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Robert Berlind

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“What You Really See Is How You Are Looking”: Robert Berlind Interviewed

by Elena Sisto

This interview with Robert Berlind took place in his Chelsea studio last June. At the time he was battling cancer. He is someone whose intellect I have long admired for its combination of penetration and empathy, seriousness and humor. He was a revered and knowledgeable educator, on the faculty of SUNY Purchase for about 27 years; a writer whose criticism appeared in *Art in America* and *The Brooklyn Rail*, among other publications; and of course a wonderful painter. He passed away in December.

One of the many artists and writers mentored by Bob was Stephen Westfall who generously helped edit this piece from a much longer transcript. artcritical magazine joins me in thanking Stephen for his efforts in this endeavor. ES



Robert Berlind painting. Photo: Mary Lucier

ROBERT BERLIND: NSCAD [Nova Scotia College of Art and Design] [Berlind's first teaching gig after graduating Yale] was a stronghold of conceptual art. And that was my first direct exposure to a lot of people who were involved with it and I found it very interesting. I was painting portraits at the time and I don't think they knew what to make of it, except I think they thought it was conceptual. [laughter] And I painted everybody. Turned out that probably the most interesting people around were, you know, friends, students and faculty. And after two years I decided it was time to leave and I came to New York and I found this place for \$250 dollars a month.

ELENA SISTO: No kidding? Oh my God.

[laughs] It was raw, this place.

When was this?

In 1976. And I got back all of my taxes that I had paid to the Canadian government because it was not more than two years. The exchange rate was good at that time, so I came with about \$11-12,000 dollars and was

able to get started. And then I did gigs. I went out to the School of the Art Institute in Chicago and did a month. And a year later, NSCAD asked me if I'd come back to teach a foundation course because somebody was leaving. I said okay, and eventually started showing. A friend said, "You should be having a place to show your work and a place to publish your writing and a place to teach. " And I got them all within a fairly short time.

Amazing

I was amazed.

So who were you showing with?

I first started with Alexander Milliken on Prince Street. I had a few shows there. Then I went to Jeanne Siegel on 57th and then I went to Tibor de Nagy and then I went to Findlay Fine Art. I've left that and so now I don't have representation. But I had a lot of shows in New York during the course of that time, and outside of New York. And I had—what was I painting? From the portraits, I got into painting spaces in rooms, windows and reflections in windows at night and so on. And those were the first paintings I did in my studio, which then had the old windows so it was kind of an interesting reflections, and looking through and painting the reflection at the same time. And it was clear by this time that my interest was really in probing perception itself and those situations where you see more than one thing at a time, like seeing through a window and seeing a reflection and seeing the window itself, you know? I thought how do you do that?

So you're seeing three things—

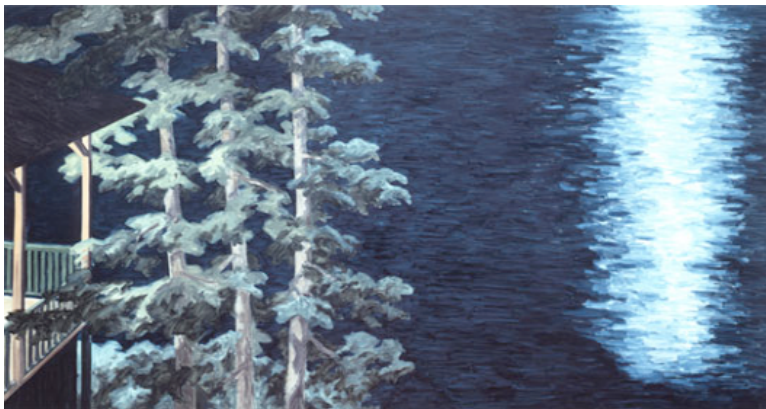
Plus whatever—

Plus then you intermix them in ways that—

You find ways of trying to make that distinct. And sometimes with a portrait involved. In fact, I discovered how to deal with the glass by doing a portrait, and it was my peripheral vision that kicked in.

Oh yes, I see what you're saying.

So I did a whole series of night paintings of windows, and then moved through the windows and made night paintings in the country and in the city outside.



Robert Berling, Piseco, 1985, oil on linen, 60 x 108", Neuberger Museum

and if I had something, it would become a larger painting. And I stayed with that basically or I'd do a little painting outside. And I sort of fell in love with painting in a new way because every move you make counts for so much.

And I realized that's what I was doing in the portraits, actually too. Because I had been doing pencil portraits for a while and rather stylized, and at one point I was working on somebody, earlier when I lived in New York, and I had a young woman, a Haitian woman who would sit for me sometimes. And one day she had her hair in curlers, these big curlers. And she was very pretty and I thought she looked like a princess, and I asked if I

What year are we at now?

1980, 1981. And I did a large series of night paintings, some of them very large, one up to fourteen feet. And—where did that go? Then I started doing them in the daytime. I mean it just opened up, you know? So I was painting mostly outside by that time and we had a place upstate.

And you always paint from perception?

I always had, yeah. And I would go out and do a small—if it was very dark, dark, dark, I'd make a, just a rough charcoal drawing and come inside and make a little oil study,



Robert Berling, *Umbel Water Last Leaves*, 1995, oil on linen, 77 x 88", University Art Galleries, Wright State University, Dayton

could paint her and she had to check with her family because this was not considered right. And I started a big painting of her. And I was having trouble with the drawing, getting it right, and then I started working directly with the painting. And I thought, this is amazing, it's so much faster than drawing and says so much more, and everything you do counts in such a deliberate way. And I loved that. And that was really counter to my earlier idea about painting, which is about an abstract configuration that may or may not have a subject. So I loved that that my perception was leading my marks. And I was in love with that idea that it's happening right now.

That ultimately—and I think going to Japan was part of this, many years later, in 2011. I got interested in the more synthetic aspect of Japanese culture. Which is to say, you're doing a lot of different things and putting them together in a quite deliberate fashion. And I thought, well, that's more conceptually controlled.

You mean “synthetic” in the sense of somewhat—

Synthesis of different things.

In the sense of synthetic cubism ?

Yes, it's a synthesis of different perceptions, and perhaps even materials. And really, Japanese culture seems to me like that. The language is like that and the food is like that and one thing modifies another in interesting ways. And it wasn't so much any painting that I saw. I always loved the Ukiyo-e woodblock prints and I studied that and made some while I was there. I'd go out and draw every day. I couldn't set up and paint in the temple complexes, but I would draw the gardens and parts of buildings or whatever struck me. Toward the end of my time there, the rice paddies started coming up. I'd seen them being planted. I came back with some studies and drawings and photos and did mostly that for a couple of years once I got back.

Now, we're coming close to the present, right?

Yeah. This was 2012, 2013. The paintings that you saw in the American Academy and that you'd seen here were all done here. A few of the first ones were done there. It hooked me. It related to things I had done before and I kept thinking, well, okay, that's probably enough of this, and then I'd have an idea for another one and have to proceed. They're part invention, part synthesizing different drawings or studies I had made and part inventing as I went along. I used to think if I really knew how to do something, it couldn't be authentic. It was just repeating Abstract Expressionism or is definitely. Not that those guys didn't do exactly that but—You can spot any Ab-Ex painter from a block away because they have a signature for that and a way of handling paint and so forth.

Okay. Yeah. Which was against their ethos in a way.

But the idea was—Irvig Sandler tells this story about being at the club one time and somebody standing up and saying, “When I approach that blank canvas, I have no idea what I'm going to do. It's all, you know, just leaping into the void. I have no idea what's going to happen. ” And someone said, something like “After twenty years? ” [laughs]

Oh, that's great, yeah.

