



03/22/2025 - 05/10/2025

Glenn Goldberg
For You

A Conversation
(11/18/24-2/17/25)
The following exchanges are shared, written thoughts related to painting. I mentioned my interest in doing this to Chris Sharp and he quickly suggested the painter, Anna Glantz. I thank them both for giving me much to think about.

–Glenn Goldberg

3/3/25

Chris Sharp: I initially came to your work, Glenn, through a handful of artists, the first of which was Anna Glantz. I am pretty sure it was totally unsolicited on my part, just Anna sharing an artist she really liked with me. At the time, I am certain that she'd never even met you, and I am not sure she'd even seen the work in person, but I could be wrong. Anna?

Anna Glantz: That's right, I had never seen Glenn's work in person– I came across one of his paintings in an online group show during the pandemic and then became immediately hooked. The paintings felt so direct and free of pretense or affectation, and they kind of hit me straight in the heart. A lot of work that's made right now feels like it's self-narrating its own importance, like it's already justifying its existence to a potential curator or art historian, which is exhausting to look at. Glenn's work doesn't feel that way at all. Glenn's work has no business being here, which is the greatest thing. Maybe that's a weird thing to say?

CS: That's a very refreshing way to look at it, which even feels quite radical at this point. I feel like that is exactly the opposite of what they encourage, nay insist on in art schools now. As a former resident of Mexico City, I remember one art school down there where they didn't have studios. It was as if a studio practice was totally secondary to articulating one's political position and the theoretical and historical framework of a so-called artistic practice. I wonder how you, Glenn, both as a long-time, very influential teacher and working artist, might respond to these very codified pressures?

Glenn Goldberg: Works of art implement both ideas and materiality. They do not match up neatly or try to explain each other. They have a strong relationship but sometimes it is entirely invisible, like a secret. But it is certainly there and is beautifully unprovable. I would say they coexist purposefully. One instigates the other and either the idea or the materiality can begin. Objects contain energy and affect us. I believe in their power and in the work that they do. I am more interested in their behavior than in rhetoric, but I do love words and their inherent challenges. Works of art behave in various ways, just like we do. Some artists make particular and powerful objects. In those situations, we do not have to anthropomorphize the objects because they are already very much alive, just like us.

AG: I love your point that ideas and materials might align in a secret way. In terms of the behavior of an artwork– I wanted to ask you about tenderness...or gentleness or kindness. I've heard John Berger speak of tenderness as a defiant act of freedom. He says that tenderness, being a purely gratuitous act, has to do with liberty, that it is something a person *chooses* in the face of... you name it, our new fascist government, for one. The simpleness and softness (roundness?) of your shapes (flowers, birds, clouds, leaves) and the milky acrylic washes make the paintings feel very tender without being sweet. I'm curious how you think about tenderness in your paintings– whether Berger's ideas ring true and whether you think about your gender in relation to the soft qualities in the work?

GG: Tenderness, kindness and quietness are intentional in my work. I have thought that it is its own form of resistance, which is related to Berger's idea. The term "resistance" makes more sense to me than "defiance", though both agree on being opposed to the muscular, the loud and the demonstrative. I think we need many more exchanges in the realm of tenderness and care. Berger also talked about tenderness as freedom and the idea that all decisions have consequences. Joining those thoughts has me thinking about the consequences of tenderness. What comes to mind is love, gift, sincerity but also isolation and separateness from our prevailing culture and its misguided values. Collectively we ask each other to join but also to hold back and leave a lot behind. I am aware that I must resist a lot of what I observe. I choose to play alone in the corner of the sandbox. Hopefully, the withdrawal is graceful akin to leaving a party with no one noticing. This behavior is a learned necessity rather than a predisposition. Perhaps it exists in most of the people that I admire. Isolation is forced when we decide to do justice to the endeavor. That beautiful, huge hope then consumes most of our time. I am trying to honor the power of the tender and deliver as much love as I can muster. For me making work is essentially an articulation of that. My damage and pain help. The work likes to eat compassion, finds it nutritious and tries not to stray too far from it. It is what I also want but the work is much better at it than I am. In response to you asking if I think about my gender in relation to tenderness, I will say yes, I do. I identify as a male and as such feel faced with the question of what it is to be a man. Tenderness is a necessary part of it. My son is in possession of tenderness, and I learn much from watching him. For me it is an aspiration that necessitates the undoing of a lot of poor training and inadequate models.

