

Tal R

Basement Occupation

Interviews

Robert Enright

Border Crossings: Let me start with a really general question and get a sense of what you think painting can do that other media can't.

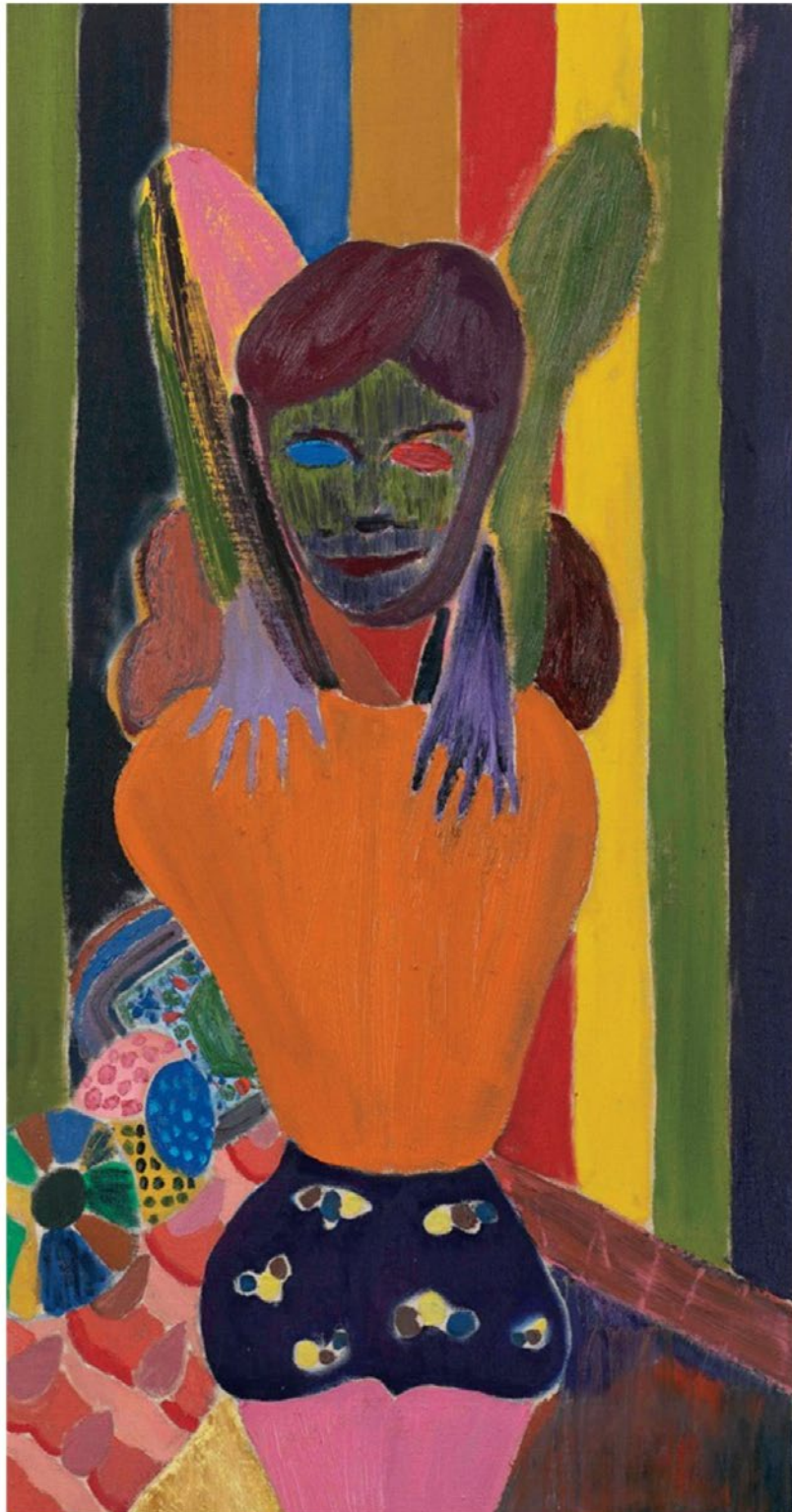
Tal R: My interest in painting has shifted over the years and at the moment I think it's quite interesting to let painting be part of your everyday experience of life. When you look out your window you experience something quite banal. Can painting be part of that? I would also use a word that's quite difficult: painting can be about something real. Something about that specific time you live in, the people around you, your failures. It's about normal life. It's not the aesthetic part; it's not about designing a certain surface. I find all those things unambitious and a bit boring.