So that's the end of Abstract Expressionism. [laughs]



Robert Berling, Nanzen-ji Sanmon, 2014, oil on linen, 56 x 55", courtesy of Lennon, Weinberg, Inc.

When I was at the Studio School, I have this very great, very vivid memory of Rosemarie Beck sitting on the stairs going down into the drawing room, going like this, “Oh, it’s not possible! It’s not possible!” Meaning, you know, it’s not possible to make a painting.

Right. Right.

[laughs] I didn’t have the nerve, but I wanted to say, “Why are you teaching then,” you know? But that brings up a good subject, which—

It was a real shift in attitude.

It’s a real shift in attitude and, actually, when I was there, we were considered—if we thought about the market at all, we were considered dirty. But within a few years, all of those teachers were sneaking back up to us and saying, “Well, how did you actually get a gallery?” you know? But

there was a time period in the 1940s and 1950s where—the idea was not really about making money from your work. And then people started making money from their work. But along with the extreme of something like the Studio School or the Abstract Expressionist ethos came a certain attitude towards process, right?

And still very essential to my practice really. I think process is crucial.

So you’ve got that throwing yourself to the universe and finding your way back sort of?

No.

Well, I mean the ethos of the Abstract Expressionist, you know, in psychoanalytical terms would be to get yourself down into your unconscious, get lost and find your way out again.

Right.

And in that process, you’re making a painting. And then on the other end of the scale you’ve got people who are, you know, painting for the market. They already know what they’re painting. They have signature paintings. Someone can order a painting before it’s even painted—the waiting list. So bringing those two together without losing—it’s a very difficult balance to bring the integrity, even if it’s a little bit corny and a little bit false, maybe a little bit exaggerated, of the Abstract Expressionist ethos and then the practical considerations of needing to sell your painting in order to make painting.

Sure.

I mean the 1950 and the 1940s were the only time in the history of painting when people thought it shouldn’t be sold.

That’s right, sure.

So for you, how have you resolved that conflict over time?

Well, I taught for years. I didn’t depend on sales. If I had something sold it was great, but it was gravy. I wasn’t ambitious. I wasn’t in New York until 1976 in a kind of really constant way. So I was very unprofessional in that way. I mean it wasn’t virtuous. Finally, it was not paying attention to something. But

what continues to be true is that you have parameters within which you can work naturally, in some way that really connects to your proclivities, your abilities, your talents, your interests, so that whatever you're doing, you probably find, well, you work certain sizes of painting. And if you get out of that suddenly you can't make the moves that you're used to making. If I am working on a painting and it's the wrong size, I can't get it.

Yeah. So in other words, you get lost but you're lost within the parameters. So there's a safety in knowing your parameters.

And if you lose that then you don't know what you're doing. And a lot of artists don't know where they connect to what they're doing, however good it might look.

Yeah.

