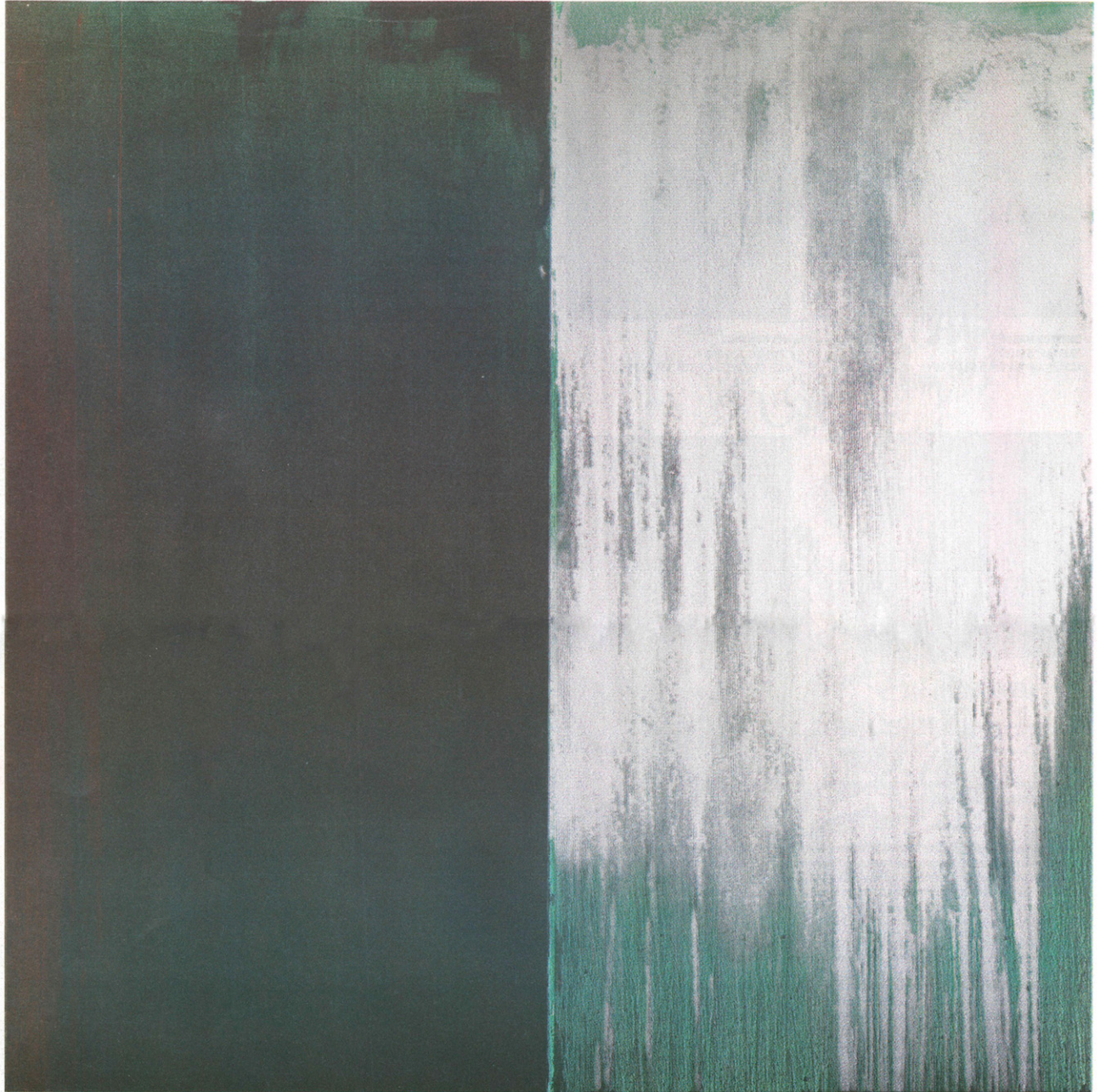


CHEIM & READ



BROOKLYN RAIL CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE **MARCH 2011**

Pat Steir · Brew It Yourself · Will Ryman · Cameron Martin
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Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

IN CONVERSATION

Pat Steir WITH PHONG BUI

Just a few days after the opening reception of her recent exhibition *Winter Paintings* at Cheim & Read (February 17 – March 26, 2011), the painter Pat Steir paid a visit to Art International Radio to talk with *Rail* publisher Phong Bui about her life and work.

