

Roland Reiss: Unrepentant & Unapologetic Flowers, Plus Small Stories
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Roland Reiss (RR) in interview with Rhonda Gawthrop (RG)
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RG: How did you get started with floral painting?

RR: My earliest memory of flowers is not a very pleasant one. In the first grade, I was a pallbearer at a classmate's funeral and each of us had to throw our rose and gloves onto the casket in the grave. After that, I just hated the fragrance of roses and anything to do with flowers. I remember my grandmother loved lily of the valley—she was from Tyrol, and it was her favorite flower. So she is the reason I always liked that flower. A couple of years ago I did a painting about lily of the valley in memory of her. It took some years of painting with flowers to come to a place where I could do something like that and to see flowers in a variety of new ways.

RG: So, your interest in floral developed slowly?

RR: Over time my interest in floral painting developed from my work with figurative art, landscape, and abstraction. Some of my early art training was devoted to still-life painting. I remember setting up still-lives for beginners to paint when I first began teaching, and although still-life painting isn't necessarily floral painting, it often incorporated flowers. Early on I had a hard time relating to still-life. You know, it was called nature morte, dead life. Then I read something by Matisse suggesting that objects in a still-life could behave like characters on stage playing various roles, which enabled me to see possible dramas being enacted by flowers and other objects. Actually, in the '50s, when I was in school, the two artists most discussed were Picasso and Matisse, in spite of the advent of Abstract Expressionism in New York, and most artists tended to favor one artist or the other. Matisse's animistic idea was helpful, but largely ignored until it surfaced years later in my miniatures, where I arranged the little trash baskets like still-life bouquets. It wasn't until 2007 that the idea of painting with flowers became important for me.

RG: You seem to like challenges, doing what you are not supposed to do. First it was your work with plastics, then the miniatures. Later, in 2007, you took on floral painting.

RR: It interested me because, as you suggest, it was a disenfranchised subject. If you look up the subject hierarchy of painting, in most cases you will find figurative painting at the top, followed by abstract painting, landscape, seascape, still-life, and then floral painting last. It is generally seen as the least important subject for painting.

RG: Although, Van Gogh and many artists did significant floral paintings!

RR: Yes, of course, even Mondrian, but it has been considered less significant in recent years. In a current article, for instance, Anselm Kiefer apologized for the flowers in his new work. He suggested that he had to deal with them in a cynical or erotic way for them to be meaningful at all. The intrinsic beauty of flowers has been a source of embarrassment to contemporary artists. The fact that flowers are beautiful in their own right, and often treated decoratively, seems to be at odds with the deeper reasons for art making. Indeed, their beauty can obscure meaning.

Over the years I have viewed my painting as an adventure into different territories. As a teacher I spent years with graduate students looking into new possibilities with them. Investigating previously unexplored creative ideas is addictive and rewarding, and I believe artists must continually break new ground if their truly expressive voice is to be sustained over time.

As a result of these explorations, my work has ranged over a wide variety of concerns, and eventually I began to think about how to put it all together. Was a synthesis possible, some way I could summarize what all of my work had been about? I have always been interested in what artists did later in life. Unlike in other disciplines, I saw that artists often produced their best work in advanced years. Someone who interested me in this regard was Manet. He painted what are called “The Last Flowers of Manet” while he was terminally ill. People brought him small bouquets of flowers, which he could still manage to paint. He put everything he knew about painting into these little paintings. He didn't need the scale and subject matter of *La Grande Jatte* or similar masterworks. He was able to make the deepest levels of his experience available in these little paintings. Artists must ultimately resolve the relationship between the subject and the nature of visual art. The role of visual art is to bring a deep level of nonverbal meaning to the more obvious subject. In art studies we spend hours discussing the difference between subject and content. It becomes clear that content is an expression of the one's cultural milieu and the deeply personal experience of one's presence in space and time. The fact that floral painting has not been considered a basis for such

significant work is what makes it such a challenging subject.

RG: I would say that, in challenging yourself, you are finding ways to bring out the real importance in things that have been unappreciated or overlooked.