AG: Glenn, it's so interesting to read your thoughts in language as opposed to painting. Maybe this goes back to what you were saying earlier about words– I find myself understanding what you are saying while at the same time realizing that I don't have full access to what I've understood. The images you've used just now– playing in the corner of the sandbox, quietly slipping out of a party, a painting feeding itself– are kind of circling neatly around the other words so that meaning doesn't fully settle, and yet something generative happens in my mind. I think this is also what's attractive about your paintings-- that meaning doesn't fully settle. It opens things up, creates new pathways to wander down. You mention sincerity as a possible consequence of tenderness. I see the little imperfections in your paintings as some form of sincerity– smudges and dots misaligned, or one dot that's bigger than the other dots, or dots that are squeezed too tightly together, etc. I love these moments and that they are allowed to happen. The dots seem to teach us how to read the paintings..."this area is like this, but this other area is like that", and they are also like a train of thought, working their way through a problem piece by piece. Having said this, I remember a conversation we had in New York where you expressed a certain reluctance to attach too much language to a painting. Do you think it's of any use to talk so specifically about the behavior of dots and what they might be doing to us? Is this how we learn visual literacy or are some things better off left unsaid so that we can each look on our own and have our own thoughts?

GG: Understanding without full access to what we have understood...yes, that makes great sense and seems to be a result of the approximate nature of language. That is a great and important

recognition. Maybe we can get the gist, or particularized gist, but understanding is always incomplete. The idea you raise about thoughts circling around each other and being generative also seems right, particularly when it concerns things that are hard to access and complex. Thinking is packed with questions and speculation. Thoughts, and paintings, seem to hover. Despite them being articulate and appearing to be complete they remain elusive. When we look at the same painting repeatedly it seems best to do so free of our desire to make sense of it. We can know something very well without fully understanding it. I see that situation more as a gift than a frustration.

Your idea of imperfection as sincerity also seems more right than not. We are flawed and inconsistent. Art benefits from that fact. Perfect objects flirt with being inert, born of logic and linear actions. Does that render them insincere? Or is "void of sincerity" a fairer way to put it? Is the person (fabricator) no longer in the mix?

Your conversation around all the touches in my paintings is meaningful to me. What you said proves that you observed the painting. You looked at it. Looking is giving and it energizes that which is being looked at. All too often people select what they like rather than observing more comprehensively. I saw a building on fire today in Soho on Broadway with a huge crowd of people looking at it. The neighborhood was loaded with energy on top of the energy from the fire. Paintings both give and receive energy. What is great is that the received energy does not change them. They are resolute, immovable and self-accepting.

Excess language around paintings does not seem helpful or necessary. Painting doesn't want us to spin entertaining narratives, dwell in creative expression or cling to naming and the literal. We might enjoy it as a fun sport, but painting doesn't want it. It feels trivialized and disrespected. When we are alone the paintings whisper that to me. I am going to look at Sienese painting tomorrow night. I want to live inside of some of them, but not forever.

The touches in my paintings are misaligned and inconsistent, as you said. That is irrefutable and an observable fact. It makes me think of Judd's exhibition reviews where description lives free of interpretation. He wrote things like (these are my words): "There are four blue paintings and two red paintings, each 40 x 28 inches, painted with dull industrial paint. The paintings have no brush marks, each one is only one color, and the paint is applied thinly and evenly." His was an informational priority, refreshingly free of opinion.

The last thing you raised was related to how we acquire visual literacy. If we are talking about painting, I would say that the best thing to do would be to paint a huge number of paintings that vary and engage experiment. That wouldn't guarantee literacy, but it would make it more possible. There is a reason why the best coaches have played the game on a high level themselves. It is best to do something, and do it a lot, to truly know it.

CS: I really appreciate how much will and desire you ascribe, or rather, perceive in painting. I am a firm believer in the life of a painting or a work of art, and its capacity to be visibly happy or unhappy, depending on how it is treated or mistreated. This is of course not to say that all works of art enjoy as much life as others. The most lifeless, or listless art is that which is required to perform, enact, or at the very worst, proselytize (which is funny since that was the primary function of painting in the Middle Ages and the early renaissance, but then again, that is not what we remember of it, or what keeps it around).

