

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM

IN THE STUDIO WITH STEEL STILLMAN

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM IS WIDELY known as a poet, cultural critic, teacher and occasional talking head. He is the author of six volumes of poetry, a novel and nine works of nonfiction, including *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (1993), *Humiliation* (2011) and *The Anatomy of Harpo Marx* (2012). In art circles, in particular, where he is admired for his incisive essays and reviews, he is famous for *Andy Warhol* (2001)—arguably the most psychologically astute biography of the artist yet written—and for his on-camera contributions to *Ric Burns's Andy Warhol: A Documentary Film* (2006), which aired on PBS. But lately, even the most ardent followers of his work have been surprised to learn that Koestenbaum quietly jumped categories in September 2010, and began to make paintings. Since then, without any formal training, he has created more than 400 easel-size works—nudes, landscapes, still lifes, portraits and abstractions—whose feverish line and electric color nod to modernist forebears like Derain, Matisse and Alice Neel. A number of these were exhibited last year in a group show organized by Stuart Horodner at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, where they were spotted by the curator and artist Matthew Higgs, director of the alternative space *White Columns*, in New York. As a result, this month Koestenbaum is having a solo exhibition, his first, at *White Columns*.

Koestenbaum's paintings have much in common with his writings: they are bold, personal declarations that celebrate surprising and often queer dimensions of their subject matter, while reveling in the felicities of their own expression. Seen en masse in the studio, where they spread across the walls salon-style, the paintings reveal a good deal about their maker's evolving tradecraft: we follow his speedy progression from blunt, writing-paper-size watercolors and acrylics to larger, more substantial compositions in oil. But the real treat they offer is the opportunity to observe Koestenbaum's mind and eye—already steeped in experiences of looking—discovering themselves in a new language. We track his familiar themes—his preoccupations with autobiography and the varieties of male desire—as he calibrates them to unfamiliar grammar and syntax. As the following conversation affirms, Koestenbaum's paintings neither pretend nor aspire to masterpiece status; instead they bear witness to the step-by-daily-step development of a new painterly voice.

Koestenbaum was born in 1958, in San Jose, Calif., and earned a BA from Harvard, an MA in creative writing from Johns Hopkins and a PhD in English from Princeton. He is distinguished professor of English at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. We spoke several times last summer in New York, in the north-lit studio he was subletting in Chelsea, not far from the apartment he shares with his partner, Steven Marchetti, an architect.

STUDIO PHOTOGRAPHY BY ADRIAN GAUT

Opposite, Wayne Koestenbaum in his New York studio, 2012.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

"Wayne Koestenbaum," at *White Columns*, New York, Oct. 27-Dec. 8.

STILLMAN Did art play a role in your childhood?

KOESTENBAUM Classical music was the reigning mode of esthetic expression in our house. My father, a philosophy professor at San Jose State University, had wanted to be a pianist, and we had a baby grand in the living room. I began playing piano in preschool; by the time I was 12, I'd become serious about it and, to a lesser extent, the trumpet, which I played with the San Jose Youth Symphony. I was also interested in film. In fourth grade I was given a Super-8 movie camera, and made a series of movies with friends and by myself, including an animated film starring a hand-drawn Mae West. And I spent a couple of years obsessively drawing movie projectors and nude men and women, and compiled small books I called "Nudism Handbooks."

STILLMAN How did writing become part of the mix?

KOESTENBAUM The summer before college, I studied piano at the Aspen Music Festival. It was the most ambitious thing I'd done as a musician, but a humbling experience. I was there with Julliard-level students and quickly realized that I would never be good enough. The years of flagellating myself in solitude, trying to get better, had come to a dead end; playing the piano felt like being trapped in a monastery. As a counterweight, I remember around that time reading D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* and wondering if perhaps fiction, more than music, might be capable of housing my emotional turbulences.

