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

INCONVERSATION

Ron Gorchov with Robert Storr and Phong Bui

by Phong Bui and Robert Storr

On the occasion of his exhibit, *Double Trouble* at P.S. 1, which will be on view till November 20th, *Rail's* Consulting Editor Robert Storr and Publisher Phong Bui paid a visit to Ron Gorchov's studio in Brooklyn one afternoon to discuss with the painter his life and work.

Robert Storr: Were you ever a student in the conventional sense, or did you paint on your own, moving into the world through a rather unorthodox path?

Photo of the artist in his studio. Photo by Grechen Kraus, 2006.

Ron Gorchov: When I was fourteen I went to Saturday classes at the Art Institute of Chicago. It was in 1944, and a few service men were coming back from WWII at that time. They were taking art classes with great G.I. Bill benefits that paid for art materials. A veteran named Jered Hoffman gave me a paper bag with all his half-squeezed oil paint tubes and a whole bunch of old brushes and he said that they'd be good luck.

Phong Bui: Then you went to college in Mississippi?

Gorchov: I didn't plan my education. My high school grades were terrible—I read a lot but I hated school. Ol' Miss was the most unlikely place I could go. The deep south was exotic. I did well in my freshman classes. I went fishing with William Faulkner and friends once when I was down there, so that was a highlight. Anyway, while I was there, because of the horrific racial problem (this was 1947), I was mentally not at all able to think about art; instead I spent a lot of time with people who had more advanced ideas that helped me grasp this intense situation. I was surprised to meet a few such people in a motorcycle club who went further on equal rights and took risks. After spending a

year in Mississippi, I went back to Chicago–-Roosevelt College and the Art Institute for academics and art classes.

Storr: When did you come to New York?

Gorchov: We (Joy and my three-month-old son, Michael) landed here in New York with eighty dollars in 1953. We moved immediately into the Marlton Hotel, right across from what was the old Whitney Museum, now the New York Studio School on 8th Street. The next day, there was a listing for lifeguards to test at the 54th Street swimming pool. I went for the test and passed and in less than a week I was working at Coney Island. We found a place near the beach but my paycheck wouldn't come for almost a month so I sent my family to stay with relatives in Philadelphia for a while until I received a few checks and Joy could get a job. By then I was teaching swimming evenings at the old Summit Hotel across from the Waldorf-Astoria. We moved to a cold-water flat in 12th street between Avenue A and B. It was a small 1st floor with 12 ft ceilings. The room I used for a studio was 64 sq. ft but the high ceiling gave it something extra. I was painting a lot but really I had no idea what I was doing.

Bui: Did you have time to see shows in museums and galleries?

Gorchov: In the early '50s we had to time things close with subways to get to jobs and relieve each other with our son. Our neighbors who had five young children helped us a lot with cooking, childcare and understanding. But somehow we had time for everything. We had parties with friends. Took Michael everywhere. Joy had a piano and singing coaches and studied acting. I could see all the shows in one afternoon, after midnight talk to artists in bars, then paint all night and sleep three hours in the morning. It was exciting and we didn't want to miss out on anything.

Storr: Just to fast forward to the present, in a very short order, you had two shows: one last summer at Vito Schnabel's temporary space, and now one this summer at P.S. 1. In both cases new and old work, and I would guess that this has very much changed the kind of situation that you're in. Many people knew your work, some who knew it had lost track of it, but many younger people are not familiar with it. I wonder what it's like to be at the receiving end of this attention: how it has affected your work process and your general sense of yourself in the New York community and beyond.

Gorchov: When I was about 10 years old, I was thrilled that in the year 2000 I would be 70 years old. For whatever reason, I didn't think that that was very old. I loved modernism, and believed that there is progress. I thought the world would be great; there'd be spaceships and everything. I remember when Pop Art led discourse in the '60s shortly after I had an early success, I said to myself, fine, I don't want to be a '60s artist. In the '70s, I had new work and considered being a '70s artist, I had support from artists. Two Whitney Biennials and Alanna Heiss at P.S. 1 provided major spaces for "Set" and "Entrance" but no strong interest from any gallerist. Nothing worked well for me in the '80s. The '90s passed quickly. I don't know if many artists have thought about picking

their time. But I'd like it to be now.

