

A Person of Parts

AN
INTERVIEW
WITH
DAVID
ELLIOTT

by Robert Enright



2

1. David Elliott, *Parade*, 2013, oil on canvas, 173 x 145 cm. Photograph: Nicolas Grenier. All images courtesy the artist.

2. *2 Buddhas in a Cell*, 2013, oil on canvas, 173 x 145 cm. Photograph: Nicolas Grenier.

I have interviewed hundreds of artists over the course of a 40-year career as an art critic and no one has ever said that the quality they look for in a work of art is love. When David Elliott said, “finding an element of love is what I hope for in a picture,” I told him that in my experience it was an unprecedented admission. I was surprised by my surprise.

Don’t get me wrong. I suspect there are artists who feel the same way about the emotional and redemptive possibilities of art, but they have never

put their belief in such a direct and unequivocal way. There is nothing naïve in Elliott’s attitude and while there may be a touch of Romanticism in his character, he manages to mix an equivalent degree of rigour with his romance. Over his life as an artist, he has produced work after work of uncompromising intelligence, beauty and critical awareness.

David Elliott is a self-described postmodern collagist with strong affinities for 19th-century Symbolism and 20th-century metaphysical painting, whose primary interest is to make large

it to engage in wild exploration.

Elliott is a member of the generation who grew into young adulthood listening to The Beatles, The Rolling Stones and The Grateful Dead and responding to and copying the graphic art that was the visual expression of what he was hearing in the music. Early on, he was attracted to the illustrations of Aubrey Beardsley, followed by a pair of Road-to-Damascus moments seeing a painting by the Canadian artist Jack Chambers in London, Ontario and the work of James Rosenquist and RB Kitaj at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery. In the wake of those encounters, he was never the same.

In his prose poem "Les Chants de Maldoror" published in 1869, the Comte de Lautréamont characterized the Surrealist apprehension. It was, he wrote, "as beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table." Were you to apply that definition to Elliott's work it would have to undergo some emphatic shifts. The umbrella would open to become a radiant colour wheel; there would be more stitching than dismemberment taking place on the operating table; and he would probably have sent out invitations to the event. Given the choice between a dark cloud hovering above his head and a sense of humour when he constructs his visual world, he invariably casts aside the darkness.

In *Choeur* (2011-12), you are dealt a promising hand with at least three aces, but the accompanying commentary is provided by a chorus of four skulls; it's a hand where you win to lose. The painting includes a pear, a staple of the still-life genre, and the event takes place on a stage with a magician's table and chair, flanked by curtains—one red the other star-laden—that open onto a black void. If what we're seeing is a party or a vaudeville act, then you're best advised to head for the exit sign and leave the theatre as soon as you can. The ace in the hole is prelude to falling into an abyss.

In *La chambre enchantée* (a 68 x 57-inch oil and acrylic on canvas from 2012), he presents a room full of objects rendered variously as flat and contoured, as real and illusory. A phrenology head and a burning candle sit on a Swedish modern table, which is in front of an oval mirror or picture frame. On one side of the table is a toy valve saxophone contained inside a blue outline, and on the other a goldfish in a blue bowl. A line drawing of a white envelope occupies the foreground and above the head is an irregularly cut, decorative sheet of a starry sky. For all the mystery of their collection in a space with an abundance of drop shadows, their predominant colour is blue and their presence is soothing.

The enchantments that are produced in this room arise as much from the way the objects are arranged in space as from the choice of the objects themselves. In his picture-making, the formal mitigates the fanciful; Clem Greenberg teams up with Rube Goldberg. As Elliott says in the following interview, "in the end painting will always be about organizing shapes on a visual field." His ongoing engagement is a delightful and inventive end-game.

In our conversation, he praised Joseph Cornell for making "lovely little universes." Except for a change in scale, the same assessment could be directed back to his own art production. For more than three decades and counting, David Elliott has been making "lovely big universes."

on July 21, 2016.

BORDER CROSSINGS: You've said that your inspiration to become an artist was what you called countercultural aesthetics. What did you mean by that?

DAVID ELLIOTT: It was largely music and the kind of visuals that went with it, album covers and psychedelic posters. I spent my adolescence in London, Ontario and I linked the music I was hearing and the surrealist and symbolist imagery that went along with that kind of music with what I saw in London at the time, particularly the work of Jack Chambers and John Boyle. I remember seeing a Chambers painting called *Olga and Mary Visiting* (1964-65) at the library and *Midnight Oil* (1969) by John Boyle, also in the library collection. The encounter especially with *Olga and Mary Visiting* made me realize that I wanted to become an artist. Chambers's painting takes an ordinary situation of two women sitting on a couch, smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee, and turns it into the kind of spectacular moment that embodies everything. It's like a fourth dimensional space that cuts through time. Trying to get to that sweet spot in a painting is still a yardstick for me. For my last two years of high school we moved to Niagara Falls and that's when I discovered the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo and saw the work of James Rosenquist and RB Kitaj, which reinforced my ideas of what a painting could be.