That fall I went to Harvard and fell in love with modern poetry—with the textures of words and the intricacies of interpretation. I took a fiction class, and writing my first story (it was about my mother and my sex life), I had an intense immersion experience: time stopped, dropping me into an ineluctable narrative flow. I had never felt so powerful; writing would henceforth be my prime pleasure. From the start, though, the visual arts inspired my methods. In a class on post-WWII American art, for example, I discovered Joseph Cornell, who became





“EVEN WHEN ADDRESSING EXTERNAL SUBJECTS—WHETHER OPERA OR WARHOL—MY EXPLORATIONS ARE IDIOSYNCRATIC AND PERSONAL.”

the first artist to approximate everything I wanted for myself, which was to take hold of my obsessions and turn them into investigative and accretive quests.

STILLMAN Were you already writing poetry in college?

KOESTENBAUM No, poetry came later. In 1981, when I was completing a master's degree in writing, I began to feel about fiction the way I'd felt about the piano. The work of creating believable characters seemed punishing. My real enthusiasm was for language itself. And so I started writing poems; I was looking for the kind of fluidity and speed that I idolized in Frank O'Hara's work—that Rauschenberg-like quality of putting everything in and not caring about high finish. What mattered instead was the sexiness of the process and the celebration of being alive. Poetry felt to me like an arcane art at first—much as painting does now—and it took me a long time to uncover its secrets.

STILLMAN Over the past 30 years, your writing has developed along several trajectories. How would you describe its core principle?

KOESTENBAUM The driving thrust has always been the exploration of inner urgencies and the performance of that search in the writing act itself. Like O'Hara and Cornell, I often make autobiographical work. I'm not interested in telling the story of my life, but I believe that much can be mined from the scenes of my past and the specifics of my desires. Even when addressing external subjects—whether opera or Warhol—my explorations are idiosyncratic and personal. The variety in my practice, on the other hand, stems from restlessness. I like to decamp. Coming to painting, like beginning to write poetry, is a case in point: it's exciting when you don't know how to do something.

STILLMAN When did you become involved in the art world?

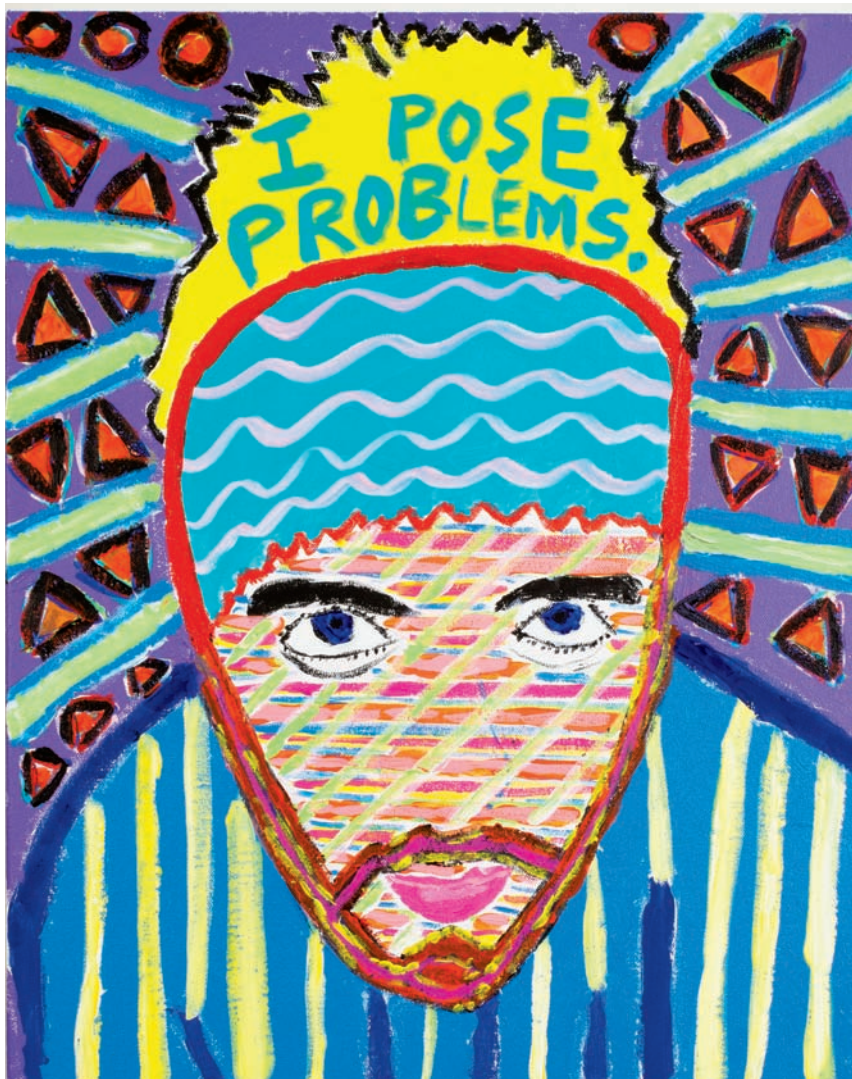
KOESTENBAUM The first art essay I wrote was about Christian Marclay's LP cover assemblages, in 1992. Soon afterward, I began writing regularly for *Artforum*, as well as for exhibition catalogues and monographs. In 1998, I curated a promiscuous summer show,

