

BORDERCROSSINGS



WANGECHI MUTU

WANDA KOOP

TRACEY EMIN

ROSS BLECKNER

NEO RAUCH

ELAINE STOCKI

ALEX JANVIER

TAMMI CAMPBELL

JANET NUNGNIK

MAGALIE GUÉRIN

VENICE BIENNALE

INFRA-MINCE: PAINTING THE INVISIBLE IN ART

PRAYER WHEELS AND COLOUR PAINTING

PAINTING

THE PLACE OF PAINTING

Interviews with ALEX JANVIER TAMMI CAMPBELL MAGALIE GUÉRIN

by Robert Enright

In 1931 the Canadian artist David Milne made a colour drypoint called *Painting Place*. The etching was made after Milne had moved to a cabin he built at Six Miles Lake, north of Orillia, where he lived, alone, for six years. The image shows a view that only a painter could orchestrate. In the foreground are bottles of ink, a glass container for water and a leather case with brushes and drawing implements. The view leads down to the shore, across the lake and then onto land on the far shore, where we see a cluster of trees and farm buildings. A pair of fir trees sit on either side of the composition, framing what is effectively a proscenium stage, as if nature were enacting a delicate drama. *Painting Place*, rendered in a simple palette of green and black, characteristically employs Milne's signature diffuse, absorbing edges, where the two colours flow into one another. The drypoint carries another signature. It is signed David B Milne, but what is interesting is that he also inscribed his initials—DBM—in capital letters on the surface of the water on the upper left-hand side of the composition, just inside the foliage of the framing tree. He makes his painting place the location of a double signing and a declaration of optical ownership. For Milne, it was both a physical space and a state of mind. Each of the following three painters who talked to *Border Crossings* has their own painting place, which exists for them, too, as both an actual and an imaginative space.

For Tammi Campbell, the physical painting place is Saskatoon, a city with a complex and contentious history of art production. The influence of Clement Greenberg and the Emma Lake Workshops established a tradition that could be both generative and prescriptive. Campbell took on the legacy of formalism and mixed it with her interest in minimal and conceptual art. Her practice makes it clear that any one place can take on the colouration and contours of many places and the artists who work in them. She is relentlessly open to the material experimentation that happens in her studio. "I'll throw anything into anything to see what happens: if you pull it, if you brush it, if you put it on something, if you mix it with something else, how can you peel it off? I will do anything to push the possibilities of what paint can do."

Magalie Guérin is a Montreal-born artist who was raised in Quebec City and now lives in Chicago. She worked in New York for 10 years and has done residencies in Saugatuck, Michigan, Provincetown and Berlin; last year she had a Chinati Foundation

Residency in Marfa, Texas, and this year painted for a month in Albert Oehlen's studio in a small village near Lekeitio in Basque Country. Her influences are as wanderlusty as her travel: she is attracted to the "weirdly fascinating" style of brutalist architecture; she can show evidence of close looking at Charline von Heyl in one painting and at Amy Sillman in another. She admires Morandi and Tomma Abts and Robert Irwin, and each of them has made their way into her work and out again. She says that the most important thing for a studio artist is "to have a generative practice. To self-generate interest in your own work. If you can do that, then there's no end in sight."

Alex Janvier, the distinguished Indigenous artist, was born in 1935 on the Le Goff Reserve, Cold Lake First Nations, in northern Alberta, where he now maintains his family-run studio gallery. Janvier was taken to the Blue Quills Residential School as a young boy and it was there that his gift for drawing and painting became apparent. "Art was my saviour," he recalls, "a way of securing a little of myself." Over the course of a six-decade-long artistic career, he has created a unique abstract language that incorporated his early exposure to European modernists like Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky, the quill work he saw women in his community making as a child and his interpretations of traditional powwow culture. His transformative invention is evident in the linear elegance of *Grand Entry*, 1980, an abstract representation of the ceremonial entry of women powwow dancers, and in *Alberta Rose*, 1977, where he stitches together the torn fragments of roses that had been cut and scattered by municipal highway workers. In his self-portrait, *Indian Group of 8: Alex Janvier*, 2011, the containment of the vigorous mark-making and shape-shifting of the painting's interior makes a subtle but unmistakable political comment. When asked what the viewer would learn about him from his self-portrait, he says, "The portrait is inside the Indian reserve." His 65-year-long retrospective exhibition, "Alex Janvier: Modern Indigenous Master," was organized by the National Gallery of Canada and toured across Canada from 2016 to 2018.