Storr: The general tendency is in fact to date artists' work to the moment when they become visible on the scene, so they're locked in that. De Kooning is a '50s artist, even though he painted for the next 40 years. It goes like that pretty predictably. You're right. Artists are not allowed to pick their decade. It is picked for them.

Gorchov: I had at least a couple of gallery shows in every decade. The best part of that was being able to show artists what I was up to. I'm aware that selling art is hard. When gallerists couldn't sell my work, the easiest way for me to handle it was to assume that my art had to get better. I wasn't desperate for more exposure.

Bui: So that was the sole reason why you pulled away for two decades? To most artists, that would be considered a professional risk since most have learned slowly to accept their retreat by force, not by choice, and very few share your introspective view of making work without feeling the pressure of meeting all the demands from the art world.

Gorchov: I don't think these things are calculated. One thing that I never feel comfortable with is the so-called mid-career artist. I think it means the work is undervalued. An artist whose work is undervalued must produce the show, and then have a hard time capitalizing for the next show even if there are sales.

Storr: By capitalizing you mean having enough money to build structures and pay for materials?

Gorchov: Yes. The only time any value was ever created for my work was last year with the adventurous cooperation of Vito and his dad, Julian. They understand that artists probably like to be able to work and also live well.

Storr: That's a good principle that we all agree with . So, you see yourself as a 21st century artist, but you did in fact, more than any other group, have real ties to the generation of the '50s. For example, I remember once you mentioned having known John Graham, who is a mysterious and emblematic figure because he always remained somewhat outside the art world's establishment. Did you feel that there was a disadvantage with being associated with older artists, or that there was a particular lesson to be gained?

Gorchov: The professor/student relationship has some inherent problems. I wrote John a letter in the summer of 1954, telling him who I was and what I was trying to do, and that I gave up painting the figure after I saw his work. After two months he wrote me back a very polite letter saying, perhaps in cooler weather we'll see each other. I thought that was cryptic. Then suddenly he showed up two or three weeks later at my studio.

Bui: This happened while Graham had his show at the Stable Gallery?

Gorchov: No, months later. I actually wrote in care of Stable Gallery. The first time Graham visited my studio (then at E. 70th St) he looked around and said, I like that painting over the piano and I'd like to buy it. As for this painting over here it's like a child pissing on the street, it's charming, but absolutely not made by a thinking adult. So his immediate opinion of my work was mixed. We became friends. There was a hard period for him for two years but he called in 1957 and Joy and I saw him almost every day until he left for Paris and finally London in 1959. We corresponded until his death in 1962.

Storr: Now you were in the New Talent show at the Whitney in 1959, which means you were making abstract paintings at a time when the tenor of things was changing back towards counter figuration, you were going one way and they were going another. Can you describe the paintings you were making at the time? From what I can tell through reproductions they look like they were quite heavily painted, with rather intense color.

Gorchov: They were abstract surrealist paintings. Even though my work was being well received—I was very conscious of not wanting to make that kind of painting and I ended up painting quite a lot of them. I had a couple of shows with that body of work. I felt I had to get my feet wet in the art world. An artist who was gently critical of my work was Carl Andre. He said, my work was *retardétaire,* which I took seriously enough to go underground. Years later I reminded him that he said my old work was *retardétaire,* and he said, "I didn't say that. I said you were a retarded terror!

Bui: When I first came to know your work I thought of you as being a part of the generation of painters like Stuart Hitch, Thornton Willis, Peter Pinchbeck and Ralph Humphrey, whose work have significant links to abstract expressionism, but nonetheless came at the tail end of its decline. Yet at the same time, you were all questioning the validity of the New York School's second or third generation and the rise of Pop Art, in addition to the complex climax of that decade, in which emerged so many directions taken in the art world: Neo Dada, Environments and Happenings, perceptual realism and so on. In your case, how did you manage to stay close to your vision?

