



### **Skowhegan Class of 1994**

Don Edler: We are building an archive of artist interviews that we hope to make available through the Skowhegan library, the concept for these interviews is to allow artists to speak candidly about their practice or otherwise. We hope to create a more interpersonal archive through which contemporary artists can represent themselves in their own words, through conversation. The format is open, so if there is anything you would like discuss, feel free to do so, otherwise, I have a few questions prepared, we can start from there and see where the conversation goes.

Rebecca Morris: Great! Thank you for inviting me.

DE: Do you mind talking about your time at Skowhegan as a participant in 1994? And is there anything in particular that you remember learning during your time at Skowhegan that is still part of your life or practice today?



**Scott Reeder, Elizabeth Saveri, Rebecca Morris, Matthew Plumb, in front of Van Gogh Studio, 1994**

RM: I went to Skowhegan right after I got my MFA, and I think that was perfect timing for me because when you get out of graduate school, you can get a little depressed and overwhelmed, and you lose the community that you had while in school. Attending Skowhegan really opened up my community at a crucial moment—I met people from New York, LA, and places in between. It was exciting to have conversations with people that were in the same place I was, but with different backgrounds and having come out of different schools across the country. I was living in Chicago at the time, but meeting all these fellow artists that summer helped me begin to make decisions about what I wanted to do next. It was empowering to open up those kinds of possibilities. It was at Skowhegan that I met and became friends with people from Los Angeles, whom I later visited. Soon after, I began thinking that I wanted to move to LA. That was pretty huge in terms of where I am now, having lived in LA for 16 years and counting. Looking back, Skowhegan was very stimulating in this way.

DE: Let's move on to your work. Do you see a relationship to photography in your work?

RM: When I was in undergrad at Smith College, I was doing equal parts painting and photography. At some point, I started working primarily in painting. I don't remember any sort of a specific moment that caused this shift, it just happened. I know I was getting sick of all the darkroom work, I liked taking pictures, and I liked working with contact sheets, but after a while, all the chemical processes became too tedious, and working within photography lacked immediacy. It felt too distant from the hands-on aspect of making an image and working with materials that you get with painting.



Photography is still incredibly important for my work in the sense that I have always taken tons and tons of photographs. One of my graduate advisors was the Chicago Imagist painter Barbara Rossi—she had this slide collection of ice cream cones that she had taken, basically signs for ice cream shops. A lot of them were taken in India, and you would think that ice cream cones would be a pretty steady format, some variation of a circle and a cone, but these are so charming and surprisingly inventive. She took hundreds of pictures like this. If you were a very lucky graduate student of hers, she would bring in a slide carousel and show them to you. It made a huge impression on me—this idea of taking a picture of a single type of thing over and over and over again and capturing all the different permutations, and thus creating a personal typology. I have always been interested in a kind of vernacular photography (that so many people are interested in now with Instagram and Pinterest) so it is not very novel at this point. But I think seeing Barbara's ice cream cone pictures in my early twenties really made an impression on me. It encouraged a directed start to documenting the normal and weird things around me like signs, architecture, parking lots, van art, whatever. This is interesting to me still, but I see people who can capture these same things I'm photographing doing such a better job and putting all of their effort behind it. So it doesn't feel as important to me to reveal that part of what I do right now. But it's definitely there.

DE: It is interesting to hear that you have also made those connections between your paintings and contemporary modes of image making. I don't really know why I was thinking of those things when I was going through your catalogues but the idea of casual photography just came to mind somehow.

RM: That's nice actually. The thing that I really do take pictures of all the time is my studio. I'm constantly taking pictures. Each time I go, I maybe take 20 pictures of what's happening in there. The paintings change so much, I take pictures because I want to remember what something looked like before and after certain moves. It's helpful.



### **In-progress shots of *Untitled* (#14-13), December 2013**

DE: Do you think subconsciously you might be incorporating the collapse of dimensionality or the flattening of the image plane that happens in photography—taking that flatness into your mind and using it as a resource for coming up with the shapes that you paint?

