

JOE FYFE

by Josh Blackwell



DARGAH; 2008–2010; LINEN, MUSLIN, COTTON, GAUZE; 48 × 56 INCHES. COURTESY OF JAMES GRAHAM & SONS. PHOTOS OF ARTWORKS BY BILL ORCUTT.

Traversing an ever-expanding, increasingly globalized art world is a tricky business for artists. Sometimes it seems like New York has become so large and unwieldy as to feel anonymous. Making work alone in the studio, it's easy to feel overwhelmed by the enormity of it all—is anybody listening?

Occasionally, however, there are moments when someone (or something) emerges from the glut of artist talks, studio visits, and gallery openings to instigate a less inhibited exchange, one that speaks directly to shared concerns. That's why I want to begin by enumerating the series of encounters that

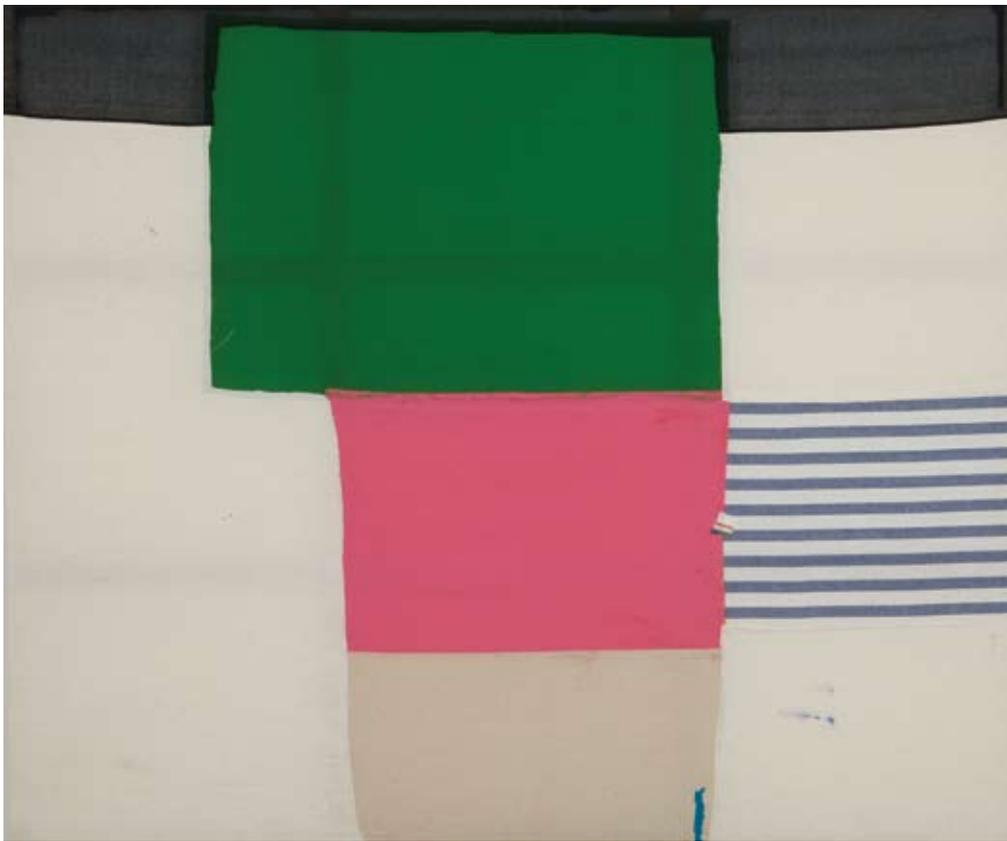
ended with this conversation in Joe Fyfe's Brooklyn studio. I first saw Joe's work in his exhibition at James Graham Gallery in 2007. Struck by the works' combination of humble textures and full-bodied colors, I was left with a vivid impression. Upon further research, I discovered a multifaceted artist whose activities include writing, curating, and teaching as well as his studio practice. While visiting the gallery with a friend the following summer, Joe and I were introduced. Subsequently, we found each other on Facebook. Last year Joe contacted me about some works of mine he had seen in an exhibition at CANADA Gallery, and we began corresponding. We discovered that we both teach at the same institution, Pratt, nearby his studio. Our proximity to each other, engendered through common interests, the urban geography of New York, and a propensity to wander, has yielded an interesting conversation touching on travel, writing, French painting, and the artisanal versus the industrial.