When you talk about your work you often refer to decoration or pattern. Is that part of what inevitably happens in the act of making art?

Let's say you want to paint a man with an umbrella. If you're quite clear about this man with the umbrella, at a certain point in the process of painting him there will be a door that you can decide to take or not take. That is the door of letting the painting slip into what I call ornament. That's when you start to breathe with the painting. You start to let it go into its own pattern, its own repetition, its own kind of music. It's the most beautiful moment when this happens because that means the painting sails away under its own direction. I try always to keep the painting on a track towards the man with the umbrella, but in one out of five paintings they sail on their own. They develop their own ornament, their own arabesque.

You have said that at least half the time the painting tells you what it wants to do, how it wants to look.

You know you're doing something wrong when at the beginning of a painting you start thinking, What colour should the shirt be? or, What colour should the walls be? From the start you should be 50 percent clear. Half comes from something you experience that has nothing to do with art. So even though from an aesthetic and formal point of view, it would be wrong to give someone green hair, you have to do it. Actually, I think the best painting doesn't come from painting, it comes from something outside art. Something you saw. So you are walking down the street, looking into a corridor, somebody opens a door and for one second, you see somebody sitting at a table. Boom! Then you start. And it's complicated because to mix an experience like this with paint can be a very bad idea. But that bad idea eventually will make unpredictable, beautiful moves because you're trying to mix oil and water. And the process of combining what doesn't want to be combined, between real life and art, makes extremely beautiful paintings.



Tal R, Susannes Arm, 2014, oil on canvas, 44.12 x 22.88 inches. All images courtesy Cheim & Read, New York. All photographs Anders Sune Berg.

You have referred to your own “little art academy of everyday objects.” I gather that’s the school you continue to attend?

I’m always digesting new material, always saying this is impossible to do and then trying for the impossible way in. It’s like when you have a dream at night. Somebody’s hunting you, you’re in a corner, and they’re going to stab you with a knife. And it’s going to happen in a few seconds. There’s no way out. Suddenly, you slip out from under the corner. That’s exactly the way I treat painting. You set a task for yourself that is impossible, and the beauty of the painting is in solving it. That may be too romantic, but it’s how I think about it.

It’s a kind of pragmatic Romanticism, one based on using what is around you. Is that where your idea of leftovers came from?

I’ve known this word since my childhood. *Kolbojnik* is kibbutz language for leftovers. What’s leftover is put in the *kolbojnik*. You know, our topics are not necessarily what we choose. Maybe in the end, we are just five percent us. The rest is a big *kolbojnik* of histories, socialization, education, genetics. We are just one big hot pot. So if you want to do art, don’t go to the library to search for subjects. You simply deal with what pulls you, what drags you, what you can’t resist. “Obsession,” I think, is the word.

Is it also about seduction? How does that function?

The idea of a painting should be something so simple that it can be explained over the phone. But you can only experience a painting when you stand in front of it. When I paint I always want to give people something that encourages them to get closer to the painting. It can be a girl with blonde hair; it can be a banana; it can be anything that makes the audience feel. Then when they get closer to the painting, what happens in Freudian terms is the *unheimlich*, the uncanny. Maybe it’s something where the viewer loses balance. It’s always important to throw in something that makes it seem as if you could take a step into the painting. I don’t want viewers to stand outside the painting and say, Oh, isn’t that interesting.

Is that what you mean when you say you want to create paintings inside which viewers can wander around?

Let me make an odd comparison. I have a very big dog that I've had for only a year. When you have a dog, you're always standing with other dog owners and they talk about what the dog is feeling. I think we have no clue what kind of feelings a dog has. When people look at paintings they also like to think the figures in the painting have feelings. I think that's all wrong. It's all banal projection. We have to think of painting as a mysterious object that has feeling, but not necessarily our feeling. It's simply something to wonder at. The painting has only one purpose: for us to get lost in.



Fog Over Malia Bay, 2011, oil and dispersion on cardboard in artist frame, 47.5 x 36.5 inches.