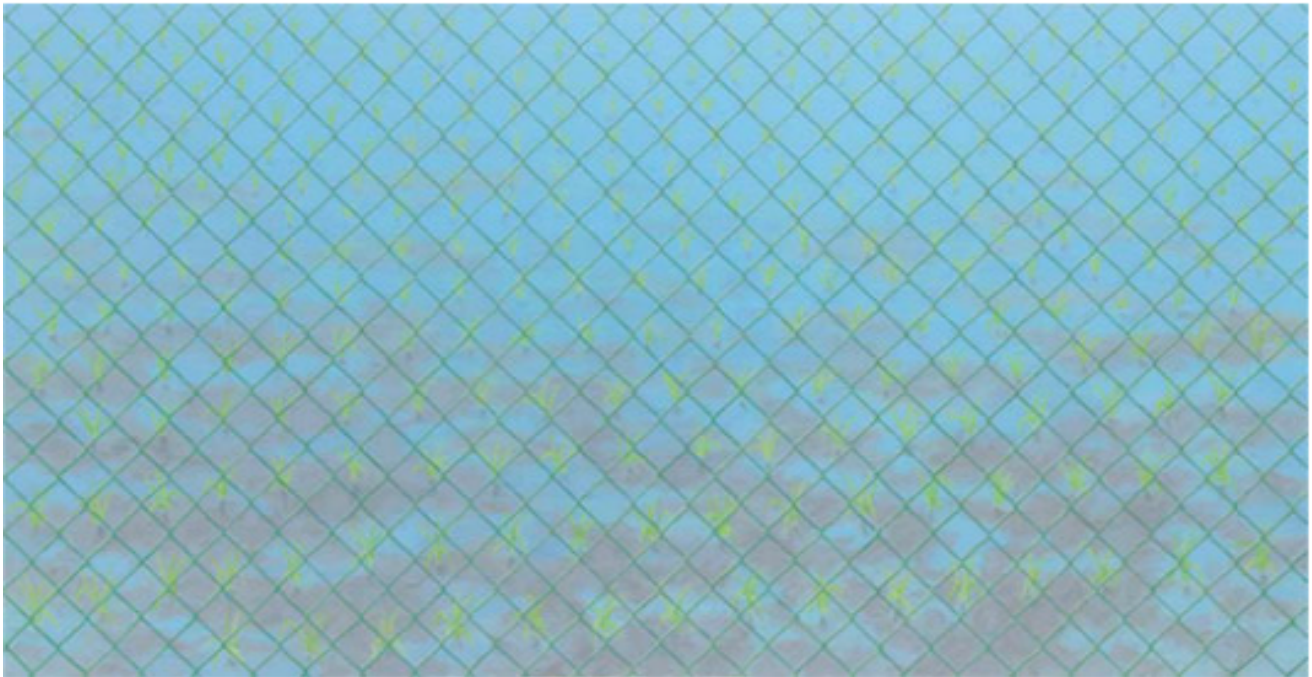
Your work is very specific in size.

Mine?

Yeah. Very specific, and it wants to be that size and it doesn't want to be—I mean if it got three times as large. But it wouldn't be the same painting at all. So you're working at a scale where you can feel it through and stay in touch with the entire image in every respect. And if one doesn't find that it's not going to feel right, either to the painter or I think ultimately to the viewer.

Well that brings me to the next question, I believe, because your parameters are obviously not only size. How would you describe what the parameters are that you work within, in every sense? Like the way you set up your studio, the way that you listen to music, how much stimulation you need from the outside . . .

I find I work best now in some seclusion. It's great to be Upstate and in my studio and nobody sees the work until there's a bunch of work. And somebody said, "Well, what is your inspiration? Where do you get your inspiration from?" And I think you get it from working. That's where I really get the, you know, the forward drive, doing something and questions start to arise and possibilities and your appetite increases.



Robert Berling, *Rice Paddy with Cyclone Fence*, 2014, oil on linen, 48 x 96", courtesy of Lennon, Weinberg, Inc.

At the Studio School, painting was treated almost as if it was a calling rather than a profession. We spent eight hours every day and every night and on the weekend in the studio. And then when we weren't in the studio, we were in the museum, and when we weren't in the museum, we were in the

library. When I go into my studio, my ideal is to just sort of putter around, clean up, do things and not even notice that I've started painting. And then, you know, when you finish what you have to finish, you stop. And that takes many hours at least five every day, and many more than that. Do you feel similarly to that?

I do when I'm on. And when I'm off—like this winter, I didn't do much work because my health was so bad. And then barriers start to get put in place somehow. I become more critical of what I've done, of what I'm thinking about doing, because all I have is my mind to think about it at that point, Then it's very good to see some work that I love, you know, somebody else's work—

To get your juices flowing—

Or just find a way in. And usually when I start, it's right there, it's just waiting for me. But I feel the obstacles and so I'll be in a place where, oh, you know, maybe I'll just take a nap or I'll read or I'll do yard work or I'll do something else, where I find myself resisting, to a certain point, getting in to it. Because I know once I'm in it, it's like, it's consuming, you know?

