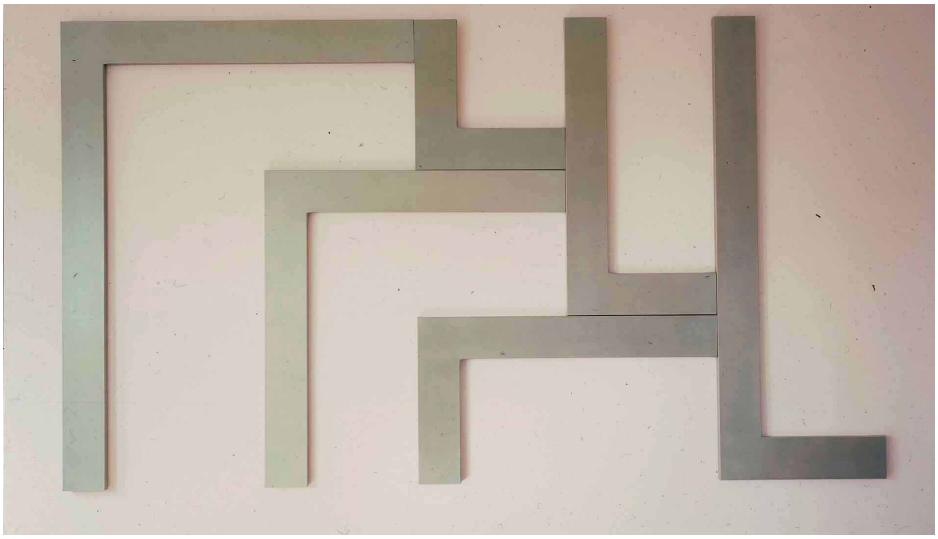
Whitehot Magazine of Contemporary Art
Butter, Thomas: August 2009, Interview with David Novors
August 2009

August 2009, Interview with David Novros, Part 1



Untitled, 1966, 6 panels, acrylic on canvas, Murano pigment, 8'X 12", collection of the artist.

David Novros has been painting and showing his work in NYC and internationally since 1965. I visited him in his studio in Manhattan earlier this year and we talked about a wide array of subjects bearing on his work and career.

He will be opening at Paula Cooper Gallery in Chelsea Tuesday, September 1, 2009 with an exhibition featuring a selection of paintings from the sixties.

This interview will be published in three parts.

Part Two (http://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/with-david-novros-part-2/1931) Part Three (http://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/with-david-novros-part-3/1934)

TB: *Phong Bui did a great job interviewing you for the Brooklyn Rail in June 2008* (http://www.brooklynrail.org/2008/06/art/chuck-close-with-phong-bui-june-08).*He covered your development as an artist, important exhibitions you have been included in throughout your career, and your close association with Don Judd, Brice Marden, Paul Mogenson and many other artists in NYC. You explain your involvement with Park Place, Dwan, and Bykert Galleries, and give the details of your recent exhibition history. A fascinating and impressive account. As you and Phong talk, I get a sense of the depth and breadth of your activities. I looked up the shows, articles, and reviews you mention and I learned a lot about the ideas and events shaping the art world during that period in NYC. Artists were still, by and large, determining the way things moved and developed with art in the public sphere: there seems to have existed an active, viable community. Not as true today.*
Anyway, for this interview, I don't want to go over the same territory you and Bui describe and evoke so well. I thought of doing two things - one is to get further into the meaning of your

work, the other is to talk more about your experiences in NYC and what they have meant to you.

DN: I'm happy to talk with you about that. I just finished an interview for the Smithsonian Institution- they are doing an artists' interview series…I did it for the Mellon and I've done a number of these interviews in the last few years. I begin wondering: "Is this the sort of thing you do when you have terminal cancer?"

(lots of laughter)

Maybe I had better go to the doctor, since everybody wants me to do these interviews… (more laughter).

TB: *I looked up the one from the Smithsonian- it hasn't been transcribed yet, so it isn't available.*

DN: At any rate I'll be happy to talk with you about anything you want to talk about…

TB: *OK. I went back to look at an article that you seemed pretty enthusiastic about. It was written a while ago-*

DN: Harris Rosenstein.

TB: *Yeah, I was pretty impressed with the writing…the guy is pretty good.*

DN: Yes… he's dead now. He was really an astounding person. He was writing for Artnews under Tom Hess - they were friends - he came out of a science and philosophy background essentially. He had known and become friends with many of the New York artists- especially Elaine and Bill DeKooning, Rosenberg- he was involved with a certain kind of milieu. When he went to Artnews, Harris did a piece on Paul Mogenson, Brice Marden and me. Really, I think even today, it is probably one of the best things that has been written about us.

TB: *Yeah I just read it this morning.*

DN: It is very good. He then went to the DeMenil Foundation. He was responsible for an exhibition I did with Brice and some paintings of Rothko's that were left over from the chapel project. I pitched the idea of that exhibition to him, and he bought it.

TB: *You had 3 rooms, right?*

DN: I had 3 rooms which were one painting. It is not well understood that it is not meant to be three separate rooms…it is meant to be an inter-related cycle. 2 of the rooms are at the DeMenil Foundation, one of them is at the Fort Worth Contemporary Art Museum. I always thought they could be lent back, but they never are…One of them was shown recently at the DeMenil itself, on a single wall. It just adds to the confusion about how the work is supposed to be seen - I am always happy to have it seen, but it would be nice if it were put in a permanent location somewhere…that's what I would like to have happen.

"Room" 3- 1975 10'x 20' one of three rooms-each 10'x 20',oil on canvas, Collection-Menil Foundation, Houston, Texas

TB: *And that would be for work throughout your career - locations set up for individual pieces?*

DN: Yes, really from the beginning, and even before…if you have read the interviews, you would know that I have always thought of myself as essentially a wall painter without jobs… and in order to do them I have had to invent ways of painting (to make them) acceptable to me as murals.

TB: *Yeah I read that- did that come from seeing Fra Angelico at San Marco?*

DN: That had a great deal to do with it, but that isn't the actual… you can't pinpoint that as the actual raison d'etre for that kind of painting. I have been interested in wall painting since I was a kid. I was encouraged to do it by my father- I used to paint murals in the garage- each year I would paint over the previous one and paint another. I did this for a few years. I liked painting murals. I then forgot about it for a long time, and made "normal" student work- regular picture paintings. After a while, as a student at USC, I saw some Clifford Still paintings-4 big wall paintings. They interested me…then I was able to go to NYC- and I saw the great paintings in person which I had never seen before.