PHONG BUI (RAIL): Having always acknowledged what Hegel said, that “Every single phenomenon that is represented in a work of art should suggest presence of a greater and more universal idea,” and having read Doris von Drathen’s two extensive texts along with the two lengthy interviews with you, all of which were included in two volumes published by Charta in 2007, I still rely on my own visual reading. When I look at the painting “Self-Portrait,” painted in 1958-59, I immediately see all the familiar elements, which seem to take a lifetime to isolate while refining each of the elements in different categories of time. It seems to reveal many parallels, pairs of opposites, or contradictions, if you will. For example, the nude figure, painted so smoothly and uniformly, is in extreme contrast with the rough, tactile surface of the background. The indication of the two feet in profile implies the figure, set in a vertical field, is in motion, yet her whole body is portrayed frontally. It actually reminds me of early Cézanne paintings, especially the well-known 1866 portrait of his uncle, Dominique, as a monk. The name Dominique corresponds to the Dominican habit. And the cross that sits on his chest corresponds to the crossed arms right below. Similarly, the first two letters, E and X—which comprise the word extent—are displayed in the two extending arms and legs of the figure in “Self-Portrait.”

PAT STEIR: I’m surprised and thrilled that you chose Cézanne as a reference point to talk about that painting. Cézanne was the first artist I fell in love with. This was one of the first paintings I did when I was in my first or second year of art school. The first thing I want to say about it is that my subject was and is always the paint itself. No matter what you do with paint, it’s paint,

though one is able to speak or sing or cry through paint, it is paint that is singing or speaking or crying. Although in this painting, the X can read as a cross, it’s also a picture of a female fighting her way through the atmosphere of paint, smooth paint, rough paint. It’s me struggling with the profound desire to be an artist, and the desire to make my mark. When I was growing up here in America in the ’40s and ’50s, we were fed the idea that there was a choice to be made between work and family, that a woman could not do/be both.

You see in the painting the little fire in her belly, conflict of desires—the desire to step out in the world alone to be what I am, and the desire to be an ordinary, acceptable woman in my family’s eyes. Notice also how her two feet are standing sideways right above the bottom edge of the painting, as you said in profile, like an Egyptian painting. That was because my mother was a Sephardic Jew from Egypt. I’m not sure anymore, if it was an unconscious reference or a deliberate joke with my mother.

RAIL: I also am compelled by the way in which the two arms are tied to, or buried by, the predominately horizontal blue band with white brushstrokes, which for me in some way can be read as sky or water, the two consistent motifs in your work.

STEIR: I thought of sky and water when I painted it. I thought of landscape absolutely. There was a whole body of paintings, dating as early as the late ’60s, the whole decade of the ’70s, and leading into the ’80s, which dealt with sky and water, as seen through various permutations of how I tried to wrestle with abstraction and representation.

RAIL: I have seen a couple of them. One, “Night Chant Series No.1: Beauty Way for J.B.” (1973), was included in the *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967-1975* exhibit that Katy Siegel and David Reed organized in 2007. And, of course, the X signs were at times dominantly featured in that group of paintings, especially from the early to mid-’70s, as in the painting “Virgin’s Dream” (1972), for instance. Other times it became a part of a more equal distribution between sign and images, as in “Veronica’s Veil” (1972). Looking back now, how do you reassess that whole group of paintings?

STEIR: Well, I started a career and an exhibition history with those paintings. They were widely written about at the time. So how do I assess them? I see them now as containing everything that after 1988 I began to unravel, and explore. There’s a painting called “Legend” (1973) that has everything in it that I later did, like a premonition. I didn’t know that this very early student painting would become a key painting.

I would add to the discussion that they also were about the questions of women’s place in the world, in work, and in history, which later became feminist subject matter.

RAIL: Another early painting shows a woman in the Richard Lindner-esque custom of bending down while looking at her reflection on the water’s surface, “Woman Looking at Her Reflection” (1960). And as you have mentioned in the past, you studied with Lindner at Pratt Institute. Can you recall what he was like as a teacher? And what sort of impact he had on your work at the time?

