



RON JANOWICH

Pamela Auchincloss Gallery

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558 Broadway, New York

New York 10012



Generator, 1992, black oil on linen, 84" x 168"

A CONVERSATION WITH RON JANOWICH

Richard Kalina: Over the years you've created a body of work that has a clear conceptual unity, a stylistic center, and yet within this body of work, within this set of formal and extra-formal concerns, there has been considerable differentiation. When you look closely, the paintings, even those made at nearly the same time, seem to have separate cognitive densities, to operate on dissimilar visual principles. Artists normally engage in a more or less wide-ranging survey of their aesthetic territory. Themes are staked out and variations are explored. I sense something different in your work though; a fundamental "give" in the underlying structure, something that disturbs causality but keeps logic and clarity intact. How do you see the paintings relating to each other?

Ron Janowich: The notion of differentiation is something that's important to me now, and has always been. But, I think it was a mistake to try to understand it in terms of resolution. Modernism seemed very much about resolution and how the individual could be defined by a singular point that was more or less significant, and therefore dominant. Refinement of style led to clear individual signatures that always seemed to tempt a personal visual exhaustion. Yet extensions from this central core were always considered a weakness and unsupported. Differentiation allows the painter to embrace these extensions which ultimately set the terms of possible evolutionary paths within a body of work, the limits of experience in both life and work define these parameters.

RK: Could you be more specific?

RJ: I believe that inside a body of work, no matter how disparate, there always resides a core. A place from which the work emanates and reflects back. From the outside this can seem like chaos; from the inside it can seem like an oasis. I try to sense the moments of stillness long enough to hold and understand them. All I know for sure is that they exist. The more I understand them, the better I'm able to trust the extensions that reach out and form new paths, defining their own parameters. In a sense the threads then become invisible. This is where differentiation begins. As I define and explore each variation there emerges a "give" that is the momentary conceptualization of an internal visualization. It is referential to my specific set of formal and extra-formal concerns. The hold and focus of these specific moments define just how a painting will appear and how varied the cognitive densities are. Like crystallization occurring out of seemingly clear water, all the elements are there invisible in the transparent medium. What's usually needed is a catalyst of some kind. Sometimes it's only a speck of dust or an imperfection that will cause crystallization, yet what results can be fully ordered and in a sense perfect. The principle of pure abstract sight unifies everything, where all visual sensations are similar and meaningful, into a field of apparently chaotic noise, much like elements being suspended at random in the clear liquid. The mind filters and holds certain thoughts and emotions that can be touched and brought into the world by simply listening to their color and form.

RK: You're saying then that there is a reciprocal space between the painter and the painting.

RJ: Yes, this space is a sort of medium, and its underlying structure is my interior life and the extensions and conflicts within that life are where tranquility and terror can co-exist. That's where the "give" is. It's about the nurturing of multiple paths that have at the center the self. I think that the self is shifting and changeable, and this can create an expanded notion of what we mean by the center of the work.

RK: You seem to be very concerned with space – with a pictorial arena that is transparent, fractured, evocative, and yet because of the blunt, object-like quality of the shaped canvas, still straight forward and matter of fact. There seem to be two realities here, the intangible, allusive reality of the window space and the compressed physical reality of the object. These realities create different perceptual spaces; they move at different speeds. How do you see them interacting?

RJ: From my point of view, the exploration of the nature of space in abstract painting is really in its infancy. We are at a time now when the existence of space as a complexity should be accepted and embraced. Any other position seems historically redundant. Sight simply is not reductive, although there can be reductive moments. Imagine what it's like to be in a head-on collision, the moment when it all comes together must be amazing. Sometimes I want the space to be like a head-on collision, other times I want the space to be like the inside of an eggshell. The allusive reality of the window space and the compressed physical reality of the object do, in fact, have a point of convergence. This point of convergence is the experience of an abstract sensory situation that is overlaid with our culturally conditioned concepts of space. This visual sensation corresponds in some way to a mental mapping of our world space, and yet remains separate and fractured from it. I've found as time goes on there occurs a kind of co-evolution between the shape and its interior at convergence.

RK: Ron, your paintings are resolutely abstract, and yet they seem to go out of their way to question and even deny traditional notions of abstraction. This broadens the field, while at the same time creating, in me at least, a certain edginess and anxiety. Your paintings are so seductive. It's like at the beginning of a thriller, when everything is just going too well. Do you see beauty and evocation as subversive?

