

robert reed



Interview with Robert Doty

January 25, 1973

New Haven, Connecticut

RD What was your educational experience?

RR Fifteen years ago, in the process of formal education here in New Haven, the exposure that I had to a lot of painters was very influential. I was very young and very spongy in terms of trying to pick up information about painting. I saw school as an opportunity to really absorb as much as possible. Having come from a liberal arts background where there were other concerns, I thought it was very important to find out a little bit about my position relative to painting in general.

During the summer of 1960, I met Jon Schueler, who, unannounced to me at the time, was to really touch base with me. I unconsciously identified with many of the issues he was working with in his painting. He was very involved with the landscape at the time.

RD What issues particularly?

RR Well, basically, his translation of his personal experiences with the landscape into formal painting concerns. And I can remember really absorbing his pictures which came at a very important time in my life because I had just gone through a very formalistic set of values and I was asking myself questions about my personal imagery and how that could be translated. So Jon was someone to get into, someone to rebound from.

I went to Minneapolis shortly after that and spent about two years doing a lot of drawing, a lot of drawing, and I hadn't really drawn before, and I didn't show anyone the work. It was a real regurgitation of ideas.

Finally, it became clear that I was simplifying, becoming involved with the traditional landscape experience. They were not too literal, however. They were dealing basically with some forces of the landscape. At Yale's Norfolk Summer School, I'd been in-

involved for the first time in being out of doors, and I'd never been out of doors before and I really looked and was affected by it. I began to synthesize, symbolically, some of the things that affected me personally such as the landscape, the color green. I remember green, and for about three or four years, I just worked in two or three colors, green, grey and black which became symbolic of a very personal romantic experience.

Moving out of that, it became clear again that I was dealing with some rather romantic issues that I had in my mind about painting, about imagery. As a result the paintings took the form of very large, open landscapes, with illusions of certain tree-like forms, but even at that time, my canvases were generally horizontal to follow suit with the kinds of spaces that I was working with. I had the occasion to do a lot of drawing at that time, which was not really tied in with the paintings at all. However, I was feeding off them. There were some forms that were in the drawings that I hadn't put into the paintings. I became involved in a literal translation of some personal symbols, with the heart as a symbol. I was involved with numbers, with the calendar, and again that came as a result of the experience at Norfolk which broke an habitual nine—three life kind of issue, nine months school, three months work, nine months school, and that was the first time I had the opportunity to continue some kind of painting energy over a period of a year.

After that, I was on a path which would eventually lead me into more personal paintings. So I did a lot of painting in Minneapolis, and then, after moving, went into isolation. The first painter I really talked to about my work was a guy named Cameron Booth. He came over, looked at the work, and saw what he thought was a kind of indulgence with the surface, with the paint, because I enjoyed the act of painting. I thought about that and shortly after, because they were fun, I really enjoyed doing them, I changed

the medium. I went into plastic paint, and that slowed me down some. It cut out some of the strokes and it allowed me to deal with some color issues. So I went through a couple of years where I was involved with a spectrum of color.

Then, about five years ago, I wanted to re-address myself to what I wanted to do. Earlier I'd been very much taken by the paintings of Philip Guston in terms of his daring nasty kind of dishwashy color orientation because it wasn't what I would do. As a result, I started analyzing the use of color in my painting, and it became clear that I wasn't really concerned with color anymore, not in action-type color. I began to go back to some of the very simple observations that kicked me off colorwise back in 1960, green, blue, and I did a painting in which I used a purple color, for the first time, and I'd never used purple before in any kind of way. The painting didn't quite make it, but it was an important step for me.

So I liked the idea. I held onto it, and when I began to search around for characters, as I began to call them, the color characters, this thing popped up. I fell in love with dioxidine purple. It was regal, it was deep and I enjoyed that as a color, and I began to use it and completely changed my act of painting. I didn't stretch them for a while. Then I moved into this studio. I wanted to really let loose, expand, so for about a year, I did a lot of things which I threw away. But out of that, I managed to develop some simple visual vocabulary, and it became clear that I had gone back to some of the very same images I was involved with in the sixties.

I've always been concerned with certain architectural forms as they related or didn't relate to certain organic forms, and I began to bring those out much more and develop about four or five simple forms that I had started to work with. One was a doorway idea, a post-and-lintel notion of horizontals and verticals meeting together. That came from drawings that I didn't really understand ten years ago, and it

cropped up again. There's some kind of needle stitch that moves forward and then comes back, loops over and ties itself together.

