

SO ... So let's start with formalism. Your decision to make representational paintings that are formalist...

JL Well I've always been a formalist.

SO But the real question here is your use of representational images to make formalist, abstract paintings.

JL Well throughout my whole career I've always had this issue with what abstraction is and whether it really resides in this space between representation and abstraction. So, I guess I've always been interested in that relationship, both spatially and in terms of form.

SO Given your use of a historical model of abstraction or abstract painting [through] references to other paintings, and your use of architecture to reference modernism, and now your use of Ad Reinhardt to represent a certain type of modernism; what does that give you? How do you see this assemblage functioning? Obviously, on one hand, it allows you to paint in a certain way, but it also does something else, it must be doing something else, otherwise you would just paint – abstract painting.

JL Well, I don't see how it's possible to paint an abstract painting anymore. Or at least, for me, in the way Reinhardt painted an abstract painting. Because that's sort of the end that [my] paintings are about, the end of making paintings that way – the end of making that kind of modernist painting. So the issue then is, what is that end about? What is that ultimate kind of failure about? Of the Reinhardt, of modernism, of the modern movement that the building represents, of the Hudson River School? So, the architecture, the representational elements that you're talking about, allows me to create a painting that for me talks about the ultimate failure of modernism.

SO Okay, so that gives me two responses here. One – that they're not paintings about paintings, they're about the failure of a certain type of painting, and at the same time there's this notion of making work that's about failure. Can you talk about making work that's about failure? Why pick failure as a subject?

JL Well, it's both about failure and it's about faith. I mean, it's about the ultimate failure as well as the

ultimate pursuit of something in spite of its failure. So, one keeps on making paintings despite the fact that modernism failed – that there's something so beautiful, something so sublime about modernism that's so ingrained in our culture, that it speaks to me. It just creeps in, it's just this pull.

SO The people that immediately come to mind are people like Jonathan Lasker, Tom Nozkowski and David Reed who attempt to ignore the failure of modernism. And yet, you want to confront this failure and make paintings about this failure.

JL But I want to address the failure, and at the same time acknowledge the hold that modernism has had. I can't ignore it. I live in this culture where you can see modernism everywhere, particularly in design. So if you go to Target and you see a piece of plastic – a five dollar bucket to mop your floors with which is a Michael Graves design – or if you go to Design Within Reach, and you see some really dyed-in-the-wool high-end designer chair or a Case Study bed...

SO That's almost an argument that modernism was successful, but you're making the argument that modernist painting is a failure, and it's that part that I'm interested in hearing you [talk about]. What was the failure of modernist painting? Or was it just the failure of modernist ideology that you're talking about?

JL It's the ideology - that we were somehow supposed to reach this ideal. I mean there is somehow still this ideal of beauty that's like nirvana, but the world is falling apart. There is no utopia. The promised utopia of modernism is a complete and utter falsehood.

SO The models of painting [that you reference], someone like Ad Reinhardt, would basically argue that the utopia is within you, not outside of you, that it's a very personal experience and that it starts closing out the world.

JL You can't close out the world.

SO Okay, so is the failure you're talking about specifically in terms of that type of modernism that promised the preeminence of individual experience, and what you do is you vernacularize the residue of it and it becomes just a series of conventions, is that what you mean by the failure of it?

JL That's it. On one level it's the individual sense, and on another level it's the promise of redeeming society. I mean, modernism promised both a personal and societal redemption.

SO And these paintings promise?

JL These paintings....

SO [laughter]

JL These paintings talk about the fact that in the end the only thing left is the paintings, that the utopian vision can't be achieved, that the only thing left is the painting.

SO [The only thing left] is the material object?

JL The only thing left is the material object. And the material object reflects a craving for beauty, and the attachment to this aesthetic.

SO These paintings are about, I mean, not about, but the paintings you make, you would like to be fetishes?

JL No, I think –

SO That's what you just described. [laughter]

JL No! I think that they talk about – art is – to me – and we had a little bit of a conversation about this earlier – I believe in art as an aesthetic, transcendent experience, and also, simultaneously, art objects are objects of desire, and they function that way. And they are part of painting space, so they are objects of transcendence, and commodities, and you cannot look at the culture we live in today and not see them simultaneously as those two opposing conditions happening at the same time.

