in making them. I also think of the heaven/earth/man principle, the principle of the haiku. You express this in your paintings through the sense of shifting perspective. From a height, the *shen-yuan* manifests the deep distance, and then there's the *gao-yuan*, which is the elevated distance, and finally the *ping-yuan*, which is the flat distance. I'm looking at your use of dripping paint

on your canvases. There's a term used in the Tibetan tradition, *lungta*, head and shoulders. It refers to the horizon, like the heaven principle. In your smaller drip paintings, it feels as if there are these shoulders at the point where the dripped paint sort of breaks. The horizon takes place at the shoulders. It has this incredibly uplifted quality. Yet the dripped paint is also a controlled chaos, or a controlled randomness. There's the delight of accident, of surprise in this particular way of applying paint, and yet it's so ritualistic with the principle of aspiration, soaring upward. The heaven/earth/man principle is about the man or woman who aspires to join heaven and earth, who stands between them—the mediator, the “technician of the sacred.” There's always that triad.

ps When I did my first colored paintings, I had been looking at Tibetan painting. People had violent reactions either against or for them when I first showed that work. Now they are among the most desired of all my paintings. But at the time Thomas McEvilly, the critic and scholar, said to me, “Well, Pat, it was irresponsible of you to use these colors.” (laughter) I said, “What do you mean?” He said, “Those colors evoke certain states of mind, and you used them without knowing what state of mind they evoke, they backfired on you, the colors are playing with you as you played with them. What can you expect? You deserve it.” (laughter)

aw But those states *can* be evoked in people—

ps Yes, I know, and in many ways.

aw There's a wonderful sense of the five Buddha families that manifest as different colors. The red would be *padma*, which is Sanskrit for “lotus.” Padma is about seduction and sunsets, and in its more neurotic aspect, it's: Come into my world, let me seduce you, don't be afraid. Green is karma and is associated with action. Blue is associated with *vajra*, and is more intellectual, icy, distanced and meditative. These new paintings of yours are extremely celestial.

ps The Big Dipper, yes.

aw You're in what in Buddhism would be called a *vajra* realm, which has to do with a quality of perception and intellect. These descriptions existed prior to a Buddhist reading.

ps Which is so interesting because the response to the red paintings was, Leave me alone, you whore! (laughter) They were, like, perfume and female seduction.

aw Ooh!

ps And later, one at a time, people would really see them. But the blue ones people responded to immediately.

aw Well, there's no fashion to the cool intellectual distancing. A most famous deity in Tibetan Buddhism, Vajra Yogini, has completely red skin, three eyes, wears a necklace of skulls and dances on ego's corpse.

ps When I did the red paintings, that's what I was looking at.

aw That's wild. But I don't think you need to know that to experience those paintings. Being a reader and a writer, I love the description and the way these articulations emerge out of other wisdom traditions, but they're not needed for the visceral experience.

ps When I was a young girl, I couldn't decide whether I wanted to be a poet or a painter. And my father said, “Be a poet, you'll earn more money.” (laughter) But now that I've been a painter for 40 years, I think less in words.

aw That's considered the more enlightened state. We're so seduced and manipulated by words. Which brings me to your titles. How do they come to you?

ps I try to stay to two words that together describe the painting best: so that I can picture the painting in my mind's eye when the title is spoken. *Night Sea, Hungry Ghost, Winter Sky, Sea Storm, Big Dipper*. Many more than two words wouldn't be a key to my memory.

aw But that suggests a relationship. The words have a rub of energy between them. There's something synaptic going on there.

ps Definitely. When the paintings are hung, the titles have to be next to them because of that rub. I'm walking a thin line between image and not image, between flat and deep space. I want to help the viewer see the picture. And the poetry of the title is part of the picture for me, it's absolutely the same thing.