titled “Bathroom,” with 100 artists at Thomas Healy Gallery in Chelsea, my only excursion, thus far, into curating. Living in New York, I naturally befriended artists, including Peter Halley and Carolee Schneemann, who had a profound influence on how I saw the world, visual or otherwise. Their work taught me about structures of sight, patterning, symbolism and color. Two friendships, especially—with Glenn Ligon and the poet-critic

Bruce Hainley—have been crucial threads over the past three decades. The experiences, say, of visiting Glenn's studio in 1988 and seeing his first text paintings, or of going to the Joan Mitchell retrospective at the Whitney with Bruce in 2002, fed my writing and now feed my art.

STILLMAN I read that you got the idea to paint from a dream.

KOESTENBAUM I know it sounds like a myth, but it's true! I dreamt that I was



Above, *I Pose Problems*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 20 by 16 inches.

Opposite, *German Landscape*, 2012, oil on canvas, 24 by 18 inches.

"I'VE REMAINED WILLFULLY NAIVE ABOUT COLOR THEORY. I USE COLORS THAT TURN ME ON, RELYING ON WHAT KEATS CALLED ONE'S 'PLEASURE THERMOMETER.'"

writing in my journal with a fountain pen, and that the lines, instead of forming words, were just continuing on their own. The process was natural and physically inevitable. So the next day, which happened to be my birthday, I went to my neighborhood art supply store and bought watercolor pencils and paper, and went home and made a drawing of a ladder. I liked it and made another. The following day, I bought a set of watercolor paints and several brushes, and the adventure began.

STILLMAN Had there been other precursor experiences?

KOESTENBAUM There had been several. Thanks to Peter Halley, since 2003, I've been a visiting critic in the MFA painting department at Yale, which has been an education in itself. I think I've heard just about everything that can be said about a painting. And on a more practical level, approximately four years ago I took a daylong life drawing class for nonartists, taught by Amy Sillman at Bard. Everything I learned that day is still with me—especially the exhilaration of doing one-minute drawings on newsprint and throwing them on the floor. I should also mention that I started meditating a few years ago. The quieting of my nervous, habitual need to put everything into words changed my relation to visual experience and undoubtedly made painting possible.

STILLMAN How have you learned the mechanics of painting?

KOESTENBAUM Except for two figure-drawing classes, which I took last year with Anton van Dalen at the School of Visual Arts, I've been essentially an autodidact, experiencing all the loneliness and pleasures of that position. My guiding principle derives from Robert Ryman, who has indicated that, if you listen to the materials, they will tell you what to do. Each mark or gesture opens the door to the next; each color demands a response (whether rebuttal or acquiescence) from another. When I began, in the fall of 2010, I was still writing *Humiliation*, and painting a watercolor a day didn't seem like an intrusion on writing time. But gradually, the

rhythm picked up, and watercolor and gouache on paper became acrylic and eventually oil on canvas. For now, at least, painting is my central activity, and I'm in the studio all day.

STILLMAN Do you use any source imagery?

KOESTENBAUM At the outset, I worked from memory and observation. Then, about two months in, I figured out how to transfer images from photographs, using tracing and a kind of monoprint technique inspired by Warhol's blotted-line drawings. I also bought an opaque projector and began enlarging images that I'd found on the Internet or taken myself. Many of the earliest paintings included bits of text. Adding words became my way of finishing a piece. You might say I was justifying the time I was spending painting by pretending I was still involved in a writing project. But by June 2011, when I began subletting studio space, the pleasures of tracing and text had worn thin. Since then, I've been committed to working freehand and without words, although I still sometimes use photographs as reference material. Most of 2012's paintings have been abstractions or portraits.

