In this conversation with Judith Russi Kirshner,
painter **MATTHEW METZGER**
and sculptor **RICHARD REZAC**,
both educators, discuss the relation between representation
and abstraction in their exacting processes.

JUDITH RUSSI KIRSHNER: Let's begin by talking about first encounters with Chicago.

RICHARD REZAC: In 1985 I came with Julia Fish, my wife, from Iowa City. We had spent many years in Portland, Oregon, and after grad school in Baltimore considered New York and Los Angeles as two large cities that would offer museums and galleries, but Chicago seemed a better fit. Sometimes I make decisions in life by process of elimination. By the time I arrived here, I felt some confidence and familiarity with the way I worked; the pace and deliberation were established. I think Chicago has less competitive noise and anxiety than I imagine is in New York. We had seen people from Maryland and Oregon move to New York, and few were able to work as artists; it was discouraging. And since I hate driving, Los Angeles seemed like a nonstarter. Chicago was surprisingly supportive, friendly, and livable. We stitched together part-time jobs, consolidated that with teaching, and never had a second thought about leaving.

I also came because Feature Gallery, directed by Hudson, was representing my work by then. I knew about the Imagists, and I was familiar with Martin Puryear's work, and soon after arriving, we met. I slowly saw more and more shows and was impressed by the diversity. In the mid-'80s and '90s, younger Chicago artists gravitated to work that was minimal. Donald Young and Rhona Hoffman showed art that was compelling and typically abstract. The MCA exhibited rich contemporary shows, and the exhibitions and collection of the Art Institute were reinforcements for us.

MATTHEW METZEGER: I grew up in Houston and, retrospectively, realize how corporate and vacant it was. Although I went to the Rothko Chapel and the Cy Twombly Gallery on the Menil Collection campus, my understanding of art was limited to the icons of cultural cliches: Magritte, Picasso, Van Gogh. I finished my undergraduate studies at the University of North Texas, studying visual art while learning percussion and music theory, with the nagging question of what to do next. Chicago had an exciting music community and a long history of compelling jazz and improvisation. I'm an avid, nearly obsessed collector of free jazz and improvisation, and at the time I was smitten by John Corbett's Unheard Music Series. One of my professors who I respected greatly, Annette Lawrence, also recommended I apply to the University of Chicago for my graduate studies. So I arrived to Chicago in 2006. I went to the Velvet Lounge regularly before it was uprooted and the Empty Bottle during the tail end of Ken Vandermark's tenure of Wednesday-night concert programming, and knew I would apply to graduate school as soon as I had Illinois resident status. I was thoroughly fascinated. Chicago was welcoming, active, and unpretentious. I could get a foot in the door more easily than in New York, and LA echoed Houston's sprawling cityness. When I got here, I managed a frame shop. I knew little about the Chicago arts scene and never visited a Chicago museum until I was in graduate school. I was painting every night in my efficiency apartment when I was not at concerts, but visual art was not yet my priority.

One year later, in the fall of 2007, I started graduate school at the University of Chicago, where I worked closely with a number of faculty in the Visual Art and Art History Departments. My first class was an art history course on abstraction with Darby English, and although I understood nothing for the first three weeks, the conversations were enlightening and totally transformed my way of thinking about my art practice. I was completely invested. After grad school I managed Theaster Gates's studio and worked with him to rebuild the buildings in his Dorchester Projects, while also working as a preparator at the Renaissance Society and the Holocaust Museum in Skokie. I was painting Jason Salavon's house on off mornings. and began teaching at Northwestern and UIC trying to make ends meet. By 2010 I began having studio visits, showed with Tony Wight Gallery, and it didn't make sense to move.

JRK: Let's talk about process.

RR: As an undergraduate working representationally, I had a choice between continuing to observe and create what I was looking at or making a 180-degree turn and contending with abstraction. I sensed that there was more opportunity for invention there, and the field was open.

Matthew Metzger, *No Title (On Holiday)*, 2016. Oil on canvas, 15 ½ × 16 ¾ in.

I always begin with drawings. The blank sheet and the endless possibilities. No drawing starts from nothing; previous ideas do find their way to the page quickly. But at the same time, I hold out as an option an abrupt turn away from what I did before. Once an idea or image is set on paper, I begin the translation toward a three-dimensional object. Like in painting, if you do a study first and then switch mediums, the needs are different. The drawing becomes obsolete. The materials of the sculpture, or the one-to-one scale model, become the focus of attention, resolving what's essential and proper.