Pat Steir, *Winter Sky*, 2000–2002, oil on canvas, 126 x 108". Courtesy of the artist and Cheim & Read, New York.

aw It becomes a kind of intervention. William Carlos Williams has a line about the actual word and its image cutting into space. You almost feel the slice of the word as you look at this piece of fruit, for instance, or this skyline view that we're looking at now from your studio. Gertrude Stein says that words are things, and we must never forget that. Not just concepts, feelings. They exist tangi-

bly. You could also apply what's called the mandala principle of emptiness, that gestalt of where we are located while looking at anything in our phenomenal world. It's a version of the world that is constructed, yet it exists. There's the play of absolute and relative flipping around. Which brings me back to the notion of being an instigator, an inventor. The notion *terma*, of treasure. You make

sense of the hidden things, the details in our world, bring them to the fore. And if you paint them—well, have some response in paint—you would have something that's frozen in time, a resonance.

ps With these paintings, especially with the last ones, I've tried to show you what you see when you don't know what you're seeing. Anything, if you never saw it before, would

be abstract. When it's foggy, there's nothing out this studio window. It's terrifying, it's just white. And when your face is right up against what you can't identify. . . . The closer you get to something, the more abstract it is.

aw The more you stand in front of something and accord it a kind of attention, the more the ordinary little particulars become bright and strange.

ps When I discovered Japonisme, I went to Japan and then China a couple of times and worked there. I was struck by the chaos, the way things are done in China, the casual confidence with beauty. That's the tempo. Two sticks and a stone can make a temple.

aw It's very different from Japanese aesthetics.

ps Right. That chaos cannot be released in Japan. I was in China just before Tiananmen Square, at the most shockingly open moment. We went to make woodcuts. I had been making them in Japan. The registration there was so clean and clear, uniform. In China no two prints were the same, every page was different. I asked to see the plates, and they brought out what must have been five hundred little pieces. They had cut out every mark on a different block, so as not to waste wood. I said, "How do you register that?" And the printer turned around and, *sk-sk-sk*, made a print for me. In China the printer's eye and heart is in the print.

aw So how did you find working in those countries? Was there camaraderie in the artistic endeavor?

ps Yes, in China especially. The Japanese printers have worked with foreigners for a long time, but Kathan Brown, who publishes prints, and I were the first to go to China to make woodcuts with local printers.

aw You invoke beauty, noting how unfashionable that word has become. We're looking at a vocabulary that's becoming uglier and uglier, with more and more warmongering words. I never thought I'd see the day that the word *kill* was on the front page of the *New York Times*—and more than once.

ps That was this morning, wasn't it?

aw They are getting us used to it.

ps Just like that! One adjusts to violence in increments!

aw You have quoted Rilke: "Every angel is terrifying; beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror." Why is every angel terrifying?

ps When you look at something beautiful, you are really seeing Beauty. I think Beauty evokes a desire to hold on to the moment; when you realize you cannot stop a moment, you understand that it will pass, and that you also will pass. You will die. That's why people cry at weddings more than at funerals. Everything will die. And when you know that, everything becomes very delicate and tenuous and precious. We live in a culture in which that is getting so harshly denied, the reality of ending. Then war, the killing, has no sense of reality.

aw Why wasn't it more evident after 9/11? We're all vulnerable. And our response is to build more weaponry—

ps —to kill even more. I have insomnia, so I watch CNN to fall asleep. They parade out the most horrendous weapons. And they talk about a quick, fast war. What about the woman going to the supermarket on a Wednesday morning and she's killed?

aw It's an industry.

ps It's like sharks, complete, absolute, blind genetic desire. And we are seen as the freaks because we don't want to go to war.

aw I see it in terms of the psychology of the six realms in Buddhism. There is a warring god that thrives on a hallucination of enemy, it thrives on—

ps —power.

aw Exactly. And paranoia.

ps It's evolutionary. You and I are just at different points in our evolutions.

aw So what gives you the optimism and inspiration for your work on a daily basis in the face of the weird larger incongruities?

ps It must be genetic too. I only feel happy when I work.

aw You have the "negative capability" principle in you: the ability to hold in your mind two disparate thoughts or contradictions

without any irritable need to reach after fact or reason. John Keats's famous epiphany. It's an artist's mind, a mind that can handle the chaos and the terror, actually. Not to ask you to speak for your whole scene, but what about your colleagues?

ps Well, I'm part of a very small community of people who still paint. And I would think that for the most part they're all equally as optimistic, if not about the future, then about making the work. The work is like pulling a little thread. There's a little tribe of people who are putting out work from the heart.

aw There's this idea of the poet moving the century a couple of inches—

ps Exactly.

aw Do you see paint as a kind of alchemy?