STILLMAN Broad, wavy lines and assertive color relationships seem to be becoming hallmarks of your style.

KOESTENBAUM Though I've experimented with thin, Klee-like lines, I seem to prefer the bold outlines of Matisse or Dubuffet, which I've appropriated for use as borders, divisions and grids. Cy Twombly's lines are also an important touchstone. Roland Barthes described them as graphisms, materializations of thought. The lines in my artwork extend the poetic line into realms of scribbling and desire. There, they meet my lifelong love of squiggles, my now neatly cropped Jewfro and my sexual delight in body hair. Color, too, is pure pleasure. I've always put a lot of energy—not necessarily money—into what I wear, fearing that I wouldn't exist if I weren't wearing something I loved. And color—particularly strong, bright color—has been my salvation. Practically speaking, though, I've remained willfully naive about color theory. In my paintings I use colors

that turn me on, relying on what Keats called one's "pleasure thermometer," making intuitive choices and monitoring my emotional temperature. Curiously, two things have happened since I started making visual art: the first is that colors like red and blue, which have long had specific resonances for me in the everyday world, now have entirely different connotations in painting; and the second is that I've stopped caring so much about how I dress.

STILLMAN How do you decide between landscape, still life or figurative subjects? And what are the challenges of abstraction?

KOESTENBAUM Often the choice of genre is spontaneous. I need a break from whatever I've been working on, or I want to try out a new technique. But the question of whether to make figurative or abstract paintings is thornier, and is weighted by a dilemma I've had my whole adult life: should I make narrative sense in my poems or should I attempt a non-referential use of language? In the poetry world of the past few decades, this distinction separates lyric poets from "language" poets. My solution has been to do a version of both. I need the freedom of abstraction, but I'm emotionally moved by the presence of figuration and autobiography. Sometimes I'll be writing a poem, and the language will be cloudy and nonspecific, as though it came from a horny, bargain-basement Mallarmé; but then I'll throw my father in, and everything will become grounded and luminous. The same thing seems to happen when I paint—narrative threads animate even my most abstract works.

STILLMAN I'm intrigued, given your critical writing's attention to pop culture, that your paintings rely so much on appropriations from a more distant art history—on the convention of the nude and the expressionist grammars of Matisse and the Fauves. Of course, your paintings also refer to outsider art.

KOESTENBAUM You're right. I'm appropriating acculturated modalities and styles self-consciously. Though I have everything to learn, I'm not naive, and I can't literally be a Fauve. But there is nonetheless something pop in my work's reference to the found erotic





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image—to the photographs of George Platt Lynes, Bruce of Los Angeles, Robert Mapplethorpe and their porno equivalents. Even my self-portraits are done in that style. I’m always painting a guy who is somewhere between Montgomery Clift, a young Gerard Malanga and Fabian.

STILLMAN Your male nudes strike me as a rejoinder to Western painting’s timeworn cult of the feminine.

KOESTENBAUM The hunger to see more and more of what you desire is a philosophical quest, a love of knowledge. Freud described it in terms of the primal scene and the necessarily sexual nature of curiosity. When I decide to paint male nudes, I do so with the permission and dignity afforded by a tradition of misfit poet/philosopher/artists (Marcel Proust, Jean Genet, Warhol, Yayoi Kusama, Henry Darger, Adolf Wölfl, Forrest Bess, Egon Schiele, Louise Bourgeois, Dennis Cooper and others) who investigated their own desires and erotic preoccupations. A lovingly rendered butt or penis does not preclude seriousness or awe. What I’m reaching toward is the pornographic sublime—the hunger to interrogate the material world and the relation between self and other. When I paint myself nude, I don’t necessarily think of the results as self-portraits (though it’s handy to refer to them that way); they become pictures of someone else.

STILLMAN What is your painting process like?