Ultimately, I love how your paintings, or how great art in general is able to transmit desire as a thing, or a force in itself. I think this is in part what makes your flaws or inconsistencies so appealing, their relationship to desire, which is a fundamentally messy thing. A friend of mine, the painter Christopher Page, once made the very trenchant point that desire is precisely what separates us from machines, or AI. This is why AI could never make your paintings, much less paintings that are capable of possessing a will, or desires of their own. You cannot transmit something you haven't got.

AG: I think AI might be able to make an interesting image, in the way that things can be accidentally interesting– I once saw some old boots and a rolling pin on the side of the road that happened to make a really great sculpture. AI can't make my paintings or Glenn's paintings, but maybe it could make something by accident (which is half of the process anyway!). It seems like we've been circling around ideas of deadness and aliveness. One of the first things you said, Glenn, was that meaningful art is alive like us. And later that a "perfect" object might be inert (dead?) or maybe even void of sincerity. I don't know if I believe that paintings have wants and desires, but I do agree that they have energy to give. There's this great essay (<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2024/03/05/dead-or-alive/>) by the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips about how we have to collect details and experiences that contribute to our aliveness lest we forget how to be alive. That, in fact, our aliveness (which is linked to our true self) is something that can slip away from us, maybe even of our own will. These experiences, like looking at meaningful art, or seeing a building burning on Broadway, can shake us out of our familiar deadening habits. Not that we should seek out burning buildings... if there's one thing that reliably shakes me out of the everyday, it's Sienese painting– please tell me you saw some Sassetta, Glenn? But I want to briefly go back to the self-isolation of making art ("playing alone in the corner of the sandbox"). Do you think there is something inherently contradictory about going to the same place to paint, alone, every day for years on end and expect to encounter aliveness? I suspect that you, Glenn, are not going to the same "place", which makes me want to know about your series titles– "Other Place" and "An Other Place"?

GG: Thank you, Chris, for introducing "desire" to the conversation and the idea that it can be dominant in painting. The idea that we can see desire is powerful. I want something to happen in each painting and I work towards that in a sustained way. I remain in a painting long enough for it to have lived a life. It's a bit like journaling from one thought to the next while simultaneously forming a book. It feels risky and demands that I pay close attention while somehow remaining free to allow. It is unplanned and holds contradiction. I must trust that my decisions are mindful of each other and will bear a worthy result.

In terms of AI, I imagine it could be used in illogical ways (against itself) to fabricate a version of life in what it produces... an undoing of its usual purpose to a different end. I would force it to perform disparate tasks in succession and see what happens. Perhaps it would look like life even though the ingredients are dead. If different forms of deadness join together maybe there would be a kind of life. I would try to undermine its natural tendency, which I also try to do to myself. It would be an attempt to exhaust and break a system to cause a different result. Often artists use tools incorrectly to produce surprising and unforeseen results.

Anna, I am still thinking about the question of whether paintings possess desire or is it only us that has that. That thought moves into the next one related to what drives painters to work. Is the work driven by the artist's will or does the painting offer a direction that we then respect and service? That is how I think of a painting's needs and desires. Our relationship with paintings feels conversational and involves negotiation for them to become.

I read the article by Phillips a couple of times, once with distraction and once in silence. Privately assessing how alive and how dead we are and what contributes to that is an intense thing to do. The idea of going to the same place every day for years and having it stay alive does seem challenging and contradictory, as you said. The way I understand Phillips is that we store our experiences of aliveness. They are in us and some of us have larger and more varied storage facilities than others. If we feel that what we have in storage is not currently useful, or if the stock has been depleted, my guess is that we must find some fresh, new life. We travel, either locally or far