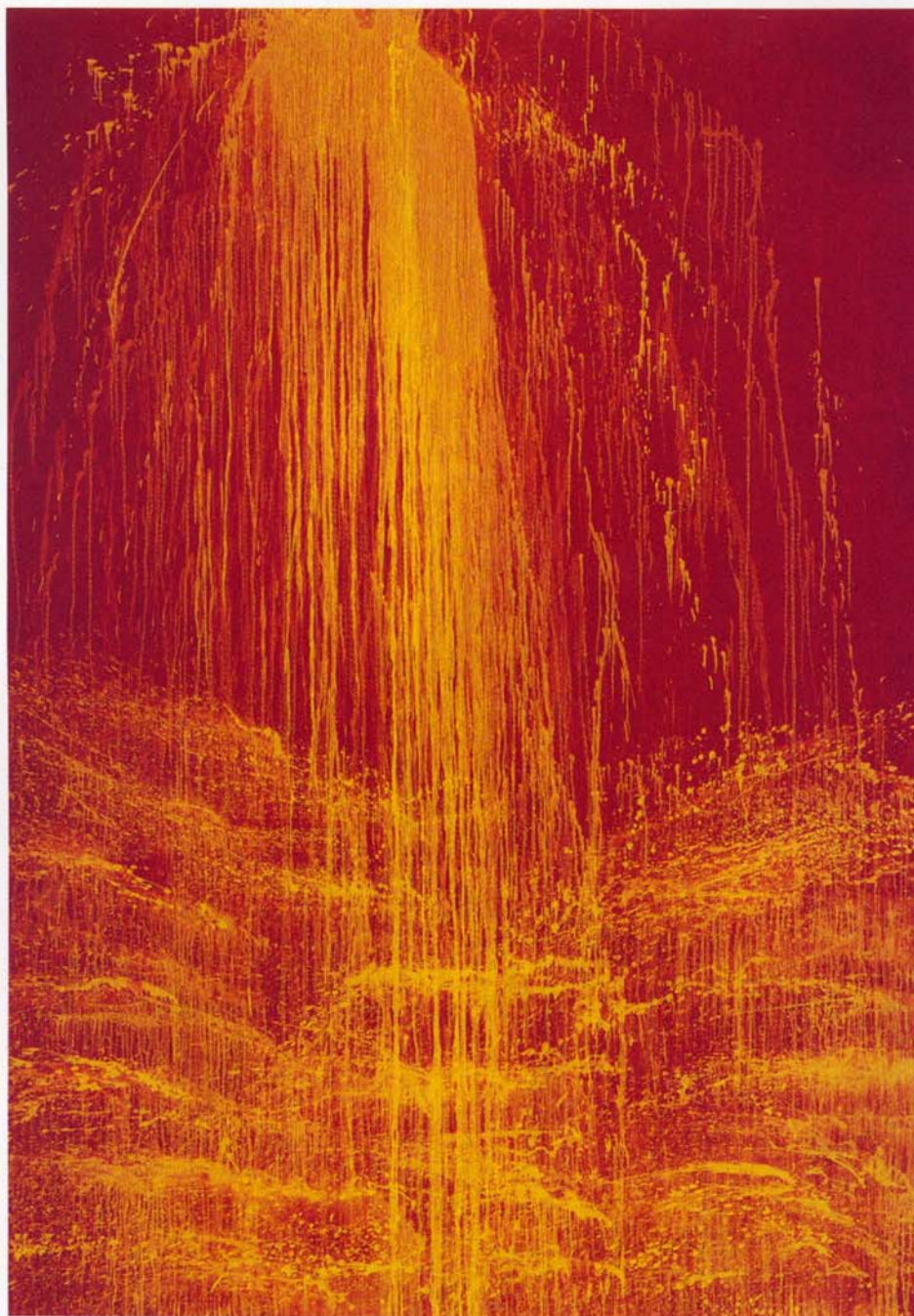
ps I'm making something that wasn't there before. I've always liked being an oil painter, attached to the mythology and the magic of making something that relates to history, that has a history, an image of space that is simultaneously flat and deep. Also the idea of making a line. If I were to draw you and draw your hair, I'd have to make a curvy line. The idea that that curvy line can then represent hair knocks me out. I think, Oh, that's the most conceptual thing I ever saw in my whole life. The most abstract concept, you know?