TB: *At the Met?*

DN: At the Met, at the Modern, at the Albright-Knox…everywhere. I had gone to the Albright Know when I was driving across the country. It was an eye-opener. And then I went to Europe. That was the moment when I understood- through a series of events- the kind of work I wanted to do…I went first to Spain, in Spain I went to Grenada, and I saw the Alhambra, and it occurred to me that painting could have that same quality of being non-pictorial, or being "not a rectangle", not a picture in a rectangle. But instead, something that worked directly with light and space. I didn't quite know how that was going to resolve itself in my work, but when I went to Italy and saw the frescoes, I was bitten by the bug to make that

kind of work. Subsequently, every time I see a cave painting for the first time, or a new fresco cycle, or mosaic, I am equally encouraged. It is very difficult, almost, for me to look at regular pictures. I adore many, many, many paintings that were painted that way- but my preference is for the other.

TB: *In some of your interviews they get very specific about references to nature…not just the light coming into the room, or the light the painting makes, but direct references to nature. I'm curious about other references. Rosenstein says your work is "poetic" but he doesn't say what the poetry is. He describes the conditions you set up to get things moving, but he doesn't actually get to the part where he describes what is happening…*

DN: Well perhaps when you get to that point it isn't really poetic…

TB: *That's the question, you know?*

DN: I don't like talking about that aspect of my work. I'm uncomfortable talking about content directly. I make poems, I write poetry. If anybody reads my poetry, they'll have a better idea than any specific reference I could make to meaning or content, which I try to avoid doing at all costs.

TB: *OK. Um, your poetry…could I have some of that to include as well?*

DN: Of course. That would be great. Two of my things have actually been published. I never had any intention of making publishable poetry. What I have done over the years is usually, before I get to work, I sit down, and look at the things and then I start thinking. Certain kinds of language, or other kinds of observations that go on when I am doing this looking begin to make their way into my head. Sometimes this suggests a kind of literary poetic content. So I write them down. And then I go back and I mull them over. But I never sit down to write a poem. They are internal conversations, almost always related to my painting.

TB: *Related to your painting, but really the subject seems to be your mind, the way you are describing it…*

DN: No, that distinction between your mind and the external reality that determines your processes is something that is beyond my ability to comprehend.

TB: *The distinction.*

DN: Yeah you get into the completely Zen conundrum. It can give you a headache. Trying to make that distinction.

TB: *So the condition just exists.*

DN: Being a painter is a condition. I love that way of describing being a painter. And making paintings that are themselves conditions. In fact, Rothko used to talk about painting that way. That he was really making a condition. I find it is very helpful to think of my own work in that way.

TB: *Did you speak with him?*

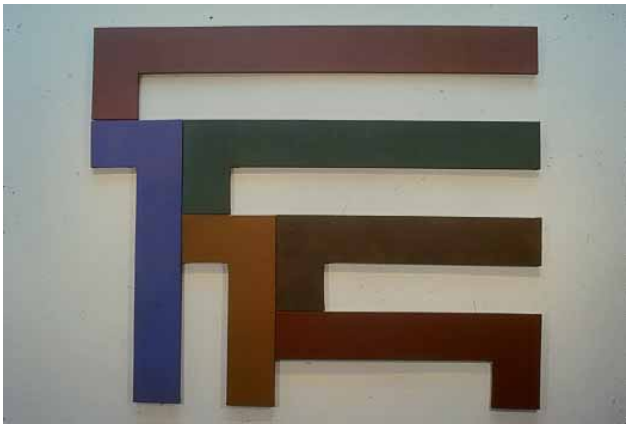
DN: Once. He came to the opening at Park Place (Gallery)- the first show I was part of in NY with Mark DiSuvero, and I was introduced to him- just a handshake. I lurked around, and then I asked someone with whom he had been talking- "What did he say? What did he say?" He said-"He's OK, but we'll see what it's like in forty years."

(lots of laughter)

And that was the perfect thing to say, because what, I was 24 years old, 25 years old? Who could say anything about a 24 year-old's work.

TB: *Yeah. But he was there.*

DN: He was there, and the paintings were good paintings. Those are the ones I will show with Paula- a group of paintings from the '60's. Some of the things she showed when she was at Park Place.



Untitled, 1966-67 oil on canvas, 10' x 15' collection of the artist.

TB: *She worked there, right?*

DN: Yes she was the Director the second year when I was there.

TB: *Do you know Richard Van Buren?*

DN: I did very well. In fact, when I first came to NY, Van Buren had a studio on West Broadway and Broome. A very narrow little building, very small. There was a guy there named Dan Dudrow who had been at Yale Norfolk with me. I heard that Stella had a studio there too. I was staying with a friend named Bill Hochausen who was fantastic to me when I first came- very open and welcoming. I had met him that summer of 61 at Yale, along with Marden, Close and Vija Celmins and a whole lot of people. Bill was really, really, sweet to me, and put me up at his place, nearby. I heard through the grapevine there was a room available at this other place. There was a Greek Diner on the ground floor. This is a long way of saying, yes Dick was there. He was very welcoming and nice. We showed at a bunch of galleries together.

TB: *So, I don't want to bug you with this…you call it a "condition".*

DN: I don't call it a condition, it came up in the conversation and I went with it. I would like to stick with my original….I'm not trying to be mysterious. I'm trying to make the point that the

kind of "pinpointing" of intention, or content, seems false to me. It seems like a false way to describe the process as I know it. It doesn't work that way. Maybe for some people. When I was young I could have answered that in 5 seconds. I could have told you all the things, everything. And if you kept listening to me before you fell asleep, you would have known probably just as little as when I started. But also, my earlier paintings were much more formal than the paintings I'm doing now. They were simple. I was really involved to a great degree with resolving ideas I had had with extremely formal means. Thinking in formal ways. For instance at the time when Harris Rosenstein wrote the piece that's where my mind was. About 5 or 6 years later I was moving away from that kind of thinking, that way of approaching the paintings.