It became very clear that my image was definitely horizontal. I began to work with some of the forces that I'd worked with at Norfolk, organic falls, positioning, colors, blue sky, green grass, they have a traditional relationship. I began to work that way literally for a while. But the main character was always the violet and the violet began to be the thing around which everything was rallying. And from that point, I knew that I had to deal with the issues that were happening on the actual surface of the painting. So I began to simplify, using these post-and-lintel shapes in concert and juxtaposed with a very large open field of violet, and I was very interested in those shapes, blocking out some of the information that was being given. I was very interested in those shapes counterbalancing each other. I've always been affected by that marvelous thing that happens at the Sistine Chapel where the two fingers meet, that tension, and if you look at the paintings, you'll see that every time a right angle comes to another side, there will be a kind of touch there. I became very, very concerned with the planes that exist there, touching other planes, like two sheets of glass meshed together and things were falling down or going across those two sheets of glass.

I wasn't really interested in any kind of deep space, as I was in the earlier landscapes, bringing everything up more to the surface. It was a matter of trying to expand that by bringing it into play with various formats, be it the square or the rectangle or what-have-you, and then seeing how those characters reacted on that stage. I found some interesting things. I found that it was very difficult for me to deal with the square for a long time. Somehow or other, the image didn't work. So I started turning it around and did a whole series of diamond paintings which I felt more comfortable about. The forms were reacting to

that. I couldn't deal with the square. I'm still not sure I can.

And then, by virtue of the fact that I had to put canvases together, I began to look into my work. I have everything around, I'll look into it. I'll try to see some things that are occurring in the canvas, and I put two canvases together. I enjoyed the break from one surface to another, and began to go into the whole notion of split canvases and what happened in the crack or in the gutter, so to speak. So the work that I'm doing now makes an effort to deal with that gutter, as a stimulus, to deal with what happens or doesn't happen between two surfaces as they meet on the canvas and consequently the whole *Plum Nellie* split series evolved.

The triangle came into play as a reflection of a classical form I was concerned with a few years back. A very frontal plane, a very aggressive plane, but at the same time, one that sat there and became very stable. So then I started playing a game of running forms through that triangle, and at the same time, blocking out things, working with the gutter, and that is where the thing has come in terms of images.

Another person that was very important to me is René Magritte. I felt very close to those people who, as Magritte does, deal with juxtaposition of different kinds of situations. I think one of the most fantastic shows I saw was his retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art. And I still look at him a lot, especially a painting called *The Chateau of the Pyrenees*, that one with the big rock, floating in the sky. It has been an influential thing to me because of its form dynamics. My *Seastone* series reflects that interest.

Development has been a search for personal iconography, which has come out of working within very severe limitations. I tend to like the edge, the kind of precarious position that you're put in when you only have a few things to work with. Once I get into the painting there's a lot of planning going on. This plan-

ning is manifested in studies, watercolors and drawings on a smaller scale, and by the time that I'm ready to make a move on a large scale, there are some calisthenics that have been made, there are some moves that have been made. Once I get to the actual canvas, I'm completely reliant on the vocabulary that I've built up to that point, and the reality of that particular surface. It's kind of a frightening thing, but I enjoy the fact that the paintings give me only one chance to do them. I do a lot of work and I want them to appear as if they were done all at once. Actually, they're done rather slowly, but I'm consciously concerned with the fact that I only had one chance to do that particular painting, and I enjoy that kind of critical feeling. I take the telephone off the hook, and when I make the pour, which is on the floor, it's a matter of letting that shape find itself and identify itself and its shape on that particular canvas, and then I'll freeze it. Then the other characters will come in and start playing around that particular thing.

RD I had intended to ask about the development of your work. You have already indicated an awareness of a progression.

RR I'm definitely feeding off each work with information to inform the next piece.

RD It's a brick-by-brick, block-by-block attitude towards your work. Do you rely on spontaneity before the canvas?

RR Yes. As a matter of fact, the thing never comes out close to the original mood I had intended. It's as if once I pour that stuff out of the jar, it begins to take on its own life and I've tried to coax it into the image that I have in the beginning. Again, they appear to be fast, but they're slow paintings in terms of how they are made, and I'm very definitely picking up on what's happening as that mass is moving out, and for the most part, it'll start out at the center, and I watch the edges move, I watch the edges break up. But it's very definitely a give-and-take at the ac-

tual moment that the flood is occurring, and sometimes I'll stop it in one area or let it go in another area, and I find that exciting too, the fact that right there, as it is occurring, I can still deal with it, as I try to guide the flood in certain ways.

RD And right there you become very concerned with the surface.