Did you begin to actively search out other artists?

I guess I was trying to put it together. Buffalo was certainly important to me in that respect. I would go across the bridge as often as I could. The Albright-Knox has a wonderful collection with a lot of post-war figuration. In the early '70s, when I went to Queen's University for my BFA I was introduced to Clement Greenberg and formalist doctrine. In fact, the only textbook we were required to buy and read was his collection of essays, called *Art and Culture*.

Your estimation of Rosenquist was that he was as much a late Surrealist as a Pop artist. Were you already beginning to reread conventional notions of how artists were regarded and placing them in a context that made sense to you?

I'm obviously not the first person to call Rosenquist a late Surrealist. But Pop was this container that people got thrown into and some people fit easily and others less easily. Hockney and Kitaj in England were initially put in the Pop category, as was Rosenquist. These artists interested me more than hard-core Pop artists like Warhol and Lichtenstein. I enjoy Warhol but I also respect and relish the history of painting. I suppose I felt that unlike Warhol, Rosenquist and Kitaj had not thrown away that history and were still investing in the medium.

How hard did you work to learn how to paint? I know your mother would get the *Golden Book Encyclopedia* from the supermarket and you were studying the Walter Foster *How to Paint* books. Other than those sources, were you actually thinking about the language of image-making and how you could make things that were your own and not copies?

Well the Golden Books with their trompe l'oeil covers were something from my childhood, which I recently remembered because of the illusionism of my new paintings. While the Walter Foster books I used in the early 1980s as a joke. I realized I wanted to do things in a painting that I wasn't able to do and that led to some copying as I tried to figure out how to render things. How do I paint this peach or this head or this bird? I was aware of the irony or comedy—I think I used the word burlesque—of people coming out of art school who wanted to be painters but didn't know how to paint. They had gone to art school in the '70s and received no technical training. One of my theories about the Transavantgarde and the New Image painters is that they are starting from the beginning and

break it up to such an extent that it became simply another strain of mass media, which our culture is rife with. That kind of breaking up didn't interest me, and anyway other people did it better than me.

You have talked about the “surgical element” of collage. Are you talking about the simple mechanics of the process in that it is a cutting up, or is there something more existential in that observation, that it is surgical in ways that go beyond the practical and the pragmatic?

Sometimes I think that because of the polio, which I had as a child, I have always been a person of parts. My legs don't work; my arms did work; I had braces; I had a number of surgeries and I walked

Installation view, 2012, *La chambre enchantée* and *Vanitas*, Rimouski, Quebec.



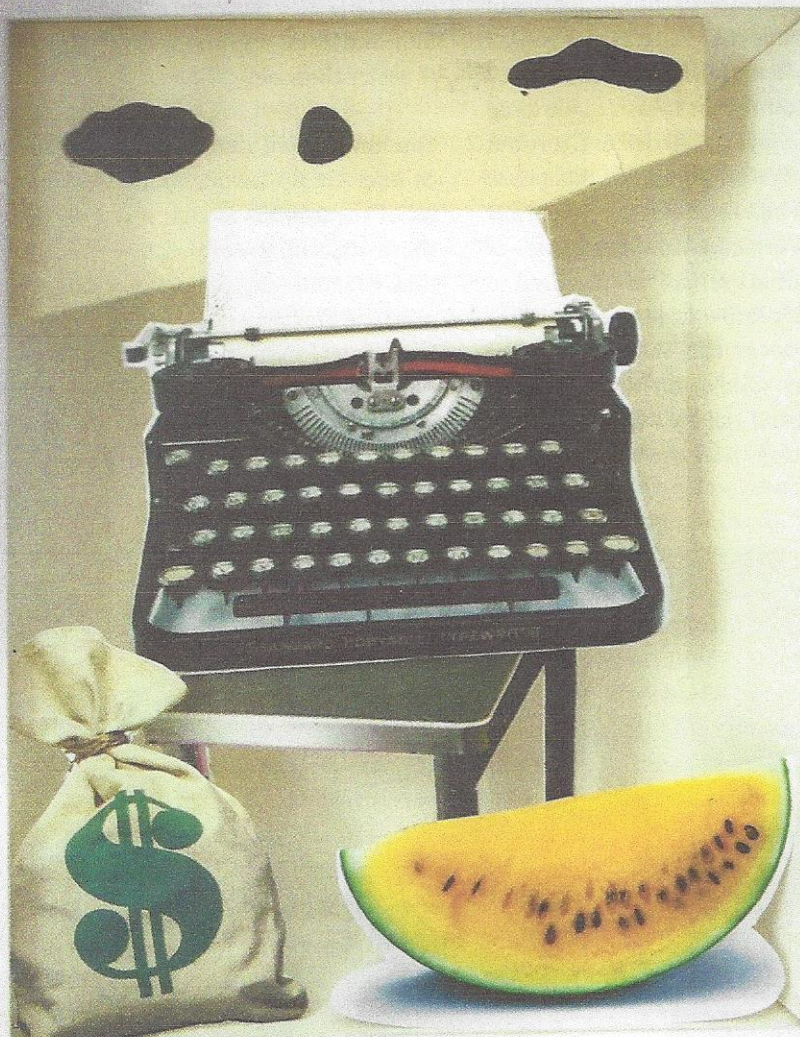
teaching themselves how to paint. Eric Fischl was teaching himself how to be a Manet-like or Sargent-like figurative painter. Even someone like David Salle, who is connected to my work in some ways, was trying out different ways of painting, various techniques in the same painting. His early works sometimes look like technical demos.