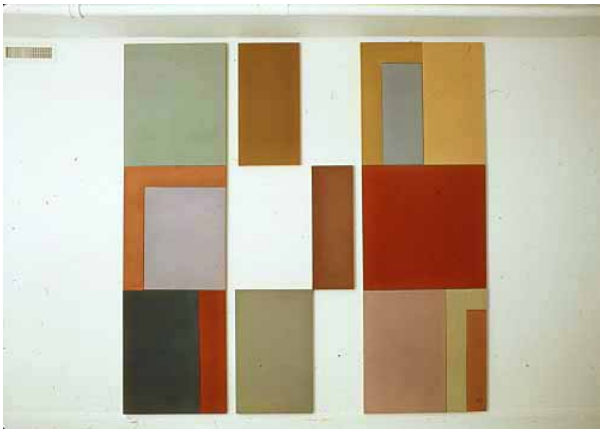
TB: *They were a uniform color, but what he calls "complex color".*

DN: They weren't uniform, in the sense of one color, they were made up out of materials and ways of painting that made the paintings shift in light. When I first came to NY and was in the studio, the one I told you about, there had been a piano in that studio. I shoved that piano against the wall, and I got a fan, and I turned it into a spray booth. I was interested in paintings that modulated through the spectrum. They weren't supposed to be one color, they were supposed to be all colors, and move through the spectrum. They had a lot to do with my interest in Byzantine painting, having seen Ravenna, and seen that kind of color. After a while spraying and doing that, I decided that I was going to attempt to achieve that kind of quality without having multiple kinds of color, chromatic activity. About that point I was walking down West Broadway, and there was a store there- Harry's Paint Store. All the painters went there. He was this guy who just had house paint for the most part. He was kind of a bullshitter. We would all go there and buy our stuff from him. So I walked out of there one time, and I saw a tin can, and on the edge of the can was this weird stuff that changed colors as I walked by it. I had all kinds of associations with it immediately; I was like, "Wow". I come from California, from LA, and I had seen paint similar to that on cars. I thought of that. And also when I was in London I had seen "The Cup of Lyserges". Have you seen that? Maybe in the British museum. It is a Roman glass goblet that, when seen from one side is red, and from the other side goes green. I had no idea how it was done- some kind of refraction/reflection. The thing that killed me was that this material I saw at the edge of the can at Harry's paint store did the same thing. Depending on the undercoat, and the way you painted over it, or used it in an admixture with paint, you could get different sorts of effects. I began using that. That's the kind of "simple to complex" stuff Harris was talking about. Before that I had used metallic pigment, and other things that did not simply allow for one reading. I was trying to make paintings that could be seen by people in motion, and by light that was in motion. Not a fixed kind of gallery concept.

TB: *Is that the Murano paint?*

DN: Yes that's the Murano paint.

TB: *So the paintings you are going to show at Cooper in September are these?*



Untitled, 1966- 8 panels, acrylic on canvas, Murano pigment, 8'x 23', collection of the artist.

DN: Yes. We haven't really finalized it, but I'm going to show a green painting I never exhibited. It is one of the earliest paintings I made, and for some reason, I really don't know why now, I never showed it. But it's green with some gold powder in it…and I'm going to show a big painting that was in the show at the Guggenheim Museum- "Systemic Painting".

TB: *Alloway, right?*

DN: Right. That painting is a kind of big double right angle painting with a little end. It's painted in multiple layers of everything- it starts with a red and ends up with a blue, with some of this metallic stuff in it. Gold metallic stuff in it. So it shifts quite a lot. I'm not sure about the other ones. I have a group of the pearlescent ones- I may, or may not, show one or two of those. In another room I'm showing paintings that were made later, in '69-which are oil paint. At that time I was making multi-colored paintings. Also I'm going to show one that I showed there last year- I'm going to re-show it- which was the first time I began…it was one that had been monochromatic, and a couple of years later I painted it as a multi-colored painting.

TB: *The front room has natural light in it, no?*

DN: Both rooms have natural light- the big room has a large skylight, the small room has a front bay of windows.

TB: *Right. So that's good, huh?*

DN: Excellent! I love the space. I have to say, because I have known Paula for so many years, it may get easier to want to show again, and also because the space is so beautiful. I think it is a really good space for my paintings.

Part Two (http://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/with-david-novros-part-2/1931) Part Three (http://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/with-david-novros-part-3/1934)

August 2009, Interview with David Novros, Part 2

Graham studio, acrylic on canvas, 2006, Venice CA. (David Novros on left.)

Part One (http://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/with-david-novros-part-1/1927) Part Three (http://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/with-david-novros-part-3/1934)

TB: *In your interview with Phong Bui, You are talking at one point about the difference between Rothko and Newman?*

DN: Yeah.

TB: *And you used the word presence? Which is a word I love.*

DN: Yeah I like the word too. It explains the things you can't explain.

TB: *Yeah. That's why I'm coming back to it.*

(laughter)

DN: You are going to try and pin me…

TB: *Nah, I'm not trying to do that. I think that even if you can't talk about it, there are ways to talk around it. This can be illuminating. Somehow this has to be able to be done, otherwise things are incoherent somehow. Right? I think I understand that you want your work to come to us through the senses, empirically- my senses, or your senses. But that is a way of talking about it.*

DN: But the issue is, for instance (how can I state this?)- the distinction between the senses and perception- what I was trying to say before- is a very badly understood issue. I don't understand it, I'm interested in it, I'm intrigued by it and it has something to do with my paintings, but it is only one of a lot of different things that have to do with my paintings.

TB: *OK but you still don't want to talk about it too much?*

DN: I still don't want to talk about it too much. My father always tried to get me to talk with him about (quote, unquote) color. He was a very bright guy, very interested.

TB: *What did he do?*

DN: He had been a painter, when he was young, sort of Cezannian, and then he became a filmmaker. He worked for Disney as an animator. He was quite well versed in all these sort of things we are talking about, and he was writing a book. He would want to talk about color in film and he would ask me about color. And I kept refusing to answer him, because I didn't like the distinction being made between "color" and "light". And color as this, or that- (here David Novros moves his hand along the edge of the table, patting the surface in an interval). I don't like the distinctions made between various kinds of elements. I prefer the interconnectedness of the elements, as expressed in the painting, not in some other form of expression. I told you a lot about the paintings here in the studio, didactic things about them. But as I say I would never repeat it as a kind of explanation. It is only talking about- "this is my thumb"- that's incontrovertible. This is my thumb! (laughter). I'm happy to say that sort of thing. But beyond that, even kicking and screaming, I won't go there. If you like I'll read you some poetry…

TB: *Well OK, I would, but I want to go to another place. I'm not going to try and pin you down…*

DN: That's what everybody says…and that's probably the reason you're going to another place…
(laughter)

TB: *No, no, I want to hear your poetry, I just…*

DN: But the poetry would explain a lot to you, I think. It would explain the kinds of things

you are trying to talk about.

TB: *OK. I'm not going to talk about those things, quite. I just want to move sideways a bit.*

DN: OK.

