

Conversation between Richard Phillips and Gianni Jetzer / 3.27.10

GJ: "Lets start with the beginning." to quote Hans Ulrich Obrist.

If I think of the first painting that you did after Adolf Dietrich. On one hand, it was part of a six painting show, it had a theme, the whole show had a theme of itself, and the Dietrich painting was just one element. And actually now you take it out of this context. And you show it in the context that is much closer to Dietrich, or this compliment of Dietrich gets much stronger and almost dominant.

R.P That, I think is a real possibility. And I am very curious to see what will happen.

G.J. I want to ask you, what your thoughts are, and if you think there are any risks to do so. Before there was a *Bukkake* [2003] painting; I don't know if it was hanging right next to the squirrels...

R.P. The show never occurred,

G.J. Oh , really?

R.P. It was scheduled to occur. Then, I was scheduled out of the program, and it ended up only being shown spread apart throughout Le Consortium, in Dijon [France] The paintings were never shown as intended: the Oscar Fischer, the Bukkake, the Money Painting, and Similar to Squirrels were never shown together in the context that they were intended. The two other paintings were more ancillary not as focused as the core four paintings that was the Demi Moore painting and the Deepak Chopra painting. But the four national themes pieces, they were never shown together. So, the painting has always lived its life apart from its intended context to deal specifically with its identity as an emblem of a national treasure and also of a very specific kind of sentiment. For me, having experienced the drawing [*Squirrels by Adolf Dietrich*] when Peter showed it to me at the Kronenhalle, and then to receive the book of his [Dietrich's] work from Beatrix afterwards, there was a kind of initiation to a whole world that I did not know much about, which is a kind of non urban remote environment of a very focused painting practice. To make a portrait of that, and to point towards that with my work in relationship to a national idea of perversion or sexual perversion or currency as a kind of emblem placed on the body, or of a political manifestation by a poster, that particular window into a way of understanding nationality was guided by a non-urban, sentimental look at animals, non exotic animals in the country side. I think that it is possible that we could, that the relationship between the way the painting was originally intended, and how it could be seen with its referent is something that is unpredictable. It is an essence. Unlike other forms of appropriation, there is no attempt to change or alter it, it was a re-painting, albeit in a different scale, but it was a portrait of a kind of sentiment, a portrait of an image, a portrait of another painting. That type of portraiture could be vulnerable to a different type of interpretation or a different type of appropriation, once it revisits its, or it visits its source for the first time.

GJ: And actually the source for painting for you was an illustration from a book. And now you bring together, you go much more backwards actually in the sources, and you bring in two sources that are made in the same medium of painting together. And you hang them on the same wall.

RP: Exactly, what started from a kind of, a vague or complete misunderstanding of the work of art, and not knowing the context or having no access from the absence of language to understand it only sensing...

GJ: IF you think of this clash, because eventually it is a clash. It is an art historical clash; it is a short cut if you want, or somehow you blow the fuses by hanging the paintings next to each other. Because all the differences, and somehow there are so many differences probably step into the background for some moments. It seems to be that you have two entities that can be compared because they have the same formal composition and obviously they are related. So all of a sudden, all the similarities get much stronger and more obvious somehow, and all the differences will step into the background.

R.P: Well I think, yeah, in terms of the similarities. The similarities of the image, and what is depicted will definitely come together in the paintings that are directly quoted. I think that aesthetically, the differences are going to be huge: scale, the actual method with which they are painted. And in a way, I think it may open up an idea, I actually really highlight intentionality, what painting is being used for, what it is actually showing and what the sensitivity of the medium is capable of communicating. I think to a Dietrich; you will see a one hundred percent affirmative use of that language towards his objectives of communicating the environment that he lived in, the people, the animals, and his particular view of his world, which was a non-urban and in a way, not as self consciously reflexive environment as well. With my painting, even the ones that will completely repaint a Dietrich painting, it is almost in a way like paint by numbers version of that same experience. I am trying to get close. The constructions of those paintings are entirely different in the way that I make them, and the meaning is to try to get closer to something that I cannot possibly possess—to literally immerse in it and to try to hold it, to stop it, to make it, to hang on. But it does most closely relate to paint by numbers. The facility is obviously different but there is a kind of remaking, like a hopeful remaking of a picture in order to gain access to something that I could not possibly have access to. The quotations, the fragment of those images are meant to offset, and to create a dramatic offset from the intention of the inclusion of another image like the *Message Force Multiplier* or *Der Bodensee* there is a social and political dimension that are being forced into context with the overtones of Dietrich's paintings, it is the same with *Libertas*.

