

The Brooklyn Rail

Bui, Phong: Art In Conversation – David Novros with Phong Bui

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Portrait of the artist by Phong Bui. Pencil on Paper.

Since his last exhibition of six copper paintings at Earl McGrath Gallery in 2000, David Novros has been working on five monumental paintings which can be seen as his synthesis of early shaped canvas and fresco paintings. On a sunny afternoon this Spring, *Rail* Publisher Phong Bui paid a visit to the painter's studio to talk about his life and work.

Phong Bui (Rail): The first time I saw your work was in 1989 on the second floor of Donald Judd's 101 Spring Street building. It was a fresco that Judd had commissioned in 1969. I remember it had this repertoire of rectangular and right angle forms moving in both vertical and horizontal directions, while all painted with chromatic hues of earthy colors. Knowing that it was minimally executed, it still evokes this strong presence of Florentine frescoes. Would you describe how that came about?

David Novros: Judd was using that space as his laboratory to center on the belief that the placement of a work of art was critical to its understanding. He was thinking of the various paintings and sculptures of the building as “permanent installation.” It worked out well for both of us, because it suits my concept of how a work of art could exist in an architectural space, what I’d call “painting-in-place.” Don’s fresco was my first chance to work in fresco. As for the Italian frescos... they were among the first experiences I had with mural art and they put me on the path I have been following. In the ’60s, painting that was called “minimalism” wasn’t supposed to be “relational.” You were supposed to be a kind of “gestalt” painter but the painting that moved me most (Cezanne) was anything but “non-relational,” so I didn’t want to create that Gestalt through some sort of narrowing.

Rail: So you didn’t fall under the Greenbergian spell?!

Novros: No. There was no connection, and although I admired his earlier writing, I thought that he had too great an influence on some of the painters that I knew.

Rail: Let’s go back to the beginning. You were born in 1941 in L.A., and had studied at the University of Southern California. What sort of work were you doing then?

Novros: Actually, in college, I was more interested in becoming a filmmaker than a painter... partly because I grew up in an environment where film was considered a great art.

Rail: You mean avant-garde film?

Novros: No. I knew what Bruce Connor, Kenneth Anger, and a few others of that generation were doing, but my main interests were with the new cinema coming out of France, Italy, and Japan. My early interest in film, followed by my becoming a painter, is sort of a reversed image of what my father had done. My father (Lester Novros) started as a painter. He’d gone to Europe to study painting and he came back to New York in the early ’30s, and had a showaround the time when Disney was coming to the East Coast looking for artists to work at his studio. Disney was prophesizing that animation would be the art of the 20th Century. My father bought into it, went West, and worked for Disney on *Fantasia*, *Snow White*, and other films. It’s hard to imagine now, but in those days, the Disney “campus” was a very radical cultural scene. Anyway, my father did that for a while, then he started his own animation studio and ended up making documentaries. Meanwhile, he brought home Chaplin, Eisenstein, etc. and we watched the films (in 8mm) as a family—my brother Paul and my mother. I suspect that a lot of us can identify aspects of our lives with what movies we were seeing. In my case, my childhood and adolescence were watching movies...you know, 13 or 14 and seeing Brigitte Bardot. Pretty great.

Rail: *And God Created Woman*. Did you make any films?

Novros: Not really. I worked a bit for my father and made a couple of student films but after a while I couldn’t stand it. I wasn’t really a film-maker. I didn’t want to interact with people that way; I just wanted to work by myself and I found the film-making process too slow and boring. At

that point I was between film and painting. Then, in 1961 I went to Yale Norfolk where I met, among others, Bill Hochhausen, Brice Marden, Chuck Close, Vija Celmins. The students were operating with a lot of energy and each in their own way; they thought they could do something with painting. Coming to New York, seeing great paintings in the museums, hearing the lore about the contemporary NY scene, and having friends who loved painting was a great learning experience.

Rail: After that you went back to L.A. to finish your undergraduate degree in 1963. Then you went to Europe for nearly a year. Where did you stay and what did you see that made such an impression on you?