away. I never starve and rarely sink into deadness, but when deadness makes an appearance, I reach for the courage to change. In the context of what the article asks us to consider I would say that most days I have usable aliveness inside of me. Mine fills through travel, challenging interactions, getting licked by a puppy, food, water, surprises, reading, sound and music, home life, changing my mind, athletes, walking, extraordinary people and by my nature that wants to be affected. I want to be instigated, and I also accept the role of instigator. I'm not sure it is important who does the instigating as long as it occurs. I listen to others. My titles "Other Place" and "An Other Place" reflect my need for an elsewhere. The aliveness that drives it is of an internal nature that is usually not visible, though one might get a feeling or a hint of it. Both alive and dead, neutral spots exist in paintings. I build the paintings and hope they become tangible, but nothing is there. I am not looking for transcendence or for the paintings to offer that. To fixate on the spiritual aspect of the work is not my intention but I am aware of its demeanor and presence. I am interested in a construction that is welcoming and convincing. Maybe they have something to do with a vacation that has substance... a worthwhile journey as opposed to an escape based solely on the need to get away. If you observe it, you become a part of it, you can live in it and you participate inside a realm of feeling. Strong feeling is powerful and always lurking. I am thinking now that maybe the job that I have given myself is to use my aliveness in a way that can contribute to yours. We make contributions to each other's aliveness. What is paramount is really the painting of a painting. It is not as if the "what" is not important, but it is deemed important only by "how" it gets made and delivered. How it gets done is the deciding factor in whether we believe in it or not. The value of forms, images, references, stories, implications etc. is decided by how things get made and their ability to perform. It is best (for us and for painting) to not be easily convinced. A simple offering or the stating of an idea may not be sufficient. We understand things in painting not by what we call them but by how they behave. Painting is about painting, and it is its own structured way of delivering, whether it be bliss, defiance, violence, nature, experiment, invention, distortion, imagination, dignity, respect, devotion, pain, struggle, beauty etc. Generosity, stamina, patience, restraint, articulation, orchestration, scrutinization, deliberation, waiting, deciding, implementing, listening, watching, accumulating, marrying, allowing, separating, distinguishing, forgiving and reaching drive painting. To remove or exclude what painting wants creates a weakened condition. Expedience is generally not a friend of painting. Painting prefers a sustained, fabricated efficiency that is illogical, adventurous and fulfills an "idea." Painting teaches us patience. Painting ideas are contained within painting and cannot be translated. Painting is a language with many dialects. Painting demands a deep commitment and gives back more when that is in place. It requests changes and additions if we are quiet and watch. It makes little sense to ignore painting's needs and resort solely to the limitations of our will. It is not important to like painting but preferable to find it meaningful, instructive, energized and fulfilling. Painting isn't designed solely for pleasure. It prefers to challenge, surprise and present wonder, awe and the inexplicable. It is not designed to reiterate. Painting removes things from their context and re-orders them with purpose. It is more than play or curiosity though it contains both. It, like the greatest things in life, is purposeful without proof. Its very existence is its proof.

AG: So much of this rings true to me. Particularly: restraint and forgiving. These are the two that I have been thinking about lately. I have to forgive the painting for not meeting the impossible standards I impose onto it and forgive myself for trying to impose them in the first place. Similarly with restraint—I am learning that sometimes it is best to stop early and allow for things that are not quite right to exist within a painting. Sometimes paintings are better left a little undone. This way they have room to open on their own. It would be like forcing open the petals of a flower—you could probably do it, but it would be best to let it bloom on its own, or just let it be—sometimes they don't open all the way. Often, when I am looking at a painting, this phrase pops into my head: "how does it come undone?". It seems to be crucial that a painting should have the potential to come undone. And that it can come undone in a way that is particular to itself. Sometimes paintings are wound too tightly and then they can't come undone, like a super tight knot. These paintings often look very nice, but you don't want to look at them for very long—everything that needed to be said was said. Incidentally, this has nothing to do with the looseness or tightness of brushstroke, though it could. Some of Giorgione's paintings are "undone", like *Il Tramonto* (the *Sunset*)—there seem to be gaping holes in that painting, nothing is settled, what is it about? On the radio, they had a jingle expert explain why the Oscar Meyer bologna song was such an "earworm". Part of it has to do with the fact that it is sung a little bit off-key in a kind of talking-singing way. If it was sung with perfect pitch, nobody would remember it. The bologna song can come undone, and so it can continue to live on.