TB: *To the history. I'm a kid in art school, in the early '70's. I'm reading about Donald Judd. This is the Philadelphia College of Art. Raphael Ferrer is there, Italo Scanga is at Tyler.*

DN: I spoke at Tyler one time. The painter Stephen Greene was there and he invited me. He had been a big influence on Stella at one point, I was told. Anyway I'm sorry you were saying…

TB: *No that's OK. I had started reading about contemporary art. It seemed so crazy. My teachers, a couple of them had been educated at the Barnes Foundation in the French tradition…*

DN: That's interesting…

TB: *And all of a sudden I realized- "This is really something else…what is going on with "Minimalism"?"*

DN: Yes. I had something of that experience. I went to Europe and came back to the United States. Before I had left, I read had Judd in Arts Magazine. There was a very bright librarian at the University of Southern California. He stocked "It Is", he stocked "Arts" and he stocked the most radical kinds of magazines, and the best writing on art at the time. I started reading it, even though I had never seen the painting that was being discussed. I was interested, fascinated, and obviously dying to get to NYC and check it out. So then when I went to Europe, I had a totally different kind of experience: huge paintings and these big monumental fresco cycles- things that were outside of the historical lineage that one is taught- because they are not "pictures". Many of them are made by anonymous artists. That put them outside of the interests of most people. I love Fra Angelico. But as much as I love Fra Angelico, there are any number of nameless fresco painters I like just as much. So then when I came back to the States, I began seeing work by people like Judd and Stella in Los Angeles in the San Paulo Bianalle Exhibition. It was exhibited at the LA County Museum. That stuff made perfect sense to me as related to the kind of thing I had seen in Europe- I don't know why, I can't tell you why. I had been looking at Roman floor mosaics, and wall mosaics in Madrid. I had spent a lot of time looking at them. I was very influenced by them. These paintings, especially those by Stella, you would see geometric, free-floating things on the wall- they reminded me of the mosaics, the things I had seen. The shaped, one-color paintings, not so much the black ones, but the purple ones, the silver and copper ones…I liked those paintings a lot, they meant a lot to me in the same way that Judd's work meant a lot to me. Not that they had the same feeling. But they were fresh, they were new- what you are trying to talk about. Judd's writing was the same way. Judd's writing cut through all the bullshit, went right to the experience, it was profound.
He was a great writer.

TB: *Yes.*

DN: So there's this confluence with what I had already been thinking and what was going on

in New York. At least there was in my mind. Maybe there really wasn't, but in my mind…It seemed like the same idea. You wanted to do away with the paradigm of the art object bought by a collector, hung up on their wall, shown in a white space, with the single lights, soulless, no use. The use had to be built into them. I think that was true of the Abstract Expressionists. I was trying to make that point about Newman, and Rothko, Still, Kline, Pollock of course. They seemed to be muralists (I'm retracing my thoughts). They seemed to be muralists who didn't have walls. None of them wanted to buy into the WPA concept about how to use art, which is understandable. But they were all interested in that kind of public expression of a private idea, on a huge scale…They were unable to get the jobs. They tried: if you read their histories, you see them trying to do wall painting, or architectural things, but never able to really get it to happen. So I think they built that into their paintings. So their paintings became places.

TB: *That is really interesting. When you say-"a private idea"- for them, is it more private than it had been?*

DN: I think so, yes.

TB: *Would it be Existential then? Was that part of the thought then, was that in the background? The notion of the level of responsibility each individual has…I have always wondered…*

DN: "Existential" is a loaded word in regard to painting. I'm interested in it. I won't deny it. I think "existential behavior, existential thought" has a specific meaning that can be ascribed to a lot of these painters we were talking about. I don't think they were Existentialists. But I think all of them were involved with questions of being that had been talked a lot about on a literary level by the Existentialists, but had not been painted.

TB: *It was in the air, right?*

DN: I think so. I think the music, the jazz, the poetry, in America, specifically is what I'm talking about. I think it was a very exciting moment in a very repressive culture. These people were able to find their existential selves within their art.

TB: *It is inspiring. I missed it, I was too young. But looking back it is inspiring. I met Judd once, he was very nice to me. It was in Philadelphia, I went up to him, it was a thrill for me.*

DN: Hmm. It is curious. Everybody has a "Rashomon" circumstance with Judd. Everybody has their own attitude towards Judd. I loved him, he was very tough. He was a tough guy, and there are some aspects of his ideas I don't agree with…I think he was limited, in some kind of way, after the mid-'70's- he really cut a lot of stuff off. He and I had been close, and when I made the fresco (at his place in SoHo) he was encouraging, he really liked my work.
But the moment I began exploring other ways of painting, that was it, I was no longer doctrinaire. Although we remained good friends, there was never that kind of interchange again, he was never interested in coming by and seeing what I had made, anymore. As long as it supported his concepts about things, he would be interested. That's not true all together, because he loved Chamberlain, and he loved Kenny Price, and Larry Bell. He loved a lot of people's work. You know what I'm saying...but in my case I guess he just didn't like where I went.

TB: *He loved Bontecou, and Kusama.*

DN: Yeah he was odd…In painting he liked Reinhart, he collected the Swiss color grid painter- I can't remember his name. He liked his work. That all made sense based on who he was. But he did like all this other stuff, plus he was so generous because he was willing to share his space, and money, and time, with other artists, and give them a chance to do other work. Which almost nobody does- other artists' ego are so gigantic that almost nobody is willing to make that kind of gesture.

TB: *Right. I asked him- "What does that phrase mean, "root, hog, or die"? He smiled and said it was a Missouri farmer's expression. It was great.*

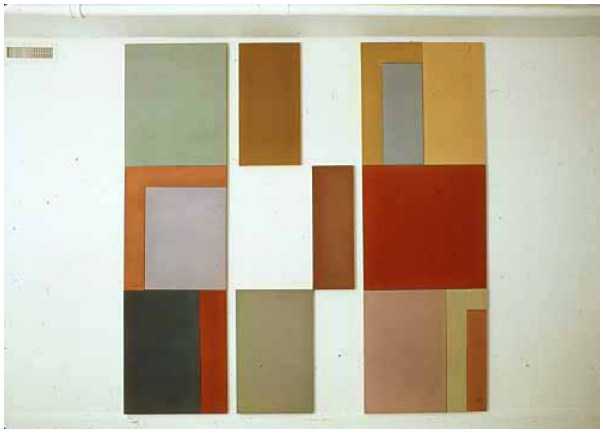
(laughter)

DN: That's right! Yeah there was that. People tend to forget that he was a philosophy major at Columbia- Shapiro was there- it was a great moment. He got turned on initially by painting. I mean, how can you give the Don Judd history lesson?