One of the things that Salle and Rosenquist do that you don't do is to break up, fragment and upend their images.

It is probably true. When you use collage you are disturbing a single reading in a picture, which is why I like the medium. But I didn't want to

with crutches. Now I'm in a wheelchair. I suppose I've come to think that the world is in pieces, the body is in pieces and your job is to put it together the best way that you can, to put it together into something that feels whole, at least whole enough for you to move forward.

That connects you both personally and in the arena of the history of ideas to the classic modernist dilemma. The Modernists find a fragmented and broken world, TS Eliot's *The Wasteland* is a poetic example of that, and face the necessity of finding some way to literally Humpty-Dumpty it back together again.



1. *Study for Philosopher*, 2012,
25 x 21 cm.

2. Various maquettes on studio work
table, 2008.

I think you're right and in using Humpty-Dumpty there is an acknowledged comical, vaudeville aspect to it, like "Whoops, I fell, what am I going to do?" or "It's broken, how do I put it back together?" I suppose it depends upon what kind of attitude you take in doing that. Do you do it with a sense of humour, or do you do it with a dark cloud above your head?

You like the disruption caused by vaudeville. So many of your images have figures who are in a precarious physical state; they are about to fall. In fact, falling is the theme of one of your exhibitions. I gather the world's unbalance and the potential humour in that disruption appeals to you?

It does. I enjoy silent cinema and I like to imagine the innocence and staginess of vaudeville theatre, which I suppose I relate to what a painter does when they begin a painting. You're seeing how you can balance all these various elements in a public arena and if you can be entertaining while doing it. I am drawn to the comic and entertainment aspect of the enterprise. I remember at one point in school someone promoting the notion of art having to be tough

and rigorous and hard. That was the language of the '70s and even into the early '80s and I'm not sure I ever really agreed with it. I like the notion of people coming to one of my exhibitions and taking snapshots of themselves in front of a big apple or a huge rabbit or the man falling, as though they are at a carnival sideshow.

I want to pick up on brokenness and the idea that collage allows us to put the world back together. Surrealism recognizes that brokenness but its way of putting things back together isn't to normalize it, but to make it strange. How does strangeness play into your work?

I think that part is related to metaphysical painting. De Chirico and his ideas were a big influence on the Surrealists and he might even have been the trigger for Breton. If you look at a de Chirico it is normal on one level—it's a piazza or a still life with cookies and dolls and stuff—but in the end it is insoluble, you don't know what to do with it, there is no place for you to put it that makes sense. That interests me an enormous amount. I don't think you can force that to happen. A huge part of the project is to try to get there.



And there is no program or recipe that can help? There is no secret code book?

I would like to say I wish there was but I'm not sure I do. I like the idea that it doesn't happen very often; that you arrive at a certain state of grace in this collage or this particular painting and for whatever reason, you make something that confounds you.

You refer to the canvas as "a metaphysical spatial container." I like the metaphysics of it and I am also intrigued by the notion of the necessity of containment. If everything is available and everything is broken, is the container a necessary device to formally structure all that information?

For me it is but for a lot of artists it is not. Post-studio practice and un-monumental notions of collage, with artists like Mark Bradford and Thomas Hirschhorn, is a whole other approach. It is this unruly thing that doesn't want or need borders. I like the borders. Braque talked about loving the limits of the rectangle and de Chirico wouldn't work without those limits, without the edge of the canvas closing in on a shadow or a column and forcing us to see it in a particular way. Someone like Philip Guston is a good example of that too. He is keenly aware of the limits of the rectangle when he puts his cigars and smoke and bricks and eyeballs in a particular location in his ink drawings and in his paintings. That is the motor for the picture in a way. If those elements were just strewn in a more open fashion they wouldn't have the same impact.

you refer to yourself through two markers in different centuries. You say you're a 19th-century Symbolist and a 20th-century metaphysical painter. Is the 19th-century reference a residue of the countercultural aesthetic and all those album covers of The Rolling Stones and The Beatles?

Yes, you must be thinking about the Rolling Stones's *Satanic Majesty's Request*. I have a genuine interest in 19th-century Symbolism. I was in Europe a little while ago and I went to Bern to look at Ferdinand Hodler's paintings at the Kunstmuseum because I had never seen them. They're corny and fantastic at the same time. I think part of my interest in 19th-century Symbolism stems from its rejection by Modernists and its embrace by '60s popular culture. I grew up like many in my generation with the formalist aesthetics of Greenberg and Michael Fried and they would have seen Arnold Böcklin and Hodler as the stinkiest, worst kind of art possible. Melodramatic illustration. I've been interested in trying to see if you can make something out of this kind of work. Of course, all the current neo-romantic painters are coming back to it.

The way that you come at collage and the unfamiliar seems to be more about space than content. I don't sense in your work, except

occasionally, the kinds of distortion, violence or enigmas of the classical Surrealism of Delvaux, Dalí or even Magritte. You seem to work more as a Formalist than a Surrealist.

You have a point. I realize in many ways, however much I complain about it and however much it was problematic to live through it as the dominant style in the '60s and '70s, that I am very much a formalist painter. In the end, painting will always be about organizing shapes on a visual field. In fact, about 10 or 12 years ago I did a series of paintings with stripes and rectangles that were tributes to *Plasticien* painting. That being said, there are skulls, naked women, candles and some of the iconography of Symbolism and Surrealism in my work, but I realize it is their orchestration and their organization, as much as the symbols themselves that gives them their strangeness. So it's a combination of the iconography and the internal rhythms of the painting, the particular ways that the repertoire gets organized.

When the distortion or the grotesque comes into collage, say, with Hannah Höch and John Heartfield, it enters for political reasons. More recently you've done some collages that make reference to the student protests in Montreal, but fundamentally your use of collage plays less into Hoch and Heartfield than it does into Schwitters and Motherwell.

You're right the political is not a big part of my game, although I don't feel very connected to the abstract character of Schwitters or Motherwell. Collage artists like Max Ernst and Jess Collins interest me more. In general, my collages have tended to be more

distorted than the paintings. I can just accept more in a collage; I can be more radical; they are faster and easier to do and I can do whatever I want. When I paint I'll tend to edit and I'm organizing things in a slightly different way. Sometimes I'm taking that radical shift in the collage and honing it into a more holistic form. There's one image I can think of in the show I had in Mexico in the early '90s; it's a tall portrait of a woman and she's really distorted. In the collage she was fragmented but when I did the painting I took the eye, ear, nose, the mouth and the hair that came from different sources and blended them into a single, seamless woman. In some ways I suppose this morphing or streamlining multiple images into a single image is connected to Photoshop and other computer and animation software, although I did it long before I ever had a computer.

Sometimes in looking at the clarity and focus of your work I think of John Baldessari, who is as far outside the Surrealist orbit as you can possibly get.

I'm not so sure he's not a West Coast Surrealist. Look at his iconography: animals, guns, clowns, sex, rupture, decapitated figures. Even though I'm a painter I'm aware of Baldessari, I'm aware of Gilbert and George, and that their bright, in-your-face, presentation of things is not that different from mine. They are also seeing the world as a kind of theatre, maybe even a theatre of the absurd. Certainly conceptual photographers in the '70s and '80s were employing many of the same tactics as painting, blowing up pictures and using a collage aesthetic.

You also use drop shadows, which is a technique for creating the suggestion of illusion. There is this ongoing dialogue in your work between flat space and the illusion of spatial depth and volume.

I've always liked that about pictures, going all the way back to *Olga and Mary Visiting*. The sense that the surface is flat but not flat at the same time. I find this an endlessly fascinating part of picture-making and the really stacy stuff of Braque, Beckmann, de Chirico and Guston has always interested me. Here's this room or this box or this space: how are we going to manipulate these things and which one is going to have a shadow and which one is not; are they all going to have shadows? It's a marvelous part of the game of painting and picture-making.

You always include a component that insists upon recognizing the two-dimensionality of the surface. In *Oracle* (2013) you have three bottles sketched in on a black ground, or in *Painting for Claude* (2012) there is the cartoon cloud sprinkling virtual raindrops.