Gorchov: For one thing, I never wanted to be a second or third generation artist of any kind. Also, I think painting, per se, is an ideal way to criticize the work you already admire because that way you can take the best things in it and try to make your work to be the next consequential step. I mean, to me, that's a given tradition in creative thought: to build on what you're seeing that you love and try to bring it to new and unknown terrain.

Storr: In that regard, you did two pretty decisive things. One was that you dealt with the structure of the support in a way that nobody had done before. I mean, I can only think of a handful of people who had found similar ways of expanding the conventional structure, but it's still your territory, and the other thing was this ambidextrous way of painting with the left and right hand as to free the gesture—one is simultaneously informed by the other, therefore this deviation created a very unique tension.

Gorchov: I think it began on a walk with Al Held when he was looking for a studio space in 1962. He said that Ronnie Bladen and David Winerib thought that the forms in his work would make more sense if he adapted them to shaped stretchers, and he refused to do it. And Al was right, because for what he was doing, he didn't need to fuss with all of that carpentry. Held believed the rectangle was the inviolate static and his forms were the variables that he could play with. He called them "dancing angels". But for me, I was thinking about what Richard Smith was doing with a hyperbolic canvas built out in extreme three-dimension that I saw at the Jewish Museum. The work itself felt somewhere between Minimal and English Pop, but the strong 3D got me thinking that even if you start cutting or building a structure onto a 2D rectangle or a square, it's still a rectangle or a square—it isn't a major change. But I thought I could use that idea. Since I didn't have any woodworking skills, in '66 I made the first negative curve structure with wire dipped in a plastic liquid. And I realized that when you stretch a saddle shape on a frame it had properties that were unusual: the whole thing got stronger. And it could make less acute corners. I also discovered that, with the new structure, it creates an even tension throughout the whole surface. What I've finally learned was the right way to build it was to start with a rectangle, and the curved part has to spring off of it. Therefore, the structure itself becomes an argument to the rectangle, and that interested me. In 1968 I made "Mine" the first complete painting from this line of thought. It disturbed me because the corners were even more acute than a regular rectangle. It had something I liked, but the structure was all wrong. I had to give the structure a form that I would want to draw into. I taught myself to work with wood as I began "Entrance," "Set" and "Strand" as exercises that had to be large so I could see small errors of form easily.

Bui: During that time in the '70s, there was a strong sentiment of anti-action painterliness, which, for better or worse, was a product of the Greenbergian School of Painting: the surface is more varied, form and field became more soft and lyrical, technique more loose, like the crustily painted surface of Olitzki or stained paintings of Frankenthaler, Morris Louis and a few others. But there came a group of artists, you mentioned Richard Smith, but there're others like Alan Shields, Richard Tuttle, Sam Gilliam, and Robert Ryman to some extent, who reacted against that doctrinaire formalism, took canvas off the stretcher, draped it around the room, resembled it on the floor, and tacked it directly on the wall. Were you a part of that discourse?

Gorchov: We were all thinking about these related conflicts and doing it our own way. Lynda Benglis and I had breakfast and talked every morning from 1968 to 1972 about these questions. Soho was heaven then. It was very local. Few appointments. We just ran into each other. Malcolm Morley had a new exciting idea every week or so and would insist you come to Greene Street and see it. Jake Berthot would call at 2 AM if he was reading a great poem or something unusual was happening in his studio. That's something I think is missing now.

Storr: My sense is that there's much less conversation among artists about what they're doing now then when I first came to New York. Partly because there's less agreement about what the central problems of the moment are; they just don't have the same common culture that they once did.

Gorchov: I mean you can learn from even those who didn't paint; although they could, like Carl Andre.

Storr: Yeah. He said a great thing to a friend of mine. At one point she was talking about how painters were getting beat up once again and he said, 'Painting's not bad, it's just hard.' which was a wonderful answer.

Gorchov: Part of the difficultly in painting is the glut of images. I've come to fear images. They are randomly used: in a magazine, on a billboard, or in a film or a video. Vic Muñiz has directly addressed this confusion with his hypnotic photographs.