G.J. So you use...I don't know if it is correct to talk about the symbolism in relation to Dietrich. But it is like, there is like this symbolic upload in these paintings. Might it

be represented with the red sunset on the clouds on the German side of the lake. I don't know if the frozen lake could be understood to some degree.

R.P. I think that when we put words to it, we could, we can speak about with symbolic potential for those paintings. I know for myself when I have experienced looking at being in front of those frozen lake paintings. There is an unmistakable feeling of alienation and of frozen despair, or loneliness. It is unmistakable. He paints what is difficult to put into words. I will go as far as to say that. I think that, yes, so there is in a way trying to capture the communicative potential of those symbolic portent in his work and put it into a relative displacement with other images, in at least three of the other paintings within the show. *Libertas* and *Message Force Multiplier* it is like an elliptical completion of falsehood of valor. Those two paintings we will have to get into in an other question, but they form a complete ellipse of meaning from positive to negative, from true to false, and I think there is kind of a very interesting relationship between those paintings in relationship to Dietrich. They both use Dietrich paintings in the background, but what is being depicted are entirely diametrically opposed to each other, although related.

G.J. Opposed to?

R.P. Literally speaking, In *Libertas*, you have a member of a regime, in the propaganda division in a regime. *Libertas Schulze-Boysen* being a member of Goebels film division in propaganda, in Berlin. At the same time an actual war hero, in that she was a double agent working for the resistance in Berlin, using her position in the propaganda division to collect evidence against the war crimes that the Nazi party was committing against its own, against the citizens of Germany. And she died, she was caught and was executed for treason, within that state.

G.J. What was her name?

R.P. *Libertas Schulsze Botzen*. Her image is on public display at all times in the topography of terror in Berlin about those people who were executed, that were imprisoned at the Prince Albert Strasse Number 9, or whatever it was, and eventually executed there after. Both her and her husband, her husband being a member of the Luftwaffe, he was also involved in producing zines, or flyers, or whatever to help distribute information to the resistance. They were also friends of sculptors and painters; their involvement in the arts was also well documented, so there is a relationship. Now, with the *Message Force Multiplier*, you have the exact opposite; you have the regime's tool of propaganda, using a male model to pose in a uniform of the marines, the spearhead of a regime. This person could not be further from a position of valor or courage or honor or anything to do with the ideal that he is purportedly advancing with the wearing of that uniform. He is only there to inspire young men to make a critical decision about what to do with their lives. His very image is an utter falsehood. It only speaks to the kind of propoganda that is used toward youth. He is misrepresenting, his image is ultimately mis-appropriated

or put to use for purposes of disseminating false information. In his background there is a frozen landscape of Dietrich, almost in equal portions. You look at the indeterminate racial image of this young man, and it is offset by almost fifty percent or more with Dietrich's frozen landscape. The kind of discussion of alienation and beauty and loss, that one attributes to those appearance of looking out into a frozen landscape and putting it side by side with a kind of hardened almost shield-like physical presence of a model posing as a marine has a very different type of feeling than the image of the mug shot taken by the SS of a person who was condemned to die for their actions to attempt to thwart a criminal regime.

G.J. It was a mug shot that you used?

R.P. It was a three quarter mug shot that was taken by an SS photographer. Those two paintings within the show complete a kind of idea about the use and misuse of images. One is an image of documentation offset against the landscape. The other is a fabrication of military propaganda. One is taken by a military entity to document those that they would kill, and the other is creating a false document of qualities used to entice people.