—Josh Blackwell

JOE FYFE It's strange the way things happen. For example: I think I became an abstract painter because I quit smoking. A big change allows you to make another change. It's a practice leap. I really became an abstract painter because of Blinky Palermo's work, but it could just as easily have been because I quit smoking. I quit smoking and couldn't bear to do figurative work anymore—I didn't know what to do so I just lay on the couch and read.

JOSH BLACKWELL Because you weren't smoking?

JF Exactly. Whenever I found this



MONIVONG BOULEVARD; 2009; COTTON, MUSLIN, FELT, GAUZE;
68 1/8 x 80 1/8 INCHES. COURTESY OF ACME, LOS ANGELES.

sentence I really liked, I would project it onto the painting and trace it out. One day I crossed out one of the sentences and the painting looked really good. Then I thought, Oh, that's how you make an abstract painting. After I'd been painting for 20 years the fact that it's an actual language emerged.

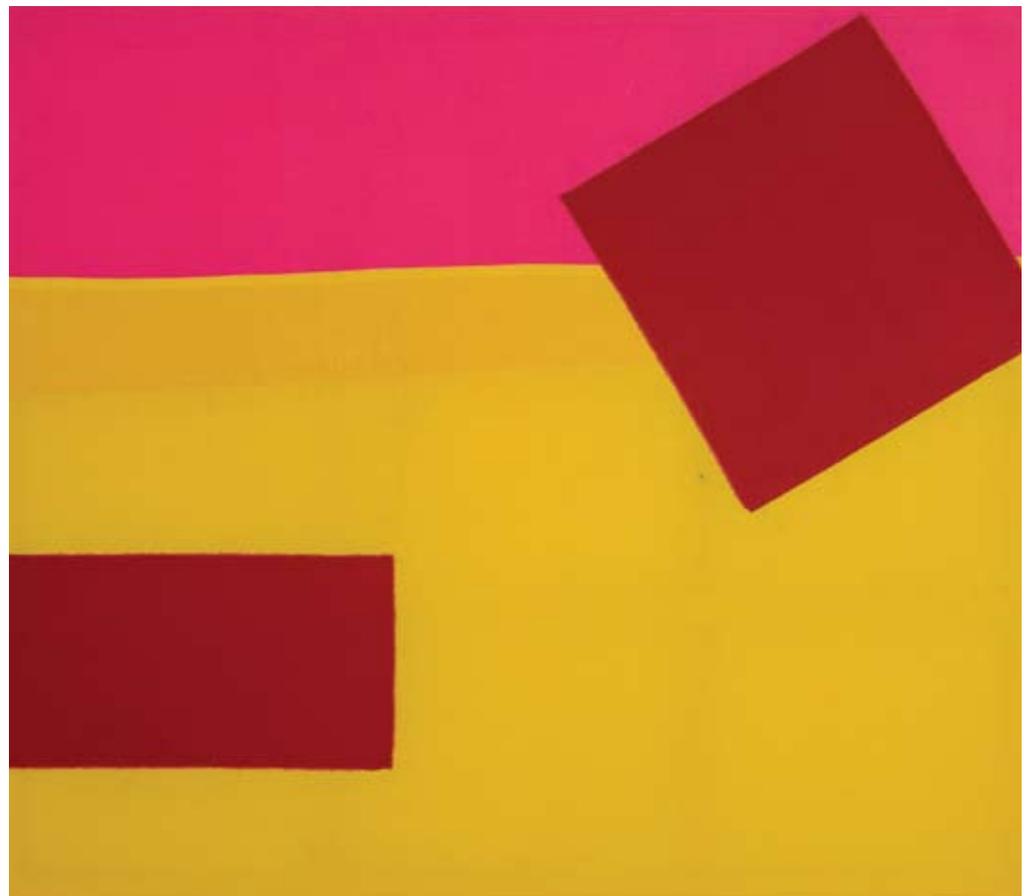
JB (*laughter*) Right.

