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TONY SCHERMAN

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notations

An Excerpt from an On-Going Discussion
with Tony Scherman on the Materiality of Painting



BY SUSAN DOUGLAS

Tony Scherman, born in Toronto in 1950, received an M.A. from the Royal College of Art in London, England, in 1974. Since then he has shown in solo and group exhibitions in North America and Europe, drawing subjects from history, mythology, literature and popular culture. He uses encaustic, the art or technique of painting with melted wax mixed with oil paints and pigments invented by the ancient Greeks and employed in the famous mummy portraits (A.D. 120–130) from the Egyptian Fayoum. Reviving encaustic painting successfully requires mastery; in Scherman's hands it has inspired powerful, elegant, subtle and gritty images whether the subject is animals, celebrities or food.

His exhibition "Chasing Napoleon" (accompanied by an English language edition of the book *Chasing Napoleon*) is at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette September 7 to November 15, 2002, and will be at the Ellen Noel Art Museum, Odessa, Texas, December 7 to January 19, 2003. "About 1789," the series on the French Revolution and Napoleon Bonaparte, was first shown at Galerie Daniel Templon, Paris, and subsequently at Galerie Haas & Fuchs, Berlin, Scott White Contemporary Art (formerly Soma Gallery), La Jolla, and Marcia Wood Gallery, Atlanta.

Many public collections own his work, including: Museum of Contemporary Art, Montréal; Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal; Arts Council of Great Britain; Contemporary Arts Society, London; Royal College of Art, London, F.R.A.C. Ile de France, Paris, S.A.C.E.M. Paris, and Fondation



Tony Scherman, "Bonaparte dreaming of Napoleon", About 1789, 1998-99, encaustic on canvas, 84 by 96 inches (collection Jean Hamon, Paris, photo John Howarth).

Guerlain. In the U.S.A his work is owned by The High Museum, Atlanta, Georgia, the Hunter Museum of American Art, Chattanooga, Tennessee, San Diego Museum, California Center for the Arts, Escondido, California, L.A. County Museum, Denver Museum of Art, Birmingham Museum of Art, the Library of Congress, Washington D.C., and the Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Mass. For more information on his current work see www.tonyscherman.com.

Tony Scherman has also been a visiting critic and lecturer at universities, art colleges and art galleries in Canada, the U.S.A. and England. He has taught at the New York Academy of Art, the University of Toronto, and the University of Guelph. In this excerpt he talks about standing back and getting close to painting. As a subject of study, the seventeenth-century Spanish painter Diego Velázquez is one of Scherman's on-going passions. Attention should be concentrated on Velázquez, says Scherman, because his images parody the process of painting. Thus he belongs in a supra-artistic category where the formal characteristics of the work exceed language. But this is only one of a number of references to earlier artists. Hals, Van Dyck and Manet also are woven into this dense and sophisticated tapestry of decoding and recoding as a cultural form. In the following conversation, Scherman discusses notational painting, social and cultural ideology, and the decline of art.

Susan Douglas: Several aspects of Clement Greenberg's history of modernism are in question—especially his ideas on the canvas's materiality. The handling of the surface by major masters needs more considered attention. The squiggles in Vermeer, the surface gestures in Goya, the blobs on a Velázquez—these "accidents" on the canvas are nods towards the beholder and towards tradition. They are not just curious or interesting visual effects, but forms that give the lie to bland modern surfaces.

Tony Scherman: Yes, what we're talking about is important, though most people would see it as marginal. But "materiality" and so on has always been a fact passed down in the western painting tradition. The question is, are such things manifesting now? You have to be able to create a representation that's full, I mean fully developed in its language...

SD: I'm not seeing it manifesting now, partly because there are few technically skilled painters in a glue-gun world.