Is it also about being in a state of unknowing or vulnerability? I mean that both for you as maker and me as perceiver of what you've made.

I think part of the process of making a painting is that you let the viewer understand it is not done in a complicated way. You don't alienate them; you make them feel it's actually done by somebody. Usually there are mistakes and in the end, they are what open up the painting. Those mistakes are the painting's vulnerability. What makes the painting grand is not only the stuff that succeeds, but the stuff that doesn't succeed.

This ties in with your sense that a bad drawing can make a good painting?

Yes. The last group of paintings I did was the "Allstadt Girls." I had done drawings for this series and I would go into the studio and try to make paintings from them. I found out if a drawing had its own perfection, it was very difficult to open it up into a painting. There was no entrance. So you want there to be uncertainty. You could even say there is a kind of tragic vulnerability, which is perfect for painting. That's when you have to step in and make it right.

One of the paintings from the “Allstadt” series that I particularly liked is called *November*, where I can see echoes of Matisse. In *Winter’s Sleep*, I detect Delaunay and even Milton Avery. Your painting is also a trace of what has already been made.

I have actually done very deep art history, I’ve just never done it in an academic way. I’ve looked and looked and looked. So I could say that I have a deep knowledge, but it’s all visual. When I go into museums, I never stay more than 45 minutes. I find postcards of my favourite works, go into the cafeteria, and sit and really chew on them. I try to take them apart so that I can understand them.



Fog Over Malia Bay, 2011, oil and dispersion on cardboard in artist frame, 47.5 x 36.5 inches.

You make a lovely connection between drawing and dreaming. You say when you dream, you dream what you need. Do you think about painting the same way? Do you also paint what you need?

Out of ten, you can do nine mistakes in a painting. If you feel the necessity in the painting, then you will forgive all nine mistakes. You can do nine great moves in a painting that are all about being elegant and with the right proportions, but if there are no necessities, then it’s still going to be a

mediocre painting.

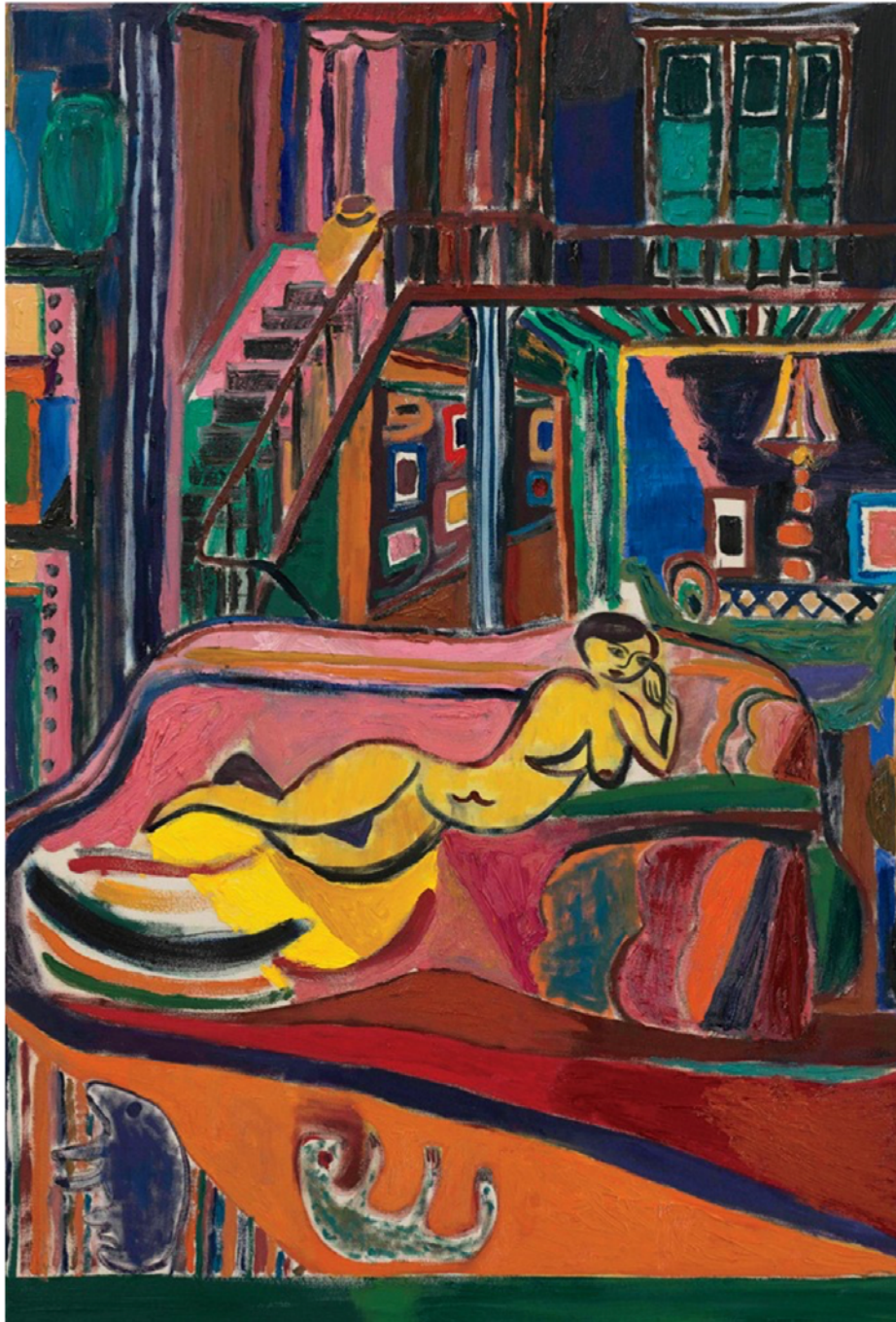
One of the interesting things about the way you come at the making of a painting is to resist everything you’ve already got in your head. It’s as if you perform an act of self-sabotage; you’ve got this idea and then the idea has to be abandoned.