JF Or, another example: I began traveling because my dog died. I decided that instead of getting another dog, I'd visit the airport whenever I could, because nothing was keeping me here all the time. After getting into lots of debt, I learned to get by on nothing, just being careful about every cent. I learned to go to Mexico for \$700 for a month—stay in places for five dollars a night, eat for three dollars a day. I would run over to Paris for ten days as soon as I had the money, or jump over to Southeast Asia. It's an incredible education, even in your 40s, to be able to do that. You don't realize how hungry you are for what travel has to offer.

JB Did you have an opportunity and

then it led to an unfolding of a lot more?

JF Prior to my first trip to Vietnam, the artist Mary Carlson said: "I know this Vietnamese artist, Kim Tran. I'll send you his email." Then he sent me email addresses of artists in Hanoi. I told Raphael [Rubinstein] at *Art in America*, "I think there's a Hanoi art scene." He said, "Well, take notes." I was dropped into this burgeoning—actually, it was the opposite of burgeoning. It had fallen through after the late '90s Asian boom. There were 30-year-old artists who were already completely cynical about the art world. But there were still other more interesting, more political artists working enthusiastically. I wrote something about it for *Art in America*. I got invited back to do a show and wrote more about it. Then I applied for a Fulbright because I already had a trail of articles and went back for six months, two of them in Cambodia, in Phnom Penh. It all came out of curiosity and wanting to be away. But initially, it had to do with the dog.



KHAN JAHAN, 2010, COMMERCIALY DYED COTTON, 68 x 80 INCHES.
COURTESY OF JAMES GRAHAM & SONS.

JB How does that work exactly?

JF Somebody said to me that to be an artist you've got to be stupid. I had begun writing by then, so there was enough of a firewall between the part of me that needed to be a certain kind of smart to write and the part of me that had to be a certain kind of stupid to paint. The way that I see my art is there was never any kind of conceptual leap. I've always painted my way to where I am. Even though I can talk about the work, I see it as coming completely out of painting. It's not some conceptualization of painting. It's painting.

JB But at the same time, it's painting that has an expanded address. What you make speaks to a wider experience than an exclusive discourse on painting.

JF Yes, it's not really painting that comes out of looking or referring to paintings, though there are obviously models.

JB Sure.

JF You get to the point where you can't help but speculate or find the values in the work. I have this idea that you're given these materials by workers and that you don't want to overly manipulate them. I was really taken with André Bazin, the film critic who, as a devout Catholic, believed that physicality is a manifestation of spirituality. He wrote that filming reality is something that shouldn't be endlessly manipulated or contrived. It's like Veronica's veil, a direct impression of reality—this gift from God. Bazin was antimontage. I discovered that all those funny jumps in Joseph Cornell's films were his deliberate underediting. He liked the found quality of the films that he made himself, this kind of hands-off practice. I think one should leave the viewer with something where they aren't forced to participate. Everything else is manipulating us all the time.

JB An important precept in your work that one needs to understand is that it's a painting and an object. The physical qualities that you are discussing are very much coming from an encounter with the world. They

aren't necessarily found compositions, but they are compositions that aren't entirely invented either—

JF Right. The material dictates the form: how wide the fabric comes on the bolt, its transparency, etc.

JB There's a material specificity. It looks like a modern or abstract picture on the one hand, and, on the other, it exists as a material piece of something in the larger world.

JF Um, you mean something that isn't so specifically a picture as much as a *thing*?

JB Mm-hmm.

JF Exactly. I think about them as being in this place between sculpture, architecture, and painting, but participating in each one of them. That's what's confusing about them for some people; they don't even exactly see where the work is—

JB Yeah.