Alex Janvier was interviewed by phone to his studio in Cold Lake, Alberta, on June 19, 2019; Magalie Guérin was interviewed by phone to her studio in Chicago on June 26, 2019; and Tammi Campbell spoke from her Saskatoon studio on July 24, 2019.

MAGALIE GUÉRIN: Logic Like Gravity



Magalie Guérin, *Untitled (res 2.2)*, 2019, oil on canvas on panel, 24 x 30 inches. All images courtesy the artist and Corbett vs Dempsey, Chicago.

MAGALIE GUÉRIN: As soon as I arrived in grad school, I decided to stop making the ballpoint drawings I had been doing for a few years and just start painting. I had never really painted before and I absolutely loved it; I never felt so engaged in my entire life. That was it; I understood painting was how I was going to keep my mind occupied. Because I didn't know how to paint, I would draw in my sketchbook and then try to translate the drawing marks as precisely as possible with painting marks. I used only black, grey and bright yellow paint so it looked like graphite and highlighter yellow.

BORDER CROSSINGS: You didn't know how colour worked at all?

Not in paint, no. But I did spend 10 years analyzing the slightest shift in hue as a photographic colour printer, so perhaps I knew intuitively. When you're working for a big commercial lab, printing for established photographers—which I was when I lived in NYC—you have to be completely precise, otherwise the prints will be rejected. Through this job, I got to be really particular about the way colour appears.

The two painters who turn up in *NOTES ON* and who I see in your work are Charline von Heyl and Amy Sillman. They also use colour in unpredictable ways.

If I had to name two painters whom I look at the most, it's those two. I feel like I fall in between them. I look at Amy Sillman for things that I'm not capable of doing; the looseness of her marks is something I can't do. But we have a similar interest in shape and the way shapes play on the canvas. Then, my structure is always super-tight, which I feel is a lot more the way Charline constructs a painting.

You've also remarked that your sense of colour is informed by everything from the sneakers you're wearing to the topography around Marfa. Is colour something that always comes so directly?

I don't think about it when I use a colour. It's after the fact that I notice the connections. I'll question why this particular orange is everywhere in my paintings and then I'll look at my feet to see that I'm wearing these crazy orange sneakers. Did I buy them before or after I painted that orange? I have no idea. It's one of those weird things. It's as if that colour is in the air for me. I'm sure my selection is intentional, but I couldn't explain how.

The other thing you share with Amy Sillman is that she's an abstract painter with a strong sense of the representational. Your painting is always urging itself in that direction.

I actually don't consider myself an abstract painter because the way I think about spatial relationships in my painting is always figure/ground. There's always a sense of gravity. There's a bottom and there's a top. You can't flip the paintings.

That's interesting because sometimes I have no idea what makes your paintings work. It's as if the shapes are feeling out the space they're in. They're not confused and they're not tentative; they're just figuring out what is the relationship between one thing and another.

I love what you just said. To be honest, they're pretty mysterious to me, too.

There are a few personal things about you that interest me. Is it true that you learned to speak English by watching episodes of *As the World Turns*?

I grew up in Quebec City and English is not my first language, but for some reason when I was a teenager I was obsessed with being bilingual. What we learned in school was not enough so I would watch *As the World Turns* every day, which was surprisingly not dubbed (everything on television

was dubbed in French back then). You don't need subtitles to understand a soap opera because it's such simple writing. It was not intimidating and I was able to follow the storyline. Then, when I was 20 years old I left my hometown and backpacked across the country by myself and that's really when I learned how to communicate. For the last 25 years, more than half my life, I've been living mainly in English-speaking cities.

How did you end up doing a residency at the Chinati Foundation in Marfa?