Part of the strategy of the recent canvases is to paint elements as though they are sitting in a box with dropped shadows in trompe-l'oeil fashion. These flat things you mention, the cartoon cloud and wine bottles, are cut out of paper and when I paint them, I'm really careful about acknowledging that, leaving the trace or the edge of the paper along with their shadows. So the paintings in the end aim at a high degree of verisimilitude while also declaring their fakery.

That works especially well in a piece like *Lindberg* (2007) where that blue cloud hovers above the shadowy rectangle behind the cloud, except there is no behind. Then you do a simple drawing of a cassette, which is one kind of flat object; the blue x's on the orange ground is another, but then in the face of that two-dimensionality you insinuate the idea of volume and depth. What is that dialogue about?

I'm conscious of selecting images that are a mixture of 3D, like Casper the Ghost, a really obvious three-dimensional form, or the airplane you mention and then other things that are flat and very graphic, like the cassette from an early Mac icon. I enjoy the theatricality of the contrasts. When I was department chair for a number of years, I sometimes received promotional material from various companies. Many of the decorative stars in the shadow-box paintings come from a catalogue of decorations for school prom and end-of-year graduation parties.

As early as 1981 in a painting called *Function at the Junction* you've rendered Guston-like tubes, but then on the left-hand side you place a long, modelled cylinder that looks like Fernand Léger. So there is this whole illusion of contour and modelling going on.

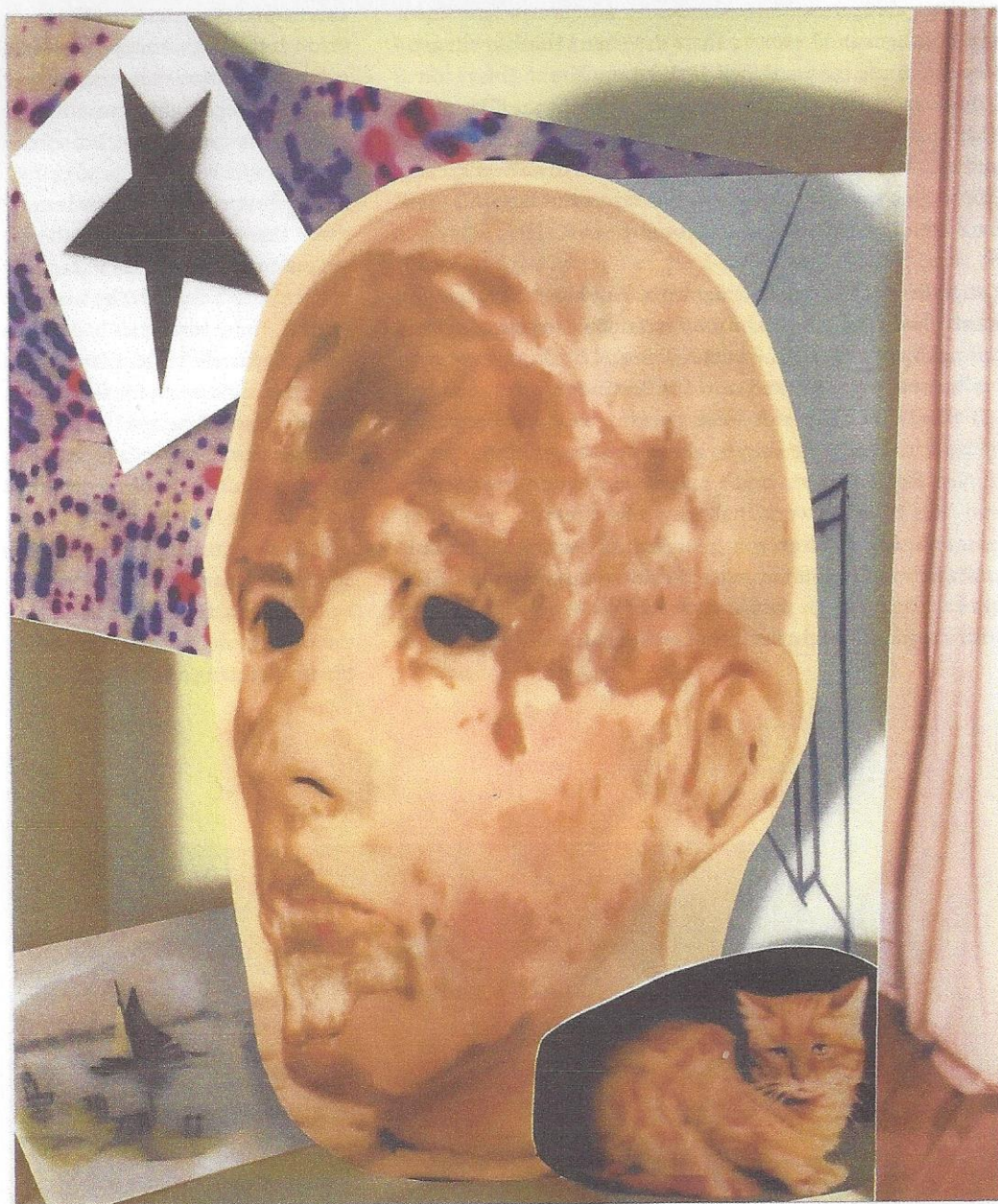
Anyone in the late '70s early '80s who was modelling to create an effect of three dimensions was doing a radical thing. Believe it or not, you could have completed art school in the '70s and never done an exercise where you had to create a sense of three-dimensional illusion. So an aspect of these early paintings was my having fun just fooling around with those simple 3D effects.

