

Both have, at heart, an agonistic approach to conversation, belief-systems, and practical solutions. To your question of whether or not religion can be placed into an art context, I do wonder, if one practices a particular religion, does entering into a context that potentially regards that particular brand of faith as a historically monstrous, thought-killing poem of platitudes change one's relationship to it; the same faith that has seeped into our secular understanding of conventional wisdom—a theistic wisdom which feeds our common, atheistic sense of morality? Maybe this is one place an exchange can begin?

RVK: I would agree insofar as wisdom-literature is an important part of biblical scripture, just as wisdom is captured in aphorisms and platitudes—"street" wisdom, if you will.

TL: I'm not sure what you mean by "street" wisdom. Do you mean "street smarts," acquired by spending a lot of time on the street and on street corners, knowing the customs, language, codes that originated there? I feel that's quite different than the aphorism or platitude, yet slightly similar insofar as both are ways for people to not only survive but advance in life within a community.

RVK: By "street" wisdom I have in mind a way of speaking and thinking that is not elitist or one-dimensional; it has breadth in its intention and impact, speaking to the masses because it originates from the general populace.

TL: I understand where you're coming from. To be fair, I've noticed in discussion and writing about my work a conflation of the influence of the modernist "grid" with the "grit" of the urban landscape. I can say this correlation is a tool I've decided to use. The conversations that develop out of this deduction usually end with a familiar mythological narrative that I unfortunately don't live up to—although I imagine it would be nice if I did—to

help people understand the work more clearly. The dirty condition of the work (all graphite pencil or graphite powder) can be traced to a larger conversation of drawing as an principled, physical activity, and the slipperiness of material as metaphor (issues of the studio and the attitude it promotes). I would argue this "street wisdom," is in fact a quite elite and one-dimensional take reflecting the skewed perception of the general populace. For example, the book I've worked closely with for years, *Life's Little Instruction Book* by H. Jackson Brown, is filled with common themes of American positivist sensibilities, with consideration for God, others, and oneself. Though this book is inclusive, with

PAM LINS speaks with AMY SILLMAN and MOLLY ZUCKERMAN-HARTUNG

Pam Lins: Let's start in the middle. Do you think there's something about us all having connections to the Midwest? I have the accent, but I had no role models.

Amy Sillman: I was a full-on Midwestern dork. I wore lumberjack clothes, and only when I moved to NYC did I realize there was such a thing as style. Molly, I'm embarrassed that I once asked you if you were going to stay in Chicago. No one has ever asked me if I will be "staying" in NYC! Molly Zuckerman-Hartung: Oh, I've much to say about the Midwest. I've been there ten years now. But also, when I was in my late teens back in Olympia, where I'm from, I met these emo punks arriving from Michigan. They would show you their palms like they were from Star Trek and point to their city. I loved these funny, slow sweethearts.

PL: I'm all for funny, but fast funny, not slow funny.

MZ-H: I was a tank! Angry and pushy.

an altruistic systemic wisdom, it was written by a white man for his son leaving for college. This fact changes my perception of accessibility to such writing. By this I mean the book is intended it for the masses today, yet there's a subtle historical authority that can be perceived as alienating to women and nonwhite people. I'm not saying the book is not accurate, or oddly comforting in rare cases—I think it is, or I would not be working with it. But there's a strong component of social instruction that relates to authority, and it's understood as a sensibility that is less about what you *have to do* to live right, and more about what you *should do* to live right, if you want to participate and succeed in *this* society.

PL: I needed to get out of the Midwest because I felt you were considered a downer if you were seeking ugly thoughts. Asking questions was equivalent to complaining. Plus everything in Chicago burned down one hundred years ago. AND they have a series of alleys to hide their garbage in. I'm just sayin': there's no garbage in sight.

MZ-H: Chicago does hide its garbage in alleys. It's really passive-aggressive.

AS: Do you guys think about ugliness? I always wanted to call a painting "The Ugly Light"—after the name of the light that comes on when the bar is closing.

MZ-H: Of course I think about ugly. When I said I was a tank, I really meant my face. It was square and heavy—masculine—and I hated it.

AS: I love your description of your face! It reminds me of a Jim Nutt face.

MZ-H: More Egon Schiele or Otto Dix! The first paintings I made—I think I was twenty-four, twenty-five—were self-portraits, which allowed me to look at myself with more care. So I started thinking that my feelings were all trapped in my face, and that was making me ugly.

AS: It's really interesting to know that you disliked your own face, but still made pictures of it! I like my face just fine, but I'm alienated below the neck: above = good, below = scary. Huh, all of a sudden I realize why I'm not a sculptor. [hahaha] No, really: maybe feeling uncomfortable with one's body is an advantage in art?

MZ-H: Awkward bodies. Yeah. Formally I think all of our work operates roughly as body surrogates. Pam, your paintings on sculptures seem like heads on bodies. Is that too crude a read?

PL: No, not crude at all. I have an interest in faciality, and maybe this is a small part of how Amy and I started a collaboration.

MZ-H: Right. You two are working together on a piece for the WB, and you've known each other for years. About figuration, that reminds me, Amy, of that three-way painting series you made—showing couples intertwined, imagining yourself as a third wheel. That psychological situation was formative for me. I was often the smart girl invited to hang out with couples on dates because they had nothing to say to each other, and I always had something to say.

AS: WEIRD! I don't think I ever had such a role—a date add-on!

PL: I was never brought along to spice things up either! I think it seems like a huge compliment. And here we are, a threesome.

MZ-H: It didn't feel like a

compliment. I think I didn't know how to address or be addressed as a lover—OR a collaborator. