THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

Art

INCONVERSATION

Katy Siegel and David Reed with Phong Bui

by Phong Bui

Just a few days before installing the exhibit *High Times, Hard Times: New York Paintings 1967–1975,* which features over 40 significant works by 30 artists and will be on view at the National Academy Museum from February 15 until April 22, 2007, curator Katy Siegel welcomed David Reed, who serves as the exhibit's advisor, and the *Rail's* Publisher Phong Bui to her home in Boerum Hill to discuss the work and artists included in this broad survey of experimental abstract painting.

Phong Bui (Rail): Could you tell us how the idea of the show came about, in terms of constructing the time between 1967–1975 as well as the selecting process?

David Reed: Several years ago I was a member of an advisory group for the Independent Curators International. For the last meeting of my tenure we were asked to brainstorm ideas for possible painting shows. As the meeting was ending, Susan Hapgood, the Director of Exhibitions at the iCI, asked if, being the only artist attending, I had anything else to say. I told her about a dream of mine, something very dear to my heart. I had always wanted to see an exhibition of the experimental abstract painting that I encountered as a young painter coming to New York in the early '70s. I mentioned a few artists: Lee Lozano, Jo Baer, Dorothea Rockburne, and Ralph Humphrey. To my surprise, there was a lot of excitement about the idea and a few weeks later I was asked if I would be interested in curating such a show. Thank God, I knew that it would be too much for me—I said that I would like to be involved, but that I couldn't be the curator. iCI invited Katy to

Portrait of Katy Seigel and David Reed. Photo by Phong Bui.

become the curator, and I have been working with her as an advisor.

Katy Siegel: When we began to work on the show nearly three years ago, I tried to take responsibility for the final decisions, for better or worse, about who was included in the show, which I know is a sensitive subject, especially in New York, because there are so many great artists from that time who deserve another look from everyone. The problem was, exhibitions and museum space are finite, and we knew we had to narrow it down to a certain number of works. So, to make a coherent grouping within those parameters, first we had to leave out Color Field painters and the hard-edged abstractionists. We originally thought about starting in 1965, with post-minimalist painting like Marden and Ryman, but ultimately we decided that was more the end of something than the beginning of something new. So the show begins in 1967—an explosive moment of optimism and excitement—with huge illusionistic, brightly colored, even day-glo paintings, and from there follows the different directions that experimental abstraction painting took in expanding the definition of painting in the post-Greenbergian era. We went through every art magazine from the time, and I tried to pick David's brain for his memories of New York and all the artists he knew from that period. We talked to David Hammons and Stanley Whitney about African-American artists who got even less coverage than others. We talked to a huge number of people in New York, just looking for names and trying to figure out who made sense together as a coherent artistic and also social group.

Reed: My initial idea was to have four or five painters from the early '70s: a room of work by each. But instead, thinking about the possibilities, Katy and I decided that it would be better to expand the number of artists and present a fuller picture of the period—then we could only include one or two works by each artist. This led to a lot of tough decisions about artists and works because we found so much good work. There are 38 artists in the show! And we could have added many more. iCI has been very supportive and we've really pushed the envelope to include as many artists as possible. From the beginning we were committed to showing major works—so there have been difficulties and expenses with transport. But in the end, the exhibition gives an overall view of how the mood and social concerns of painting changed from 1967 to 1975.

Rail: 1967 was a very important year in relation to all the good and bad things that happened in the world, for instance the women's liberation and civil rights movements, the Johnson administration losing its confidence as the war in Vietnam escalated, the riots in Detroit and Newark, as well as the Six Day War in the Middle East and other related events. The art world was also going through its own significant changes: Philip Leider and *Artforum* moved from L.A. to New York. The first New York issue contained three seminal essays: Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood," along with Robert Morris's "Notes on Sculpture," and Sol LeWitt's "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," that added the fuel to the ongoing and intense debate on the war between formalism and minimalism. But as we all know, it was sculpture that dominated the art world—painting was put on the back burner, which precipitated the first claim of "the death of painting." But I'm sure both of you, on behalf of the participating artists,

would have different views?