RJ: I think the paintings are abstract in that they are of the essence of a seeing and reseeing, a kind of second sight that occurs within the boundaries of the whole. Different edges keep being created, and they're in a constant state of flux and anxiety. Why one shape and not another? Why varied densities of transparency and opacity? There's anxiety and ambivalence in the perception of the shape and fractured space. For me, I've always had that anxiety around a rectangle – in the Euclidean field. I chose rather to create my own anxiety field through shape. But, it also has something to do with beauty. Beauty is such a strange concept in our culture, the way it's equated with veneer. The beauty that compels me is interior. It might be a way of understanding why I make transparent paintings with an invisible veneer. What you see in a painting is the end of the thriller. The viewer comes in at my end and their beginning.

RK: What about history? Here you are in 1992, making paintings on stretched canvas, using black oil, glazes, and the deepest, richest colors and tones. These are the tools of the past, and you're using them for different, but not entirely different ends. There are certainly not the same representational or iconographic concerns, but I do see an exploration of similar emotional, even spiritual terrain. To use history in this way implies an attitude towards history, just as dealing with the unconscious implies a certain approach to hidden processes. In one sense the history of modern art is the history of the interpretation of the history of modern art. Where do you see yourself standing?

RJ: For me the iconography of the history of painting is something that I see as its most basic historical part, the part that's usually extracted by the historian. This is the first thing that fades in my observation of a painting and as it disappears something else emerges, something fuller and deeper. This is why I go back to certain paintings. Someone like Warhol was involved almost entirely in iconography and I'm just not moved by it. It's the reason why a recording of Elvis or Marilyn moving on film is more interesting to me than Warhol's extraction. It's the reverse of what I was taught. Our experience of the canon is constantly changing, and as I said, when some things disappear, other surprising things emerge. That's the gift of postmodernism. It extracted the facade and allowed us to return to the residue, to the soul of the original work. It's going to be interesting to see where the core of the culture resides, where future generations go for understanding. I have a feeling that what

is going to be important is not irony but rather direct experience. Black oil is part of the superficial, the tool from the past that I needed to open the door of space and feeling in the present. There was no iconographic transfer from the past that I could or wanted to hold on to. There was only this strange medium that allowed a kind of open-ended investigation into everything I wanted to visualize in a painting. History, in the end, is a line. The paintings that I care about are points in the simultaneous present that exist in the past and in the future as well.

RK: Your work is unmistakably American. Do you see reflections of the American sensibility in it, of the contemporary culture?

RJ: Yes, this is my culture, and as an individual I've grown and evolved through this culture. The American sensibility is a hard thing to define. I see it as a culture of conflicts: of harmony and harshness, of brutality and incredible sensitivity and poetry. It's a culture not tamed, where dumbness and brilliance somehow coexist and contribute. The challenge is to find the connecting thread. I think it has something to do with acceptance. Contemporary culture accepts anything – assimilates everything, reflects on next to nothing. Maybe we're reaching for a way that's inclusive yet restless in being defined by these limitations.

RK: Painting operates within nesting contextual sets, but ultimately it is an individual act. Do you feel that painting, specifically a broadened abstraction, has a particular purpose now?

RJ: It's seductive to believe that painting somehow is a communal enterprise, that it's really the arrangement and rearrangement of mutually agreed upon signs and signifiers. This is certainly a viable and available option for any painter in the culture, and in a sense, the most understandable. But the extension of abstraction, if it is to occur, has to take place through individual responsibility, responsibility for both the mark made and the feelings that generated it. Just as avoidance is a personal choice, so is individual extension and I think that the possibility of real growth positions abstract painting in an extremely exciting place right now.



Rip, 1992, black oil on linen, 72" x 47"



I and You, 1992, black oil on linen, 132" x 84"



Blue Light, 1992, black oil on linen, 108" x 52"



Argentina, 1992, black oil on linen, 120" x 60"



Night, 1992, black oil on linen, 72" x 36"



Edge, 1992, black oil on linen, 132" x 84"



Ice, 1992, black oil on linen, 20" x 10"



Some Thinking, 1992, black oil on linen, 24" x 12"



Good-bye (for Fred Thursz), 1992, black oil on linen, 24" x 12"