TS: Exactly, thank you! That's precisely why I'm painting the paintings I'm painting! I think we're in a "dark age" of painting. And the times we're in means that we have to talk about it: technique, skill, form and tradition. What's pressing is not what I'm doing in my work but what the great notational painters were doing in their work. This "tradition" of materiality, carried in painting and in architecture, passed into linguistics in the twentieth century. That's been obvious to me since I was twenty years old, starting to read Foucault and becoming aware of poststructuralism. Since then it's been very clear to me that the preSocratics (specifically Gorgias the Sophist and Plato's archrival) had already covered the ground that we call deconstruction.

What we're saying is Gorgias = Derrida.¹ We have to stop and, as you said, tease it out of the text. Not everything yields itself to deconstruction, however. There is a level of consciousness beyond language. Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man are absolutely correct: meaning is always on the move; the sign deconstructs itself over time. It does this in art as well as language. I mean, de Man showed quite brilliantly that the sign is mutating all the time. The linguistic sign deconstructs itself, and anyone who's deconstructing is merely helping it along. It is my view that the artistic sign deconstructs itself over time. That is to say, all we're left with is form whose signification we can no longer find even though we may know what the signification is.

SD: Do painters today see this "tradition" as relevant? I mean, does anyone beside you see these connections?

TS: I've been having this conversation since 1969. When I was in the Royal College I was introduced to R.B. Kitaj who came around, and he saw what I was doing and he was very intrigued, and he asked me to tea with James Kirman [Lucian Freud's dealer]—and there was also Saatchi's architect, the collector Max Gordon, who was at the epicenter of the London scene around 1974.

A year later Max was buying my work, and he came over one day, and I'd done a life-portrait of Margaret Priest in encaustic. And Max said, "I see you've come under the influence of R.B." Max saw that I was moving out of the ironic, was changing direction. This unapologetic portrait of Margaret was a clear sign to him that I betrayed the potential he saw in me. I stress that unapologetic because the thing is, I went to figuration without irony. Kirman understood. It was the resonance of the "canon" in that work, a resonance that Max had spent his entire life trying to deny. I mean, these "advanced art guys" had spent their whole lives trying to undermine the canon and still continue to do so: the whole generation! The history of western painting is the history of the use of realism—or naturalism—to describe the subject in order to signify something else. This is a semi-otic chain whereby form signifies subject and subject signifies theme.

SD: Going back—"notational," this is your term, I believe, adapted from Phillip Rawson's discussion of drawing.² I take it to refer to a sensual tradition in painting where objects and materials are rendered by the inflection of strokes and tones rather than

by drawing lines to represent closed, isolated units. It's not an actual technique. It's more complex and subtle. It preserves a kind of balance between two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality. One version of it can be found in Titian, who invites the viewer to grasp the salient features of his represented subjects through the rhythmic element of this brushwork as much as through the painting's structure.

TS: I want to go back historically. Notational painting comes from Venetian painting. I suppose the easiest way to describe it is as a code of difference that at a certain point away from the painting becomes an optical mixture that represents form convincingly. "Notational" painting as opposed, say, to the continuous surface of the black and white photograph. In the photograph there's no room for the rupture of the uniform nature of the matrix. (The matrix is the DNA of the photograph.) It is a quantitative, a vertical, system like any other matrix.

Notational painting is the opposite, it is qualitative in that each mark describes volume and form through difference. It operates horizontally—that is, no mark is quantifiably privileged over another. A great example is John Singer Sargent, who we might consider a pinnacle of notational painting. But the "super pinnacle" is Velázquez. So this notational line comes out of Venetian painting and really gets going in the seventeenth century, in Holland. In England, van Dyck. Franz Hals is among the first great notational painters. When we look at Hals, everything is described through absence: that's what makes his work so very strange. When we look at the hand in our Cavalier, the eye is actually moving across the volume. But it's moving across because of the dynamics that the notations set up. The notations show you the beginnings and ends of planes, of shapes on the surface, in perspective. Between these shapes are intervals that are sometimes filled, sometimes not. In other words, you can sometimes have an interval that is formed by a base color underneath it. This kind of painting is very different than what is going on in, say, French painting in the sixteenth century—Clouet or Cranach or Dürer. Northern painting in general follows the surface of things, as does Florentine painting. Now Italian painting out of the Florentine school is a painting bounded by line where shapes are colored in and remain, seen in perspective. The reading of the form is given by shape to shape to shape, and they're all connected. This is not notational painting. Think of the difference between Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*—the way that is painted—and a late Rembrandt.