STEIR: He had great impact. He was able to encourage students to use their lives and dreams as subject matter. Lindner was teaching illustration while working as an illustrator, although he was making paintings at the same time. His work had not become well-known yet.

In my painting “Woman Looking at her Reflection,” the influence of Lindner is too strong visually, in the painting style and especially in her costume. The meaning is mine. The figure is standing on a very small little column, it looks like she was juggling and dropped a ball. Her shadow is painted abstractly. I was still a student. I was struggling with my conflicts and I had no idea that other women were having the same struggles. It was simply thought that women were not qualified to be artists and thinkers. It seemed to me I had to choose between being a normal ordinary woman or an artist. From the time I was five I thought I was an artist: that’s what I wanted to do all my life, for better or worse.

RAIL: I think the implied reference to Lindner’s erotic custom is not as evident as you think, except that, as we all know, his mother owned a business of custom fitting corsets.

STEIR: Exactly.

RAIL: In Nuremberg, Germany where he grew up. The other interesting thing is that you and Lindner share similar experiences in that you both were illustrators of and directors of publishing firms.

STEIR: Well, the courses I took at Pratt were graphic design, illustration, printmaking, typography, and so on. Those weren’t the things I was interested in but—

RAIL: In those days that was considered very normal for those who were training as young artists, because no one ever thought being an artist could be a viable profession.

STEIR: It was considered suicidal. Anyway, later I went to Boston University, between 1958 and 1960, where I studied painting and comparative literature. I was curious and eager.

In the painting “Mostly Female Hermaphrodite,” the figure is embracing a little bundle of abstract paint in her arms. I thought having a man’s desire to be expressive and strong made one a mental hermaphrodite. In any case, the erotic dress was a comment on dressing to please, dressing to be an erotic symbol. The emotional

discomfort I felt with that, with how women would dress in the '60s and '70s, was an important issue. So the erotic costume was for me a symbol for half of my conflict. I was asking, "Well, am I the abstract shadow in the water? Am I the paint? Or am I the woman in the uncomfortable costume who lives to please?"

In 1969 I met Marcia Tucker. She introduced me to the women's movement. I was amazed, shocked, and thrilled to find hundreds of women who as felt trapped as I did by the very real limitations of society and government on women.

RAIL: But besides that, in the late '60s (1966 – 1979) while you were working as an art director for Harper & Row, were you able to keep up what you were doing in the studio?

STEIR: The job was a miracle, a gift. I was hired by a man named Cass Canfield, with whom I am still friendly. Cass senior was the president of the business and I believe the primary shareholder of Harper & Row. And little Cass, as we called him, who was only a little older than me, was my direct boss. Actually, when they hired me, I didn't know much of anything. I had just come to New York alone, after having been a married student and then divorced while still in school at Boston University College of Fine Arts. I was working freelance from publishing house to publishing house doing illustrations, but I wasn't good at illustrations, because I couldn't follow instructions. [Laughs.]

RAIL: Thank God for that.

STEIR: It was a good job. After a while I asked whether I could do my job in three days, with the same salary, as long as I would stay and work late to make up the hours of the additional two full days. Big Cass and Little Cass both said yes and then I had three days of intense work in their office and four days to do my own work in the studio.

RAIL: Perfect arrangement.

STEIR: Yes. I worked there for four years. I left the job because Diane Arbus quit her job at Parsons the New School for Design, and she asked me if I would like to apply for it. I did, and that was how I began to teach illustration at Parsons for three years. Then, in the early '70s, I went to Cal Arts in California, and taught painting for another three years, until 1975 when I stopped teaching completely. Except for once or twice a year now, when I lead a painting retreat at Zen Mountain Monastery.

RAIL: Did the political climax at the time, from the Vietnam War, civil rights movement, women's rights movement, and other civil unrest, affect you?

