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David Reed

Meyer Raphael Rubinstein

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[See table of contents](#)

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Contrary to some popular notions, painting did not disappear in the 1970's, nor did abstract painting disappear in the early 1980's. If proof is required of these things, one need look no further than the work of David Reed. Born in California in 1946 and working in New York since the late 60's, Reed belongs to a middle generation which, too young to be Postminimalists, too old to be Neo Expressionists, had to wait out the 1970's, keeping alive the guttering flame of painting on a minimum of oxygen. In the present decade Reed's work, along with others like Sean Scully and Ross Bleckner, has caught fire, both with itself and with an increasingly large public. His dramatic, physically unwieldy, visually liquifying canvases resemble no others, yet are coming to seem more and more central to their period. Informed by Reed's fanatic attachment to Italian Baroque painting and his sense of connection to Abstract Expressionism, but also involved with postmodernist questions of representation and contradictory orders of discourse, his paintings refuse every pigeon-hole except the one reserved for good painting. At the end of this interview Reed says that artists of his generation are doing extraordinary work. I would suggest that his own work is the most extraordinary.

Meyer Raphael Rubinstein : *You studied with Milton Resnick at the Studio School. Did your contact with him give you a special feeling for Abstract Expressionism ?*

David Reed : Yes, the most important part of my education was Milton's stories about his fellow Abstract Expressionists. He loved Arshile Gorky and those stories were my favorites. In one, the poet Charles Resnikoff was walking down 14th Street and noticed Gorky pacing back and forth uncertainly in front of the entrance to his building. Resnikoff crossed the street and asked Gorky what was the trouble. Gorky said his life was over, an image had appeared in his painting which was so frightening and horrendous he had thrown down his brush and fled the studio. He said he could never paint again and was afraid to return. Resnikoff calmed him down. And after a cup of coffee, he was finally able to convince Gorky to return. Gorky's studio was in the front room and as they entered, Gorky scuttled along the wall to the back living area. Resnikoff, of course, was eager to see the painting that had so frightened Gorky. There was only one small canvas on an easel. As he circled it, he saw the painting was a still life, a single apple.

M.R.R. : *You strike me as always having been pretty optimistic about the possibilities of painting, even at a time when its prospects seemed dim. Is this true ?*

D.R. : Yes. As a student and after, I was completely happy struggling with painting. It challenged me in every way : physically, intellectually and emotionally. Perhaps more than most I tend to separate emotion and intellect; painting seemed a way of combining them. I



David Reed, *No 202-2*, 1982-86.

Oil on canvas with alkyd; 9 x 3 ft. Courtesy Max Protetch Gallery



did not care if there was no future for painting. Then at least I would be allowed to work in peace. Now I feel there is a great opening and opportunity for painting — not by repeating what has been done in the past, but by reinventing forms. Until now, abstract painting has used color in very schematic and simplistic ways. Now we can use all the properties of color — hue, value, temperature and intensity. We can do things with color that were impossible in representational painting. These are not just formal possibilities. Abstract painting documents non-objective feelings. These feelings are evolutionary, new to humans. Or perhaps they have always been a part of human life, but ignored because they are so fleeting. It is crucial that now, through abstract painting, we understand them.

M.R.R. : *When did you begin using your “brush stroke” motif ? Was it an accidental discovery ?*

D.R. : In 1974, I had about six paintings in a group show at The Susan Caldwell Gallery. The paintings were door size, very colored, with varied marking—some horizontal brush marks. I had noticed that often there were internal divisions in the paintings 11" wide and the height of the canvas 76", so to relax while the show was up I decided to stretch canvases that size. It was something of a joke on myself. On the first canvas, I tried just black strokes into wet tan paint — horizontal strokes across the whole tall thin painting. To my surprise and horror, it had everything the more complex paintings had and was clearer and better. It was funny in its directness and I even liked that. I stopped painting,

looked at it for a few weeks, and changed my work.

M.R.R. : *I think one of the best things that happened to abstraction was Neo-Expressionism. Paradoxically the emphasis on figuration recharged and reoriented abstraction, challenged it and gave it a renewed sense of mission and possibility. Did you, do you feel this ?*

D.R. : Yes. I was very impressed by their ambition to deal with big themes and human emotions. I wanted to get those feelings into my work also, and make it clear I was not just interested in formal issues.

M.R.R. : *You are very interested in the use of new materials, of pigments which have never been employed by painters before. Can you talk a little about this ?*

D.R. : There are pigments and colors being used commercially now for cars and printing which are new, which do not yet have emotional connotations. I think it is a great opportunity for painting because through our work we can define the emotional meanings of these colors. Carl Plansky has made some oil paint for me from quinacridone pigments which, until now, have only been used for painting cars. I am also very interested in the color and light of video and photography. Again, I think it offers great opportunities for painting. This technological light may in its timelessness be in some way like the religious light of Renaissance painting.

M.R.R. : *David Carrier has compared your work to photography in the sense that he does not know how it was done. Others have felt the same way. Apart from the “photographic effect” this recalls painters of previous epochs who employed techniques that they*



David Reed, *No. 248*, 1987.
Oil and alkyd on canvas; 3 x 8 ft. Courtesy Max Protetch Gallery

kept closely guarded for professional reasons. Is there some ultra secret David Reed technique ?

D.R. : No. I am glad to tell anyone how the paintings are done. The technique is very simple and straightforward. If someone else can use the technique better than I do, that would be fine, my tough luck. I use an alkyd medium, Liquin, and combine it with oil paint. I think there are two kinds of artists, those that hide their effort and those that show it. I remember being struck by this first in a painting by Matisse. It looked fresh, done quickly, all at once, but examining it closely one could see it had been painted and scraped down, many, many times. In the 70's the Knicks basketball team had two guards, Earl "The Pearl" Monroe and Walt Frazier. Frazier made everything look easy, flowing, and elegant. It was not until you saw the photographs in the paper the next day (Frazier horizontal to the ground, going in for a layup, changing the ball from hand to hand) that you realized how difficult it was. "The Pearl" would come down the court on gimpy knees, hobbling, as if he would never make it down the court. Then suddenly he would spin, turn, jump and shoot the ball in. He made everything look difficult and used this as a technique to fool the man guarding him.

M.R.R. : *You have tended to hold on to your paintings for a long time, working on them over a number of years. You have also said that you want your work to unfold slowly. Is there a correlation between these two things ?*

D.R. : Yes. I hope that a viewer could look at my

paintings over a long period of time and continue to find something new and unexpected. I want to be a "bedroom painter". My paintings are meant to be seen casually, or intently, as part of ordinary daily life. Galleries are an awkward intermediary way to show paintings. I wish museums had hotel rooms connected with them where you could spend the night with a painting.

M.R.R. : *Standing in front of your work I am sometimes struck by a feeling of what can only be called "the heroism of modern life", a kind of gleeful pride that I am around at the time these works are being made. I compare this to what people may have felt looking at Warhol in the 60's or the Futurists in 1913. Am I completely off base about this ?*

D.R. : Thank you, that is a real compliment. I am very concerned that the paintings seem contemporary and not nostalgic in any way.

M.R.R. : *What artists working today do you feel close to ?*

D.R. : I feel that, contrary to what one would generally read, there is a number of extremely good abstract artists working now. These would include (and I could list many more) : Judy Pfaff, Elizabeth Murray, Barry LeVa, Brice Marden, Ross Bleckner, Jonathan Lasker, Klaus Merkel. I feel that artists of my generation are doing extraordinary work.

**Excerpts from a March 1989 interview
with Meyer Raphael Rubinstein**