JF Lately, I've been thinking about Duchamp. What I have in common with him is his relation to time. The time that my painting exists in is counter to the time that most of us experience it in. The production is almost antiproduction—it moves along at a pace that seems to be dictated by how things come together more than how I can make it better.

JB Right.

JF Anita Brookner writes that Baudelaire seemed to have taken all the time he needed for his work while he was under incredible pressure: running away from landlords, constantly in debt, undergoing incredible anxiety. But his way of operating as an artist—as a poet—was to act like he had all the time in the world and unlimited resources. So his artifice was in the denial of himself being like everyone else—with the same bills and problems. Which is, I suppose, kind of dandyish.

JB There's this irony in your work that is dandyish. Too often, when confronted with an object, one's first

inclination is to think about how it was constructed. It's a particularly American idea to assign a value to the apparent labor involved. Your work looks "easy." It looks like it happened off-the-cuff, and so there's a value judgment attached to that, diminishing whatever it is that the dandy has made. And yet, you're right, one has to look at your paintings as being very time-consuming. It takes a while to apprehend the *image* of the work. How do you see that dual response playing out?

JF The work evolved because I started paying attention when something gave me pause early on in whatever it was that I was making. If I were to deny where I thought it was interesting because I needed to keep going on it, it would be false. So it isn't really a pose. It's not deliberately contrary, but I have to admit that nobody's going to like the paintings for the wrong reasons, because they're just not going to get them until they do. And maybe they don't get them. I mean, I don't deliberately make slow paintings.

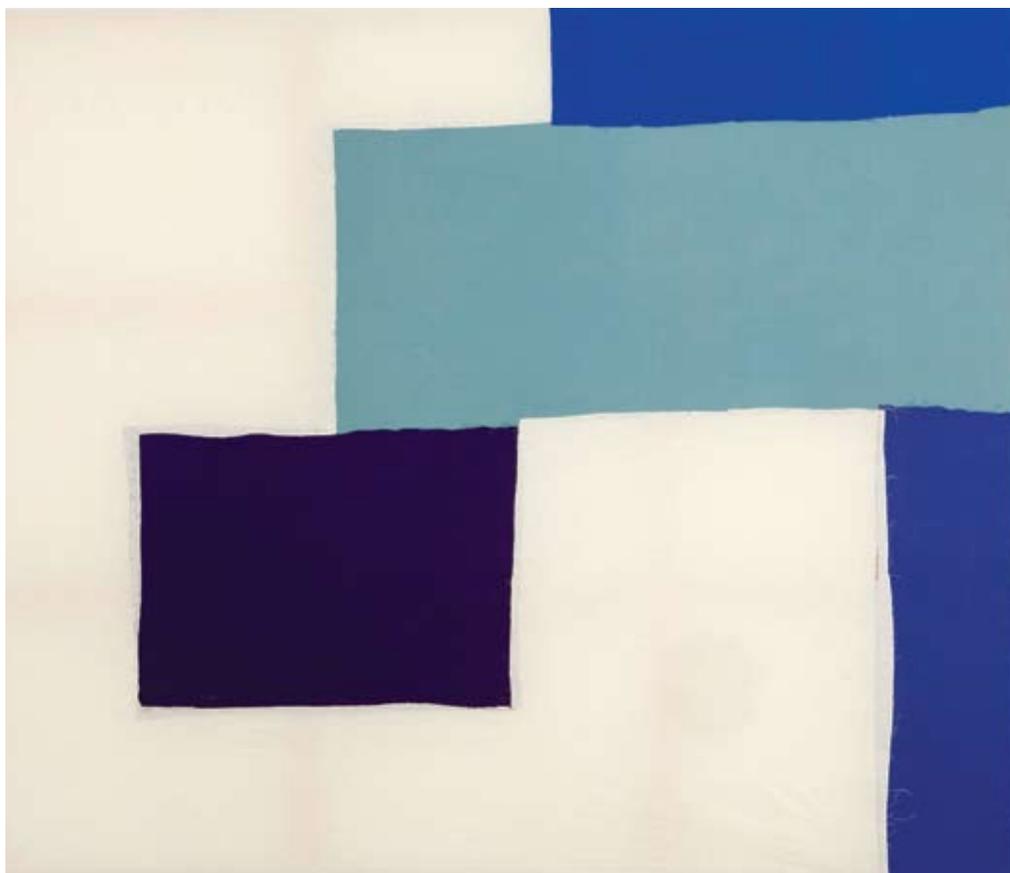
JB No, but saying you are locating the interesting moment in making something within a temporal progression implies that there is a decision to stop before things have been resolved.