RR: Exactly! That I can bring something extraordinary to it, especially when something is overlooked or underrated, provides me with the opportunity to do something new. I realized that floral painting provided just such a context. At first I wasn't sure how that might work. I began to think about summarizing my work, how to put together portions of various things I had done over the years. Then I saw that flowers could serve as a compositional scaffold. You could look at them and through them while they formed a kind of organic grid. Finding things between the flowers provided me with the format to explore everything I knew about painting and the images I've explored over the years. From the beginning, my approach involved painting the flowers in a one-to-one scale, the same size as they are in life. Few floral paintings are like this. Sustaining the scale of real life relates to abstract art in which everything is naturally a one-to-one experience. My painted flowers are exactly the size they would be if you were holding them in your hands. Now, after ten years, I am just beginning to entertain a larger scale. My work with miniatures over the years helped me to really understand scale. Images in my work, other than flowers, have always occurred in a wide variety of scales. In the early floral paintings you would see different sized elements in between the flowers. This issue of scale exemplifies how many artists develop formal and expressive parameters as a basis for their work. I used to tell my students that if Diebenkorn came to draw with us from the model he would always leave the room with a Diebenkorn. Certain issues largely defined his work. Parameters are not formulas or resolutions. They help shape the work and make a high level of achievement possible. You want the work to reach a high point, what [psychologist Abraham] Maslow called a "peak experience." In a way, parameters provide the format through which a work aspires to a life of its own. One aspect of my chosen format was that images were not allowed to touch the canvas edge. In this way all images appeared to be suspended in a galaxy-like space. At first, the floral lattice allowed one to move through the surface network to images appearing in other levels of scale, space, and time. In the early paintings, I included airplanes, satellites, monkeys, and cities, etc.—all kinds of images from my experience. My history in painting was to be found between and behind the floral networks. I saw the flowers as an attraction meant to draw the viewer deep into an encounter with these [other] images. Years ago the average viewing time of a painting was measured at 30 seconds per work. I think viewing time is much shorter now. People used to think a painting was something you could sit with for hours, see again and again, and live with at home.

RG: The first time I encountered a huge Monet in the Art Institute of Chicago, I sat in front of it for as long as my parents would let me! You have to! I got lost in the colors as a kid.

RR: Extended viewing helps you discover the sensibility of the artist. The artist lives for you during that time. Viewing involves re-experiencing the energy that formed the work, apprehending the consciousness of the artist. In the process you will probably experience its positive or negative nature. I believe the artist's work reflects those qualities. I want my art to be a psychological and social instrument for healing. Matisse would bring a painting to a sick friend in the hospital and say, "I'm going to leave this painting with you. If you keep looking at it, it will help make you better." I believe he meant that his friend could improve his outlook by viewing a healthy configuration. Some art seen today is not healthy. Wittgenstein said, "Artists produce the art that society compels them to produce." We know that art reflects the state of culture. In a way, artists are social workers. My chosen part in that involves positivity in outlook and in art. Painting may, of course, also encompass difficult subject matter. I'm talking about its effect on consciousness at a deeper level. Art may investigate different subjects, but ultimately it is more than its apparent subject. I recall William T. Wiley saying some years ago that "Art is big enough to support anybody's fantasies." It is important to remember that the subject is one thing and consciousness revealed is another.

RG: What kind of changes would you say happened in your pursuit of floral painting over the years?

RR: When I began the floral paintings I saw that there were different things I could do with them that would allow me to encapsulate my history in painting and the unique sense of my own experience. Over the years my visual approach to these things continued to change and evolve. At one point very large and intense textured brushstrokes were placed between the flowers in dance like gestures. At that point paint strokes produced an experience meant to encapsulate some of my past concerns in a less literal way. Images between the flowers were replaced by [these] individual, gestural brushstrokes. Over the years in the process, I have changed my thinking about flowers in many ways. In the beginning, they were a compositional element, which I used to develop visual structures. They formed a screen through which other things were to be seen. As I worked with flowers regularly, I became more aware of them. I began to notice them more often, read about them, and see them everywhere. As I saw more flowers, I realized flowers are a lot like paintings. They do not provide intellectual or verbal meaning, but

we attach ideas to them. When words fail us, we reach for flowers in an effort to express love, loss, or grief. We reach for them perhaps because their beauty fills emotional space. We often use them as a form of expression in a wide variety of emotional or aesthetic situations. I have also gained a deeper understanding of their fragile temporality and ineffable color. Their colors are translucent and we see light traveling through them. You can't quite make that kind of color in painting—approximate it maybe, but not reproduce it. It is what it is.