Do you want the congregation of images you choose to add up to a kind of story?

I'm interested in multiple narratives and multiple readings that ricochet around the picture. I put relatively neutral things in and then set up elements which I hope will lead to a variety of different readings. If you asked me I could say what was on my mind in any given painting, I could tell you what I was thinking about, certain hunches I had, but I couldn't tell you what they were about. *Green Parrot* (2001-02) was done around the time of 9/11 and maybe that is why the airplane is there, but who knows. As I shuffle through my bits of collage and set them on the table to establish finished collages and things I might develop into a painting, I'm looking for poetic resonance. I want that big-chested bird to resonate with that match, and to resonate with the airplane coming forward or with the key hanging down. I think paintings have motors—in the 19th century they used to call paintings machines—and for me the motor in a painting is that one thing leads to another, that you are moving in it constantly and you're not tiring and you're not solving it, and you stay in it being bounced around until you choose to turn your eyes and walk away. That's the kind of perpetual motion machine I'm looking for in a painting.

Another trope you use is to describe a painting as a poem, to which you add, "and things rhyme." The suggestion is that you are engaged in a kind of visual rhyming.

I always thought this was an obvious thing, but people don't tend to talk about poetry and painting anymore. It was Picasso who said that a painting is a poem with plastic rhymes and I think



Nefertiti, 2008, oil on canvas,
165 x 137 cm. Photograph: Richard-Max
Tremblay.

inevitably when you look at anything, not just a painting, the eye is going to link similar things. So in *Rainbow (for Rose and Licorice)*-2008, for example, the viewer will link the red elements, the golden elements, the black and white, the more naturalistically rendered, the more mechanically rendered, etc. etc. All of these different simultaneous links or rhymes send the eye bouncing around the painting in polyrhythmic connections, like the motor or perpetual motion machine I just described.

When I look at a piece like *Nefertiti* (2008), any disquieting associations with the death mask of the Queen is softened by the orange kitten that has the same tone, so you achieve a kind of tonal

harmony. You do the same thing in *Blue Wave* (2008). Any reading that carries us off in that dark cloud you mentioned earlier gets mitigated by a sense of tonal harmony. Is that a conscious strategy on your part in composing?

I don't tend to use the word harmony but I'm not afraid of it. I am drawn to classical harmonies in paintings, and they're all over the place. You don't have to go to Poussin for harmony. It is really about the integrity of elements meshing and fitting into that rectangle.

You regard a painting like *Rainbow* as "a box of goodies that will take you lots of places."

Essentially, I want the paintings to be rich enough that people will hang around and look at them for

a while. Part of me thinks that there is this positive vibe about some of them and I want to share it. When I think about art, I sometimes use the word love. Is there any love in this picture? I think an element of love was what I saw in the Chambers. That's part of what I hope for in a picture. It sounds sentimental and it is. I'm wondering, does it always have to be ironic; can a painting be sincere; can you involve sentimentality? All those have been important questions for me.

You address that issue straight on. You have said that you wanted your paintings to be understandable to your children. Your subject matter, the butterflies and birds, are not normally used in the painted world of Postmodernism.

It's true. When my kids were growing up I was conscious of working with the angst-ridden and hermetic language of Neo-Expressionism and I made a conscious effort in the mid-'80s to make work that they might respond to. When you're raising children you're looking at Disney's Pinocchio and all the stuff you haven't seen since you were a kid. So it has been a conscious part of my work for a long time. It began with *Vacation*, a picture of a boat I painted for my kids in 1987.

This may be a good time to talk about your methodology. Take me through the steps from an idea about a painting to the finished painting, and how that process has evolved over the years.