Novros: I first went to Lisbon, then to Madrid. I had a pensione near the Prado, and spent a part of every day there. I initially wanted to see El Greco's, but on the way to the Greco gallery I passed the Fra Angelico "Annunciations" and never got out of the room. The Italians and Flemish (Rogier van der Weyden's "Deposition") painters became my primary interest. I spent a couple of months painting on the island of Formentera, and then began traveling through Spain. Seeing the Alhambra in Granada was an extraordinary experience for me. It was the first time that I understood painting as something other than an object hanging on a wall. I thought that paintings could be in a fixed place, made for that place, made for the light of the place, experienced kinesthetically. It didn't matter that the "painting" was tiles, it was still painting. From Spain I went to Southern France looking for contemporary examples of mural art. I visited the Leger museum in Biot, where, once you come to the end of a winding road, you see a huge and intense mosaic. Also there were amazing stained glass windows, I was knocked out. When I went to Venice to see Matisse's chapel, I was not interested, but the paper cut-outs on the wall of his Cimiez apartment had the same effect as seeing the Leger work. Then I went to Italy. Rome, Florence, Assisi, Padua, Ravenna, Venice. I got to Venice at the time of the Kennedy assassination and found a letter telling me I'd been drafted. Before coming back to the states, I went to Paris. I joined a reserve unit in L.A. to avoid spending 2 years in the army and spent 6 months at Ft. Ord and Ft. Sill (Oklahoma). When I got back from Europe, the U.S. hadn't declared war on Vietnam and although we were sending "advisors" I didn't have much of an idea about what was happening or what we were doing there, I just figured it was going to be a drag and wanted to get it over with as soon as possible so I could get back to New York and start painting again. Meanwhile we were being trained by Sergeants who were coming back from being "advisors" and every one of them was either an alcoholic, a drug addict and/or a sadist. They'd tell you all this stuff you're going to have to do when you go over to Vietnam and I said, "Okay, I get the picture, I'm out of this." So after working in an artillery unit at Ft. Sill, I went to NY and was placed in something called a "control group" where you didn't have a unit exactly, but they knew where you were, and if they needed you, they'd get you. People in the "control group" were the first sent to Vietnam. Those days were nervous times. My friends and myself were living and hiding illegally in downtown lofts, and once in while the Army guys would come around but I wasn't busted and finally, after 8 years, I got a letter saying that I was going to be discharged but that I would have to join a unit and go to summer camp in Watertown NY. I had no idea what they were talking about but it was the only way to get my discharge papers. So, I closed down my studio and a friend gave me a candy bar of hashish. I went to Watertown.

Rail: In Vietnam, many of my uncle's friends chopped off their index fingers so they couldn't shoot in order to be disqualified.

Novros: Anything that works. Park Place and Bykert gallery artists were active anti-war protesters. So on the one hand, I was protesting, marching, etc. and on the other hand trying not to be called up. In Watertown they found out I was an artist, so they said "We have this coat of arms, can you make us a sign? You don't have to do anything else here for the two weeks, just on your own time make the sign." Every morning I woke up, took a big bite out of that candy bar, and went to this little cabin out in the woods where I was supposed to paint the coat of arms. I drew the image in the first couple of hours and then I began painting the red ground. Two weeks later that's all I'd finished painting.

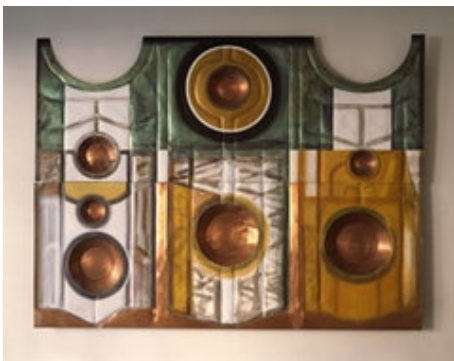
Rail: That candy bar really did the job. *[laughs]*

Novros: Completely Zen.

Rail: So they let you go after that?

Novros: Oh yeah, they were happy to let me go. I was just wasting their time.

Rail: In '66, when you'd come to work in NY, you had your first show at Park Place, which you shared with Mark di Suvero. How did that come about?



David Novros, "Untitled" (1989). Oil on copper, Gallisteo New Mexico. 6 x 9 feet.

Novros: Frosty Myers liked my work and he brought Mark to my studio. Mark asked me to show with him. But my first one person show was in LA at the Dwan Gallery. Virginia Dwan was one of the Park Place patrons and she gave me an exhibition. She was, and is, a terrific patron.

Rail: What was the response to the LA show?

Novros: It was favorably reviewed, but there wasn't much feedback from the local scene. I sold a couple of paintings and considered the show a great success.

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Rail: What sort of paintings did you show?

Novros: I showed a group of six paintings. They were "shaped" canvases that hung in groups on the wall. They were painted white with a glaze of different colored pearlescent pigments. One is in the Menil Collection and one is in the MoMA collection. The others were so badly damaged in storage that they were useless... and now I'm remaking some of them.

Rail: When and how did you begin to show your work with Bykert Gallery?

Novros: In '66 Klaus Kertess came to my studio. He'd already been to see Brice (Marden) and was going to show him. In those days you tried to turn your dealer on to the work of people you liked, so Klaus asked me to show as well, but I was committed to Park Place and Dwan (NY) for the coming year. Meanwhile Klaus was bringing in painters with whom I was very close. Apart from Brice, he was showing Paul Mogenson and Bob Duran as well as Ralph Humphrey (I admired his work even though I didn't know him at the time). In '67, I began showing regularly at Bykert. It was a wonderful gallery. Klaus kept the whole thing going with support from Geoff Byers and Barbara Jakobsen. They had connections to the museums and were very helpful. The gallery was full of interesting sculptors and painters.