SO Okay, so, in that case, you are a modernist.

JL I know that I'm a formalist, I don't know if I'm a modernist.

SO That statement you just made sounds very much like –

JL I don't know if a modernist would call their work 'commodity.'

SO Ahhh...

JL I don't know that a modernist would talk about their work in terms of –

SO Judd, I mean, a lot of the artists that you chose to use, painters, sculptors, all acknowledged that their work was commodity, and basically all that was left of the artwork was commodity. The notion that a Judd is almost – off the assembly line, Sol LeWitt or

Carl Andre – repetition and variation, things like that. The object is one thing the experience of it another.

JL Well, in terms of repetition and variation, and in terms of the assembly line, I don't know that I would align myself with Judd, but I certainly see myself as sympathetic to Judd and see myself as Judd's progeny.

SO If anything, Judd, the minimalist, is seen as the last modernist.

JL Honestly, I don't know what that means, I don't know what it means to be a modernist. And I guess that is what this whole project is. I don't know what it means to be modernist. I don't know what that word means – I don't know how to define that. I couldn't even begin to talk about what it means to make modernist paintings. I know that these works are about modernism, but I have no idea if they are modernist or if I am a modernist – I don't know what that is anymore, or what it means to be post-Modern.

SO What does it mean for you to be able to talk about modernism, and at the same time be uncertain what it is?

JL I think that for my entire career that has been the huge elephant in the room, this thing that I struggle with. And it has to do with space – it has to do with space in painting, it has to do with space in art, it has to do with a model that has been held up in terms of why one is making art, and what it means to be an artist.

SO So the solution you're talking about has to do with you using the space of painting as a place to assemble the iconic references to those things? For the last couple of years your paintings were bi-partite: they were sky, ground with object, right? The sky was an icon taken from nineteenth-century Romantic painting, the objects were either modernist sculpture or buildings, the ground was fairly nondescript. Recently, you've introduced personal references to the painterly process, and that has now turned into a series of paintings that makes reference to Ad Reinhardt's paintings, the ones he made just before his black paintings, right? So now that story is tri-partite. With the exception of the location of the object, which is either to the left or the right or the center, they are very standardized. How do you understand that as operating in terms of being a commentary on modernism? Is it about the practice part of things, about the notion of modernism having become standardized, that

modernism, which was identified as idealized is now represented as a series of standard icons?

JL Well, actually I've got to go back to before the architecture paintings, to the biomorphic abstraction and say that was also in response to – I don't know what else to call it – my own internal practice? But the paintings have always dealt with how modernism deals with space. And as a young painter I was told that if you were making abstract paintings, they certainly had to address space – and that there was something called abstract painting space, and it wasn't illusionistic. I was painting abstract paintings using illusionistic space and biomorphic forms that were sort of figurative, and they drifted in kind of a landscape, nowhere kind of space. So I made these paintings that didn't fit [my teacher's] model of abstract painting, and I was told that it wasn't really 'painting'. So this sort of discussion between what was "the way to make an abstract painting" and the way that I wanted to make an abstract painting was something that was interesting to me. And in a sense that's the part that carries over into these paintings: there is an object that sits in a space, but it's not an illusionistic space – it's a painted space that I create. That's the sort of thing that has always interested me, how to create different kinds of space in a painting, and how that space can function. As for the question you're asking about composition, it started when I was making abstract paintings. I found I could make compositions that would be interesting in a Bauhaus sort of way, over and over, so I was looking for its antithesis. Instead of a series of "interesting" compositions, I would have an "anti-composition."

SO So, if some of the principles of modernism were authority, uniqueness, and inventiveness – so on and so forth – do you equate turning the results of these principles into a series of restrictions, in that you were told "well you can't do that type of thing," with the failure of modernism? That it became a code, and now as your subject matter you paint the codes of modernism, rather than having to subscribe to it?