RM: Yeah, maybe, I mean no one has ever said that before, but I could see it. It is totally possible. I am a strong believer in the unconscious. There's a painting I made recently that's going to be in a show in Los Angeles in March. I'm not going to bore you with explaining it too much because explaining abstract paintings can get really kind of stupid, when you start hearing back what you say. But it's a painting that has a similarly painted background area and center area, so the center area seems to reveal back to that background. But I changed the marks in the center so it's not a one to one match. It ends up doing that thing in filmmaking, I don't remember what it's called—maybe you do, where you pull back and zoom in with the camera at the same time.

DE: I don't, but it's a weird sort of warping effect where the subject matter stays still but the background shifts.

RM: Yes, exactly, and it's a way to really create drama and it's almost that feeling when your heart starts beating faster and freaks out for a second and the camera can kind of capture that sensation.

DE: It emulates vertigo, right?

RM: Yeah, it's like a hyper focus? Anyway in this painting that I'm describing, I had to think for a long time about whether I would make this center area a direct reveal to this outer border. In the end I decided not to, and change them a little, and to me it creates that cinematic effect I'm talking about. It was "the big decision" in the painting and I'm very happy I did it. To me it feels cinematic. So I think you're right about that. There's something conscious or unconscious or whatever.

DE: Weirdly enough I hadn't thought of this but now that you mention it, it becomes very loud in my mind - Do you find yourself thinking about the perceptual implications of your paints? How the viewer perceives the paint?

RM: I do--sometimes it has to be pointed out to me, someone will say "oh this is doing this space-wise for me" and I'm like "oh, right." So although I know I am doing it, I may not be aware of how much I am doing it. I also think there is always a sort of question about the space I am painting, it is never a very assertive gesture where: this is the foreground and this is the background etc. There is always a bit of ambiguity as to whether I am painting the background, or the foreground, or painting the flicker between these two possible spaces. I like that in-betweenness more than deciding. Some paintings will have very similar formats, but the way they work spatially will create very different impressions. Some will be very layered and go back into space, but others will feel like the space is side by side on the same plane. I am not overly aware of these things while I am painting, but maybe subconsciously I am accepting that picture space, and going more towards it. I don't set out thinking 'this painting's going to be very flat' but I am making decisions and moving in one direction or another, but without a set idea of making a specific type of painting.

DE: How do you feel about that creation of space, and maybe we can actually use this as a transition to speak about one of your paintings in the Biennial—*Untitled* (#14-13). I was looking at

that painting, and I noticed you are using framing devices and scale to create depth and distance in a vaguely architectural sense. Without getting into a conversation about defining what is or is not abstraction, I am curious if you could talk about the depiction of space and how that relates to abstraction because I feel like establishing figure-ground relationships you're starting to undermine pure abstraction in a sense.