G.J. How much are you interested in history, as a scientific construct, compared to maybe storytelling, as a form of cultural identity. You can look at it as historical references or historical sources that you use. Maybe it can be compared to how Dietrich used certain historical references, but it is so loose that it can be read as this but it can be read beyond.

R.P. He can be read out of time. I sort of take the former rather than the latter. The idea of storytelling is something that is really pretty vacant in my work. It does not really happen that often. It is something that can be applied for sure, when you look at these kind of iconic images. At any given time, there is an implication of a narrative, but there is no directive narrative. There is not an open ended narrative agreement that is set up between the viewer and the depicted scene, or the object for that matter. I think with the Dietrich, as well, there are few places where you have historic scenes. There is the burning of the ferry and then a particular carnival scene of a fire at night, which is a foreboding scene. He, likewise, his images tend to be more iconic, ones that you would meditate on. The idea of how he finished his paintings, and how he painted over every part of every inch of his paintings to have them have the maximum visual information, literally on every part of the painting. That, in some ways attributes to the naive reading of his work because there is not as much of a sense of a hierarchical order within the construction of the work. But what it ends up doing is creating a highly stable image, and one that can withstand a great deal of scrutiny. And in that time of scrutiny, and in that time of scrutiny that is when the story telling begins. You tell yourself back to yourself, those stories that are projected into the spaces or onto the objects that he literally recorded a great deal of sensitivity and feeling about with the paint application, color choices, all of those things build into an experiential narrative, an experiential storytelling that has less to do with nailing down literal identities or literal passages that are related to a

literal construct of history, so that they remain almost exclusively painterly, I know it is a pejorative thing to say, so that they remain painterly experience. Things that can only be communicated that way. What I have learned is that one of his guiding principles in his production was to discover how to get better at that, to actually amplify his capacity to communicate in that way. When artists from the Neue Sachlichkeit, let's say, came and visited Berlingen to see at his work, because he was known to contemporary artists, particularly in Germany, and when they did visit him, much of the conversations figured around how to paint better, how to figure out how to do it. When he took the trips in to see master paintings and Durer was a huge influence to him obviously...

G.J. It is funny that they have the same initials

R.P. He signed his paintings the same way as Durer did. He came up with his own figure as Durer. I mean he thought of himself as the contemporary Durer of Switzerland and without joking around. I mean that was, he absolutely was one hundred percent convinced that that was his role. I mean how else would he have called himself Meistermaler and you don't do that lightly. You don't make that reference lightly; he was totally serious when he did that, although he did seem to have a pretty good sense of humor as well.

GJ: I mean it is not the first time that you use. I don't know in the case of John D. Greene, were there also certain examples where you cut the format and the framing of the original image and you just blew it up and you kind of re-synthesized it to your own painting style.

R.P: With "The Birds of Britain," it really was a site-specific almost sculptural piece. It literally was the final show for White Cube's Duke Street space. The images of these silver, the silver gilded paintings of the nineteen sixties youth quake stars that had utterly re-entered anonymity due to the fact that they literally did not accomplish enough to become the stars that they were purported to be at the time. My intention with that show was to create a meditation of that very fact of that incapable, of the burst of youth, the clamor for attention, and the mediation of that experience only to fall into anonymity and only to fall into silence, which is the state of painting. Painting is the silent medium. By and large, it is the inert dead object. It was kind of a memento mori for that space because so many of the YBA generations, particularly British, and as was the youth quake generations, the particularly British experience of super stardom away from the American conception of it. So it was a site-specific piece and a quotation of a photographer and a designer and the writer Anthony Hayden Guest, at the same time. Their project that they put together called the Birds of Britain, and so by re-presenting that it became a kind of historical meditation on total fallibility, not infallibility, but fallibility, total failure and the beauty of total failure. It was a show meant to discuss that passage of time.