JL I do paint the codes of modernism. But the interesting thing is that I find myself painting within the codes of modernism also. I'll start to paint a little composition at the bottom of a painting, and I'll get caught up in composing it. I'm making up this cool little composition, and then I'm within it at the same time I'm outside of it. [I] really can't escape it – it's the same thing that I tried to describe before, which is like being on both sides of the conversation, or maybe a better way of saying that is that I sort of acknowledge that both things are happening at the same time. It's this idea of simultaneity.

SO Keeping in line with this, you've chosen one side of the modernist argument seemingly –

JL Which side?

SO Very classic, the classicist side. Your work does not deal with process, it does not deal with gesture, it doesn't deal with the autographic mark, it doesn't deal with automatism. That aspect of it comes through with your use of Reinhardt – short of Barnett Newman, who is the most classicist of the Abstract Expressionists. Why that wing of modernism, as opposed to the modernism that would be identified with surrealism, or identified with Dada or the Futurists, things like that?

JL I feel they're very similar.

SO I'm talking about in practice, not just image and looking surreal because of the juxtaposition, but literally...

JL You're talking gesturally.

SO Max Ernst, surreal in the sense of Salvador Dali or Magritte, who also could be conceived of as classicist – but I'm talking about in terms of, for instance, you don't choose to reference Miró and Gorky.

JL I think that it's a rejection of this idea of the mark – the mark of the hand – the idea that this is somehow indicative of the autonomy of the artist.

SO But why this rejection?

JL I guess again, that it is somehow a rejection of my past and maybe my schooling, my upbringing, my early training as an artist. The great value that was placed on the artist's hand, the touch of the artist, and gesture and mark-making. It just seems so easy to do. It just seems so easy to fake, so easy to invest with sincerity, and it just seems insincere. You know that whole mythology of Pollock and Abstract Expressionism – that is the thing that I guess my generation was reacting against. It seems so insincere.

SO You don't think that one could make the argument that these paintings, despite the sort of juxtaposition and the collaging aspect, that these paintings pretty much function as 19th century representational landscapes influenced by Pop?

JL But that doesn't make them insincere.

SO No, no, I am not saying insincere, but that there are a set of technical standards that they can be judged against, as opposed to that notion of inventing

one's own standards. Painting against that notion of sincerity – back to someone like David Reed or Bernard Frieze or even Richter – who are taking gestural abstraction and do not attempt to imbue it with a new sincerity, but literally just use it to be ironic.

JL David Reed, Jonathan Lasker. They are not in that group of artists that I'm talking about. They are completely doing the opposite – they are using the gesture.

SO But that's why I'm asking you this.

JL Why didn't I use the gesture?

SO Why hasn't that been part of your vocabulary?

JL I just think every artist has a way of working that they gravitate to. I think that Lasker's and David Reed's paintings are as mannered and classical as my paintings. I don't think they're any less mannered, they are not any faster, they're not any more authentic, they're not any more sincere or insincere. They are exactly the same kind of mannered classicism – if you want to call it classical [painting] – and they come out of the same kind of spirit. What I'm talking about is authentic, sincere, gestural painting. I'm talking about Cy Twombly, and that I can't – I just don't relate to that. But Lasker? And Reed? They fit squarely in the realm of painting that I am relating to. I think artists have a hand or a way that they are comfortable working with or just an attraction to material and materiality.

SO So it's not a repressed sense of the sublime – the notion of the emotive?

JL No, there are painters that I love the way they paint, like Nozkowski. I love the way they put paint down, but I can't do it. I just can't do it – I would love to do it! And I go up to their paintings and think, "Oh my God! If I could only put paint down that way, or that thickly," and somehow every time I try, I end up smoothing it out. It's just something I can't do.

SO The reason I was asking is, you know, this type of surface, this type of flatness....

JL I just can't paint any other way.

SO Talking about this sheen reminds me that before we started to record this we were talking about Bleckner and the ironic sublime, I was wondering are your paintings more about the subjective sublime?