Bui: That's because pop culture enhances graphic image rather than images that emerge out of plastic form. That's why I think the structure of your canvas not only increases the objectness of the painting, but it also amplifies the meaning of the image. I feel the image in some cases appeared almost like some kind of marking. They seem to have a strong connection to both John Graham's paintings of the late 1940s, which were loaded with cuts and puncture wounds as in his land mark cross-eyed woman paintings, and Julian Schnabel's paintings from the late 1970s particularly two paintings: Acetone, and St. Sebastian. These two artists, one older than you by 44 years, one younger by nearly two decades, you know intimately well. Does that sound adequate?

Gorchov: Yes. Graham claimed he was using wounds formally—as punctuation. And that the crossed-eyes were a way of trapping space. As for Julian, he and I share a love for extreme forms, not necessarily tormented forms, but forms that imply expansiveness. When I think of Julian's treatment of form, I think of Rodin's monumental Balzac, according to some source, the nearly completed plaster torso didn't look right to Rodin so he hit it with a sledgehammer, which gave it a new twist and energy. When I first met Julian I was immediately impressed by his energy. He has an admirable passion for work and a gift for overcoming obstacles that thwart most mortals. I'm lucky to have a studio near Julian and next to Ray Smith and St. Clair Cemin. Ray's understanding of abstraction, his inspiring example of being a fearless art warrior would be a great gift in itself. St. Clair's interest in chimerical phenomena has affected my dreams. Besides, with all of their impressive ability to produce constantly, I don't know how they tolerate my way of working, which is painting that comes out of leisure.

Bui: You mean you don't have a puritanical work ethic like most good Americans?

Gorchov: I hope not. My paintings are mostly made from reverie, and luck.

Storr: Let me go to the gesture side. If you take Graham as an example whose work was hugely important to de Kooning and Gorky, this counters the myth that the gesture is totally spontaneous, because Graham rehearsed all the moves that he made, and so did de Kooning—that's the Classical tradition. Over your shoulder there is a computer unless people hearing this conversation think that you're a representative of the old school. I've seen you work on a computer as a way of developing

an image which is the technological alternative to the old classical method of Graham, Gorky, and de Kooning, so how do you think about the business of pre-meditation, performance, the thing you know which relates to the thing that happens on the surface.

Gorchov: The computer helped me at a time when I didn't have enough space, and materials to do as many forms as I wanted, I could make a lot of shapes and just save them (I was brought up where you create a form after having gone through many trials and errors, and you couldn't change anything, you can't get back to where you were. Even stripping the painting changes it a lot.) I don't use the computer that much; it was a novelty that I enjoyed for a while. Digital images don't interest me much now. For me, it's always the alchemy of mixing the paint that gives excitement to painting.

Storr: Nearly two years ago when I was in the studio you had made a rather decisive change to go back to the rectangle. Could you talk about that since quite a few of them are included in the show, a change which to some viewers, who are familiar with your shaped canvas, may seem abrupt?

Gorchov: I had about five or six curved stretchers left and since I had gotten in the habit of paying all my bills on time, my credit was good. I didn't want to stress my credit by ordering $10,000 of the stretchers, and I thought, wow, it's so great that people can just spend a few hundred dollars and they can have a supply of canvases and get to work right away. And some individuals have questioned the fact that my work is built on so much craft, that I could only paint on saddle-shape stretchers. So I was thinking about that, which led to an intuition I had relating to the great Blinky Palermo stripe paintings on aluminum at DIA. In this case two vertical stripes with three spaces in a rectangle. So the first one I did, called "Who's Afraid Of Barney Newman," 2003, turned out to be promising. I felt something from it; it was real enough that I was compelled to do more. Remember I called you up, and I asked you, what do you think? And you said, 'Puzzling. They're handsome paintings, you can handle paint, but they're not everything you can do. You should go further with these before you look for a dealer.' It was good advice. So I pushed it a little bit. I started to make forms, and the forms became disengaged from the stripes, you thought the project was okay, but not to give up painting on the curved form.

Storr: Another issue of many of your paintings is that they are now very open, in terms of densities of tones, or where the edges are. Again, in the '50s, the unfinishedness of paintings was thought of as an ideological proposition, but I remember when we did an interview years ago, you talked about how you faced a problem with finishing a painting, and you would give yourself a time limit, and I wonder if you could talk more about that?