JF I don't put anything out there that I'm not perfectly satisfied with. Which is completely different from when I write, where I never put anything out there that I am satisfied with. You know, there's this word *provisional*—deliberately stopping a painting at a point before it's finished. It's a performance of a painting with hardly anything going on. But mine are paintings in the most traditional sense of the word. It's not an idea about what a painting might be according to certain parameters. They're paintings, period. Is that different from what you're saying?

JB I'm trying to sketch out this idea of a popular understanding of painting as something that is labored over. And these pieces really work hard to avoid that. They seek a kind of facileness. They really are quite elegant in the economy of the picture-making itself. Because of that, there might be a perception that they don't feel finished



VENDREDI, 2010, FOUND WOOD AND COTTON, APPROX. 75 × 12 × 12 INCHES. COURTESY OF JAMES GRAHAM & SONS.



A DOVE, 2009, COTTON IN VARIOUS WEIGHTS, 84 1/2 x 70 1/8 INCHES.
COURTESY OF ACME, LOS ANGELES.

because they don't feel as if they were hard-won. These works really are not interested in that, it seems to me.

JF Well, there's a big difference between my paintings and those by artists 20 or 25 years younger. I've spent 20 years or so making all kinds of paintings. I was a figurative painter. I labored over paintings for months on end where you could see nothing *but* work. These are elegant paintings that seem facile, but they aren't if you know how to look at a painting. Any number of younger artists are doing work in this category that has suddenly become very, very popular—I just don't think most of their stuff is very resonant because they don't have all those years of painting behind them.

JB I agree with you. It's not the same thing, but I think it's because there's this idea of failure, which is crucial to a lot of that work that you're referring to. They're very performative, and part of the performance is that it does not totally resolve itself. It's not successful.

JF Ah.

JB It's really invested in how it does not resolve a compositional, material, or contextual problem. You're absolutely right. Anyone who is familiar with a painting practice would understand that these works are not easy, in any sense of the word. That it takes some kind of experience or a career to figure out where something should go. That's what Matisse practiced his whole life. Americans still don't understand Matisse because they don't see where the actual labor is in some of those paintings. And it's possible that there's a misinterpretation of Matisse when it comes to this idea of failure.

JF Did you ever see that film of him where he's drawing his nephew, and then he's drawing a flower? It's obvious that if this guy doesn't get this drawing right, he's going to slit his throat—

JB The Matisse show last summer at MoMA was successful because it isolated a particular episode in his career. It really gave you a bit of an insight into how obsessive he was about his subject matter. He didn't make just one picture of an open window; it was



STREET 302 (SECOND VERSION), 2010, FABRIC AND (YELLOW) NYLON ROPE, DIMENSIONS VARIABLE, APPROX. 9 FEET HEIGHT. COURTESY OF JAMES GRAHAM & SONS.

like many, many pictures, and there were many, many pictures underneath what you saw that were wiped out, traced over, erased in some way. This idea that he would get it right on the first try is contrived. It's incredibly seductive because you want to believe that this artist makes beautiful things merely by waving his hand, but it's not the case at all.