TB: *I know…OK, you want to read some poetry?*

DN: Do you want me to?

TB: *Yes.*



Untitled, 1969, oil on canvas, 15 panels, 9'x 9', collection of the artist

DN: I'll only do it because I think that it is a way of moving the discussion outside of the jargon of the art world. And the constructs. I first started really allowing it to be published for a catalog that Michael Auping did for an exhibition called "Geometric Painting". I really objected to the title, and told him I wouldn't be in the show if it was going to be about geometric painting.

TB: *At the Albright-Knox?*

DN: Yes. Because I felt in the same sense that Newman didn't like being included in geometric painting shows- not that I felt that my work looked anything like Newman's, or was

about Newman's- but I thought that is was a broad and meaningless categorization. I felt it was bad- like being put in a "minimal art" exhibition. All these conventions are just there for the purposes of sales…and I objected to them. So I included a poem, instead of a statement. Instead of some sort of formal writing, which I could do…I wrote a poem, which says more about how I am thinking, and where my paintings are coming from, than if I were to make some sort of statement. As I say, all the statements I have made, for example, in ArtNews, I find embarrassing in retrospect. And if I were a better poet, I would probably find my poetry embarrassing too.

(lots of laughter)

But I don't. And it still seems true to me. A friend of mine died recently, a sculptor named Robert Graham, he was my closest friend for many years. His dying has been very tough for me. He had a role in my life no one else has had. I have been very, very close to Brice (Marden) or to Paul Mogenson, or my friend Bob Duran who died as well. Graham was in Los Angeles. In fact the last thing he did was to build a new building, and make very interesting new kinds of sculpture before he died. This building is a huge place. He, like Judd was an incredibly generous guy, and he would say- "You come, and paint paintings all over the place in my building." And I did, I painted 5 murals for him, shortly before he died. That was the last fresco cycle I have done. I did a lot of writing about them. I was thinking, not about death specifically, but certainly longevity (laughs) was playing a role in my thinking.

TB: *Do you have pictures of that work?*

DN: Yes I do, I can show you some pictures…hand me those two little notebooks over there. See that building on the one? That's the building that he built.

TB: *It's beautiful. Did he design that as well?*

DN: He designed another earlier one for himself and his wife, Angelica Houston. Then in the adjoining lot he built this other huge studio as a workspace with a foundry for himself and a space for her as well. His son designed the 2nd building, and saw to getting it built. It was very important for Bob to tell people that his son, Steven, had been responsible for doing it. Bob's influence was everywhere to be seen- he is the only person I have ever truly said I have collaborated with on a painting. I have never done that with anyone else. I have wanted to collaborate with architects, but I have never found one I could deal with…but I was willing to accept Bob's needs on this job. He would say- "What about…how about doing another one over here? Do something else over there." I would say- "OK!" And I would do it. It actually worked out OK.

TB: *What was the new sculpture he was working on?*

DN: I can show you a piece. He was no longer making things based on verisimilitude.

TB: *Oh really! That is very surprising!*

DN: He was making very loose drawings and sculpture. Drawings and wax. They are figurative. They remind me a bit of the DeKooning sculpture. They are somewhat like that. You now this guy had been looking hard for 50 years at women and other subjects to make his work, so all that information morphed in his psyche to make these new, very different works. I think people have a lot of trouble with them because they have expectations.

TB: *Sure.*

DN: That is unfortunate. I am hoping eventually people get a chance to see this stuff. At this point a woman, Noriko Fujiyama is still manning the phones and his son is still there. It is not really open to the public, it is going to be a while. Very complicated. I am hoping maybe Jeremy Strick, who is going to the Nasher Sculpture Center, will be interested in doing something with his work because he liked Bob and he knew him…Strick has expressed an interest in sculptors who use video and photography, which Bob had done since the '60's. In the mid-'60's he was showing with Nick Wilder and he made some films- sort of semi-pornographic using these wax models he had made…they are quite beautiful, really terrific. And he always used photography. And then the last 10 or 15 years he started using video and computers a lot, and he began making movies about his work. He had a couple of exhibitions with Doug Christmas at Ace in LA and they showed some of those, they were running through the exhibition.

TB: *How long ago did he die?*

DN: He died uh, now, two months…

TB: *Oh wow! That's really close.*

DN: He died quickly- he was sick for about 5 months.

TB: *I'm sorry.*

DN: Yeah, me too. So I wrote a poem that was published in the "Brooklyn Rail" that is not really about Bob directly. I think it has been misunderstood. People think it is about seeing Bob's place, but it is not really. It is about being at a table in my studio and seeing how much of what was going on in my life was influenced by him. The odd back and forth about what happens here and what happens outside his windows in Venice. The back and forth between them in my mind. I'll read it.

Robert's Altar

The noise has stopped
but the police remain on the street
Where the Japanese women clapped hands yesterday
Two Greyhound boys stashed their packs
In the shadows of the parking lot
That was outside.
Inside the same light illuminates…
books, drawing pads beer bottle openers
right angle on a drawing board
The postcard 69 Windward
Chaloula Hot Sauce, empty glass,
empty Pacifico
There is music
Pottery shards collect
ashes of marijuana
as the telephone rings

I had forgotten the knife
Robert without a knife
without his suitcase
full of passports and cash?
The knife completes the poem.

So that was a poem for Bob Graham. Not really a poem. Here's one that has never been published, I haven't really shown it to anybody. But I have been thinking a lot over the last few years about the observable universe- what is black in the sky? What are the colors of the stars? Because we are given a scientific reference for many of these things, even though the scientists just don't really know what the black is. Nor do they really understand how to calculate the color of the stars because they don't know where to start from. It is about time, it is a philosophical issue, it is not really an issue for physics or cosmology…I was musing on that when I wrote this poem.

The Observable Universe 1/12/09

I am an orange star
soon to be harvested.
My green star son
neither recedes nor advances.
The spectral stars remember
those that became black
and, in remembering,
they form our inheritance.
My yellow star wife,
My red brother,
et. al.

Do you want to hear another one?

TB: *Sure, I'm enjoying it.*

DN: Yes, I like reading, and I like what they are…these are some earlier ones…sometimes they are just a single sentence and are references for paintings. This is one:

The turquoise sadness washes the splendid forest.