I was encouraged to apply by Charline von Heyl, who lives part-time in Marfa. I was introduced to her by Albert Oehlen, who was my advisor in grad school, and now we all show at Corbett vs. Dempsey, which makes me very happy. Chinati is amazing; the artist in residence lives on the museum grounds and has access to all the rooms during off-hours. You can borrow a set of keys and go at sunset when, in my opinion, the art looks its best. Not many people have this opportunity. If you are lucky enough to spend that much time in that place—I was there for two months—then you see all these different weather patterns acting out on the art installations. It's really unbelievable to see the light changing on the Roni Horn piece. I completely fell in love with Marfa.

You mentioned what you call a "logical sense of construction." Can you take me through what that logic is and how it governs you in making a painting?

It's connected to my trying to explain that I feel more like a representational painter than an abstract one. Let's say you paint a circle in the middle of the canvas. If the circle is floating, then it's a sun. But if you put a line from the circle to the bottom of the canvas, then it's a lamppost or something of that sort. It's logic like gravity that I'm talking about. I have to think in those terms in order to resolve an image. You might not see the logic clearly when you look at my paintings—I actually don't know how they appear to other people—because I constantly fight against my need to have everything visually make sense.

You have a very elegant painting that shows three orange lines at the top. It indicates a sense of complementary harmony. Is that something that emerges in the making of the painting itself?

Yes, in the making. I don't set out to make it that way. An example: I actually thought I was going to paint over those horizontal colour stripes because they happened quite early in the painting. I work on multiple paintings at once and the most exciting things seem to happen at the end of the day when

1. *Untitled (Marfa 2)*, 2018, oil on canvas on panel, 20 x 16 inches.

2. *Untitled (Marfa 5)*, 2018, oil on canvas on panel, 20 x 16 inches.

3. *Untitled (hat cave)*, 2016, oil on canvas, 20 x 16 inches.

4. *Copy Drawing (hat-Flintstones)*, 2017, colour pencil on paper, 27 x 23 inches.



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1. *Untitled (res 3.3)*, 2019, oil on canvas on panel, 30 x 24 inches.

2. *Untitled*, 2017, oil on canvas on panel, 24 x 30 inches.

I'm cleaning my palette. I take leftover paint from a previous painting and apply it on a newer one. What's interesting is that I don't have enough of that colour to make something specific, so however much paint I have will delineate the shape that's going to emerge. I don't want to waste any paint. It always surprises me because those are more intuitive decisions. I'm not setting up a visual situation where I would want to use that particular green to make that shape. So it's those shapes, created with leftover paint, that end up moving the image further. They open up possibilities in the painting.

In *NOTES ON* you talk about Tomma Abts. One of the things you have in common is a sense of scale. She tends to work fairly small; you have worked in a relatively compressed size. Why do you work in that scale as much as you have?

For multiple reasons. I'm a very small person and I want to be able to manage the canvases easily, lift them up, move them around and not be encumbered by their physicality. I want to have an easy relationship with them. The intimacy of the body/torso relationship to painting is something

I'm interested in. In *NOTES ON*, I also talk about how seeing the Morandi retrospective at the Met completely changed my life. That was a turning point for me as an artist. That scale created their intimacy. Also, because of my interest in making surfaces that are sculptural enough to have grooves and valleys, I'm afraid they would crack if I go bigger. So for all those reasons and probably other ones, too, I've stayed pretty small. But I have been questioning that lately. If I do go bigger, there are things I will have to let go of and I'm not sure I'm there yet.

Morandi is critical to your development and so is Robert Irwin. In *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees*, Irwin talks about recognizing that even though Morandi repeats the same shape, they're not the same. They get drained of specific meaning and become a new investigation every time.

I'm still using strategies of repetition in my work. I read Robert Irwin's book right after grad school, when I was confused about how to engage with my paintings. I had multiple sizes going at once and they all seemed to demand different things. And then I read the chapter in the book where Irwin decided to reduce his visual questioning to a minimum. That was his quest. He explains—and he's extremely articulate—how freeing it was when he limited the possibilities. And when he brought up Morandi, whom I had experienced as an epiphany, it all made sense. That's when I decided to experiment with painting one shape exclusively, the hat shape. At first I set out to do this for three months because I thought that was a huge amount of time, but it turned out I painted the hat for a couple of years because it kept pushing my paintings forward. By reducing all these other possibilities, everything opened up.