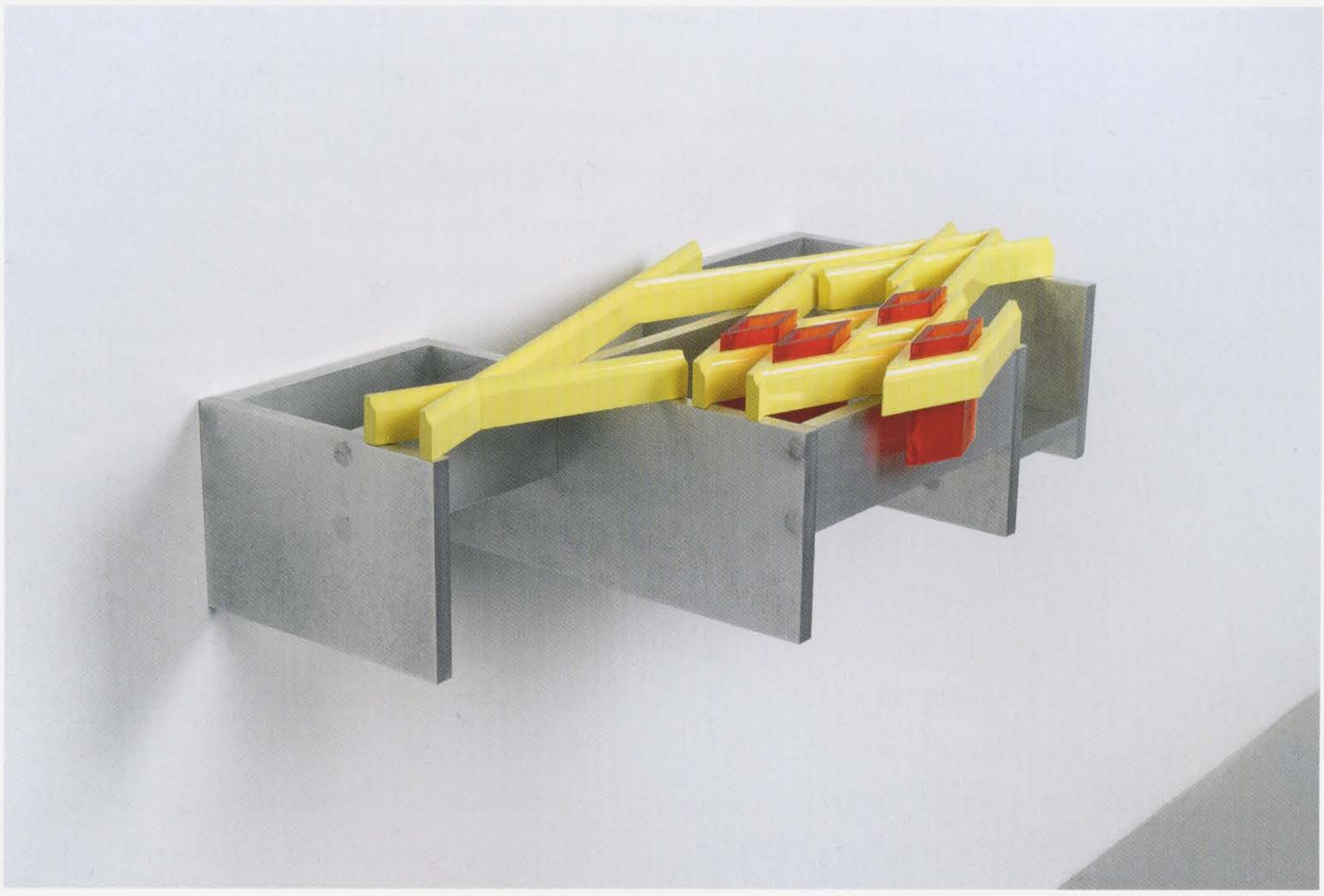
In the last ten years I've become more willing to see the virtue of digging deeper into an idea. The design or the drawing, as a matrix for a dynamic composition, offers more than one possibility, situated differently and spatially. There's a size to that action of drawing on a sheet of paper that is circumscribed. My sculpture is body-size, torso-size at most. As we move around in life, we identify with the positions of things we live with—a bed is horizontal and low, and a window is at eye level. Those things have a carryover logic in my sculpture.

MM: Since I was a child, I've struggled with the question of how to make something become something else. My interest now and always, I think, has been a question about proximity. How close can something get to something else? And more importantly, what are the ramifications of such a closeness? How can one find a type of alchemy in representation? And is abstraction always an alchemical way to join empirical knowledge with emotion and imagination? In grad school my fascination with abstract painting was the seduction of unmediated purity, not in my work but as a theoretical idea. How do I understand what I do (represent surfaces of things in paint) in relation to what I love (abstract painting)? In what way can I be in proximity to abstraction? I don't think of my practice in terms, like figuration or abstraction, so much as in questions about what role abstraction plays in the negotiation of image, object, and self-expression.