STEIR: My work didn't directly mirror all of those events and struggles. I was active in the feminist movement and antiwar movement. In the early '60s when I was still a student, I met Julian Bond by going to raise money door-to-door in Atlanta, Georgia for the early-voter-registration movement. I was especially active in the women's movement. I felt compelled to participate to save myself. I was a young artist. I hoped to escape the isolation I felt. I wanted to be seen simply as an artist, I wanted to be a contender, an equal. I am an artist, that was and is still my feminist statement. My involvement with the feminist movement from the late '60s until the mid-'70s did not involve making "female or feminist art," although I was on the founding board of *Heresies*, and stayed on the editorial board for several issues. During those years I was on the editorial board of *Semiotext(e)* and was a founding member of *Printed Matter* as well.

I think my existence and survival in art, along with other women of my generation, has political implications beyond the personal, and is my feminist statement. It is a strong statement whether I make significant art or not.

It was an unbelievable moment. Of course, things didn't end the way we hoped they would.

We are still at war, only it is now in other parts of the world. The civil rights movement, which includes the feminist and gay rights movements, still has to be fought.

RAIL: And, of course, the Vietnam War shifted to another war elsewhere. At any rate, apart from the so-called X sign as a gesture of denying representation or parody of our being conscious of illusionism, what other things should we know about the rose?

STEIR: The rose was a symbol of a symbol, a series of visual quotes and puns: "a rose by any other name would smell as sweet," from Shakespeare; "A rose is a rose is a rose," from Gertrude Stein; Four Roses bourbon; The rose and the cross as symbols of Mary and Christ from early Renaissance painting. With the rose I wasn't referencing any one meaning; it was simply a generic symbol. I crossed out that symbol to make a painting without an image. I also had the idea that once you do something you can never erase it, that everything done will exist in reaction to it seen or unseen.

I just had a show at Galerie Jaeger Bucher in Paris and a collector asked Joan Simon, who has written about my work, to explain my paintings. Joan simply said "A bird flies in Pat's window; Pat paints a picture of the bird; she crosses the bird out: conceptual art!" Joan is very smart, precise, and funny!

RAIL: I enjoy the visual puns in those paintings quite a bit. Meanwhile, your friendship with Sol LeWitt, Agnes Martin, and John Cage is fairly well known for those who have followed your work for some time. Though, while looking at the survey of your works on paper, *Drawing out of Line* at the Museum of Art at Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) last year, I couldn't help but to think of the penmanship of Saul Steinberg, especially his tabletop collage or his so-called wood "Drawing Tables" of the '70s. The reason I'm thinking of Steinberg is because he allows for different graphic motifs and expressive potential of found styles to coexist in his work. I wondered whether there was a rapport between you and him.

STEIR: Of course I knew of his work, though I didn't know him. I knew the work from my years as an art director. I was aware of his work for the *New Yorker* and had seen shows of his drawings. I wasn't deliberately referencing his work; it was coincidence. I loved the magic of the crow quill pen, it would open up and spit ink by accident on everything. Also, in the mid-'70s I was traveling a great deal so working on a piece of paper with pen and ink was the only work I could do, in hotel rooms.

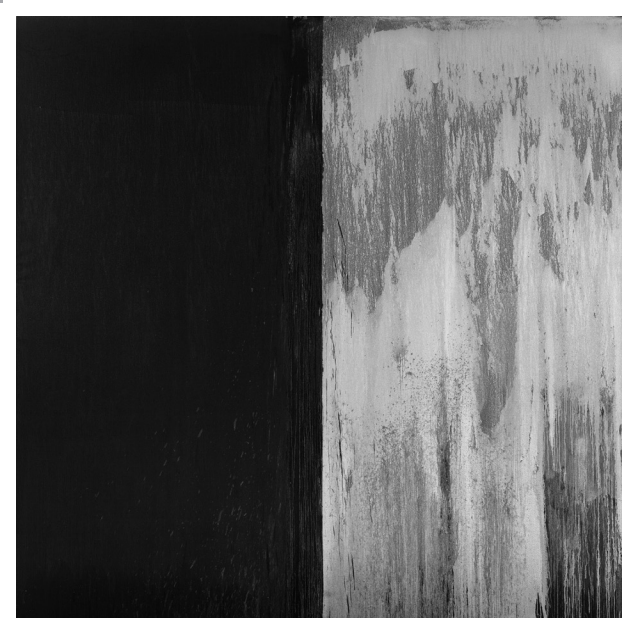
RAIL: What about the "Brueghel Series (A Vanitas of Style)?" I read many analyses or interpretations of it and most were not that far from one another in terms of what the subtitle suggests, and how the grid is utilized in 64 panels, where each is painted with different styles. Why did you choose Brueghel's still life instead of, let's say, landscape, which is more known?

