

Processes (group show)

Catalogue interview with Robert Enright

It's kind of a slippery term, but we know what we mean when we say it. I gave a lecture at a New York art school and I was accused of being a conceptual artist who used painting. It was wild. It seemed absolutely correct from that perspective. At the same time, because I have such a deep love of Western painting, to say that wouldn't be the whole story. But there's no question that I have found my own use for the canon.

RE: A painting like Robespierre's Dream is like a cross between A Midsummer Night's Dream and 19th century symbolist painting. It looks like John the Baptist's head could be somewhere in the midst of that incredible brightness. I'm just interested in how you decide how far to push the beauty and the lustre of the work. Is that determined by the subject or is there something else that convinces you to really up the ante?

TS: Torque it! It's funny but beauty is never a word I use for myself.

RE: Is it like Yahweh, the word that never escapes your lips?

TS: Not at all. It's just not one I use for myself. I talk to myself in terms of whether it works. Is it functioning the way it needs to in order to operate as a sign. I guess you could say there is a metaphysical formalism, or a metaphysics of formalism? Nobody is talking about that much because metaphysics is such a frightening prospect for post-structuralist thought. The idea that there might not only be parallel worlds operating simultaneously but that the effects of those worlds on the chemistry of my body might actually change my thoughts. You know Prozac is a big problem for post-structuralist thinking. It really is, because it suggests that form — in this case, chemistry — can change meaning. That is formalism. That's the metaphysics of formalism: when we're in the space of beauty, our organisms are acted upon by form which changes the chemistry and thereby changes the thought.

RE: Now you also do some quite literal symbolic things. Chez Himmler looks like Fantin Latour, but then there's a red fallen flower which looks like a symbol to me.

TS: I rarely use symbolism consciously. Would I use a white dove in a painting to symbolize peace? No, I wouldn't. What interests me more is the idea that the painting signifies its opposite and that's why it's hard to look at sometimes.

RE: This subject matter is so fraught that it would be inconceivable to present Himmler's household as a place of origin for a beautiful still life. It would be too nervy to present it without any indication of your awareness of the irony of that presentation.

TS: Actually, that's very interesting because I've often seen that happen in homes, especially with peonies. They're very heavy and so they suddenly squash like some cartoon character. When I painted the painting I wasn't really thinking about it symbolically. In fact, this is the first time I've ever thought about it. I think that happens with all artists.

RE: The fact that Mamma Robespierre looks like the beautiful young Claire Bloom.

TS: Absolutely. He lost his mother when he was very young, and it affected him in a big way. This is my big question about history and life in general. We'd all like to think we're in an A movie and when we feel bad about ourselves we're in a B movie. In my movie, Mamma Robespierre steps out of a late 60s French film. There's always a libidinous current through my work.

RE: Is there anything of the libido operating in the way that you handle the surface?

TS: Not intentionally. I was just looking at this painting I'm working on and it's really thick and has holes in it. It's succulent to everyone other than myself. I look at it and it's an aggregate of mistakes that somehow adds up to a stab at the real. Occasionally I do a thin painting, one that somehow I had the guts to leave alone. At a particular moment I saw something that was more valuable than what I might get if I go down a road I know so well, which is the one of toil and accident. I actually think I'm trying to paint a painting of a painting that's already there. And the only painting that would be worth repainting would be one that was wonderfully executed. Otherwise what would be the point. So when I paint a still life or a portrait, I'm not painting the thing itself, I'm painting a painting of a painting that's already been painted by someone else. Which is why they're getting thicker and more difficult as I get older.

RE: So the surfaces quite literally are a repository for memory, both as an active state and also as a psychological state?

TS: God, that's an interesting question. No, to me the surface is an intentional byproduct. I say intentional because I choose to work with wax so it's an inevitable byproduct of the process. What is inevitable about that process is that I'm too compulsive, I'm too neurotic to leave the thing alone. Do you see what I mean? I have such a low opinion of myself that I can't think I'm good enough. So I have to keep on until I can at least live with it. I'm serious. I have to keep picking and picking until I get an aggregate that I can at least live with.

RE: You're willing to go as far as a painting like *Waiting for Marat*, in which you use blue to occlude and almost erase the face underneath?

TS: That was my last ditch stand with that fucking painting.

RE: But from my point of view they're such fine paintings. Your sense of your work strikes me as almost being comical.

TS: It's totally critical. You have no idea. I'm off to Paris to launch this book and I've got to get some paintings down to New York and I've a truck coming in two days but I'd like keep on looking at them. Some moments I think 'Great, you've done it.'

RE: And then you make the mistake of turning your back on them.

TS: I turn around again and I don't fucking believe it. That bit I'm obsessing about is the first bit that everybody's going to see. But the anxiety doesn't come from what I think other people are going to say, because I'm well aware that people don't really see very well any more. I want to take on the big guys, I'm not ambitious but I really want to go for it. And I believe you can get better and better until you die. It probably sounds weird but what actually drives the entire painting is my conviction that it just doesn't look good. Let me tell you a story. I applied to art school when I was 18 years old and I didn't get in because my portfolio was so bad. I remember going to the interview and the Head of the school said, 'I suggest you take a year and go to night classes and learn how to draw and then reapply next year and we'll have another look.' That's how bad my drawings were. I remember I threw a shit fit at the interview and I said, 'you'll read about me one day.' I said, 'I came to you to learn something and you're telling me to have already learned it before I get here. Fuck you.' I walked out and a week later I get an acceptance letter. Because there was

one guy there who thought I should be let in just because my rhetoric was so good. And I really was the worst by far. I mean I had no skills at all but I watched myself overtake a whole pile of people through really hard work. It's a thought that I hold on to every day: that it is possible for me to paint better paintings. And people say, 'is that just technique?' and the answer is yes, but technique is not what you think it is.

RE: Ezra Pound said technique was the test of a man's sincerity. By that definition, you're a very sincere painter.

TS: Absolutely, there's no irony in the way I paint. I can't afford it.