GG: Your ideas about a painting being "undone" or being capable of being undone is important and gets at questions of the logical, linear, ideas of completion and the history of "getting paintings to work". A popular and reasonable aspiration is to paint paintings that are resolved and in a state of order. That makes sense. Who would want to deliver an incomplete, unfinished painting to the world? I looked at the Giorgione painting and it seems to be in order. I wouldn't suggest that it needs to be worked on, so the idea of it being undone is about something other than its appearance. The way I experience it is that the painting tells me that much has happened before the painting. It also tells me that much is going to happen after the painting. Neither of those things am I able to see so I stay with the painting rather than shift completely to my imagination. The painting speaks on the before and after without giving it to us. Giving it to us would be a sequence, a narrative, a story, and perhaps a place of safety and resolution. What we find is a static physical condition in motion, a verb rather than a noun, something alive in an imperfect state that was made with an excited, curious mind. It is hard to understand how it came to be. It is related to the complexity and invisibility of why we are the way we are. Paintings are best to hold within them invisible histories that get made, re-made, changed, re-contextualized and allow a delivery that implies all of that. In a painting we can see what came before, but we see it by implication. We see it by what we are seeing now. I am thinking that the undone-ness of a painting has to do with the process rather than the appearance. The process is one of difficulty and challenge, but it does not end up appearing incomplete. It is full but perplexing, new, confusing and exciting. We look at something that we have never seen before that does not speak of things other than itself. It is questionable, confident, lucid and trusts its own decisions. It is curious, adventurous and unafraid. It understands that to be done it must be undone many times over. At a certain point it arrives at a worthy state of offering and physical contemplation.

AG: I wonder if it's possible that one might get accustomed to different levels of resolve or completeness—where, the more paintings you see, the less a painting needs to feel resolved to still give something interesting? Maybe it's not a question of resolution or completeness exactly. My feeling is that, when someone first starts to look at paintings, they tend to like moves that are obviously seductive or that align with their personal sense of aesthetics or design. Then, the more paintings you see, the less the seduction works, and you start to want something more from them, and start to appreciate different kinds of paintings that are maybe more restrained in the seduction area. Then, maybe you start to look at paintings that are "undone" or undoing themselves. I think the "undone" quality has something to do with making space for the viewer in the painting—where the painting isn't doing any guiding, it is just being and letting you be with it in a physical place and time, and our job as painters is to maybe prolong that time. But I think, the process I was describing—which is basically the process of refining one's taste, is totally

flawed. In the end, it leaves you with nothing—you start out looking at all kinds of paintings, and then eventually you want to look at fewer and fewer paintings, and then what are you left with? It must not work like this. There are a million things one might look to a painting for, and our tastes are always changing—what do you think?

Anyway, I love what you are saying about a painting being a static physical condition that is in motion, that is complex in the same way that we are complex. Paintings are a record of time and yet they are always in the present. I also love when you say "We look at something that we have never seen before, and it does not speak of things other than itself. It is questionable, confident, lucid and trusts its decisions. It is curious, adventurous and unafraid." It's true that paintings are things that we have never seen before. But what I also know to be true is that when you live with a painting, and you see it every day, it somehow still contains things you've never seen before. A great painting keeps doing new things over and over. Or maybe it's not doing new things, but it's still "working" ... it doesn't stop working the way a toaster might stop working. GG: I'm smiling at your last sentence about how a painting never stops working the way a toaster might. I understand well how one can lick their lips over a painterly passage, or drips, bravura moves or sexy surfaces. There is a huge cheering squad for painting language in and of itself. It champions painterly moves as inherently meaningful regardless of whether they form physical thoughts. It is language without writing. Much abstraction leans on this activity, one that I call "linguaging". This seems to lose its impact as we mature. We begin to understand how vast painting is, what it wants and how much it can hold. We also begin to understand what it might take to make a painting that keeps giving and is always in motion. How do we articulate the unknown and the never seen? I think courage is a key ingredient. The idea you mention about the painter's job being to prolong the viewer's ability to be with a painting without being guided is great. We do not want or need explanation for a painting that has it make more sense than it does. Some paintings invite us to live inside of them. In these situations, paintings don't get executed, they get formed. Forming is far more demanding than execution because we don't know what it is no matter how many times we have done it. It is articulate but imprecise in what it refers to and found anew every time. We respond to paintings in relation to what they offer. There are intangibles in forming, feeling in forming, flaws in forming, expansion in forming. Forming on top of forming builds the being-ness you are talking about. Another way to say it is that a painting must live a life...a worthy life that then gets seen. The more rigorously a painting lives, the more it holds. Paintings have understandings embedded within them. A love and responsibility to physical language can deliver those understandings.