aw But paint feels visceral. It's part of our plasma.

ps It's like a Rorschach test and a litmus test and a blood test and a test of your pulse. And that's why I like to throw the paint. I have very good hand-eye coordination—I'd love to show you.

aw Have you been photographed or filmed doing it?

ps Yes, there are some photographs where you can see the paint coming off the brush as I fling it. And the thing that happens that I never knew is that I make the shape in the air that I want to be on the canvas. I always thought it took its horizontal form when it hit the canvas, but it takes its form in the air right in front of the canvas and then it moves to the canvas. That I never knew until I saw myself doing it. But I think my own pleasures are small, like a certain gray when you mix it and pour it over a certain green, becomes purple. That's like a secret.



Pat Steir, *Double Dragon Waterfall*, 1992, oil on canvas, 121 x 84 1/4". Courtesy of the artist and Cheim & Read, New York.

aw So there is intention in that sense.

ps I have a very clear picture in my head that forms over a period of time of how I want the painting to be. And I've been making gestures in air long enough to know more or less how they'll hit the canvas. The thing that I always have to force myself to do is let the paint hit the canvas, walk away and let it do its thing.

aw While you're not watching.

ps If I watch, I'll meddle in it. I can control

how it drips by how I mix the paint. What that mixture makes the difference between the matte blue background and the gold with the green under it, or this blue with the white under it. That will determine how the colors separate.

aw In your most recent work, it seems that you are moving out of this enormous range of the waterfalls and the controlled chaos there, the evocative definition of the water-

fall as a meditative trope, and moving into celestial and sky or constellation paintings.

ps Well, in the way that they're painted and the way that I think about them, they're not so different. There is a different point of view—in the celestial ones, you look up instead of down—but it's not really so different. Look at the relation of the mountain and the monk. In the Zen painting the monk is looking at the moon. Everything is huge except the monk, who is a tiny little black dot. Because in the picture we are seeing what the monk is seeing from his point of view: he is a small part of the universe. Which to me is the same as my mountain paintings, or my sky paintings. I am the painter looking from a huge distance at the huge sky and the mountain looming. Always from a distance. I am similar to the monk on the ground, a speck like a fly looking up at the sky. These paintings are simply rectangles around a piece of infinite space. The waterfall paintings are painted as though the waterfall is directly in front of the artist, chaotic but confrontational. I've always admired John Cage; his whole system involved chaos. I'm trying desperately to make chaos, but I make order. I try to make the chaos within the work; that's why I depend on gravity to leave a lot of space for accident. For chaos.

aw Cage had a lot of strategies.

ps He had a system to contain the chaos, yes. I found that I could contain the chaos by letting the paint act. It's getting more and more controlled. When that happens I start again from a new point of view.

aw That leads me to a question about the perspective you have on our culture's self-centeredness. After 9/11 there was a sense that America's pain was greater than anybody else's pain—and Arundhati Roy, the wonderful Indian writer and thinker, said, "Welcome to the world, America." Which is a very generous thing to say. If we could only pop into that larger mind. It seems key to the artist's point of view. The way you describe how you work, the perspective of looking up or down, working with water, wave, wind, stone. These elemental things are so needed. A meditative mind is an ecological mind. You bring into question our whole ecology through the elemental images that you invoke, and yet with a sense of invention and newness. Our

culture's problems do seem to be rooted in myopic self-centeredness.

ps The American mentality never really moved into the twentieth century—it's still a frontier mentality. My grandmother worked with the unions. My brother and I had a secret name for her; we'd see her coming up the street and say, "Here comes Legal Eagle!" She was always talking about the unions organizing legal rights. At the time people like my grandmother were liberal Democrats, or socialists. Now those people are Republicans, right-wingers. There's been a misinterpretation of American values: "I can do it, I can pull myself up by my bootstraps."

aw Let's come back to your perspective when you're inside the work. We talked a little about the Asian aesthetic of unlocking symbols, about chaos and form. There's Robert Creeley's line, "Form is no more than an extension of content." You clearly balance between the two, small mind and big mind. As an artist you have a big mind. But where is that small mind coming from? The relative mind, fraught with ordinary particulars and emotions, is not so panoramic.