KOESTENBAUM The physical process has evolved from working seated at my kitchen table at home to now standing up here at an easel. But internally, the process is a lot like writing poetry: both emanate from deep stillness and from an alert curiosity directed toward the present moment, including memories that thread through and obliquely constitute the “now.” Painting is like being in a trance or a waking dream, in a labyrinth where I’m trying to work something out. There’s always a specific investigation—a quest—and it’s usually about the way particles interact. It’s about, for instance, the way bodies and painted marks greet negative space; or about the way genitals do or do not belong to torsos.

STILLMAN Are painting and writing, then, two means to the same end?

KOESTENBAUM Writing is my public self and where I live; painting is my mistress—an indiscreet, sexy liaison, increasingly carried out in rented rooms. Painting is an experiment in preserving writing by rediscovering the joys of being thoroughly immersed in process. I haven’t fully parsed its symbolic dimensions, but I know I’m acting out a dynamic I’ve written about in the

careers of Anna Moffo, Maria Callas and Harpo Marx, which is the loss of voice or the flight from it. One irony is that, having dwelt so exclusively in the verbal, and having relied for years on a productive logorrhea for my writing, I now find, to my surprise and horror, that I’ve merely exchanged one flowing stream for another.

I want all my work, visual or verbal, to acknowledge the time and circumstances of its making—a notion



Above, *Blue Stranger with Mosaic Background*, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 24 by 18 inches.

Opposite, *Roman with Pink Predella*, 2012, oil on canvas, 30 by 24 inches.

“WHERE, FOR ME, THERE HAD ONCE BEEN THE POEM, THE PARAGRAPH, THE SENTENCE,
THERE IS NOW CADMIUM YELLOW AND PRUSSIAN BLUE.”



Above, *Jeff's Butt with Hieroglyphs*, 2012, oil on canvas, 28 by 22 inches.

Opposite, *Self-Portrait with Green Forehead*, 2012, oil on canvas, 24 by 18 inches.

I've borrowed, in part, from the poet James Schuyler, whose work sought to capture and enshrine the fugitive day. Instead of immediately titling my paintings, which I still try to complete in one day, I simply write my initials and the date on the back. Dieter Roth is an important artist for me. I remember a room-size installation of his in Germany that was packed with shelves holding binders, each crammed with glassine sleeves containing the detritus—

cigarette butts, bits of food, miscellaneous ephemera—of many years' worth of days. The impulse to collect and hoard and memorialize moves me so much, far more than any benighted striving after masterpieces. Accretion is the pleasure I take in making art.

STILLMAN Last week we discussed Paul Bowles, who was a respected, up-and-coming composer in New York before he moved to Tangiers in the late '40s and began writing stories and

novels. Why is his creative example so important to you?

KOESTENBAUM Many artists and writers have migrated between creative worlds—William Blake, Antonin Artaud, Marcel Broodthaers, Susan Sontag, Else Lasker-Schüler, Joe Brainard and Julian Schnabel among them. Leaving behind your native medium blasts open Blake's doors of perception. Where, for me, there had once been the poem, the paragraph, the sentence, there is now 9 by 12 and 18 by 24 and cadmium yellow and Prussian blue. To begin again the exploration of familiar tropes, but in a foreign language, is like emerging into a posthumous existence. That old life, you discover, was merely one dimension of something larger.

STILLMAN Do you know where your visual art is headed?

KOESTENBAUM I always want to feel I'm on the threshold of a new discovery. Right now, I'm investigating methods, materials, subject matter and scale. For instance, I'm trying to get "better" at drawing and I'm beginning to bring live models into the studio. I'm figuring out arms and fingers. I want to begin making larger, narrative paintings—works that will be more compositionally complex and contrapuntal. I want to play around with textures, palette knives, scrapings, layerings, printing. And I want to delve deeper into aleatory abstraction.

STILLMAN Until recently, for the most part, these paintings have been your private affair. Are you nervous about having a solo show?

KOESTENBAUM I am, indeed. The pleasures I derive from my work—writing included—are all solitary ones, with the biggest thrills and discoveries taking place in private. So I tend to approach public unveilings with trepidation, if not dread. This time, though, because the whole enterprise is based in unchecked elation, and because the paintings themselves are so explicitly exuberant and extroverted, I can't help but feel excited. ○

STEEL STILLMAN is an artist and writer based in New York. See Contributors page.