It probably begins with a painting I did in 1985-86 called *Caruso*, where I first started to work carefully from a collage study. I made a collage of a woman's head using two separate portraits from Walter Foster books and surrounded it with various elements that I knew would be interesting or tricky to paint. I blew it up and transferred it to the canvas. In those days I used a slide projector, so I'd rough the whole thing out and then begin to paint it. Those early ones had spray paint in them, especially in the backgrounds. I used aerosol cans, and I moved back and forth from the painting on the floor to the wall. It was awkward but I had friends help me and I was able to climb ladders in those days. So I transferred the collage onto this large 10 x 16-foot piece of linen and each of the elements was a kind of instruction manual on how to paint with oil. In that painting there is a feather, a cougar, a tree and a peach, there's a woman, grapes and a singer. So the working method for a long time was using straight collage and then transferring it, usually through projection. I didn't see the point in doing the gridding since it would have been more time-consuming and I suppose with the projection I was seeing



it as a bit of a performance. At the time a lot of performance artists, like Laurie Anderson, were using projection. I was doing paintings but I was also performing and the projection at night in the studio was part of that performance. I did feel I was staging something. It was the notion of spectacle and entertainment that I mentioned before. Since 2006, the collage studies have been constructed in shallow foam-core boxes that I then photograph, using the photograph as the model for the painting. This introduced a greater trompe l'oeil aspect, but essentially the working method has been the same for roughly 30 years.

Are the collages now becoming works in their own right?

They're becoming that simply because of some physical issues that make it impossible to work on a large scale and with this kind of ambition for the moment. That's a whole other question and something I am wrestling with.

The artist who famously used the box is Joseph Cornell. His boxes are hermetic and I don't get that feeling from yours.

When I first started to do the boxes people would mention Cornell. He has a lot of boxes with birds and we have in common other kinds of images. Starry skies. It's hard not to love Cornell;

they're lovely little universes. But Cornell lived a really strange, hermetic life, you might say a sadly hermetic one, and I don't at all. I live a much more public life, teaching, surrounded by family and kids and grandchildren and I suspect that is reflected in my work.

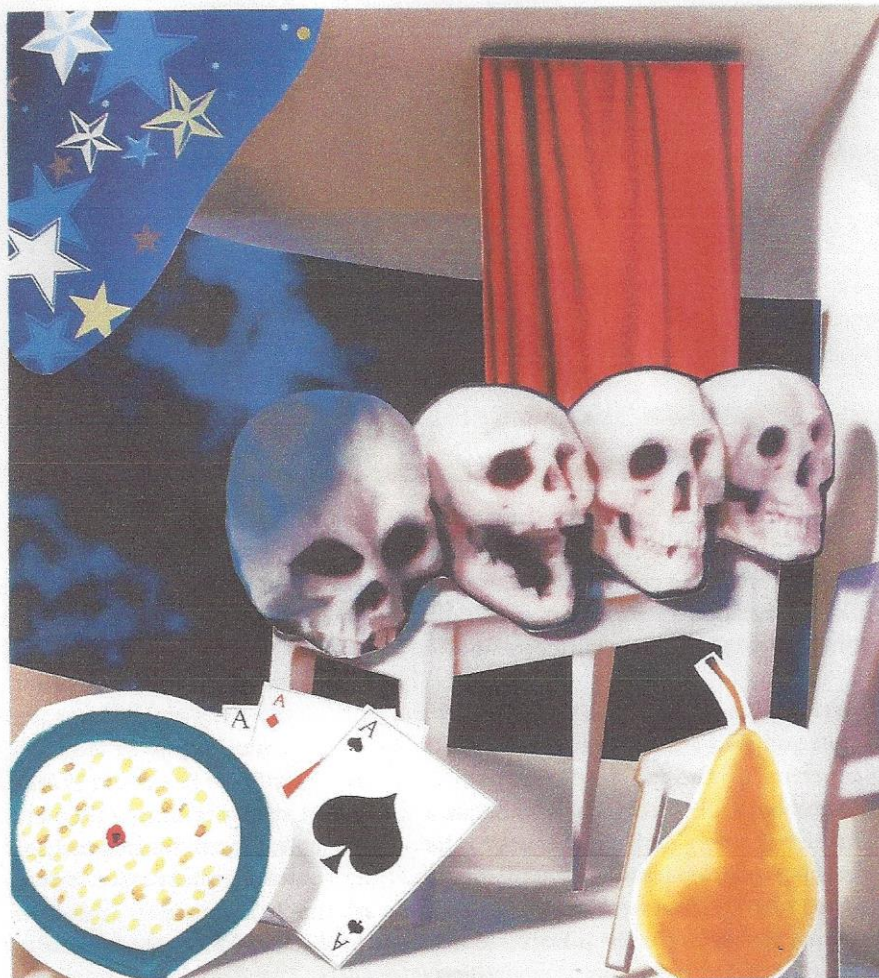
Recently you have been doing paintings like *Choeur* (2011–12) and *Valise* (2011) in which skulls are turning up.