ps That's the contradiction in living a daily life for me, being political, being part of the body politic, buying groceries, paying the mortgage. And then there is the isolation of doing this work.

aw Where do you stand in this strange time we're living in, as you pick up the brush or drip paint every day?

ps I keep thinking that I'm building a memory palace, I'm trying to get everything I know together in one place. Everything I've read, a bit of art history, a bit of science, some literature. This summer I reread *To the Lighthouse* and I saw it differently. My goal before I die is to read everything I read as a young person and see what I think now.

aw Yes, I feel that way too. Have you been back to your Proust?

ps (laughter) No, I haven't gotten to that. Tolstoy and the rest of the Russians, and *Don Quixote*. We need *Don Quixote* right now. I went to Boston University for a few years, and right after the Cuban Revolution, Castro came to Cambridge and spoke. This was before the

Americans decided they didn't like him. My friend's father was the editor in chief of the *Christian Science Monitor*, so we got in really good seeing and hearing distance. There were no seats; we sat on pillows on the grass on a chilly fall night. Castro was marvelous, charismatic. Someone asked him what his favorite book was, and he said *Don Quixote*. I fell in love with him because of that.

aw We do need more *Don Quixote* now. Humor on the one hand, and that sense of bumbling modesty, that stumbling along where you learn from serendipitous experience. Now it's all death wish summoned by those in charge of the body politic.

ps Cheney has a death wish. They want to kill the constitution. Since I signed a few letters I've been stopped at every airport check-in.

aw I think my phone's already being tapped, and the IRS is on my tail. I have a line: "I'm a citizen, I pay the taxes, I want my own Supreme Court." In another I say, "I'm in a Rogue State, getting unpredictable and strange." I offer scholarships to any informers listening in on the phone who might want to come to the Jack Kerouac School at Naropa this summer. Or join the Operation Counter-Intelligence symposium we're organizing this spring in New York. (laughter) ps Bush went right ahead—just at a time when we need one world, the international spirit, the common market—and alienated us from the rest of the world.

aw Let's walk around your studio and look at the paintings.

ps Okay. These are monoprints. When I get them done, I'll show them at Pace Prints Editions. This is a waterfall; the waterfalls drip off a brush, I didn't throw the paint. These are in sexual Mother Earth colors.

aw As a working artist, do you see paintings as your product, as an object that translates into money?

ps I am of two minds: on one hand I see it as a mother dog eating her puppies. (laughter) Every time I sell a painting, I think, I hate showing these and I hate selling them and I want to keep them. On the other hand, I want people to have them, I want eyes to hit them. Eyes give them life. They die if they

are in storage alone, and, you know, they keep me alive physically as well as spiritually, they pay my way. I didn't inherit anything but what I am, so I have to live by my wits, so to speak, sell my paintings. They are what I have, and I love working, painting.

aw And this one?

ps This will be another sky painting. This is many blues, one poured over another. It's all poured on. And this'll be another star one, darker, black and blues. You can see the test on the side here. It'll be black holes. And stars. The night sky is like a serpent. I threw that paint off a brush—

aw Are these constellations, do you think?

ps Yes. And these waterfalls are more of the monoprint series. The grid is drawn later. The blue, gold and white were printed, and then I poured paint over it and drew the grid over that. These shapes are like ghosts. I just wait in front of the thing before I either throw the paint or make the mark. If I have to sit in a chair and wait there every day for months, I do it.

aw Say something about the artist as female, or the female artist.

ps Ay yi yi. (laughter) It's like when Thomas McEvilley looked at the Brueghel painting; he said I was like one woman with paintbrushes beating on the door of history, saying, Let me in, let me in! But it's true. I'm not the only one; a few in my generation made it through. And now, it's actually a woman's world, painting. It's filled with women. But how many of us as females will be able to sustain ourselves, have an audience and sustain the audience? A few years ago there was a lot of publicity around beautiful young women painters.

aw Right, I remember that.

ps How many of them are to be accepted as beautiful old women painters and still earn their livelihood and have the opportunity to show their work? That's what counts. If you're starting now, it looks like it's easier. When I started in the early '70s, there was a group of about 30 women painters. Several have made it through the glass ceiling to sustain their work in a public framework. It's hard, of course, for a man too. But now that I'm getting older I find it much easier to be believable. ☉