SD: The principal point about this method is that, in a vivid three-dimensional sense, links in and out of notional depth conform to perceptual reality. Put simply, things appear blurred instead of crisp.

TS: What notational painting actually is (but we won't know until a couple of centuries later!) is not the painting of what I see but the painting of how I see what I see. So now we have two subjects in the painting. Certainly an object comes out of it. The notation refers to perceptual experience. The god who presides over this experience is Dionysus, as opposed to Apollo, the god who presides over Florentine planes, which are uninterrupted. By the end of the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century, the Scottish and British painters such as Sir Henry Raeburn and Sir Thomas Lawrence have taken the art of notation to a really extraordinary level. Notational painting is not rational. It is inductive, and it recognizes occult forces (I refer to a philosophical backdrop referencing the empiricists, and Newton—seen in his time as an occultist by the rationalists). Rembrandt doesn't start off notationally, but his work becomes so; most artists don't start notationally: Apollo reigns when you're young, the world is crisp and defined; it is clear. I'm jumping about. Now to French painting: with the exception of David, Fragonard and Chardin until we get to Delacroix, French painting cleaves to the Apollonian, the rational. So while the rationalist continental tradition does not accept the inductive experiment in painting, the exceptions are notable. Within the French tradition, for example, David is radical in that his work is both rational and notational. His notational work is private; his rational work is public. Fragonard too! His private

work is pure structure. But if you go to the Frick murals that's not what you see. I can't imagine how he reconciled the two styles; an art historian's nightmare, I imagine!

SD: Yes indeed: the problem of being unable to reconcile opposites plagues older forms of art historical enquiry.

TS: But then we get to Delacroix: the romantic painters burst apart the deductivist stranglehold. Delacroix is the return of Titian, and it's all notational. In the seventeenth century Ruben's work is more and more notational; the flesh is almost flying off the...

SD: ...or the hair! The women's hair free-floats on the surface, it isn't attached to anything!

TS: Exactly! And then this "notation" culminates in Delacroix and, obviously, Manet; and Monet is all notation. The greatest, for me, are Hals, Van Dyck and Velázquez. He's in a category of his own.

SD: Tell me about Velázquez.

TS: Velázquez does something unique. If you actually look at the head of the Infanta in *Las Meninas*, everything is in the "wrong" place. What I mean is that on rational inspection, I will have to mentally move all the features about because they don't conform to physical reality. But when I see the Infanta from five feet away, in context, the head looks "right." Velázquez has gone one step further than anybody else. He's painting it wrong because to look right it has to be painted wrong. This is a perception that opens up the next semiotic order: this is high, high mimesis.

SD: Looking wrong to be right?

TS: Yes. Precisely what defines academic painting is that it looks all right! Never a slip by the artist whereby you can feel something that you shouldn't be feeling. Great work in any field will always have wrong notes in it. This is the big paradox. When you're training to be a painter, what you're being taught to do is to paint right. But as a teacher what you're hoping to do is to find a student who—despite his or her best efforts to get it all right—will get it wrong. All great artists distort. Velázquez takes that distortion to a conscious level within the representation of optical reality.

SD: And what about the twentieth century?