How do you think of seriality?

The word "seriality" makes me think that it's a strategy for presentation as opposed to exploration. The word "repetition," on the other hand, feels more like a system created to go deeper. So I use repetition. But that's just semantics.

You said you love how Morandi painted silence. Your paintings are noisy and sometimes they even create a racket. Do you love how you paint noise, in the same way that you love how Morandi painted silence?

No. I'm a little self-conscious about the noise. I have this desire to be quieter, yet my paintings don't allow that.



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Do you personify the painting? Does it take on a character and have emotion? This goes back to the drama of *As the World Turns*. Is there a way to instill a sense of drama in the work so that emotion may be theatricalized? Or is it more subtle than that?

I think it's more subtle than that. I don't find my paintings dramatic. Sometimes a colour may act a little dramatically but then the shapes don't, or vice versa. I mean, nothing is really going to happen, it's only a painting. I think there is more equilibrium than there is drama. My paintings are perhaps more architecture than they are people. I look at brutalist architecture a lot; those buildings are so weirdly fascinating. That's why I titled a recent show "bunker"—a friend had sent me a photo book about bunkers, saying they looked like my paintings. And "bunker" makes so much sense because it's an architecture designed to protect. I do find that my paintings are quite tight; in a way they're quite protective.

But they never strike me as claustrophobic. There's always room to breathe. You walk a delicate line

between claustrophobia and compression. Amy Sillman does this as well.

I'm glad to hear that because it's one of my main struggles in the studio. I tend to paint pretty tight, and precisely. I can't know how my paintings appear to others, but I personally can see what my struggles are as a maker. I know what kind of person I am and what my painting issues are. Like, for some silly reason, it's very hard for me to paint over a border. That's why I make these raised edges with gesso so I'll have no other choice but to paint across them. I notice the things that I'm not able to do easily and then I try to find a system that forces me to address those things. That's my journey. I create these psychological experiments because I want to be more open as an artist.

Tell me about the copy drawings project.

The copy drawings project is connected to *NOTES ON*. The Green Lantern Press had an exhibition space and they wanted me to do an exhibition for the book release. Because the book is about copying my studio notes to see what that process does to their meaning, I decided to make copies of my paintings through drawing for the exhibition. I

made different kinds of copy drawings: some colour paintings were in monochrome graphite; others had their imagery flipped. Drawing teachers often suggest looking at your work through a mirror to see problems with the composition. I thought, "Okay, will I still like my painting if it's flipped?" So I made those and then I also made coloured pencil ones to recreate the layering of the paint. That's how the copy drawings came about. I continue to make them when I have time. In my latest body of work, I'm doing something somewhat similar because I'm repeating marks across multiple canvases. I'll be working on, let's say, four paintings simultaneously and doing the exact same painterly mark on all of them.

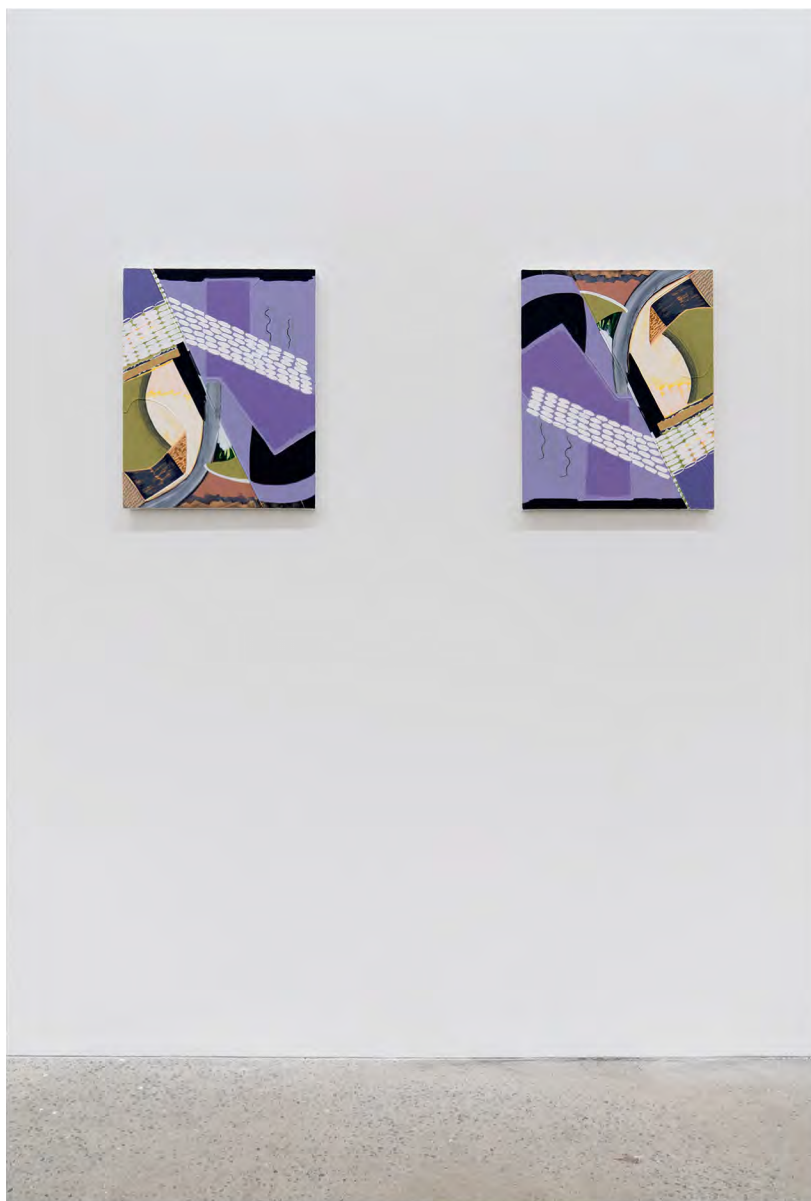
Robert Rauschenberg did a pair of paintings in 1957 called *Factum I & II*. They look to be exactly the same, but when you look closely you can see the differences. Are you doing the same thing in that you're basically mimicking a gesture or a mark as you move from one canvas to another? Yes, but I don't stop there. I repeat the marks and when I end up with the finished paintings—three to five paintings that are exactly the same—then I take one out of the equation and continue with the other ones. My interest with these is not the repetition. My interest is about their resolution. I'm trying to figure out if a resolution can be fixed. You know, the most common question people ask a painter is, "How do you know when a painting is finished?" and my current answer is, "Well, maybe I don't." That's why I test breaking the resolution multiple times.

So that's when you ask yourself what kind of a move or decision would you make on top of a painting that you like and that you consider finished? It's a dialogue going on between you and your other you. Both your 'yous' are screwing with yourself.

I think that's the fun part about painting. You can try these things. Again, for me, they're psychological experiments: What am I going to figure out if I paint on top of a painting I already like? Will I get looser or will I get tighter?

The answer to that question can come only in the making. Does it give you a full enough answer or do you have to keep asking the question?

I hope I continue to ask the question because I'm in this for the long run. But I have not been able to answer it yet. Actually, I might have answered it, but I don't like the answer, so that means I'm not done. I feel that the paintings all ended up with a very similar tonal resolution, even after all the changes, and I'm disappointed with that.



But your disappointment is the thing that keeps you interested. You quote Amy Sillman on the importance of doubt. Doubt is generative for you?

Absolutely. I think being satisfied is a huge problem. I can't ever be, so that's good. I'm teaching a painting class at School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the fall and my approach is going to encourage my students to reject satisfaction. I think the most precious thing for a studio artist is to find a way to have a generative practice, to self-generate interest in your own work. If you can do that, then there's no end in sight. You have to believe that there's always something else to figure out. Painting is the hardest thing I've ever done and because of that I find it to be the most engaging medium to work with. ■

Installation view, "Magalie Guérin,"
2019, Galerie Nicolas Robert, Montreal.
Photo: Jean-Michael Seminaro.