RG: With flowers, it is the smell that is involved too. It is fragrance and color.

RR: The fragrance, absolutely, but painting flowers is foremost an adventure in color. I've always been a colorist above all else. For artists, color is the least tangible of the pictorial elements. I am known to my students by long lectures on color, not just about color theory but largely about the lore of color, the special things painters have discovered over the centuries. I believe you find your purest expressiveness through color. Technically and expressively, the study of color is about light in different wavelengths. Thus my fondness for Light and Space work, but because I am a painter I prefer to pursue this experience in painting. Nevertheless I greatly appreciate work by artists like my friend James Turrell. Their thinking has quite naturally affected some of my ideas about color.

My most recent small floral paintings have come to be about replacing the color of flowers with the color of painting. Since my flowers are the subject of a much larger content, I employ many different approaches to color. I am looking beyond floral colors to those seen in modern, postmodern, and contemporary painting. I am employing new systems for combining colors. In this regard, my own history in abstract and figurative painting is a major source for new and creative color discoveries. I use color to replace the intensity of volumetric description. As Paul Gauguin famously said, "If the mountain is red, paint it as red as you can." My current Unrepentant Floral series has involved repeating individual paintings of bouquets with extremely varied and different colors in each one. I think of it as the poetry of color.

Color works in the viewer's eye. Music works on the listener's ear. Both work in the brain. Ultimately my work is about the experience of color, as it exists in painting relatively free of its literal existence in nature. I have limited myself to traditional pigments, eschewing the use of pearlescent, iridescent, interference, or fluorescent colors. I approach some of these properties through the juxtaposition of contrasted and highly saturated pigments.

RG: What does all this have to do with your miniatures?

RR: I like traditional pigments because I have always defined myself as a painter, perhaps more specifically as a maker with a place in the history of painting. Over all the years I made miniatures, I thought of them as three-dimensional paintings. I had a grant from the University of Colorado to make holograms. While I did not pursue this work, I thought of my miniatures as three-dimensional paintings or homemade holograms. As a painter, my primary commitment has been to visual and not intellectual experience. With the advent of conceptual art, I saw that like many other painters I had developed a natural conceptual basis for my work. This interest is largely confined to the formal properties of my painting, especially in the area of composition but certainly also in terms of the subject and content.

RG: It's an approach to art with a strong global orientation. Your interest in conceptualism and critical theory seem like a natural extension of the social interests involved in your miniatures.

RR: Absolutely, but my commitment to painting remains primarily visual as opposed to verbal. Today I am less interested in semiotics and more interested in what has been called "perceptual cognition." Perceptual cognition is a phrase used by [German art theorist] Conrad Fiedler, and later by Clyfford Still in his conversations with me. I explain perceptual cognition as "knowing through seeing." Knowing by looking at something, not by thinking about it. It involves learning how to really see. The philosopher Emmanuel Kant said something to the effect that art produces knowledge, but that it doesn't produce determinate knowledge. I believe he meant that the visual information in painting is not intellectually useful and that it is a unique area of experience. Most people want to understand the subject matter of a painting in order to know how they should feel about it, what they should think and say about it. I understand perceptual cognition as a direct form of seeing which includes emotional tone. It allows you to experience the deeper levels of another's consciousness. It can elevate one's sense of being.

This is a dimension of what [psychologist Abraham] Maslow called the "peak experience." It is beyond what is normally known. It is often awe inspiring. In nature, people sometimes have this experience when looking at a sunset.