STEIR: I chose his still life because vanitas paintings (flower paintings) referred to the vanity of life, the bloom of the flower, the impermanence of life. I was "speaking" about the vanity or impermanence of style. I was hearing architects and philosophers speaking and writing about postmodernism. I thought the flower painting could be interpreted more freely than landscape in terms of space of each panel, the space in painting is one of the indicators of period and style.

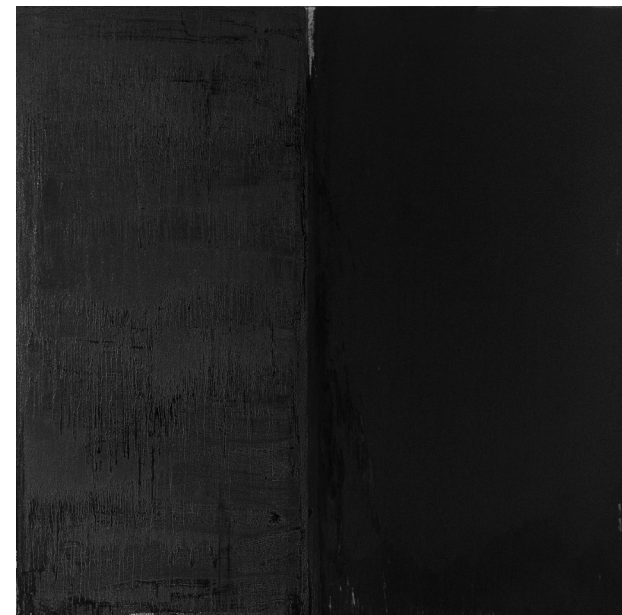
I was looking to see if postmodernism did indeed exist. I divided a poster of the painting into 64 panels. I determined which artist each panel could be interpreted as by the color and space in the panel. I was comparing style to the vanitas, hence the title.

RAIL: Did you make preparatory drawings for each panel? Or were they all painted directly and spontaneously?

STEIR: I had a preparatory drawing on each panel. I was lucky enough to have help from a young Chinese student, who was here studying engineering. However, he had worked in a silk factory copying images onto fans and embroidered paintings. He had a lot of skill and he could help me translate the drawing.



Pat Steir, "WINTER GROUP 3: RED, GREEN, BLUE AND GOLD" (2009-11). Oil on canvas, 131 5/8 x 132 3/8 inches.



Pat Steir, "WINTER GROUP 14: RED, WHITE AND BLUE" (2009-11). Oil on canvas, 84 x 84 inches.



Pat Steir, "WINTER GROUP 4: GREEN, GOLD, RED AND BLUE" (2009-11). Oil on canvas, 131 3/4 x 132 inches.

RAIL: What was the public reception of that painting when it was first shown?

STEIR: It went to a lot of venues; it was shown at the Brooklyn Museum then traveled to, I don't know, 10 or 12 museum venues, so I guess it was well received.

RAIL: I remember seeing the great drawings and prints exhibit of Brueghel at the Met in the late fall of 2001, I think, and how I realized that his work, perhaps along with van Gogh, came closest among Western artists to resembling classical Chinese painting, in that it embraces man's insignificance in his relationship to nature. Everything that appears in the painting is perceived as having equal worth. And I felt that your painting of the waves in the '80s were attempts to infuse both Western and Eastern sensibilities respectively. The painting called "Autumn: The Wave after Courbet, As Though Painted by Turner, Influenced by the Chinese" (1985) was on one hand about maintaining the level of required energy of that large scale with Neo-Expressionist paintings, mostly dominated by many male painters. On the other hand, by expanding the maximal degree of the arm's gesture it eventually led to the pouring, splashing and drip gesture, which is quite evident in the "Last Wave Painting (Wave Becoming a Waterfall)" (1987-88). What were you thinking in the process of making those gigantic paintings?