It could be age; it could be the death of my father. It could be my Protestant heritage. But the tradition interests me. Whether Dutch baroque painting, or Beckmann or Guston who used equivalents of skulls, when you do still life you can't ignore that vanitas is a big part of the tradition. Some of my paintings are connected to vanitas still life, while others are connected to the cabinet of curiosities, which is a much more neutral collecting of elements.

You have mentioned Guston in this conversation. I assume your admiration focuses on the late Guston rather than the Ab-Ex Guston. He had a repertoire on which he could constantly draw. Do you feel you have an equivalent alphabet out of which you can construct a painterly syntax?

1. *La chambre enchantée*, 2012, oil on canvas. Photograph: Nicolas Grenier.

2. *Choeur*, 2011, oil on canvas, 152 x 137 cm. Photograph: Nicolas Grenier.



I think so, and that is one of the things I have always admired about him. He introduced me to this notion of an alphabet or a repertoire, and he probably made me look more carefully at people like de Chirico and Beckmann in terms of structuring the painting and creating theatre. The other thing about Guston is that he was a model for going into your studio, closing the door and painting. You do that for a long time and when you come out you should have some interesting things to look at. In that very simple sense, he was an important role model for many of us in the late '70s and early '80s.

You have an early resist painting that you did in 1979 or 1980 called *Red Studio*. I know it was coming out of the way that Beckmann and Guston were constructing space, but you can't call a painting *Red Studio* and not call up Matisse, which makes me ask the larger question of how colour functions in your work.

You're right, but I honestly didn't think about Matisse when I did the resist paintings. He has come to mind more recently, especially in terms of colour. Sometimes I'll give myself challenges where I'll say I'm going to use a limited palette like the orange and blue in *La chambre enchantée* (2012). Here, I was thinking of both Matisse and Beckmann. I'm very aware of colour in the new paintings and how the chromatics of the shadows add a special dimension. There is a lot of colour going on in the shadows. In the last 15 or even 20 years I have been much more conscious of having the figure elements and the grounds playing off each other through colour. "Trippyness" or "spaceyness," which I have always wanted in my work, has become more subtle and colour has been a big part of that.

You quote approvingly Jean Duvignaud's *The Sociology of Art*, where he writes about "the possibility of seeing in a painting a glimpse of some idea which might reveal and clarify the whole meaning of human existence." Is that the idea, getting all that inside this metaphysical container?

That's the idea. I think in front of certain paintings that even though I rationally know that there are a finite number of elements, there is a sense of infinite knowledge or understanding contained within that rectangle. That's what I experienced in front of *Olga and Mary Visiting* and I've been chasing it ever since.

Is that related to Beckmann's fourth dimension?

Yes, it's about going to a deeper, more profound place. The notion of the fourth dimension in painting comes from a 1938 lecture by Beckmann. I interpret that text in a very particular way. What he seems to be saying to me is that when an artist tries to take the three-dimensional world and put it on a two-dimensional surface, he or she is bound to fail. But it is precisely in these screw-ups, these failures,



these breaks in the system where you can find entry into the fourth dimension. For instance, in *Still Life with Telescope* (1927), there is a spatial rupture where the flame tulips are seen against a yellow wall, framed by the telescope and another vase of flowers. The repeated use of circles and ovals (the image of Saturn on the table, the gaping black opening of the horn on the floor) creates vortexes that suck the viewer in. These fissures or holes in the painting are the things that disrupt an easy reading of the picture and take you into a provocative, insoluble, fourth-dimensional space. Duvignand is alluding to that kind of transcendent space. In some ways, the devices Beckmann uses are simply more sophisticated versions of visual paradoxes like the Devil's Pitchfork or the Penrose triangle.



Rainbow (for Rose and Licorice), 2008, oil on canvas, 234 x 422 cm. Photograph: Richard-Max Tremblay.

You talk about art as being a mongrel and that there is no such thing as a pure anything anymore. Is that state one we should be happy with?

That's a good question. I'd say yes. I think you live in the time you're in, and the circumstances of the time we're in right now are such that we're questioning notions of purity and grand narratives, and as artists that is going to be part of our makeup.

In this conversation and on other occasions you have called yourself an old-fashioned still-life painter. Do you still think of yourself that way?

I'm joking when I say that. One of my former students and close friends is an observational still-life painter and I adore his work.

However for better or worse, I'm a Postmodernist, playing with fakery, with artificial constructs. I'm aware of the delights as well as the constraints of painting in our era.

You have said that you want to be able to combine the "achingly real with the obviously fake."

For me that makes it real. It's not real unless there is some of that artificiality. That is my way of acknowledging that I see the world as something that is constructed, has been shaded by media and by the knowledge we have of the world, of history and the evolution of painting. I'm reminded of the Angela Carter quote, "How far does a pretence of feeling, maintained with absolute conviction, become authentic?" ■