Rail: From the late '60s to mid '70s, there was a huge shift in the relationship between Rothko and Newman. When Rothko was emotionally invested in making those broodingly dark paintings for the chapel, Newman was being seen as the father of Minimalism. Were you aware of that situation?

Novros: That isn't how I experienced Rothko and Newman. At the time, I thought Rothko was a great painter (when I was in London in '69, '70, '71, I saw his murals for the Seagram commission at the Tate. I was very moved. I thought they were the best contemporary paintings that I had seen.) I liked Newman's work as well but Rothko's paintings meant more to me. Newman's political activities were in line with the kinds of things I was doing (protesting the war, trying to stop the Broome St. Expressway, etc.) and his writing (like Judd) was very elegant and persuasive. Rothko's attempts to make murals were particularly sad and I learned a lot from seeing the way his work was treated by "patrons." Only the DeMenils understood what he was after. I think that the pain one has to endure to get anything profound made in a public place makes the activity a form of masochism. Those artists who continue to pursue that ambition are a form of endangered species.

Rail: But what do you think about your contemporaries who responded to Newman more than Rothko?

Novros: There are artists who identify with Newman's paintings because they think of them as a rationalist's approach to painting, but I don't understand or see him in that way. I see him as a hierarchical painter who chooses images, colors, gestures that are well within the hierarchies of traditional Western painting. Especially the color. Some of the paintings are overwhelmingly beautiful. As far as what makes a good one as opposed to a bad one? Why does one have a presence and the other doesn't? Often you just can't say.

Rail: You're right.

Novros: That's the strangest thing. I think Brice has a particular talent for identifying the image with the object in a way that gives his paintings their presence. Not only a physical presence...but an emotional one. He has always had that feel for the boundaries of his paintings.

Rail: I never understood the references made between Brice and Pollock. I always felt that those paintings made between '86 and '88 were angular and architectural, which recall the calligraphic gesture of [Franz] Kline. But starting with *Cold Mountain Series* the forms become more sinuous and slow-moving in their overall movement. I was thinking especially of Brice's recent paintings in the same light of the late De Koonings.

Novros: I think it is interesting that when I read interviews and articles relating to Brice, my name and work are rarely mentioned but you are asking me a lot of questions about him... having said that... I think Brice was very influenced by Kline and De Kooning.

Rail: You were 25 when your double right angle ("Untitled" 1965) was included in Lawrence Alloway's *Systemic Painting* at the Guggenheim in 1966. What was that like?

Novros: It was fun. Alloway was a smart, clever guy and he made an effort to see what was happening with a lot of people. So the show felt very communal. The opening was really for artists.

Rail: How about *A Romantic Minimalism* at the ICA (Institute of Contemporary Art) in Philadelphia the following year?

Novros: Don't you think "Minimalism" is already bad enough, but "Romantic Minimalism"?
[laughs]

Rail: And *Modular Painting* at the Albright-Knox in 1970?

Novros: Robert Murdoch curated the show, and if you look at his catalogue, I think you will see what a strong group of painters were shown.

Rail: Was that your first shaped painting?

Novros: In '65 I began painting multi-paneled portable murals. The individual panels were non-rectangular. I made the painting that was later shown at the Guggenheim in my studio on West Broadway and Broome. I wanted to paint on the wall, but I didn't have any commissions, so I compensated with the modular work. In '67 I began using a right angle form almost exclusively. It was for me very expressive.

Rail: Could you tell us about the show *Marden, Novros, Rothko: Painting in the Age of Actuality* at the Institute for the Arts at Rice University in 1975?

Novros: That show happened because of a man called Harris Rosenstein. He had written an article (“Total and Complex”) about Brice, Paul Mogensson, and me for *Art News* (May 1967). He thought about art in a way that I admired. He knew that I wanted to make painting-in-place (by 1975, I’d made frescoes at MoMA and another for a private commission in addition to Judd’s). In the late ’60s (I believe) he began working for Dominique DeMenil in Houston as a kind of ad hoc curator. I proposed that he do a show with Brice and I that it would allow us to create specific paintings for specific spaces. Mrs. DeMenil was running a program at Rice University out of a place called the “barn.” It was a big corrugated shed that allowed for flexible exhibition spaces. Brice and I made work for the barn while the Rothkos were shown in the gallery of the Art Dept. Paul Winkler oversaw the installation and Sheldon Nodelman wrote a catalogue essay. Ironically, I suggested Nodelman to Rosenstein—I’d read him in *Art in America* on Roman Painting and I loved the way he described spatial aspects of the painting. I thought, “this guy could really understand what we were doing.” Instead of doing what we thought he would do, he launched into an elaborate art critical dialogue between himself and the writing of Michael Fried. It had nothing to do with our ambitions. He never interviewed me or talked to us about what we intended to do for the show. He simply didn’t understand the logic of the relationship between the three rooms I made (I think of all three as one painting experience) which was based on a color logic that involved a progression of “chromatic” to “gray” walls. He was more interested in a concept about contemporary art criticism. The show was an extension of what we were doing when we made exhibitions in galleries. We tried to respond to the place and to make work that had an implied relationship—one painting to another—this wasn’t interior decorating—Now, that sort of implied permanence of the relationships between the individual paintings seems to have been forgotten. Just ask yourself, “How will this painting look outside of the museum/gallery context?” [laughs]