JL It's hard to know. If I could paint in any way that I wanted to paint, how would I paint? That's a hard question to answer. There are so many different ways of putting paint down that I am attracted to. But actually it's not that I can't put it down that way, it's that I can't leave it there. I don't know what that's about. That's the painter part of me. When I look back at paintings that I've done twenty-five years ago, give or take some experimenting with materials, the surfaces are pretty much the same. So I have to say that there's probably a way that I make paintings that is just inherent in some way to my aesthetic.

SO I'm trying to find out if it's purely that, or if there is, for you, some real appeal to flatness. It's back to the question of your being a formalist, this type of flatness, this type of laying down of paint is associated with formalism.

JL I think part of it has to do with a way of making paintings, and how I've come to appreciate how to build a painting, and that is something different than what I like to look at.

SO Can you talk about how you build a painting?

JL Well when I'm making a painting, there's a real sense of awareness about edges-- edges between two shapes --- and to differentiating between different kinds of space. One of my earliest influences was seeing the surfaces of early Renaissance painting, particularly the Northern painters, the Flemish painters. And that, more than anything, probably influenced how I lay paint down. Their kind of smooth surface, and how they laid their paint and color down. Their creation of space, and their differentiation between a flat area and a deeper space. So I'm really super conscious of how the edge of one shape, and how the space of another, will bump up against each other. I'm not so interested in how far paint can come off the surface. I am interested in how the light hits [the surface] and what the brush does to the surface of the painting. So those are the kinds of things that really interest me when I'm making a painting.

SO And on the other side, what kind of viewing experience do you imagine you're constructing for the viewer? Or when you're making a painting, doesn't that matter?

JL No, I do, I really hope that there are really distinct kinds of spaces that are visible in the painting, and this even goes back to the earlier painting, and is the reason for the tripartite construction of these

recent paintings. I want the viewer to see these three different kinds of space: the space of an abstract painting; then the deeper, almost illusionistic space of the sky; and the photographic representational space of the building. And how they float, and fight one another, that they're disjunctive and that they don't exist – while specifically talking about how painting space functions on a flat surface.

SO In your recent painting, seemingly, the space is much more stage-like, it's a very shallow box space. Was that a conscious decision, to flatten out and bring things into line with one another? Is there a conscious tendency in your work to keep illusionistic space in check?

JL They've become more abstract. They've become abstract paintings. So in that sense the spaces have become tighter, closer together, but I think that they still search for different kinds of space in painting. The way those spaces are achieved is still through different means.

SO Running through the whole conversation there's been a need to differentiate between the paintings' being about and what the paintings are, right? Because they are about modernism, but they do not necessarily attempt to recuperate modernism. They may be about space, but they aren't necessarily spatial.

JL Right. Right, some of them refer to different types of painting space, yet I think they've become abstract paintings in a much more literal, absolute way. They used to be more representational. For instance in the painting *Le Corbusier Landscape* (Ronchamp Chapel), I built this "T" form, and the building is sort of sitting on this "T." And one of the things I was trying to do, was to take this flat "T" and juxtapose that with the perspective of the building to see how the architecture of the building, as a quote/unquote "real space," bumps up against the yellow sky right along one side of the building in a weird, flat way, so that it doesn't look like it's going behind, it pops forward. But then when you get up to the other side where it does go back, it feels illusionistic. So, again, I'm doing this more surrealist thing where the space is flipping back and forth.

SO Once again the real question that arises is [what is important] in that experience, or those types of experiences that you've just described? Or what do you perceive as the content of that experience? Or is it really just formalist and self-contained: this is the construction of the painting, and it's all self-referential?

Or is this about what you think is lacking? In the face of the failure of modernism all that's left of painting – these types of small insights?

JL Oh God, that's a huge question! [laughter]

SO [laughter]

JL Can I have about – you know – four days to think about that? Well, obviously first it functions on a really basic level: it functions formally, on a pure painting level and it follows in the history and tradition of painting. But that's only where it starts. Secondly, I would hope that there's a place to go. This is not just navel gazing, because that would be really sad. These paintings are about – I mean, we haven't even talked about what these paintings depict, what they portray, at all. This is a painting of *Le Corbusier's Ronchamp Chapel* – all of them picture these utopian structures. They're not just utopian in terms of their modernist style, but they're images of buildings meant to be utopian in function. And I hope that conveys that they're symbols of that hope, that there's some sort of redemption for painting through these images, because painting is where....