To answer your question on narrowing taste and appreciating fewer paintings, I find that as time moves along what I can appreciate expands while my demands increase. Categories of interest broaden but the search for the truly extraordinary remains. In darker moments we wonder who is out there and struggle with what has happened to our so called "culture". Your ideas make me think that starts of paintings can have more than finished paintings. It is radical and beautiful to think that we would open painting up to the undone, incomplete, and a meaningful, yet unrealized, state of promise. It's like thinking out loud...speculative painting rather than painting that hides behind a false confidence. Paintings often reach for their own finish prematurely. We must stay in a painting for as long as it needs us or understand brevity as a possibly meaningful state of physical speculation.

AG: You bring up the idea of forming a painting—having it live a life—as a way that necessarily builds "being-ness" into a painting. I have thought a lot about this recently, because I've slowly been changing the way I work to have more and more "formation", as you call it, and less "execution" or planning. In some ways this has meant a loss of control since I really don't know what the painting will look like in the end, but I've also gained control in another sense that is harder to explain. Because the painting has more control, then I do too—we are not forced to follow through on a pre-conceived plan that no longer works for us, which used to happen to me quite often. Now, we can do what we like, which is both empowering and frightening. A shift has happened from "I" to "we", though I realize this sounds kind of odd, and I still do feel strangely about giving a painting so much agency in language. But I want to return to the dichotomy that we've maybe accidentally set up between "formation" and "execution". Paintings that are formed into being have a being-ness about them—but paintings that are executed are perhaps not necessarily devoid of life. Sometimes they are indeed lifeless, but what they also seem to do is to say something about the artist—the "I"—which can occasionally be very interesting. They don't stand on their own as living breathing things in the way that "formed" paintings do—they are more parasitic—they can't live without the artist who made them. I'm struggling to come up with a good example of this. Perhaps Daan Van Golden, who's work I very much admire, but maybe it's just a question of formation happening in a different (earlier?) stage of the creative process. There are so many ways of making a painting, and as you say, I too find that my interests have broadened over time, paradoxically as they refine.

I love your idea of "speculative painting rather than painting that hides behind a false confidence". It does sometimes seem to be a question of when a painting is finished, of stopping a painting before it wants to tie up all the loose ends. To me, this is where I can feel my artist brain re-wiring itself—when I realize that a painting can stop somewhere I wouldn't have previously allowed it to. It is so difficult to change habits that it can feel shocking when it does happen—I always think about this thing the writer George Saunders says about how if you are unhappy with your work, you shouldn't keep doing the same thing and expect different results...or maybe that was Saunders quoting Einstein. Either way, it seems so obvious but is so hard to do. What is your experience with stopping or ending a painting? and have you also had the experience of resisting or changing a habit?

GG: The idea of forming a painting is related to it being fully made. Something appearing to be complete may not be formed. Forming happens through a series of painting events that are unforeseen and responsive to what has gone on previously. They accumulate in an unpredictable way, are illogical yet feel necessary. They are often confusing, surprising and have a feeling of being both familiar and new. They are a physical idea that is hard to understand with the mind. Executed works are correct, attempt to prove a point and are often less confusing. They offer satisfaction in their fulfilled promise but dare not dream.

Painting is huge and vast but also discriminating in relation to what it finds acceptable. The more we paint the more possible it is to understand what painting is and what it wants. If we continue living in painting, we become less affected by the opinions and preferences of others, regardless of how strong and convincing they may be. Painting is the authority on painting. Natural protection blooms as a function of purposeful devotion. The allegiance is to painting and not to activities that neatly inhabit categories or trends in discourse and style. We find that the temporary is meaningful only temporarily. Ideally paintings are not reliant on the artist to be substantiated or powered. The narrative around an artist often affects how we look at their paintings. That is unfortunate.

If we watch paintings as they get made, it becomes possible for them to change course, have a different outcome, and stop at an unforeseen place. That happens if we let them live a life as opposed to controlling them.

Paintings finish if we are patient. At times I have false, premature finishes as a function of impatience or wishful thinking. The paintings ask me to get past that. I try to stay in them and perform the next action.

Habits seem to change, both slowly and then abruptly. I try not to resist them and accept that they are necessary. Often, I feel my paintings are suspect. That helps me to continue.

C H R I S S H A R P