Rail: But there was a radical break from those module paintings to site-specific fresco paintings. Did that make it difficult for people to show your work?

Novros: Yes.

Rail: Unlike the commissioned works which you execute within a certain time frame, with paintings in the studio you tend to allow various stages of revisions, painting over them in order to get the right images. And the word “image” is taken so lightly because of our culture of mass reproduction...

Novros: Yeah, what’s the image of vulnerability? There’s no single one. Right?

Rail: Right. Even if you have in mind to paint an image of vulnerability, it would take a long time to arrive at the universal reading of the image.

Novros: As long as it takes.

Rail: But at the same time, how do you synthesize this sense of humanity associated with Romanesque and Renaissance art, with the minimalist process?

Novros: I don’t try to make my work with a minimalist process. The various “rules” of 20th century abstract painting disappear in the presence of the painting by great painters. I am trying to identify the poetic reality of the paintings. I don’t have any particular system. Sometimes I paint one area of a painting for years—trying to find the “right” light. I keep working till the painting

gives me permission to move on. The image is only one part of the painting and if that were the only thing it would be easy to “finish” but the totality is more complicated and seems to take me longer. I think I am coming close to an understanding of what I’m trying to do and that allows me to continue.

Rail: You also have a reputation for destroying your own paintings which you’ve been working on for years...

Novros: Yes. But I feel that I made a big jump by destroying them because they are continued in the new work. My frescoes have been vandalized and nearly ruined, but that sort of destruction seems to be of less interest to people than my own decisions to stop the process.

Rail: It’s what we would call a Frenhoffer syndrome. You remember the story told by Emile Bernard about Cézanne when *The Unknown Masterpiece* was brought up!

Novros: Yeah, he stood up in tears, and, striking his chest with his index finger, said “Frenhoffer, c’est moi!” That’s a great line, whether he said it or not. I hadn’t read Balzac’s book until a few months ago. But I’d really like to play down all this talk about my eccentricity, because I don’t see myself as such a character.

Rail: Good. This demystifies all the things that people have said about you. Anyway I know that frescos and mosaics have made a profound impact on your work, but how about cave paintings?

Novros: I only saw caves in the Pyrennes, and Cantabria about 5 years ago (although I had seen petroglyphs and paintings in the southwest many years ago). Seeing them confirmed everything I have been thinking about and made the hair stand up on the back of my neck. In the caves, the light of a torch is the only boundary. The walls and the image are one. My ambition is to make something that’s part of a place in the same way. Do you remember Tarkovsky’s *Andrei Rublev*?

Rail: Sure, it’s one of the most beautiful films ever made, especially about art.

Novros: I love Rublev walking around with the other two artist-monks Danil and Kirill to look for work. It is said that Rublev couldn’t paint “Last Judgements” because he didn’t have the heart to make people feel frightened.

Rail: It’s incredible that, after having observed the misery of human suffering during the Tartar invasion, especially the rape scene, he took a vow of silence.

Novros: When people ask how I started making frescos... I ask if they have seen *Andrei Rublev*. Do you remember the scene where the bell maker dies and his son lies to the patrons, saying that he knows how to do the work? But he has no idea. He does intuitively, chasing the lightning to find the right clay. When the bell is made, it becomes time for the first ringing and the boy doesn’t know if it will ring or break. When it rings, he breaks down in tears. Having witnessed the boy’s pure faith, Rublev breaks his vow of silence and tells him “You’ll cast bells. I’ll paint icons.” That is similar to the process by which I became a muralist.

Rail: The boy Boriska restored Rublev’s faith. In his book, *Sculpting In Time*, Tarkovsky spoke of art as a timeless and insatiable longing for the spiritual, for the ideal. He strongly believed that longing is what draws people to art. And for that reason he was very skeptical about Modern art, which he felt had given up the search for meaning of existence in order to affirm the value of the individual for its own sake. Inner calling requires sacrifice...

Novros: I agree with Tarkovsky.