I wrote that a long time ago, also this one:

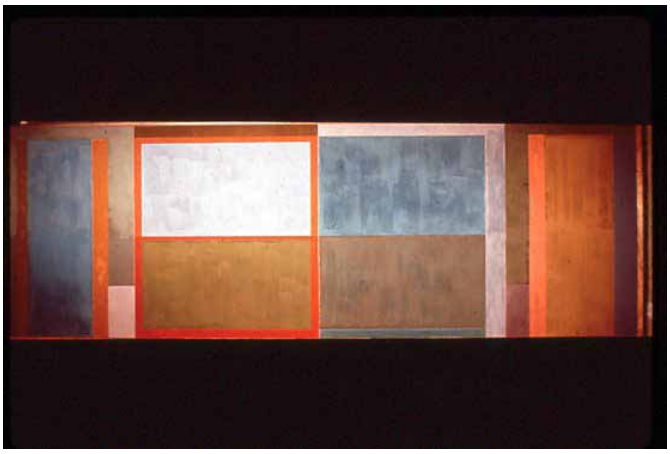
For Marley 7/7/93

How much dark before night?
Cobalt violet on white.
(Mixed with yellow and gold)

of the dogwood.
(For the moment between fire and water)
Tell the children the truth

DN: This is Melville:

"To perpetuate ones name it should be inscribed on a stone and sunk to the bottom
Of the sea, since depths last longer than heights."



Untitled, fresco, originally Penzoil Building, TX, now collection Huston MFA, Houston, TX

Another one:

Electric 7/7/93

I was drawing in your beautiful sunroom

and it was raining.

The windows were slightly open
and the sirens were screaming through the early morning
I was thinking about the Diesis
thirds
when I made this drawing.

Another one:

Trancas

First something is seen

and, then it is named

Birds come
with the first and last light.
Standing in the abyss
at the end of the day
wading through the fire.

That was one I published in the catalog for a "Geometric Painting" show at the Albright-Knox.

Light Cave and Water Wall 8/7/93

Man I am, Man
I would not be
You, you know the beauty of light
I have been burned
I will burn
Too die while swimming
as my aged father sleeps.
Eyes on eyes.

DN: That's for my father. This one's called "Must Locate".

Must Locate 7/24/02

Sometimes after black and white
the rush is so strong
Later in the sad questioning moments
the truth screams
Eos
Nyx
Helios

This is "The Boathouse".

The Boathouse 7/24/02

On the path to a new country with a bag full of Egypt No reason to be frightened or optimistic

This too shall pass said my Dad
This pond will pass into me
I am a student of students
Barracho en la tarde

How many days have been spent
Turning my ambition to face the wall.

Allow the ancient orchard to hold
The glowing golden memory
Ask no more

This is one that was published in The Rail, and it is the last one I'll read:

People I Wish I Had Known 8/20/08

Tarkovsky, Bolano, Marley, Palermo,
Life and Death, Yin and Yang, East and West, North and South
Snake eats tail
The magnetic fields continue to be benevolent
And in this instant
Circular seasons are the same as the instant
I believe my neighbor is dying

Do you understand the point I am trying to make about the way the content, or the meanings- those sorts of aspects of the painting develop poetically? To mention any one of them is out of the case.

TB: *I do.*

DN: I think the poems are clearer, they are really about how I think about what I am doing.

TB: *I understand that. I mean I understand why you don't want to step back into that other mode- what you are calling jargon.*

DN: Right. That has "0" meaning to me! I read the art criticism of today. All of it is meaningless to me. It doesn't resonate. There is nothing there. There is no poetry. The language is bad. Especially when you compare it to people like Judd or Harris Rosenstein, people who could really write, who really understood.

TB: *Yeah Rosenstein has amazing phrases in his piece-*

DN: He was brilliant! He was really…in the end he wasn't so much interested in painting. He loved Rothko, he loved and understood in a kind of Jewish rabbinical sense Rothko's moral conditions-and that made him a really wonderful friend to have- somebody who could understand things in a way that had nothing to do with the art world. He was very close to Mogenson. He had a great sense of humor, he was very funny! A kind of intellect there aren't many of these days. In that regard, I recently have been becoming friendly with Phong Bui, and through him people like David Levy Strauss and Bob Hulot-Kenter.

TB: *Whenever there is a large thing moving in one direction, there is something else moving in the other…*

DN: Right. I don't want to start knocking a whole bunch of stuff - that's not why I am raising that point. I'm really talking about literature- anybody who writes is involved in a potential

art. Why should literature not be journalism, poetry, art criticism? They are all potential art, and if you don't do them well, then you are a hack. Like with any other art. Why should they get away with it just because they write for Artforum, or for one of the magazines, or critical writing for museums…catalogs that sort of thing. I don't think they should be excused. They should be held to a high standard…

TB: *The problem is that the people who write about art often are imitating philosophers without having the depth or knowledge or education. Real philosophers become technical very quickly, so it is complicated. There is a guy I studied with at the New School, Jay Bernstein, specializing in Adorno, among other people-*

DN: That's funny because Hulot- Kenter, is an expert on Adorno…

TB: *Right…Bernstein writes about art in a very interesting way…it is unusual. Visual art carries with it a lot of heavy philosophical implications…it is not as true with other art forms it seems to me. That is also true certainly with fiction and poetry but…*

DN: I think that is particularly true for non-narrative painting- non-representational painting-

TB: *But Cezanne carries huge philosophical implications…*

DN: Enormous. But I am talking about now. Not about Cezanne or Mondrian.

TB: *Oh, OK.*

DN: One of the problems with most painting, you know, is that narrative painting never leaves. Rothko has this great line- he was showing with some Op artists and some Pop artists, I don't know who they were, and he said, "I thought we got rid of this stuff 30 years ago!" (laughter) That is the way I feel- I see a contemporary version of that or someone else, and I think, "I thought we got rid of that stuff. Why is it still here?" It is like having the Republicans still here…

TB: *But even Guston came back pretty hard with his late work…*

DN: I'm not interested in those paintings- they give me the creeps. And I like some of his "Monet-esque" paintings. But he has never been one of the painters who really got my attention.

TB: *Hmmm…*

DN: I think it has to do with the scale of his ambition- and it is odd because he had been a muralist- But I don't think he understood the implications of mural painting the painters who weren't muralists did…like Pollock. He never knew where to go with it. He just retreated back into picture making.