TS: Well—with certain exceptions in figural painting—notation is left behind. The only people who practice it are academics who were taught in the nineteenth century by people who still knew how to paint. Today, these paintings are in museum basements with paintings that, progressively as we get away from the nineteenth century, are stiffer and stiffer...and stiffer. There are some wonderful painters from the 'twenties in the U.S.A. and in Canada who still wanted to do it. It's kept alive, but it's not being fed critically so it's dying on the vine. Today illustrators carry the notational tradition. I went to school in the 'seventies. I was taught by the people who had already stiffened up. What's important for this story is that these people couldn't teach me how to paint. So, where did I go? As I see it, there are really only two painters relevant to my story, though I have to acknowledge that there are lots of painters who are driven by this kind of painting who appear in such journals as *American Artists*. Uncritical magazines, yet chock a block full of people trying to do this very difficult thing called notational painting. It has a huge popular following. But since Manet basically, the powers of the art world have made a connection between any aspiration to paint naturalistically and stupidity. Anyway, to get back to recent art. Eric Fischl is very important for a number of reasons but, for our argument, because he managed to get talked about in critical terms. The critical avant-garde let him through the very tightly guarded fortress. He's the only naturalist, notational painter who's been talked about. But, when he arrived on the scene, he was not discussed critically in terms of the notational aspect of his painting. Some just said he couldn't paint. The critical focus, of

course, was on this postmodern reading of the social but it was the first time that a notational painting had broken through the ranks. He's important for that. It's a little bit like a virus getting into a body, somehow this virus got in, the T-cells weren't fast enough! (laughs) Then the next painter to come along in America's consciousness (although he had been acknowledged in Europe) was Lucian Freud. We know his story. His early work was not notational, it was quite Florentine. The structural notations get going in the late 'sixties and early 'seventies in a big way. What's important here, though, is that the story of notational painting is now entering a new phase.

SD: You like to think of encaustic painting as the "chaos of the surface:" can you expand on this?

TS: One of the things encaustic has allowed me to do is to reveal the process of painting for the viewer. In Derrida: "meaning is always already deferred." In the same way "painting is always already a resolved contradiction." That's a cornerstone of my painting. You could say there's more than one cornerstone, but that would be the logos of my work in the same way that, ironically, the logos is a cornerstone of Derrida's work, although he wouldn't call it that. If the idea that there is no logos is an idea that doesn't change, then that in itself becomes a logos, so you can parenthesize it endlessly. What I'm saying is that the condition of all painting—good, bad, or indifferent—is this already resolved contradiction that forms pictorial space. In other words, the formation of pictorial space is an already resolved contradiction: to create a surface denying one must affirm the surface. Simultaneously. In real time.

SD: A kind of a push-and-pull?