RG: You want people to look carefully! People are in a hurry these days. They don't pause for

moments to just look. People need to give a painting more time to let it simmer, just sit there and look. Does this relate to the Barnes System of art analysis you studied under Anita Delano in any way?

RR: When I came into art, my training was to expect a work of art to hold many levels of interest. One of my instructors was the famous Stanton MacDonald-Wright. I was in a small class of four, typical of advanced classes in those days. He came in one day with an original Gauguin, placed it on a chair, and said, "Sit down and look at this painting." So, we all sat down and he sat there looking at us while we looked at the painting. After about an hour we realized that this was not going to stop. Someone eventually said, "Mr. Wright, can I go to the restroom please," and he said, "Yes, but come right back." The bells rang for another class, but we didn't dare move. We stayed all afternoon staring at the painting. It was an incredible lesson in seeing. Tired of looking and thinking, you became fuzzy, but didn't dare fall asleep. As you fought for attention, the experience would change; the experience was similar to that in the Barnes system of analysis. As Anita Delano taught it, you sat in front of an original work of art and wrote about it as long as possible. You wrote about a group of elements: line, light, space/shape, and color. For example, you would write about line for as long as you could say anything about it. This included the psychology of line, the color of the lines, the nature of edges, and even implied linear movements. I would write all day about lines while looking at a painting. The same was true about the other elements. After this you would do an analysis examining how these elements were synthesized by the artist and how they supported the artist's intention. This kind of immersion in analysis helped me in my teaching. I felt I could critique anything after doing that, but the deeper lesson came from the lengthy exposure to a significant work of art. In those days we were lucky enough to have original masterworks of art hanging in the halls at UCLA. My favorite was a painting by Matisse called *Tea*. It features two ladies in a garden with a little dog in the foreground scratching its ear, and it now hangs at LACMA, but I studied it in the hall at UCLA. One of my favorite memories in this regard is about being at the Frick one day and looking at a Chardin. When I go to a museum I often have the idea that a painting belongs to me for a brief time. As I looked at the painting someone came up next to me to look at the painting. Minute by minute I became more annoyed. I finally turned sharply to glare at the person. It was a former student from my days in Colorado who had learned how to look at paintings from me.

I should also mention that the philosopher John Dewey, whose book *Art As An Experience* was a popular source for studies in aesthetics during my graduate years, also spent a lot of time at the Barnes Foundation.

Surprisingly, Clyfford Still mentioned perceptive cognition to me. He had ideas about originality quite similar to my own. I remember him saying, "Each artist must break out of the shell at a different place." I too believe that each artist must find their uniqueness. They should contribute to painting in some small or large way, in terms of technique, subject, form, or color. In my years of teaching, I taught creative thinking to graduate students. The main thrust in graduate school is to get students to clarify their intentions and to find the form for it. In the process, they sometimes neglect their creative side. I remember [being part of] a committee helping a distracted graduate student find resolution, and we said as we walked out of the meeting, "Now, don't get any new ideas!" We laughed at the contradiction because the creative artist must always be willing to be outrageous and to challenge the conventional. Every artist must balance focus with openness.

RG: Openness to ideas and focusing on particular ones is a serious issue for artists.

RR: An early experience for most painters is to discover something happening in a painting that is a little better than their original idea. The artist will then often shift their approach to make something possibly superior materialize out of the new event. Continually chasing new events in a painting tends to prevent an artist from ever achieving the satisfying resolution of his or her original idea. While I worked as an abstract expressionist, I would paint all day looking for the magic stroke that would somehow tie it all together, and it almost never happened. Garbage in, you can't get the garbage out. It is important to realize your original idea for each painting.

In the end, for me, each painting must become a cohesive "peak experience." I believe I must have that experience myself in it before others can find it in my work. I don't depend on little studio fairies to bring my work to this level because I must make that experience happen every time if possible. This means that I, like all really good artists, must be completely aware in the process of painting. Making work and viewing it, when all is said and done, are what the critic Dore Ashton called "acts of profound attention."