Siegel: *Artforum* certainly initiated the beginning of a great period of rhetoric in contemporary art. But you have the discourse on the one hand, and then you have art production on the other. Sometimes they intersect, and sometimes they pass each other by. If you look at what was actually being done at the time, there was a tremendous amount of work that played with two and three dimensions and the relationship between them. This kind of work was in group shows at galleries like Paula Cooper and Bykert, even at museums like the Whitney. Keith Sonnier, Lynda Benglis, Ree Morton, and many others were questioning the importance of medium-specificity. Mary Heilmann quit being a sculptor and starting making paintings, partly as a provocation to the artists around Robert Smithson that she was arguing and partying with at Max's Kansas City, who said that serious artists shouldn't paint. Certain artists did say that painting is dead—sometimes, I think, making an extreme statement for effect, to generate talk. And a decade later, academic critics really turned that into an entrenched ideological position to support their own claims about postmodernism. I think the reality is much more complicated and much more interesting.

Reed: Experimental painting was caught in a double bind. Often the people who supported painting had very conservative rules and criteria for what painting should be. Some of these rules and restrictions came from Greenbergian formalism, while others came out of Abstract Expressionism or geometric abstraction. And then, on the other hand, there were people who took the theoretical stance that nothing at all was possible in painting. As a result, the most innovative work was caught in the middle, attacked from both sides. Of course one of the big problems was that a lot of experimental painting was coming from unexpected sources: African Americans, women, lesbians, gays, and counterculture dropouts. This experimental painting came from people who didn't fit the traditional profile of what a painter was supposed to be.

Rail: It would have been difficult for most people to look at the painting of Jo Baer, or César Paternosto painting on the edge of the canvases, or someone like Lee Lozano, punching holes and hanging off the wall to reveal the support, or the emblematic and concave/convex shaped canvases by Ron Gorchov. But at the same time it was all of those experiments that compelled a number of artists like Elizabeth Murray, Joan Snyder, Harriet Korman, and Guy Goodwin to go back to making abstract work in a fairly traditional format.

Reed: That's true. We begin the show with traditional large-sized canvases from around 1967–68. Then by 1970 we found that painting was breaking down. Artists began thinking about other possible structures and materials: how to pull painting apart—how to un-think, undo what they had inherited. Canvases came off the wall, onto the floor, hung in space or combined with other media, like video or performance. This is the work at the core of the show. And then some painters took these innovations and questions and pulled them back into the traditional large stretched canvas format. Our show ends

with the artists you just mentioned—Joan Snyder, Elizabeth Murray, Pat Steir, Mary Heilmann, Guy Goodwin. Katy and I found a chronology that can be followed in painting from this time, a narrative arc. For me this has been a great learning experience, a way to make sense of my formative experiences here in New York.

Siegel: So if you think of the first and the last rooms as before and after, with a middle section which is full of wild and open-ended experiment, there is a little bit of an elegiac sense to the end of the show that says that the initial moment of possibility and openness didn't go on forever, that it came to an end. And there was a pessimistic feeling in New York during the 1970s—the recession, the misery of the American political scene, the failed promise of various social and artistic revolutions. There is a certain darkness behind the end of the show in the mid '70s, when you compare it to the optimism of the opening of the show in '67.

Rail: That's when the whole political environment became part of the artists' consciousness and indeed had an effect on their lives and works. For example, AWC (Art Workers' Coalition), an important group and organization that not only protested the war, but also helped to create a community of artists and lessen the discrimination against African-American and Latino artists. In addition, it was during that time that African-American artists like Jack Whitten, Al Loving, and Alma Thomas gained some visibility. In fact, all had shows at the Whitney's project spaces.