I read a great Matisse quote, which I'm paraphrasing it, but he said, "You have to work every day all day long in order to be irresponsible enough to do what you need to do. "

Isn't that great?

Because you don't even know that you're taking a risk at that point, that you might lose something if you pursue something.

That's quite true. Because when you're aware of taking a risk, it's in relation to who you think you are.

That's a good point.

You know, and who you think you are, that's always beside the point in a way, isn't it, for real work?

It's totally beside the point.

Guston made this famous remark that when he goes in the studio, art history is there, his teachers are there, his critics, everybody, and then one by one they leave the studio. And then he said, "And finally I leave too. " And then it's clear time—then you're in the zone to really work.

Yeah.

There's a point where I don't even know I'm painting. You just work, you're just doing—you look and you know what to do next and you just keep doing what you need to do. And then you back off and you think about it, or somebody comes in the studio and you talk about what you do and you conceptualize things that didn't necessarily come out of any clear plan.



Robert Berling, Ginkaku-ji Coins #1, 2011, oil on linen, 54 x 60", courtesy of Lennon, Weinberg, Inc.

So what else do you have to have in order in your life and in your studio in order to be creative?

Well, it helps once I'm on a trajectory, once I'm plugged into something, I would just go outside, look around and see something interesting and paint that. And I would discover what was interesting about it. It wasn't just that it was pretty. It was that some issue emerged in the course of it. But it wasn't with a lot of planning. I might have a notion I want a deep space or I want a certain kind of structure, but it wouldn't necessarily be what I'd find. So I just followed my instincts and my pleasure in painting, or attraction to a difficulty, whatever that might be. For a long while I did images of water without ever thinking about water as my subject. I just like this play of reflection.

The rice paddy paintings?

The rice paddies as well. You can see the bottom, you can see a reflection, you can see a ripple, you can see something floating on it. And I did a lot of paintings of just that kind of a situation: streams or ponds or whatever in the country. That was already about more than one thing going on at once. And back to those windows, the things that keep attracting me were things that escape complete mental control in a way. There's something going on that puts it in the now.

Something ambiguous, yeah.

And that itself had been a shift from an idea that, you know, the Impressionist idea that you're just painting a field of vision. I thought Porter in a way extended that, though he was doing other things as well. And I thought, no, because a field of vision depends on what's in your mind.

Yes, of course.

I mean that was Cézanne's break, after all, from Impressionism, that it depends what you're looking for or how you're looking. So what you really see is not just how you're painting or what it looks like. It's how you are looking. So that ultimately that becomes a subject—not too self-conscious, hopefully, but that becomes a subject. And so you're painting. I guess we're all working on what it's like to be alive in this world today, how we experience that in the most vital way that gets us actually doing something and tangling with it and wrestling with it and whatever else we do with it. And so painting requires a heightened desire to be painting. As far as talent goes— I've always been very diffident about my own skills. I started a little bit later in school, you know, and I always thought, well, there are people who are so fluent — John Singer Sargent, to take an extreme case. And not that I want to make Sargents, but there are people who can just—a Rembrandt—have a thought and do a little squiggle and it's all there. And I thought, God, I'm a long way from that. And then I realized, now, wait a minute, anything you really want to do, you can figure out how to do it. You know, I used to worry about, oh God, how can I mix those colors, I never kept track. It takes two minutes, I can mix anything—you know, thinking I won't know how to, but it happens. So the difficulty of something is not an issue for me.

Do you premix your colors before you paint?

Sometimes I do. I intend to do it more for large paintings.

You intend to do it in the future or you always intend to and it doesn't work out?

Well, I have intended to also but sometimes I can't wait. [laughs]

Robert Berlind: Kyoto/Cochecton at Lennon, Weinberg, Inc. January 9 to February 13, 2016



Robert Berlind in Kyoto, 2011, from his Facebook page.