

THOMAS NOZKOWSKI IN CONVERSATION WITH DAVID COHEN

Do you have a differing sense of purpose between painting on paper and using traditionally graphic materials like pencils and pens?

I was taught by Abstract Expressionists: Nick Marsicano, David Lund, and Angelo Ippolito among others, and that education emphasized the idea that every art object should be made complete – one should approach a drawing with as much commitment as a painting. There is no priority of method, I was taught, only the success or failure of one's attack. I don't believe in the idea of preliminary drawings or studies in any conventional sense.

There are two different streams of image-making dividing my works on paper. Both can be seen as kinds of "working drawings" that have evolved out of my painting practice. One is painterly, usually oil-on-paper, and the other uses more traditional drawing materials. I am especially fond of graphite, colored pencils, crayons, ink, and gouache; and never happier than when I can mix them all up.

What's so good about "mixing them up?"

Well, the world is mixed up isn't it? I think I can get a richness of surface and color in a mix that interestingly mimics the true range of visual experience.

If, as you say, you don't do preliminary drawings or studies, in what sense can we understand these as "working drawings?"

As you know, I often spend years resolving paintings. They move back and forth between my easel and the studio wall, into storage racks and then

back again. Whenever I go back into a painting, I rework the entire surface. I'll either run a wash of color over it all, scrape it down or rub it with turpentine-soaked rags; do something that puts everything back into play. Some things will emerge out of that process and some things will be lost by it. I am pretty inured by now to the idea that I am going to lose a lot of interesting stuff in the process of resolving a painting. Every choice made in moving forward involves the sacrifice of something else. And sometimes you have to give up really fascinating images that, perhaps, are just a bit off the mark or on some kind of a tangent.

It became my practice in the 1980's to tack a piece of printmaking paper, like Stonehenge, up on the studio wall next to my easel and, using the paint on my palette, quickly put down elements of whatever interesting thing it is that I'm about to lose. Or a tangential line of visual thought that I'm not going to pursue in this particular picture, forking paths in its evolution. I would typically work on one of these oils on paper for just a few sessions, three or four, as opposed to the hundreds of sessions that might go into any one painting.

The other kinds of drawing that I do, exist in another kind of way parallel to the paintings. Everything I paint comes from something in the real world: a place, a thing, a person, an idea, any kind of potential source. If a source for a painting seems especially compelling or rich in possibility, I try will make other images that go to that point. To make this clearer: as a discipline to the primacy of meaning, I try to find other visual threads that run to and from my subjects.

Everything in the world connects to everything else. From simple physically to the most mandarin intellectual constructs, everything is linked. By thinking and looking hard enough, I believe it's possible to build extraordinarily visual connections.

So a lot of these drawings in more conventional materials are done to the same ideas as the paintings, but try to catch these ideas with different images, compositions and colors. This as a way of testing the utility, for me, of those original sources. A few years back, I did a group of paintings that tried to make an autobiography – twenty paintings done over three or four years - representing visually, in some sense, my life. Alongside those I made about a dozen alternative series of twenty drawings each trying to tell that same visual story. There was certainly some feedback between each series, but in no sense was I trying to make studies that would culminate in one grand conclusion.

There is clearly a very different feel between your oils on paper and the more graphic drawings. Does line have a different status in drawing and painting for you?

One of the best teachers I ever had looked at a painting of mine and said, you are drawing lines when you should be making them. Lines are things – and they should be built, lived and thought through. Lines are just another kind of shape on the paper.

If you mean graphic in the sense that many of these images are very flat, two-dimensional and pared down, well, that goes back to the beginning of this work and was born out of the question whether it was truly possible to make meaningful images. This may sound silly today, but in the late '60s and early '70s issues of process and system seemed to precluded the idea of an autonomous, content laden image: an image that could be rich, varied and depict the different things of the world. I decided, more for political reasons than anything else, that I wanted to make images that were, in some way, in service to my life, coming out of my life.

For two or three years, I would sit down every day and try to make a simple flat image from something I read or did or saw. The blue drawings installed at the beginning of the Studio School show, for example, came out of sitting down at night, reading a book, and trying to make simple visual images that correlated to the book and my thoughts about it.

Which book was it?

Steven Runciman's "History of the Crusades," but I don't want you to think there was anything special about that text. It was simply what I happened to be reading. At about the same time, I did a group of drawings based on John Ford's lovely movie, "Rio Grande." A group of black and white drawings in this show was born when I bought a few years worth of the Journal of Architectural Historians at a library sale in upstate New York, and decided I would do one drawing for every article.

This really seems to relate to the '70s obsession with systems.

Well, I had burnt out on systemic painting and drawing in the late '60s. So, no, not really, as far as the art goes. My intended direction was the opposite, away from systems. I wanted to develop a discipline in myself that was meant to be anti-formalist. I wanted to start every picture in meaning. Can you make a picture of anything? Is there an image possible for everything? In what sense can studio practice be a part of living one's life?

But why these groups of images?

Nothing more than what I happened to be interested in at that moment. Look, I was going to spend a few weeks reading through those architectural journals: why not use them immediately as fuel for pictures? There is no

program, only personal convenience. In the depth of winter my studio gets pretty cold and I spend more time drawing in the house than painting in the studio.

Okay, but in the blazing heat of summer, if you want to deal with a new motif that has never appeared in your art before, would you not have a tentative first stab at it on paper?

No. When I have an idea that interests me I work directly into either form, with whatever tool is at hand at that moment.

We know that many motifs in your work are taken from reality: organic shapes, synthetic patterns, discovered textures. Does drawing mediate between your art and the world, or are you as likely to paint directly from observed phenomena?

Mediate is a slippery word. There's art and there's the world. They parallel each other but I don't believe that there are any fixed points of contact – other than the exact single moment of creation – between them. I would have to say that I always work directly from observed phenomena but surely not in the sense you mean it.

Well, then in what way do you work from observed phenomena?

I've often referenced the method of Song Dynasty painters to my work: never to simply depict and copy nature, but to try to understand it through reflection and studio practice. And I should add that, for me, "observed phenomena" should be taken in the largest possible sense and should include every part of our experience.

Do you look at drawings by old and modern masters? I see graphic works by Guston, Picasso, Fahlstrom and Lasker on your walls here. Which draughtsmen or women interest you the most?

Over the years I have been especially interested in the drawings of Charles Burchfield, Pisanello, Guston and the oil studies of John Constable – all of which feel relevant to my work. More removed from what I'm trying to do, I admire the drawings of Seurat, Watteau and Breughel – who doesn't? – and think the Breughel exhibition at the Met last year was probably the finest drawing show I have ever seen.

I'd rather go to a drawing show than a painting exhibition. You can get closer to how an artist thinks. And it's a sore point that there seem to be fewer and fewer drawing exhibitions every year. We don't have a good sense of the range of contemporary drawings.

I'm surprised you don't mention Klee. If we go back to the issue of line, to your insistence that it is another shape, not a privileged tool for dissecting the world. I am curious because your work is often compared to Klee who famously took line for a walk.

I never understood that phrase. I think Klee's line is a very good example of line-as-thing, line as object.

As far as a personal affinity with Klee goes, well, yes I suppose it's there. Going to Cooper Union in the early 1960s, and reading the "The Thinking Eye" gave me a stomach full of Klee, and for years I couldn't even look at his work. Every abstract artist today who is interested in meaning is very aware of the dangers of using commonly accepted visual iconography: It's lowest common denominator stuff and tends towards the sentimental and the obvious. You know: grey is sad and circles are spiritual and stuff like

that. Klee's a good artist who happens to be a bit of a cornball. As time passes, and Klee's work becomes less grounded in "Visual Communication" (and that was the name of the class we studied him in), the better he looks.

Your painting is characterized by eclecticism, by rampant variety of forms and styles. Do you feel drawing acts more to diversify or unify your vision of the world?

Diversify. And I want it to diversify more. It's a constant battle, trying to avoid repetition and, instead, see each thing uniquely. You're always trapped in your own head and culture, of course, but the fecundity of the world offers at least the possibility of continuous growth.

Tell me about the speed at which you work. You have already mentioned that drawings are made in two or three sessions, in contrast to the hundreds required by a painting. But what about tempo? Do you work at different speeds in drawing and painting?

No.

Do you discard many of your drawings?

No, but I probably should. I regard failed drawings as unfinished ones, so I hold on to everything. Every so often I go back and look through my old drawings and try to find the solutions that I missed when I first made them.

Do you learn from one drawing to the next?

Of course. And hopefully you learn something about the world, not just something stylistic.

If, as you say, you don't spend time pondering your works once they are made, do you have a strong sense of which work and which don't?

A drawing or a painting "works" for me, if I come to understand why it was that I wanted to make that drawing in the first place. If, as I believe, you can make a picture of anything then one of the most interesting questions is: why you do one specific thing and not another?

Is drawing always part of your modus operandi, or do you make drawing in bursts?

I draw all the time and I paint all the time. I try to avoid bursts and, instead, make a daily practice of both.

What role do you encourage for drawing in your work as a teacher?

I encourage my students at the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers to draw regularly and to draw to specific problems in their work. They aren't being taught by an abstract expressionist (laughs) so I hope they can use drawing as an efficient tool in developing all aspects of their craft.

What kind of market is there for your drawing? Is it a more private activity for you than painting and treated differently by collectors?

My collectors tend to be intellectuals and are interested in the range of my work. I think the majority of them collect both paintings and drawings.

To get to your second question, I don't think drawing is more private than painting. If anything, for me, the opposite is true. The amount of time and thought that goes into anyone's painting, the thousands of hours any artist spends alone in the studio and all the competing ideas that play out in the evolution of a work, make every painting hermetic. Drawings, just from the

relative immediacy of their making, are usually more accessible, more the snapshot of a moment.