STEIR: Several things. First, the scale was based on the size of my outstretched arm, that was the beginning of the paintings being very performative. I discovered that I could be a compass, that I could draw a full circle using myself, standing very still, and by moving my arm in a circle with a brush filled with paint. That's how I decided the shape of the wave. Secondly, when I was doing the Brueghel painting, I undertook the task like an old Victorian lady. I went from museum to museum studying the style of each artist I intended to quote stylistically. I quoted Courbet with my "Wave" paintings, I thought, as many people do, that Courbet saw the Japanese prints as wrapping paper when they came to France. Hokusai's "The Great Wave at Katsukisha Kanagawa" must have had an impact on Courbet's wave paintings. I discovered Japonisme through research for the Brueghel painting, and through Japonisme I discovered Chinese painting. In the early '80s I met Stephen Addiss, who had been a student of John Cage. I already knew Cage. Stephen was a calligrapher and a scholar; he knew so much about Japanese and Chinese calligraphy and paintings.

The waves are a transition toward the waterfall paintings. I began looking at Chinese Literati paintings and at Southern Song Dynasty pottery and painting, and I realized that I didn't have to use the brush, that I could simply pour the paint, that I could use nature to paint a picture of itself by pouring the paint. That gravity would paint my painting with me. I was influenced and inspired by John Cage, his idea of non-intention. Essentially, my whole voyage, from that first painting of a young woman, fighting her way through the paint to now, is a search and an experiment. All of my work is a search and an experiment. I don't consider anything finished, I think of it as all only a step along the way

RAIL: Yes, she was finally able to break out of the horizontal space of the predominantly blue band, which initially tied her up by her two arms.

STEIR: To break through and to see the space that's painted as sculptural, not as flat. In the newest paintings it's seen as space you can go into, as you are in meditation—going into a space inside.

RAIL: In Anne Waldman's interview with you, published in *BOMB Magazine* in 2003, with regard to the "Waterfall" paintings, you said two things, which stayed in my mind. First, you described how you have been making gestures in air long enough to know various ways the paint hits canvas. This is a technical question: Do you mix the paint with a medium and, if you use a medium, what is the medium constituted of?

STEIR: I only use oil paint and turpentine; I've never used another medium.

RAIL: Are there ways to measure the degree of thinness of the paint?

STEIR: Yes. I measure a certain amount of pigment to a certain amount of turpentine and oil. That's how I control the flow of the paint. What I also realized was that if I make the shape in air, let's say, a foot and a half maybe from the canvas, it will float. It floats, as a physicist explains it, because of the heat magnetism toward the canvas that keeps its shape, so I can draw in air and it moves to the canvas. Stephen Addiss told me that thrown-ink painting began in the third century. I looked everywhere for it, I didn't understand what it was because I couldn't find it. That was because thrown ink meant broken line, not traditional painting. The artists didn't actually throw the ink. I was influenced by the idea of throwing the ink but it was just a misunderstanding. I think a lot of art comes about through misunderstanding.

RAIL: I also noticed that you used primed canvases, instead of the unprimed surface that is heavily attributed to Pollock and the Field painters, including Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, and many of their contemporaries.

STEIR: That's because unprimed canvas absorbs the color and I want the color to slide, and not to be stained or soaked. I want the weave of the canvas to accept and resist at the same time, it needs to have a good priming to do that.

RAIL: And how do you control so many layers? In other words, do you rehearse a gesture?

STEIR: I did, but by now I know my movement well—it would be like rehearsing walking, eating. I decide in my mind's eye what my gesture will be. When I try a new gesture I rehearse it against the wall before making it on the painting.

RAIL: Do you often move the painting in different angles in order to control the drip or does it always hang vertically?

STEIR: The paintings are hung vertically. I am from the conceptual generation. I make certain limitations for each group of paintings. I could change them at any time, and I may, but for now, I want nature—gravity—to control the downward flow of paint.

RAIL: The second thing you spoke of in the interview with Anne was about how in Zen painting the tiny monk is insignificant compared to the vast sky or universe above him, which brings to mind how Théophile Thoré, known today as the French critic who rediscovered Vermeer, had once described his experience of being in front of the ocean. How he was happy to be swallowed by the waves, because what overcame him was the feeling of being free from the chaos of accidental details. And this, of course, refers to Gottfried Leibniz's famous account of when you hear the roaring sound of the ocean, you must hear the parts which make up the whole sound, that is the tiny sound of each wave that adds up to the big sound. My question is, is there a component of sound in the "Waterfall" paintings?