It is not necessarily like that. I don’t ever work without something that moves me, something I’m deeply interested in. But when you mix that interest with art it can get complicated. There will be a moment in every painting where it’s like you’re a child standing on a ferry, and you want to spit against the wind. You will get spit in your face and this often happens when you’re dealing with painting. You get to a point where what you imagine is just not enough. So there is this productive place where you take an idea and free-fall with it.

What you like about the process of making woodcuts is that it creates obstacles. I wonder if there are particular obstacles that come from painting?

Artists always talk about problems. The moment you say you have a technical problem with some material, what you're saying is that it doesn't do what you want it to do. So you have to find out what it does do and see if possibilities emerge from that. I got used to things not doing what I wanted because I grew up not being very technical. As a kid I would get model airplanes and tanks for Christmas and I never managed to finish one. I always fucked them up. I could never repair my bicycle; I couldn't do most things. I think that pushed me to art because suddenly I found a place where my tragic inability had a voice and could even be a language.

When you give interviews a very particular kind of language occurs; references to ghosts and shadow figures and gravestones come up. Is there a reason for that?



The Drawing Class, 2014, oil on canvas, 52 x 34.62 inches.

I heard a sentence the other day that I thought was very beautiful. "The best way to enter a house is through the basement." I think you always have to put a basement in the work. Not literally but something moving in a completely other direction. Something like a shadow. Or something that is pulling in an unpredictable way. When you have a problem with a painting the problem is your expectation. You have an idea which you dress up and that causes trouble.

What do you mean when you say “the painting has two tongues.”

One tongue is what you can reach out for: a man walking on the street, wearing a very specific cap. But there’s another tongue, something else that moves inside the painting. You should always see the first tongue first. But the basement is the other tongue. So when we say people speak in two tongues, we usually mean something negative. But in a painting, it’s amazing.

You have remarked that painting arises out of “a process of slow destruction.” What did you mean by that?



Blondie, 2014, oil on canvas, 38.62 x 26.75 inches.

I said that a long time ago but today this would mean the destruction of imagination and the demise of whatever is possible. I'm not that interested in what I can imagine. I'm more interested in what I couldn't imagine. I think you will always find possibilities in the periphery. But the big challenge is in what I would call the normal. Something that has a normal surface and then slips away, melting like ice cream in your hand. I'm interested in the magic of something quite ordinary.

You've also said that collage is the basis for everything. Is that a methodological premise or a philosophical one?

It's more that I didn't enter from painting, I entered from collage and then slowly slipped into painting. My generation entered from cutting up stuff. ■