But I am having a lot of trouble thinking of living representational painters whose work is profound. What do you do if you have an ambition to be a be a figurative painter, for instance, today? How do you deny the existence of Piero Della Francesco or of Cezanne? You can't deny them, you have to come to grips with them in some way and with that whole aspect of the figure within the history of art, all the way back, from the beginning. I think that would be

an interesting thing for somebody to do…if they really took it seriously. Then you would have a life's work- it would be profound.

DN: But a lot of work isn't ambitious enough in the way I am interested in…I am interested in stuff that is really hard.

TB: *Meaning…?*

DN: Meaning it isn't something that is part of the general culture…it can't be understood within the framework of all the stuff that is happening. It is outside of it. Usually made by somebody who has been doing it for a very long time, and who hasn't changed much. I like Paul Mogenson's paintings. But they are very un-charming…it's not about touch. I think, for instance everybody loves Johns because of the touch, I can't stand that kind of thing…

TB: *How about Stout, Myron Stout?*

DN: There is something about the scale and the fussiness of them which really turns me off…

TB: *John McLaughlin?*

DN: Same thing. Everybody tried to make McLaughlin into a "minimalist"- but he was very very different from the painting of the people…even Newman. An enormous difference. He was the West Coast Orientalist, essentially…he came at it from that kind of attitude I think.

TB: *How about Hammersley- I just became acquainted with that work?*

DN: (Shakes his head.) Nothing. I knew all those guys, you know, because I grew up there. There were a lot of California abstractionists, you know, like Feitelson- names you wouldn't know. They made murals on the sides of banks, Feitelson had a TV show…he would talk about Picasso on Saturday mornings in Los Angeles, in the '50's. This group of people were very well meaning and good guys and all that. But they never had an idea about painting that was very interesting. Especially when you compare them with what was going on at the same time in NYC, or Europe for that matter. But I have extremely high standards for painting. And I am not interested in compromising them out of some sense of friendship or out of some sense of regard for the moment. For me in the last 100-120 years there have certainly been some great master painters…Cezanne, Van Gogh. Mondrian. And then the Americans. I like Leger for instance, I like a lot of other painting, a great deal of other painting…Picasso obviously, and Matisse. I like it, very much. But there are only three of those people who really have shaped my life- Cezanne, Mondrian, Pollock, Rothko. They have had the biggest effect on me among contemporary artists. But in general I don't distinguish between painters who are modernists as opposed to painters on the caves. Because the impulse is the same, and to me the cave paintings are the most powerful thing I have ever seen.

Untitled, 1975, oil on canvas 7'x 20' (approx) collection- Rice University, Texas

TB: *I have only seen them in pictures.*

DN: I never saw them when I was in Europe, in only just the last 5 or 6 years I started to go see them in southern France, and in Spain. I have only seen maybe 8 or 9 caves. I have never been to Lascaux...I feel a real closeness. I go in and I see somebody making this image on this wall- and I say, "Oh man, that's me, that's what I want to do." But if I go into the Guggenheim and I see some picture hanging on the wall- it might be a nice picture- I don't feel that that is what I want to do. I just feel that it is a successful (or unsuccessful) painting…a picture. But it is far away from the kind of idea I have about being a painter.

Part One (http://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/with-david-novros-part-1/1927) Part Three (http://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/with-david-novros-part-3/1934)

Augst 2009, Interview With David Novros - Part 3

Part One (http://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/with-david-novros-part-1/1927) Part Two (http://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/with-david-novros-part-2/1931)

TB: *I understand what you are saying. Would you talk a bit about the outdoor structure you have planned, which we talked about earlier?*

DN: Sure. The trajectory of that idea, not including my childhood ambitions, but starting in NY when I cam here in the 60's was that I really wanted to paint murals, but I was unable to paint murals. My early work is often misunderstood and written about as if it were sculpture. I never had any intention that it should be sculpture- I always thought of it as a way of making paintings, paintings that would be on the wall. I had seen the Matisse paper cutouts in Nice, the Apollo cutouts especially, and I got the idea from that in a way. It was a way of modernizing it, because you could put them up, take them down, move them around. You could use the wall and end up with a mural of some kind…I thought I could do that with canvases, that is why I started making shaped canvasses in separate pieces that could be hung together.

TB: *The paper cut-outs are hung directly on the wall?*

DN: Yes on a big wall - maybe 20' long and 10' high. Mural size, they are not meant to be seen one by one. There are wonderful things in that museum- these Tahitian paintings and other beautiful things- but the cut-out paper drawings on the wall just amazed me, I had never seen anything like it…I thought, "Yeah that's the way to do it!" I didn't want to make Matisses, but this was a way to make mural art, without having a commission, a job. I could do it in a studio, then store it and put it up later. This was my strategy for how to do that sort of thing. And then in '69, Judd asked me to paint his fresco, and that was the first chance I got to that, and I began making more and more fresco projects and other sorts of architectural projects. I made a solar painting in the Newark train station, it is a triptych in an arch, that opens and closes with

light…and I made these projects until they stopped happening.

TB: *The article Michael Klein sent me about a boathouse - when was that built?*

DN: In about ’97 a boy came to me who was an architectural student at Columbia. He was in touch with an Austrian painter who asked if this student could come visit me, and find out if there were catalogs of my work. He wanted the boy to bring them back to him.

The student came by and we became friendly- he liked my work very much, he saw what I did, and it came about that his father was a collector and he had built a house up in Middleburg, NY, Steven Holl designed it. He asked me if I would be interested in making a mural. He brought me the drawings of the house, and there were all these right-angle windows. I said, “There is really no place here to do a fresco, but I understand you want to make a pond, and maybe I could design a boathouse”…which would be kind of an excuse for a painting. I hadn’t painted any right-angle paintings in a long time, but I began making studies.ainting. I hadn’t painted any right-angle paintings in a long time, but I began making studies. I wanted to make a very formal right angle painting, mural cycle. And this would be a really good chance to do that, plus I was going to be able to design the building- my idea of paradise- to design the building to accommodate the painting. How great! Everything went well, the father agreed in principal to do it…and he came and saw the first models and drawings I had made for the building, and he said, “This looks like a bus stop.” I said, “Oh, fuck you, that’s the end of this project, I can see that.” He said, “All I want is just a painting next to the lake.” (laughter) So I made another design…which took another 2-3 years, which was a kind of painting on stilts, in an “X” shape. One long wall with two diagonal walls on either end. That would be out along the water, in the water, with a kind of roof. And then he found out how much that would cost to build. And then he said, “What about that first painting?” So he went back to the boathouse concept. By this time, his son had graduated from college, and about to assume a career as an architect. They began working from my design, but then my design got completely fucked up. I had a pitched roof on mine, I had a different scale, I had an idea about the walls that made it unnecessary to have posts coming out of the walls. He changed this, but everything else was like my design, which was a kind of floating building on the pond with a channel which you could bring your boat up into- a three-sided right angle structure inside this glass boathouse. I went up there and I painted it. It was supposed to be a fresco, he reneged on that. He brought over a farmer from Austria, from one of his estates who he said knew how to plaster. The guy came over and put up a crappy wall. So the whole thing was kind of going down the drain. But I kept “sucking it up”, because I wanted to make the project so badly…I took my son up with me and we made it in about 2-3 weeks. I think it is one of the best projects I have ever made!