SO Why would you choose architecture as the place for the hope for the redemption of painting?

JL Architecture to me, right now, seems to be the place where there is the most hope for anything. It's the only place there seems to be hope. Look, politics is not a place to find hope. The economy is dire. For me, architecture is the only place where there's any hope. And I see it in different architects, from people like Lotek to...

SO But why not these architects rather than the nostalgic 1930s version of that hope - or '50s version of that hope?

JL Again it's because it's about my personal struggle with the legacy of modernism.

SO But I'm saying it's about this sort of analogous relationship, and - if we take these buildings as the icons of hope - hope comes to an end in the late 1950s, maybe early '60s.

JL No, no. You go look at Buckminster Fuller's *Dymaxion house* and that's the model for these people who are working today. That's the kind of vision that these architects are looking for.

SO So, walk me through that. We have the visionary view of architecture, that sits on a sort of standardized

view of modernist painting, against this backdrop of a romantic sunset.

JL You have this sunset, but the sunset is impossible. It doesn't exist. It's not going to happen, it can't happen, it's unnatural. But at the same time the skies could be read as toxic - they're toxic landscapes. I mean the weird thing about these landscapes is there's nobody there. They're totally uninhabitable, they're sort of post-apocalyptic. They're inhabited by these utopian structures which are devoid of any human being. There is no human presence other than the structure that is left behind.

SO And for a moment I thought you were hopeful. [laughter]

JL I talked about simultaneity before and how the painting's role is of presenting the simultaneity...

SO ...of all those hopeless moments? [laughter]

JL It's hope and hopelessness. It's faith and faithlessness. It's faith and lack of faith. It's belief in something and lack of belief. It's the simultaneous understanding that you want to believe in something but you know that it's impossible.

SO In that manner, do you see these existing analogous to Peter Halley's earlier paintings of the 90s?

JL I'm not sure I see where Peter Halley has faith in anything.

SO Peter plays off on one hand the formalist vocabulary and the utopian abstract...

JL I see where you're going.

SO And then he adds sociological narrative on top of that in which little squares become communities, and bars become prisons or cells, and strips become roads, and so on and so forth, and he gives you the convergence of a sort of sociological reading of abstract painting and a formalist reading.

JL I very much appreciate his use of the formal as a metaphor for the sociological, but I don't see anything hopeful in a Halley painting. I mean, having talked to him recently I think that I can read them differently now, but back in the 80s when I first saw those paintings and read about those paintings, I did not read "hope" into those paintings.

SO I guess the reason I ask about this is because your description of these is in terms of their being designed to be inhabited, but they are uninhabitable. They can't be reached. And so on and so forth...

JL I can see that reading.

SO They now become comparable to Peter's cells or prisons or things like that. Or the notion that in a funny way these buildings become like trophies.

JL But I hope that there's something in these paintings that makes you understand, and I don't know if it's in the making of them, I don't know if it's color. I don't know if it's in the nature of the romantic sublime, the combination of all three sections. But that there is something in them that clues you into the fact that there is an aspect of these that is hopeful. That this is not all lost, that there is a group of people walking towards the Emerald City. That they are waking up from their opiated sleep in some poppy field, and they're trying to get there. [laughter]

SO And you don't see them – the paintings – as being more melancholic, the notion that we had this promised beautiful moment, this dream, and now it's lost and instead they're trying to recapture the image of the dream?

JL No, it's more like that movie where they're fighting for their lives.

SO Escape from New York, or films like that? Where if we don't have this hope we descend into barbarism?

JL What's that one where there are no children – it's the end of the world and there's one baby being born?

SO Where they have to protect the one pregnant woman in the world?

JL *Children of Men*. [laughter]

SO [laughter] So these utopian buildings, these modernist ideals are the last pregnant woman, and without them sitting on the horizon, all descend into barbarism, or all descend into the end of the species?

JL That's the world of America, more or less.