Gorchov: I don't do that crazy stuff any more. But here's the method I used some years ago when I had many paintings to complete for a show. I put large cards by each painting with a number in magic marker. The numbers were the hours I estimated that painting would take to complete—say, 32. In sessions of painting with no break until I estimated that I had halved the hours left to complete; crossed out the 32—and put 16, 8, 4, 2, etc. after each session.

Storr: Well it was a great; crazy idea. But I wanted you to talk about what it is that makes letting go of a painting so hard, or that makes knowing where you are in the process so difficult to ascertain.

Gorchov: The biggest problem I had with letting paintings go was the feeling that there was an expense to getting a fresh canvas. And if I could make this painting as good as I could make it and keep going with it, however long it took. It's not rational; I ruined painting after painting to get to a better one. Then I realized that I couldn't make a painting incrementally better. If you could make it one percent better, maybe, but who cares? A painting has to evolve. With all respect to Myron Stout, I'm not that kind of an artist. Lately, I'm alone in my studio, after the preliminary marks indicate the limits of the elements, I only get one chance. I test the colors that I want, mix them, get the right brushes. I talk to myself—that form will be eight strokes; this form will be 3 strokes—and paint goes down. The next part is hallucinatory and difficult to explain. A decision will be made about adjustments later. Or it will be renovated. Or it feels perfect and can't be changed.

Storr: Apropos to 21st century thinking, if one of the problems is getting the 21st century, another problem is actually making work in the 21st century. In both cases, it has to do with educating people to what they think about what they see, and to get people really past the point where they read certain kinds of surfaces, colors, or marks as metaphors for expressions of total spontaneity, which is what a painter does, and I would assume part of what's confronting you is how do you show people how to look at the kind of paintings you make?

Gorchov: I don't know about the art public but I trust artists. Peter Acheson, a painter I met through Phong recently at my show at P.S. 1, had a response that made me happy. He knew a good reason why I was working the way I did. He said, this curved boundary allows you to be free, to paint in any way you like, you don't have to have a signature paint style.

Storr: But there is a kind of way of thinking, which is invested in this in the 1950s, which has been deeply engrained in the culture. That's what I was trying to address. How do you get people to look, with fresh eyes, rather than eyes keyed to past explanations?

Gorchov: I've been meeting more young artists now than in the recent past who that are interested in paint as a material.

Storr: Do you sense that the time is right for people to look at painting again after quite a lot of attention has gone in other directions? Or is it now just a free-for-all?

Gorchov: Even though it was always made for a small audience, I believe that painting will be looked at; it's lasted 40,000 years, why not another 40,000 years? OK, let's say it'll only last another 10,000 years, why should it come to a dead stop?

Bui: That's true. The last time we saw each other we were talking about Gandy Brody, who was very

visible in the 1950s but somehow his paintings have fallen out of favor in recent decades. All of the sudden, one of his painting "Meditation on a Kosher Tag" appeared, along with other terrific paintings by Pollock, De Kooning, Frank Auerbach, Bill Jensen, Louise Fishman and many others in the great Soutine show that Maurice Tuchman and Esti Dunow put together at Chaim & Read this summer. I mean if one were to be critical about the differences between the painterly vs. the painted, then there were choices of certain paintings that didn't quite fit Soutine's feverish brushwork. Nonetheless it was a great feast to all of those who paint.

Gorchov: Gandy was an eccentric character and a terrific painter. His work is a synthesis of his love for Soutine and Ryder.

Storr: I remember in 1989 Elizabeth Murray, Bill Jensen, Brice Marden and I did a panel on Ryder at the American Art Museum in Washington DC when there was a big Ryder show. It was a real panel by painters on a painter, which is very rare by any measure.

Bui: How about the brilliant traveling retrospective of Elizabeth Murray last year, and, soon, by late October, a similar event for Brice Marden! So painting is again pretty visible.

Gorchov: Yeah. People like good food. People like good music, dance, etc. I think everyone, if they don't have impediments, can love paintings.