RR Very definitely. There are actually about three different surfaces there. I found out that violet when sucked into that surface, comes off as a velvet, which I'm very fascinated with, and that's played off with a matte surface, and on that matte surface which is very planar, I can scrape and move and indicate another kind of calligraphy which I can't indicate on the inside of the painting. And then from that, there'll be the surface of the canvas. I also like the idea of being able to literally be up at the canvas and enjoy it for those differences, but it's not necessarily a primary concern of mine. It's that larger shape and the gesture of the shape. There's a painting that I'll call "Jiggle" or "Boodles" or something like that, and this is by way of amplifying the kinds of moves that are actually being made by that large violet shape. I'm very definitely concerned with what that shape does in terms of its dynamics, how it pushes, how it expands, how it shakes, how it breathes.

RD How do you work with scale?

RR I will try to take a particular series of a particular idea through a series of scale shifts. There will always be a small—medium—large thing and I will see how the characters are performing and decide at which particular scale the thing will work best for me. I think there are a lot of large pictures that do not necessarily have to be that particular scale. But I am concerned with a quantity of violet, and ideally I would like these pictures to be looked at in a very shallow space, and to realize that you need a wall of violet. Scale is important in the sense that I want that shape, I want that violet to assert itself. I want it to become a plane. I want it to be felt, I'm very con-

cerned with the kind of time and distance that it takes to move from left to right. I'm concerned with the breaks in the canvas and what happens to your eye when you move from one surface or one painting to another. But I'm limited scale-wise in the studio, and I don't think that I want to go much larger. I feel comfortable at that edge.

RD Are you conscious of style, that is, your own ideas of style as well as those of other artists?

RR I think primarily style comes from intent. Style comes from the original kind of image that you're trying to deal with and trying to find some means of getting that particular image down. The work, as it appears now, is very definitely not style-oriented, but is a result of my trying to use these fluid forms in a certain way. Style is something that comes from an initial kind of energy.

I look at other people, of course. There are people who, not necessarily through their work, but just through certain attitudes have informed me. Barnett Newman, for instance. I've looked at some of his issues, read some of his things. Even the writings and ideas of Albers and people who are involved in limited situations interest me, because I think I'm involved with working within very severe limitations.

RD How do you regard the act of making a painting? Do you approach painting solely as an intellectual process, or are you concerned with concepts of beauty?

RR I am concerned with something which I haven't been able to articulate in my mind. It's the word elegance. One of the things I really like, one of the qualities of the picture that I want to bring off is a kind of elegance, for better or worse. And I sometimes criticize myself because the pictures are not tough enough for me. I think this is something that I'm about to deal with. I don't want them to feel beautiful. But elegance enters into my mind in terms of traditional concerns of beauty, and when I begin to look at the pictures because I wanted to exude some

of that flavor. I wanted to exude some kind of presence of being there and being stately. Maybe that has to do with a classical attitude.

RD I think the elegance in your paintings is quite important. I think that's part of my response to them. Another aspect of your paintings that I respond to is the sense of illusion.

RR I am concerned with illusion, there's no doubt about it. It's a priority item for me. I like the kind of things that happen as I move over that transparent plane, and more and more I'm finding out the kind of ambiguous things that can occur on what is initially a flat surface. As a matter of fact, some of the early painting was almost photographic and I enjoy that kind of play. It satisfies a need for me to play with my eyeballs, not only with the split canvas part, but also with the planar situation as part of the concern for establishing an illusion of several different kinds of planes on one surface.

RD What special problems in painting are important to you?

RR A major issue for me is trying to identify the fantasies that I'm involved with, and trying to articulate those fantasies, and trying not to be afraid of those fantasies. I'm trying to be in three places at once, the past, the present and the future.

Another problem I'm concerned with is the notion of balance. Sometimes I like to pull the rug from under myself, but basically I'm concerned with symmetry. In most of my work, there is an internal sense of things being in the right place. That's one thing I'm trying to get at, almost as if I want those characters to come in at the right time, to sit, to get up and move according to a certain plan.

RD Earlier you spoke of a personal imagery, and you also described your work as literal. To what extent does the concept of the image enter your work?

RR I'm very concerned with the landscape. For me, these are landscapes. When I begin to make moves in a painting, I'm basing them on some reac-

tion to a landscape space, some movement in a landscape space. Often they will suggest growth, or a view which can be very literal in terms of a ground-sky orientation. So it has a landscape orientation, which comes out of earlier literal concerns when I was painting landscapes with trees and stuff.

RD Are you concerned about the viewer's reaction to the paradox of your landscape reference and the overall sense of abstraction?

RR No, I'm not concerned with the fact that the reader may not view my image as a landscape. I'm saying that thinking landscape provides the input and informs my decisions and moves in paintings. It's perfectly fine with me that one might begin to respond to some of the formal issues. When you have an open field and you cut through that field, I know that one is going to continue a certain motion, and I know that that particular split is going to cause some kind of activity, in terms of one's mind, as you move from one point to another.