STEIR: For me, there is, yes. Do you also want to know what I listen to?

RAIL: Sure, whether in your mind or actually in your studio.

STEIR: It changes all the time. I like the sound and the music of the empty building, the chord the plumbing strikes late at night. I love listening to Bach; I like early blues singers; I listen to the Tibetan monks' chants; I love Mozart's piano music; I like my friend Steve Reich's clapping music. I like Indian music. I listen to music most of the time.

Music is company, I'm sure that sound gets into my paintings. This summer when I was making the dark and gold painting, which is now in the exhibit at Cheim & Read, I listened to Maria Callas's arias over and over.

RAIL: Can you describe the way in which you deal with edges? I mean, we know, for example, the way Newman utilizes his zips, whether it's painted line, or occasionally he would paint on top of the tape and peel it off to reveal—

STEIR: I love that.

RAIL: The irregular edges on both sides, as opposed to straight, clean lines from the inside. But the way that you generate your line in the middle seems quite different and difficult in that from both the left and the right you have to pour layers of transparency, which hopefully would come close to the line.

STEIR: And they do. Sometimes I leave a space between each side so you can see the layers, and those layers function similar to Newman's zip. Other times I would just get it by maybe two layers. In some cases, I can control it so that they naturally come. In other cases, I want you to see one color splash on top of the other color because the colors change, so if the blue splashes over red, it would look black, but if red splashes over blue, because cadmium color is so intense, so heavy, it looks red on top of the blue. In these new paintings there are a lot of little paint puns if you feel like seeing them, if you can see them. But to make the edge that meets in an unexpected way is like walking a tightrope; it's a very thrilling thing to do if that's your thrill.

RAIL: I was looking at "Dark Green, Red and Silver." It's a very monumental painting; in fact it's the one that really expressed more of the sense of winter in the series. And I can imagine the discrepancy of the way the silver paint sits on the right in relationship to the dark panel on the left, which holds the same equal weight.

STEIR: What blinds you more, the dark or the light?

RAIL: They blind me equally, I would say.

STEIR: That's what I was looking for in these paintings with the bright metallic panel and the dark panel beside them. What do the light and the dark open up or hide? What opens and what hides? And I'm really thinking in terms of the human spirit. What hides in the human spirit?

RAIL: They are also equally frontal in the same picture plane. When you were making this group of paintings, were you thinking of them as winter paintings? And if you did, when did that begin?

STEIR: I began them three years ago. I was thinking of the space inside, the sacred space or the space for meditation, and somehow I called them *Winter Paintings*.

RAIL: In the other paintings, for instance, "Red, Green, Blue and Gold," we see more of the painterly activity in the middle zip or edges. Does the title "Green, Gold, Red and Blue" in fact suggest that the color is applied in that order?

STEIR: Yes. The gold is under the red, the reason the red has so much light behind it is that it has actual light behind it. The gold reflects light through the red paint.

RAIL: How do you apply the gold on the canvas?

STEIR: I pour it. It's a brass pigment, which I grind in the same way I do with some pigments.

RAIL: It gives such an incredible glow coming from below. Could you also talk a little bit about why you chose the three groups of sizes? One is 131 ¾ by 132 inches, one is 131 5/8 x 132 inches, and the last one is 127 x 209 ¼ inches.

STEIR: The quarter inches are always a mistake on my end. My studio assistant says it isn't a mistake. Because I paint flat on the wall, the canvas stretches. When you measure the canvass first and then stretch it on the wall, that quarter of an inch comes through stretching. The three sizes are—it's funny how I don't know. Those are simply *my* preferred sizes.

The huge paintings are landscapes—not landscape paintings but landscapes—I think landscape because the viewer can't see the edges from directly in front of the painting. As you know, I do a lot of installation work as well, and these paintings are similar to installations because you look at them and become a figure in a landscape. In fact, you the viewer and I the artist become the monk in a Chinese landscape painting. These paintings are *big*. Just for scale that's it. That's landscape. ■