JF I saw the retrospective in 1992 at MoMA, on one of those special evenings when the galleries are uncrowded and quiet. I knew the work well already but I remember thinking, This guy is one of the great minds of the 20th century—especially those Nice pictures, which are just as



STUDIO VIEW, 2011.

cerebral as the early work. Right on through, his work seems incredibly, massively intellectual to me, even more than Picasso and more sensual in this mystic way. I don't think anybody has surpassed him yet. I was later drawn to contemporary French painting (then the Supports/Surfaces group, then the post-war painters, tachists, etc.) because they retained this intellectual interrogation of the painting married to a kind of sensuality. I saw it missing in what was going on here. A French painter, Jerome Boutterin, once said to me that the difference between French and American painters is the French are artisanal and the Americans are industrial. In other words, the Americans are about production whereas the French ask, How do I go about making this thing? As my work moves on, it keeps changing what this thing is. The show I'm about to have is called *Wood/Color/Cloth*. Even the sculptures refer back to painting as this object that's made out of wood, color, and cloth and has conversations with other wood, color, and cloth objects in the world. Then there is the idea of the iconic. I've looked at a lot of French painting over the past 20 years; I kept thinking about how I was looking *through* the paintings. They seemed very consciously to be containers of light and color, a kind of continuous space, which is

a Matisse space. The thing just keeps going in all directions—I call it exhilaration. In some ways to me the most American painter—well, Pollock—but also Morris Louis is a very Matisian painter in terms of the vastness of the painting's space.

JB The difference in your artworks is they're about a sensory intelligence. It's not necessarily about finding a question and then attempting to answer it but about an experience you've had and your observations about that experience. That is where this work speaks loudly and strongly. It's very tactile. It's not so much about constructing an argument as it is about representing an experience or state of being.

JF Well, I'd seen the Blinky Palermo paintings in '77, when I first moved to New York. I was a busboy in this restaurant around the corner when *Times of Day* was shown at Heiner Friedrich. I didn't know how to look at them but I liked them. Ten years later I saw them at Dia and I was just floored because I had never seen abstract paintings that spoke so directly to the physical, but also, I understood how they have this mystical idealism of the physical that I never really identified with Abstract Expressionism—that transformed me into an abstract painter. Slowly they

seemed to work on me, only half consciously, before I changed from figuration to abstraction. And the French work furthered that; I hadn't really been paying attention to Claude Viallat or any of those people. Some of them were kind of spiritual, like Simon Hantai, who was actually Hungarian, Catholic, and wrote the Catholic liturgy onto the ground of an early canvas.

I was so taken with your crocheted plastic bags in the trees over in Freeman Alley a few years back. I had a photograph I had taken in Sri Lanka of Buddhist flags in a Bodhi tree outside of this site where the Buddha visited and I found myself thinking, This is my ideal painting. Your work was so much along the same lines, almost literally. It was like another version of my ideal painting—wood, color, plastic... (*laughter*)

JB A different scrambling of things. Well, what I really love about painting is the idea of it being a place where the physical tactility meets a visual one. Painting represents this intensely sensory experience that speaks to more than just your animal instinct. It's something that, at its best, stimulates an argument between sensory experience and intellectual logic. The tree was this way of pushing this idea, a verb in space. The plastic bags come from the street, making, or meeting,

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or reconciling with nature literally in the tree. Pushing these two very unlike things together provoked this tactile experience.

JF It's like an abstraction about what it's like to be in a lot of developing countries. You see nature and what you would call trash, or just man-made material—

JB Waste.

JF —just jammed up together. There aren't boundaries between man-made and nature in places like Vietnam. I was in Bangladesh two years ago and most of the country is a back lot for first world countries. Everything is recycled there. There are barges full of scrap; trucks everywhere full of industrial offal . . . the whole country is like a tree full of plastic bags. I used to be embarrassed that I found those countries so aesthetically appealing, but it's tactilely and emotionally, and even intellectually, satisfying. Yes, it's all fucked up, 'cause that's the way it actually is. We kind of tidy it up a bit but we know that underneath it's totally fucked.

JB Navigating that boundary between nature and artifice is one of the reasons I like working with trees in an urban setting.

JF Nature's completely full of our trash. It's more apparent in those places. And I don't see the act of making a painting as being isolated from that. It's the opposite; you're stuck with the material, you have to deal with it. I mean, if I made paintings of garbage, it would be making a different point. I'm not interested in turning something into an image—it's what we were saying, you have to use a different language.