TB: *It looks beautiful*

ENU

Boathouse, building design and murals. 1996-2003. Oil on plaster, Middleburgh, NY

DN: Thanks, yes I thought it was really good. I had made hundreds of very finished watercolors and studies for it, and I wanted to keep them all together, I had a huge archive from this project. And I said to the son, "Tell your father, if he will agree to certain conditions, I will give him the whole archive." But I want him to make a publication, and I want him to agree that this work will go to a public institution, and be seen, not just hidden away. He agreed, said, "Yes, yes." And I gave him this box, it weighed about 100 lbs, and I took it up to their house, and I left it up there. Then as the project went on, I realized this guy had no intention of filling any of my requests…he just wanted the stuff. So I went up there and snuck into the house and stole back my work. At that point the project was finished. I hadn't heard anything from anyone about the project- finally the son called me and I asked' "What do you think of the job, do you like it? Do you think it is good or bad?" He said, "I like it but my father doesn't like it. He doesn't like the way you painted the lines." I thought, "He doesn't have to like it." The son also said, "My father says you have to return those drawings to him." By this time I had also given them models, plus he stole one of my notebooks. So I am sitting there without the first, and most important, notebook, and I said, "No I'm not going to return that box. He hasn't done any of the things I has asked him to do. He hasn't made the slightest effort towards doing any of them! He just wants to hold onto a whole bunch of stuff. I got a letter back saying, "My father has instructed me to tell you that you may never come up to the boathouse again, you may never come here again, you may never publish any pictures of the boathouse, etc, etc." Of course they couldn't stop me from publishing anything, in fact I could stop them from publishing it. And that is the end. It is a very sad story because I would like that thing to be public, to have people see it. A lot of the fresco projects worked out very badly sociologically. I made a huge fresco cycle in the Miami courthouse, and that led to many arguments, several years later someone wanted to tear it out.

Fresco. 1983 Old Miami Federal Courthouse, Miami FL

TB: *Is that the one with the tilted walls?*

DN: No that's in Dallas. That one is fine, that one worked out very well, it was a very nice project. But this one in Miami, which was vast, and took enormous backbreaking work, really hard work- I put everything into it- then the GSA (General Services Admin.)- (around the same time as the Serra controversy over the "Tilted Arc") wouldn't put up a piece Chamberlain had made. And this thing that everybody had liked initially, this courtyard I had painted, became the subject of many arguments! The preservationists didn't like it because they said my painting wasn't in keeping with the historic nature of this 1930's Art Deco pastiche of a Spanish courtyard…there is no point going back over all this. It is just that it is very disappointing to make these projects to have most of them be destroyed or…damaged.

Untitled, 1977 Fresco, Gooch Auditorium, University of Texas Health Science Center, Dallas TX

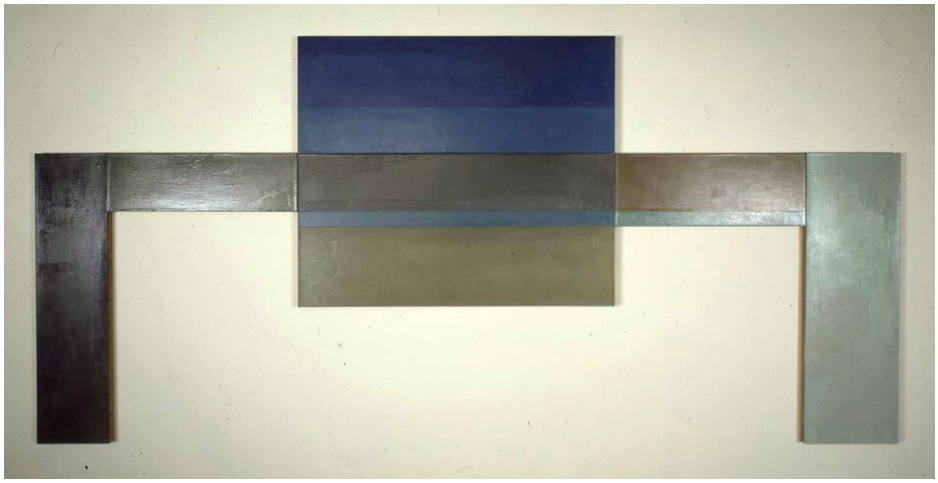
TB: *Yeah it must be very hard.*

DN: That's why I am glad I am going to be able to re-do the Judd painting.

When I made the paintings for Bob Graham in LA he had me make old paintings that had been destroyed. I remade them in different scales and in different places. It was a record of things I had done before. He wanted to have these, because he really liked the '60's and 70's paintings. It was his idea.

TB: *So the model you have in your studio is a dream for you, something you would really like to have…*

DN: Yeah it is a dream, but it has been a dream since 1970, consciously. I tried to get Heiner Friedrich to do it, and I made exhibitions about it with Riko Mizuno in LA. I have shown material related to it here…I tried to get Heiner to build it on the roof of the Dia building…but he was never interested in my work, so that didn't happen. I kept striving, and doing these other projects and thinking about it…plus some of the looser ways I have been painting in the studio- (I have been painting this way for a long time). I was thinking about the argument between decoration and meaning (and content) because I liked that one could do something where both things have equal power. And that's what I am doing now. I have never really developed a way of painting that…so every time I paint, I try again. Same with the right angle paintings. When I begin painting them there is a lot of confusion I have to work through- they aren't "a to b"- it is always fresh- I can go over something for ten years and it will still be fresh every morning.



Untitled, oil on canvas, 6 panels, 9'x 18', collection of artist.

Untitled, 1977-78, Oil on canvas, 9'x 27' Collection: Bank of America

***TB:** I understand that. Thank you David.*

DN: My pleasure.

Part One (http://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/with-david-novros-part-1/1927) Part Two (http://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/with-david-novros-part-2/1931)

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