It's rare that I come up with an idea theoretically and then find the object I need to use to represent that idea. Wandering through thrift stores, walking, driving—doing all the things that I do every day—something will grab my attention and then I begin to think with it and research it. This process can take weeks or years. Sometimes it never amounts to anything, and other times it expands into a suite of works that extends far beyond what I would have expected. I can't put everything I'm thinking into one single frame. So the series has become a way of positioning meaning as something that comes from time, living with the work, living with the ideas, living in Chicago. It's not about having an idea and articulating it clearly and concisely in this framework, but about letting the framework generate a series of ideas that constantly fan outward. I think with all of that, the most substantial role that Chicago has played in my practice is the ongoing diversity of cultures, people, and their interests and labor that stem from so many different traditions. In Houston I had to look really hard for inspiration, but in Chicago inspirational confrontation with people and materials can occur daily if you want.

RR: I wonder, Matthew, if making a series allows you edge toward abstraction, a kind of wiggling away from the single image that we call representational. With a series, you have the opportunity to reimagine, reinvent the composition. In principle that's what people involved with abstraction do, like improvisation in music.

JRK: I like wiggling away, like the rabbit or the duck, shifting back and forth.



Richard Rezac, *Untitled (13-06)*, 2013. Aluminum, painted cherry wood, and cast polyurethane, 8 ½ × 30 ¾ × 17 ½ in.

MM: Absolutely! Although I wonder if the phrase "wiggling away" seems too reactionary, like some sort of representational avoidance mechanism. Perhaps I could instead suggest distortion, where the root of the tone is present but illegible in the thick of its distortion. It remains both itself and something wholly other. It's also a way of using abstraction's theory against itself. I couldn't think of a way of amplifying flatness more than the rabbit-duck question, but with an object and its image. One is far more aware of the flatness of the image at that moment of oscillation than the flatness in a Rothko, which transports and rarely falls back onto itself. That insistence on flatness is a way of confusing thoughts about illusion, and like capitalism, I find illusion to be a powerful tool.

JRK: Let's talk about color in your work.

RR: I have a predilection and some tendencies. I've always thought about color more as a material and less as a surface phenomenon. For about twenty-five years I've used a high-end Dutch house oil paint for my sculptures. Occasionally I use it out of the can, but most often I intermix stock colors. Somewhat like a process of elimination—I know what it cannot be. An early decision is, does the material of the sculpture show? If it's wood or metal, then obviously applied color has no role, as the color of the material informs the surface also. If a painted color is too bright, too neutral, or too dark, there's no shadow play or it becomes too emblematic. I normally end up with tertiary colors that are usually pastel, related to, but rarely one of the primaries or secondaries.

MM: Any color I use is a reference to something. If I use wall colors, it could be the architectural color of a space where a painting hangs, an institutional color or the color of the object that I'm representing. Color is one of the most time-consuming and intensely considered

aspects of my studio practice. Something doesn't become what it is unless the color is correct. I have archived a set of colors that I call my palette, and I deploy them in different ways—as shadows, as grounds, or as the surfaces of objects, but always in a way to build content in the work, like using metaphor in writing to say more with a single sentence. Sometimes I have to decide whether the object needs the possibility of reflection in real time and space, or do I negate "active" perspective by painting a reflection that represents my position as a viewer without moving. The answer is about mixing reflective color or polishing a surface so it reflects.

JRK: Has Chicago shaped your practice in important ways?

MM: Yes, definitely. I feel my art practice really began here in Chicago. I've taught adjunct at the University of Chicago and Northwestern. Now I'm full-time at the University of Illinois at Chicago. The students here in Chicago and the institutions I've been lucky enough to teach at have fundamentally changed my practice. I learned to be a more careful listener and critical thinker. I became a slower reader and a more patient advisor. The risk I want students to take in their work and research, I've realized I needed to start taking in my own practice. I think studio practices can dangerously produce a type of tunnel vision, on both the world and yourself. But as often as I begin to think that everything has been done, a student surprises me with a magnificent gesture, idea, or accident. Either way, that resonates with me and keeps me thinking. I feel extremely lucky to be a teacher to such extraordinary students as the ones at UIC.

RR: I suppose my formation was of a generation and at a place that prized forms of modernism, or at least independence in a firm way, and a kind of self-reflection, self-examination; a hermetic form of generating art. Then there's my involvement with art history, my travels, and the admiration I have not only for art but for architecture. Looking closely at other cultures and time frames, there's a natural reverberation, and I allow aspects of those experiences to become manifest in parts of the sculpture I make. That's as far as the work goes into an outer ring of contemporary social cultural identity. It's held within an aesthetic that is quite private but also within the larger history of art.