JB The longer I look at your work, I see how vividly it belongs to this other place. This cloth being from Bangladesh or Vietnam is not the same thing as paint from a tube bought at an art store. It is *other*. It is something

else. It's not particularly keen on assimilating into monochromatic painting or geometric abstraction or any other kind of painting trope that I could mention. It's very resolutely still a fabric that you collected on travels somewhere else in the world.

JF Well, the funny thing is, a lot of serious painters really like the work. They're actually very conservative paintings as they strive to have a kind of wholeness in the way traditional paintings do, as opposed to being disjunctive. So, on one level, the way that they are deliberately contrary is that they're anti-wet-painting paintings. Like the whole idea of the beautiful, wet surface is why I got out of the business.

JB The idea of a wet painting speaks to this more stereotypical or conventional understanding of what painting is. That's painting's image, that it is wet.

JF Well, it's about showing off your moves.

JB You brought up portability, which is also a tenet of what you do. How do these things come to be? Is it a process of going out and collecting these things and then transporting them back to a studio?

JF When I was a younger painter, I thought about how great it would be to be a writer because you could do it anywhere. I was fortunate, all these years later, to have discovered that I work in such a way that I can do my artwork anywhere. When I was in Phnom Penh I would go down the street to this guy who made stretchers and I could get whatever I needed for somewhere between three and seven dollars a pop. When my time was up I could take them off the stretchers, roll them up, take them in a bag on the plane, and order new stretchers in New York. You can't really do that with big oil paintings. So that earlier desire turned into a reality many years later.

It's really great to work in other places. I was sometimes miserable in

Phnom Penh. I'd been away too long, I was lonely, but the work I did there was really good. It was the first place I changed from burlap to color. I would buy all this fabric at the markets. When I look back on it now I think about what a wonderful time it was even though I was unhappy. I had a rat I couldn't get rid of, it was a beautiful house, beautiful studio, and there was crazy noise at odd times, lots of odd things—a scarily seductive city. I'd do it again. I could find a house again.

JB Were you intending to move on from the burlap then, or did it just happen?

JF Years ago somebody came to my studio and said, "Where do you see this work going?" and I said, "Nowhere. I like it here." (*laughter*) I refuse to push it. Like these wood things: I had a couple pieces of wood leaning against the wall for two or three years and then one day I tied a piece of fabric around it. It was more like an accident. It wasn't like, Oh, I've got to do something with this wood. It was like crossing out the words—it just happened. And the color, for years, still had to feel like the burlap color. My relation to burlap was like a love affair; I didn't want to move away from it. Just this dumb stone, concrete, mouse color, you know? I knew where I was. If I know where I am there's no reason to move until I find myself somewhere else.

JB It makes a lot of sense in the context of travel, where you find yourself in a place and then you figure out what that means or how it changes you when you're there in the moment.

JF Those places are very inspiring because everybody's improvising all the time. They're improvising a basket on the back of their bicycle out of an oilcan. When Al Taylor went to Africa it changed everything for him. I understand it completely. It's very different from being in developed countries. The first time I went anywhere like that was in '89, to Thailand and Malaysia



ABOVE: NIPHAMARI; 2009; PIGMENT PRINT 2011, #1 OF 5; 27 × 16 INCHES (INCLUDING 1 INCH BORDER). BELOW: ROLLED MATS, BAGERHAT; 2009; PIGMENT PRINT 2011, #1 OF 5; 27 × 16 INCHES (INCLUDING 1 INCH BORDER). IMAGES COURTESY OF JAMES GRAHAM & SONS.

and Indonesia, and the way things are constructed—it's so great because everything is slightly different, not just one or two things. And you realize that everything's up for grabs. It's wonderful in that way. I still don't think I've gotten over it.

JB Do you feel like these wooden pieces are improvised in that way? The decision to tie the piece of fabric around them, did it happen in a similar manner to finding yourself in a moment where you need to make something out of whatever's around you?

JF No, I was very specifically attracted to this weathered wood because it brings me back to when I was using the burlap, and it looked like weathered material. It happened when I had the show in Vietnam. I brought over all the burlap that I would use and made all the paintings in ten days—

JB Wow.

JF —and I got the show done, put it up on the walls, and then I took another trip up to northern Vietnam before the opening. I was in the countryside and when I came back to Saigon, I looked at the work and I was so embarrassed because it became obvious to me that I was influenced by this waterlogged and then dried out, makeshift architecture that so many poor people lived in. And I thought, God, do these people know that I've aestheticized the way they live?

JB Wait. Do you feel like you saw this in your work *after* the fact?

JF Well, I'd already been to the countryside once before, but I suddenly realized that on a certain level these paintings were made out of what impoverishment looks like. But then I just kind of accepted it. You know, they also call it *wabi-sabi*.

JB Exactly.

JF But I do not exactly see it as an aesthetic philosophy; it was reflecting a contemporaneity that has been overlooked by painting. I had a second show in Hanoi and gave a slide lecture at the alternative artist's society there, Nhasan Studio. I showed slides of my

work mixed with photographs I had taken in Vietnam. The Vietnamese artists took it as a homage to their country and that's exactly what it was. But to me the wood is just a return to some of what was in the burlap paintings, this kind of weatheredness, this impoverishment, actually, this color. Bringing back the kind of color I was using before. No more than that.

JB Do these wooden pieces play that role of speaking to the idea of a material, which has experienced something, experienced the world, experienced use?

JF It's on the one hand very artistic and on the other it's trying to include the half of the world that sits in a shack next to a muddy road selling something. I hope they recontextualize the paintings so that what they are really about may be understood, because people still see them and think that they're geometric abstractions. I think they're lots of things. I mean, there are all these private puns, the way that *Triangle* is kind of like Matisse's *Piano Lesson*.

JB You've said that it makes a big difference gluing the fabrics together instead of sewing them. What is that difference?

JF Well, gluing just seems more like painting because you're taking this sticky stuff and this color and kind of throwing it together and you can rip it open. You can do that with sewing, too, but at least as far as the process goes, it's more direct. The glue just worked out so well I never saw a reason to change. I am ironing now, which makes them nicer.

JB I think the difference is the flatness of the plane. Because they're glued you're really unifying two surfaces into one, whereas when you sew it's additive, one thing on top of another. They haven't necessarily been ineluctably joined. Literally gluing the picture together becomes one continuous surface.

JF A lot of the time it's reversible, the front becomes the back. And it's kind of like that Matissian cutting-into-color thing, too, and slapping color together.

Why do people paint when they can just slap color together like this? What are they bothering with all this disgusting paint for?

JB (*laughter*) Do you think paint is disgusting?

JF I think there's something suspicious about painters who actually like paint. If you're a real painter you have to dislike it, even if you still use it. It's hateful stuff.

JB Because . . . Why?

JF I think it's why Mary Heilmann is such a great painter.

JB Because she hates paint?

JF Put it this way: She doesn't paint like she hates paint, but she paints as if she is indifferent to it. She doesn't think that she's working with this material that the masters used.

JB Well, that's why I stopped using paint. It had too many connotations of this idea of mastery. I stopped using oil paint soon after I graduated from college and I started using gouache because it was traditionally used for commercial purposes. It had this kind of affectless quality when it was applied correctly. This idea of mastery was a little oppressive. But interestingly, recently, I tried to experiment with oil paint and I made something with it that wasn't totally successful, but it was very seductive. I don't think that I'm interested, at the moment, in going back to using paint again, but I did enjoy playing with it. Maybe because I hadn't used it in so long, I didn't have that sort of trauma of having to make a giant, heroic Abstract Expressionist painting like I did in college.

JF I'm still trying to make New York School paintings, in a sense. But that time on the couch when I stopped making figurative paintings and I didn't know what else to do, I realized that back in the studio I wasn't going to do anything that didn't give me pleasure. And the pleasure principle is still really strong. In the end, the work is pretty much about the pleasure of the play of materials, period.



K E I T H S O N N I E R

Files

March 12 - April 23

Leo Castelli 18 East 77 Street New York 10075