Siegel: That was really Marcia Tucker's idea. She wanted to use that space to showcase unaffiliated artists, which then meant not the hottest young artist out of an MFA program, but whoever hadn't had a lot of gallery exposure and who wasn't making it in the commercial world, which is really wonderful. And she recognized, along with Elke Solomon, at the Whitney, it was tough to be a woman or a person of color and get recognized. The shows she gave didn't necessarily translate into immediate commercial successes, but they were of real substance.

Reed: And the Guggenheim Museum had the Theodoron award shows for younger artists, which included some artists who are in our show. But that was about it. Other than Marcia at the Whitney, there was a striking lack of museum support in New York for this work.

Rail: And the women's liberation movement was very crucial in that period. It'd be difficult to see the work of Carolee Schneemann without the context of gender and sexuality or other related cultural ideas. That she and a few other women artists had so heavily invested in their intellectual and emotional framework.

Reed: Absolutely. We've been so touched and pleased that Carolee considers herself to be a painter. She is so well known as a feminist and performance artist that seeing her work from the angle of painting is neglected. I think that is also true of Harmony Hammond. But conversely, there are a lot of artists in the

show who aren't known, particularly, as feminists, although of course they may be. But I must say that I think all the women artists and the men artists in the show were informed personally or artistically by feminist discourse. It was amazing to find out how important this was to the artists—to have Harmony Hammond, for example, write to us early on about the other artists she met in her CR meetings.

Rail: That's why it would be too simplistic to think they were just critiquing second-generation abstract expressionism, pop art, minimal art, or Color Field paintings. It would be impossible to imagine someone like Dan Christensen doing his spray-painting, or Jane Kaufman's spray gun painting and not be thinking about performance art. Similarly there were other directions that were taken into the possibilities of expanding the language or process of painting.

Carolee Schneeman performing "Body Collage" in her loft on West 29th Street, 1967.

Reed: Exactly. Richard Shiff has referred to this kind of painted surface as "declarative"—surface as a kind of performance. It's a surface that shows how it was made, often with a kind of industrialized process, done about as well as you would paint the wall of your loft. This feeling for "work" is something I really remember from the time, making a painting was your "work." When I met a friend I'd ask, "How's your 'work' going?"

Siegel: It's very American. I think that is part of what the Europeans who came to the U.S., like Palermo, saw as being possible in America. Painting that wasn't "cuisine," not the French paintings and little fussy touches and refinement. SoHo was a place where real work was still happening—it was just the beginning of its transformation from a place of production to one of consumption, artistic and otherwise. There were still warehouses and factories and trucks. The artists embraced this "matter-of-factness" in their attitude towards making their work, even as they also embraced sensuality and flights of fancy. They used all different kinds of techniques and materials to get away from the connotations of the brush.

Reed: It's a sensibility that comes from a kind of straight forward thinking. Make it well. It's blunt. The painting is what it is.

Siegel: And so is the person. A lot of these artists were from working-class backgrounds, and it affected their work in different ways. "I am who I am; I'm not being artsy; I'm not being pretentious, I'm not trying to be someone who I'm not." Some incorporated techniques from being a journeyman carpenter

into the work; others, like Alan Shields and Harmony Hammond were interested in craft. And it's not a macho-thing necessarily. The women too, used materials that weren't arty—like Dorothea Rockburne using crude oil and chip board and cardboard, paper, things that people found on Canal Street. This sense of matter-of-fact materialism here is key, a sense of materials that is different from an earlier version of modernist materiality.

Rail: Artists like Dorothea wanted to assert the same intellectual rigor as her male contemporaries and she would risk sensuality in a much different way than Carolee.