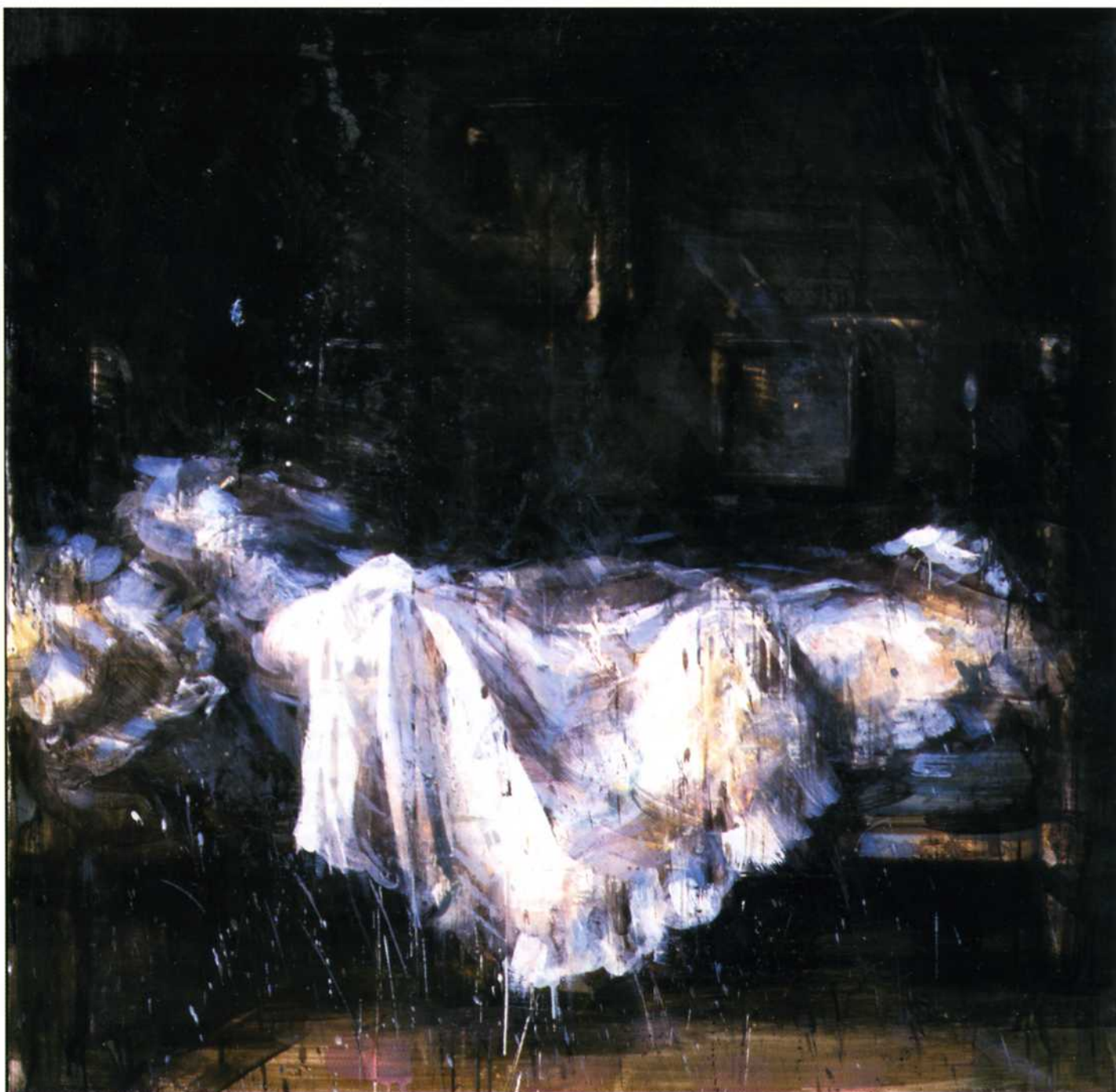
TS: This "push-and-pull" appears in all kinds of painting and, when one first apprehends it, it comes as a surprise. Take the Velázquez still-life, the only one he ever did, the one of the basket with grapes, with fruit and leaves: in the background he's painted a wall and, as the edge of the fruit is painted against the edge of the wall, it actually becomes the edge of the wall against the fruit. Well, that's how you read it when you're up close. But if you stand back, the wall recedes as it's supposed to. But in fact, in order to make that recession, he had to actually push the wall to the edge of the fruit. There's lots of examples this in fairly ordinary painting. So that's the first degree of non-linguistic paradox in painting. That kind of paradox occurs when the painter uses it to create, affirming the surface to deny the surface. I'm suggesting that there's another, supra-articulation in painting, and that's when the articulation itself becomes a subject. The wall pushing against the fruit in order to appear to recede is an articulation of a paradox, but it serves the illusion of space. The supra-articulation is if the wall were to come in front, and stay in front: this he does in other paintings. The moment you see that, it becomes the center for the painting; it's the third subject of the painting. This is an esoteric subject. It's hidden.

SD: Isn't this precisely what Greenberg was looking for?

TS: Yeah. Except that where I'm looking for it, and where I'm finding it, is not in what we call abstract painting.

SD: Well, that isn't the traditional formal argument!