***Untitled (#14-13), 2013***

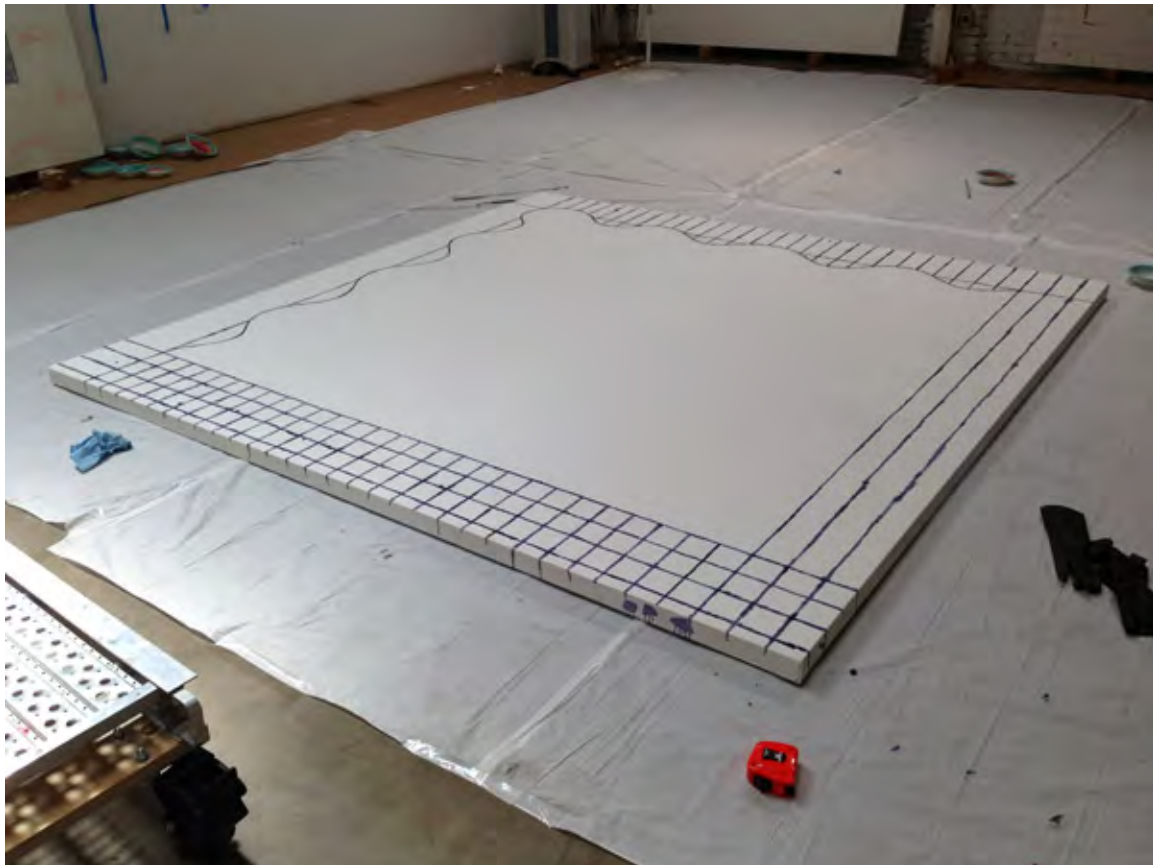
RM: For a time, I was making paintings that were more field-based, meaning the abstraction was more about an all-over composition that continued, perhaps, beyond the edge of the picture plane--embracing the idea that the painting was capturing a smaller portion of something larger. I was concerned with how to make something go back or forward in that space, or how to articulate the literalness of the canvas itself. I made those paintings in the early 2000s and then there was a definite switch to a very frontal, splintered-type space. So instead of having a single field, now there were many pieces of things coexisting together. That was a big shift and I haven't really gone back to the field paintings since. I will say that the way I'm handling the borders around the paintings right now is more field like and what's happening inside the borders is more like after that break I made probably around 2004-2005. The one at the Whitney is like this. It is a blue painting with a grid around it, and the grid is a field. If you look at how the grid ends at each edge of the canvas—it's not even.

DE: It's off-center. I see it.

RM: It's off-standard. In all honestly that wasn't something I was trying to do on purpose—it's literally because I wasn't measuring things, I'm just thinking of the basic shape I want. I wanted an internal shape of a square with two scalloped/ wavy edges and two straight ones. When I put the grid in around it, I was free-hand measuring. I was a little worried that the grid not meeting the sides of the canvas the same way at each edge would be distracting, and feel too much like content. But I think that there is so much happening in the painting, that I don't think it does. In the end, I wouldn't mind if it did function as content, whatever that content might be.

DE: Do you think the grid functioned as a sort of support mechanism or structure that gave you support or security to try different things within the composition?

RM: Absolutely, I think it is a very stabilizing force. In that painting there are a lot of wavy, free form shapes happening, so the grid, which is a cool, dark blue has a more clinical character, that is non-sentimental and functions as a structured back-drop. It may not even be an actual back-drop, but it is a bracing character, and it is a border too, containing everything, holding it together, so yes, the word support is definitely accurate.



**Early in-progress shots of *Untitled* (#14-13), September 2013**

DE: The grid is a type of repeating form or pattern, it makes me think of repetition, and the notion that the repetition of an object, shape, or sign has the effect of obliterating meaning, do you think that applies to your grid?

RM: There was a period of time when I thought about that idea a lot, repeating something to make it banal, but I haven't been concerned with those ideas for a long time. I think now when I repeat something, I only repeat it when I feel it is being used in a different way. I am not repeating something because it is the same thing each time I am using it. When I am repeating something, it has some different association for me, so I can repeat it. I am only interested in repeating things if they have a different function or resonance from iteration to iteration.

DE: You've alluded to this in other writings, but are you familiar with the term "paradoleia?"

RM: No.