Reed: Don't forget Dorothea was one of the dancers, or should I say performers, in one of Carolee's toughest performances, *Meat Joy*. I think they have more shared social and political concerns and feminist beliefs than one would suspect from the apparently different appearances of their work. For example, I have been astonished by Dorothea's piece in our show, "Intersection." I've had the honor of being the one to install the piece. While preparing and rehearsing in my studio, I looked at the piece on the floor and realized it was in the shape of a bed—a bed of oil. I mean, what could be more appropriate for this moment in time? It's an intimate piece, even very personal. You see that it's a bed, but there's a toughness in the thinking and the materials that comes out also. So it's all there. Dorothea and some of the other artists haven't yet had their work seen in a broader social context and I would like to see that happen.

Siegel: Right. Their works are about opening up painting to the social world around it. Not seeing painting or the studio as a transcendent space separate from the rest of the world, but looking at a painting as if it is a material object in the world, like every other object. I mean, it has its own properties, but it's not something *other* than the world.

Reed: That's why the work in the show is different from minimalism, where there is a physical space and you are phenomenologically aware of yourself in that space. In this work the space and one's awareness is both phenomenological and social. You are there as the person you are, a gendered, sexual, social person.

Siegel: Not just anybody, but *your* body.

Reed: Right. And you feel that as a viewer; you're taken into this space, which I think is political as well as social. This work is, as my friend Bill Wilson says, about claiming rights.

Siegel: That's a fine distinction David just made about the idea of self-expression in the work: It's not a narcissistic self-expression—that's one of the ways that painting has gotten pushed aside as reactionary, by calling it individualistic or humanistic. Instead, it is about respect for the individual, and the individual as a political, social, physical being.

Rail: How about Lynda Benglis and Richard Van Buren, whose work is often thought to blur the line between painting and sculpture?

Siegel: Lynda Benglis said that at the time that she was thinking about painting, though it's interesting to look at her work in relation to Richard Van Buren because they both showed with Paula Cooper, and they have other works not included in the show that come quite close to one another's. In any case, both of them think in terms of color and pigment suspended in a physical, material matter. Ree Morton is someone I'd add to that list, because she talks explicitly in her diary and her notebooks about painting and sculpture: "I don't want to be a painter, I want to be a sculptor because they're the people with the cool ideas and thinking the right way." Then she goes back and says "No, what I'm doing is something about both." Donald Judd already says in 1965 that some of the best work being done was neither painting nor sculpture, Lee Bontecou being a terrific example. There are other people who are playing with the idea of bringing painting to a more full, material presence; and sculpture as being immaterial or optical or illusionist or about the suspension of color. Taking away the body of sculpture and adding to the body of painting, playing with that back and forth. It's such a rich subject, one that could be a whole museum exhibition on its own.

Rail: What has happened to the artists who didn't become household names, the ones who at least were known during a certain time, but then fell out of the mainstream art world?

Siegel: Well, both Alan Shields and Al Loving died in 2005. And last October, Marcia Tucker died; she did a wonderful interview for the book, and was an amazing force during her tenure at the Whitney and beyond. It's sad because all of them have made invaluable contributions. Some artists stopped making art, or left New York because they didn't like what the art world had become, or they felt shut out. Some, like Richard Tuttle and Michael Venezia have had thriving careers in Europe; others, like Elizabeth Murray, became well-known in New York, and weathered ups and downs here. It is so complicated, an artist's career, whether you get the support to continue working as a mid-career artist. Today, of course, there are more opportunities for young artists in terms of shows and publicity, but because of real estate prices and inflation, it's harder than ever to make a life as an artist. In addition to the problem of support and survival, there is the issue of context, of what's in vogue, whether it allows us to *see* a particular artist. How was someone like Shields perceived, how did he matter if the dominant discourse of the early '80s was about appropriation art versus neo-expressionism? If you are lucky, you have the support of collectors and dealers to keep going through these times, because you can't keep changing all the time to fit whatever happens to be going on around you. It's one thing to stay aware, to stay in the world; it's another thing to change yourself constantly to fit the newest thing. All you can do is keep making the work and hope that you have the support, and that attention comes back around to you again, that you live long enough to get it.