TS: No. This is a perception articulated by the painting of something that is not a representation. It's what you could call a "painting fact." The thing is—going back to Derrida—that it's not something that lends itself to deconstruction. You have to tease the paradox out of the text. You can't just go to a contradiction and say to yourself, "Oh, I think we'll find it here." That's why it doesn't appear very often. It has to work, it can't destroy the painting. It has to be absorbed within the painting, it can't destroy the syntax of the painting, or the suspension of disbelief. And if it's too strong, the painting will crash. And there are moments of crashing: For example, there's a Manet painting, an early painting, a woman with long hair: a nude washing her feet. It's interesting when it becomes metaphysically sinister (laughs), when it becomes another order of event.



Tony Scherman, "Chez les Robespierre II", About 1789, 1996-98, encaustic on canvas, 60 by 60 inches (private collection, USA, courtesy Scott White Contemporary, La Jolla, photo John Howarth).

SD: Yes, when it's like a wink from painter to beholder.

TS: It's an acknowledgment of God in paint. The absence of the logos and the presence of the logos are not a contradiction. It's not a question of one or the other. The both exist and they both don't exist, except that they are in different scales. A paradox is a comparison of two propositions in different scales. (This whole discussion can be thought about in terms of quantum physics.) There's symmetry, but no contradiction, no paradox. But if we compare two propositions that don't exist in the same world—for instance "Daffy Duck," it's very difficult to compare a duck to a human. Metaphors are collapsed paradoxes. Daffy Duck is a contradiction; a duck that is human. I cannot perceive them as a comparison. Daffy Duck is a fusion of opposites. It's what Coleridge called the *esemplastic* imagination. In fact, it's the resolution of paradox—that you could have a human duck.

And you can indeed have a human duck but, because ducks and humans exist in different worlds—or should I say because they are infusible in reality—we have to create a new reality in which to fuse them. The fusion of duck and human being itself is the creation of another world, which is the world of Daffy Duck. It's the world of art. Art is the world of fused opposites! It's like an egg-yolk. And who/what fused the opposites that are water and oil to create the egg-yolk? The natural emulsion par excellence? I will say God because I don't think the chicken did it!

SD: So...?

TS: So with this we come to the second cornerstone. If Jean Baudrillard is right to claim that the effects of a simulation are indistinguishable from the effects of the real, then let me suggest that the



Tony Scherman, "Roses," A Kim Phuc, 2001, encaustic on canvas, 40 by 40 inches (courtesy Galerie Haas & Fuchs, Berlin, photo John Howarth).

structure of the real is very different to the structure of a simulation. One view of the real is that it is a coded message and like all codes works through signs of difference. This is the great contribution of twentieth century thinking culminating in deconstruction: The perception of the qualitative, that is to say horizontal, nature of the real. The simulation is an uncoded message. It is precisely the absence of horizontality that makes a successful simulation work. We are talking here of a lie. Lies are only lies when they are perceived to be the Truth. Here's the point: if my experience of the Truth were to be a simulation of the Truth (because how do I know that what's happening to me isn't caused by a simulation?) then how do I know that the art I'm being fed isn't a simulation of art? How would I recognize real art if there is such a thing? Here's the nitty gritty in painting. If an artist today cannot construct a knee that lives structurally in its metaphor beyond the picture plane, then I know that this artist doesn't have

the power to deceive me. Clearly, s/he doesn't have the choice to have that power. And art that is made out of choice is a very different animal than art that is made by default. The idea that there is no logos has seduced the herd of individual thinkers because without the logos, nothing has to be defended, nothing has to be committed to, I don't have to be responsible for anything. There's the point. It's like playing tennis with the net down. ¹ ²

Notes 1. Gorgias the Sophist, contemporary of Plato, makes three profound and profoundly disturbing propositions. "Nothing exists, if it does exist I cannot know it, if I can know it I cannot communicate it." Gorgias of Leontini c. 483—376 B.C. He wrote a treatise entitled "On That Which Is Not." 2. Phillip Rawson, *The Art of Drawing*, 1983.