RD I think you approach painting with the idea of problem-solving in mind, rather than any conscious attempt at creating a beautiful image.

RR I would agree with that. But a problem in the positive sense. I'm fascinated by really trying to find the options within those circumstances. I found for instance that there's a hell of a lot of paintings still to be done within this series. There are a lot of answers I want to find out. There are a lot of questions that are raised each time. When I come to the painting, and leave it, with an unsettled feeling that in trying to answer something, another question has been raised, then this is one of the things that keeps me going back to the studio, to get that information from the previous work and take it to the next.



Robert Reed

Born in Charlottesville, Virginia, 1938.

Studied Morgan State College, Baltimore, Maryland, 1958, B.S.; Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, 1960, B.F.A.; Yale Summer School of Music and Art, Norfolk, Connecticut, 1960; Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, 1962, M.F.A.

Taught at Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, 1960-62; Minneapolis School of Art, 1962-64; University of Minneapolis, Department of Architec-

ture, Minneapolis, 1964-65; Skidmore College, Saratoga, New York, 1965-67; Assistant Professor, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, 1969 to present.

Author and director of S.I.X. (Summer In Experiment), Skidmore College, Saratoga, New York, 1968-69; visiting professor, Bennington College, 1968-69; visiting artist, University of Vermont, Burlington, 1968-69; visiting artist, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1969-70; visiting artist, Morgan State College,

Baltimore, Maryland, 1969-70; redesigned and directed art division, Yale Summer School of Music and Art, Norfolk, Connecticut, 1970-71; visiting artist, East Texas State University, Commerce, 1971-72; visiting artist, University of Miami, 1971-72; directed painting seminar, Silvermine Guild of Artists, New Canaan, Connecticut, 1971-72; Royal Academy of Fine Art, Copenhagen, Denmark, 1972; visiting artist, Augustana College, Sioux Falls, South Dakota, 1972; visiting artist, Connecticut College, New London, Connecticut, 1972; visiting artist, Maryland Institute of Art, Baltimore, 1972; visiting artist, Minneapolis College of Art and Design, 1972; visiting artist; University of Utah, Salt Lake City, 1972; visiting artist, University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire, 1972; visiting artist, Lehman College, Bronx, New York, 1972.

One man shows include Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Little Gallery, 1965; Philips Gallery, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1966; Hawthorne Gallery, Skidmore College, Saratoga, New York, 1968; The Murphy Gallery, Morgan State College, Baltimore, Maryland, 1968; The Art Gallery, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York, 1969; The Gallery, Yale Summer School of Music and Art, Norfolk, Connecticut, 1970; Foster Gallery, University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire, 1972; Washburn Gallery, Inc., New York, 1973; Webb and Parsons, Bedford, New York, 1973.

Represented in numerous group shows including *Painting and Drawing in American Universities*, United States Information Agency, 1962; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1965; *American Drawing*, Moore College of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1968; *Drawing, USA*, St. Paul Art Center, 1969; Kalamazoo Institute of Art, 1969; The Edmonton Art Gallery, Alberta, Canada, 1969; *Discovery 70*, The Alms Gallery, University of Cincinnati, 1970; The Columbia Museum of Art, Columbia, South Carolina, 1970; Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska, 1970; *New Talent*, A. M. Sachs Gallery, New York, 1971; The Brooklyn Museum, 1971; Joseloff Gallery, Uni-

versity of Hartford, 1972; *Annual Exhibition: Contemporary American Painting*, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1972; Webb and Parsons, Bedford, New York, 1972.

Recipient of John Weir Ferguson Prize, Yale University, 1959; Roy Johnson Award, Silvermine Guild of Artists, New Canaan, Connecticut, 1968; First Prize, *Discovery 70*, Alms Gallery, University of Cincinnati, 1970.

Represented in the collections of the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota, and the University of Wisconsin Art Gallery, Eau Claire.

Lives and teaches in New Haven, Connecticut.

Catalogue

All works are Acqua-tec on canvas, painted in 1972, and lent by the Washburn Gallery, Inc., New York. Dimensions are in inches, height preceding width.

1. *Plum Nellie, Armstrong Disappearance*. 84 x 216.
2. *Plum Nellie Split*. 120 x 144.
3. *Plum Nellie Split*. 120 x 144.
4. *Plum Nellie, Approach*. 84 x 144.
5. *Plum Nellie, Sea Stone*. 84 x 72 (illustrated).
6. *Plum Nellie, Wok Book*. 72 x 144.
7. *Plum Nellie, For Mark*. 72 x 72.

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