Rail: That's why it was so inspiring and pleasurable to see Ron Gorchov's show at P.S. 1 over the

summer. I really admire his work and fair-mindedness. Anyway in each of your own observations, being active in both the art world and academia, is there a strong interest in painting among the young artists you know?

Reed: One thing that I've noticed about younger painters is that the writers and teachers who discuss their work often don't know enough about the history of painting. Often I find that when I go to schools the painting students know more about this recent history than the art history professors and the theorists. I went to CalArts to teach in the early '90s. I had wonderful students—Laura Owens, Monique Prieto, Jeremy Blake, Ingrid Calame, Steven Hull, and others—and they asked me to come and defend them as painters and bring them information; they knew a lot and they wanted to know more. I recently met students in Baltimore as a visiting artist. They complained to me when I brought up Blinky Palermo that they didn't have many books on him in the library. I told them that they should chain themselves to the doors of the library until they got more books because they need this information. In order to be an artist, you need to know the history, not just of your own discipline, but also of other kinds of artwork.

Siegel: At the same time there is the opposite problem, which is there's too much history, but always the same old history. And a lot of people who defend painting—bless their hearts and they even like some of the same works that I like—trot out the same formalist defense of the medium's history over and over again. But this doesn't do the painting in the show justice—this is minimum-security painting that we're talking about, not medium-specific painting. That history is largely unwritten, partly because, as I said earlier, this moment also sees the rise of discourse being almost more important or obscuring the art. Art historians have been too entrenched in binary positions to write this history until now. Some younger art historians are starting to correct this, and write less polarized, more complex histories of the recent past, but this history, like many others, remains to be written. So it's hard for someone to teach their students because they don't have materials.

Rail: It certainly seems to me that, during that interval, there were a lot of rules being broken and many inventions were being made. Only nearly two decades later, Joe Overstreet's painting projecting off the wall with strings, Lynda Benglis's poured painting/sculpture, Jack Whitten's squeezed paintings, as well as Alan Shields's three-dimensional work with wild color via Buckminster Fuller's architectural ideas, just to give a few examples, found their striking resemblances in the works of Fabian Marcaccio, Polly Apfelbaum, Gerhard Richter, and Jessica Stockholder. So there are a lot of visual references that were made available then which got cultivated later.

Siegel: Even though Gerhard Richter probably didn't see Jack Whitten's paintings; Fabian didn't know about Joe Overstreet. But I think what it shows you is how fresh and how relevant this painting is. Younger painters who have seen the catalogue and people who have seen the show in North Carolina and Washington are very excited to see all this work. It gives them a history to think about. And as far as painting being an ongoing dialogue, I think that's absolutely true, especially to those who are open and

receptive to new possibilities and insights. For instance, in Jessica Stockholder's show a few years ago at Gorney Bravin + Lee, where, along with her own work (part of the history of two/three dimensional playing), she included many works by her friends and artists she admired. In her show were paintings by Marilyn Minter, who makes shimmering realistic images, along with abstract paintings by David Reed and James Siena. Usually the web of connections isn't so explicit, but they are always implicit, packed into the work itself; in Lisa Yuskavage's or Dana Schutz's or Carrie Moyer's paintings, you see all kinds of historical references (whether to Piero della Francesca or Ernst Kirchner or Jules Olitski), kinship with their contemporaries, and interest in a million other images and experiences that do not belong to painting. The dialogue of painting is not the only one for these artists, just like your relationship with your father and mother isn't just your only important relationship.

Rail: True. That's the reason why the painting in the show is not just a discourse about and among painting, per se, but painting resulting and reflecting from all mediums and fields of disciplines, including all of the things that were part of the beginning of the consuming and technological culture of the '60s.

Siegel: So the emphatically missing word here is that it's not "New York School" painting, it's *New York* painting; that's another important distinction.

Reed: It's a good time for painting when it is under stress, when it is questioned and doubted, even for social and political reasons. That is when painting has to prove itself, when you get the best work. Hard times are good times for painting.