DE: It's a psychology term, but it's the psychological phenomena for seeing recognizable things in patterns or objects. When you see an animal in the clouds or something, that's paradoleia. It comes from the Greek word "Dolem" which is Greek for "form." "To perceive form" is the Greek translation.

RM: Yes, I am interested in that idea without having known the formal word for it...that's how I see the world a lot. It's funny--when I listen to music and really like something, I'll hear the lyrics based on how they fit in with the music but I'm very rarely listening to the lyrics for meaning.

DE: I can relate to that. Are you good at remembering lyrics to songs?

RM: No, only if the song is playing at that moment might they come back to me. The words don't translate to meaning for me. My dad who is a composer comments that I often refer to the sounds of music as "noises" -- I don't say notes -- and I think it's something funny about the way I'm perceiving it - sounds as noises.

DE: I can totally relate to that, and I sort of have the exact same relationship to music and lyrics as you just described. Maybe it's how our minds work--why we're drawn to abstraction in general, or image making, or why we're visual people.

RM: I'll also look at things and never question what the image could be about--like strange shapes or something. There's sort of a literalness that I notice, but that's not to say I'm not detail oriented, or not able to experience nuance.

DE: Are you speaking to looking at images in painting right now or in general?

RM: In general. Though I've done studio visits with grad. students, and I'm looking at their work and talking about it and realize after an embarrassing amount of time that this thing I've been talking about the whole time was an abstracted figure and I had no sight of it. I think it's because I'm just so prone to looking at shapes and forms that I just don't feel this urge to make them make sense. I can exist for a long time without this necessity to make things cohere, and I'm perfectly happy to exist in that state, but I know it drives other people crazy.





**Morris' studio in Los Angeles, November 2013**

DE: I think that's an invaluable tool for you as an abstract painter though because it allows you to fully explore shape and form in that regard without having to deal with any sort of additional informational hang-ups associated with those things.

RM: I think you're right about that. You stay more baggage free.

DE: I'm interested in your relationship with mixing materials or experimenting with textures and also I'm really curious about your use of white in your paintings-- are you painting white or are you leaving the canvas gesso white? How do you deal with that background whiteness you seem to leave in a lot in your painting compositions?

RM: I sometimes leave the white of the gesso as a white and I sometimes paint-in the white. I like using the white of the gesso because it's such a neutralized surface and I enjoy that. For example, with the painting at the Whitney, *Untitled (#14-13)*, the blue grid sits on white gesso and there's no white oil paint there. But inside the central shape, there are lots of different painted-in whites. I love seeing white on white, especially when it's kind of a bisque-y dirty white next to a very warm white. I think it looks really beautiful and it's very subtle. I do a lot of light paint handling—a lot of turped out oil paint, so everything gets very transparent, and you're very aware that the paintings are painted on a white ground because of this transparency. The transparency also highlights the quality of oil paint itself, which can change so dramatically given what color you're using, and what brand you're using.



Williamsburg Paints—some of their blacks and browns have this really earthy chunkiness so when it turps out you see the paint's granulation. I really like that. I'm making the paintings with oil paint and not acrylic because I like this sort of stubbornness and the irregularity that happens with oil paint. I really love this quality in oil painting, so I'm always trying to highlight different aspects of it—with certain brushstrokes, or by painting something quickly. Sometimes I purposefully fill-in an area in specific way because I want a motion or direction left in the paint. Due to it being so thin, that motion is captured. It's a way to make everything look vibrating and different from itself.

I'm also quite dedicated to color and color relationships for textural shifts. Specifically relational color. I have a friend (Mary Weatherford) who's so gifted at layering colors and building washes on top of each other and creating entirely new color situations because of that layering- I'm always attracted to that because I don't do that so much. It is a different textural look.

DE: Now that you've spoken about it a little bit, and I'm looking at this painting in the Biennial, and it almost feels collaged. It feels like you have different moments or shapes that are all collaged together as opposed to like painted in a transparent way that would sort of layer them in the way you're talking about that your friend does.

RM: You know when I was talking earlier about making that break from the more field-based paintings to the work I'm making now, I see it as coming out of an intense period of making collages back then. That sort of did it—collage is incredible.

Rebecca Morris (A 94') lives and works in Los Angeles.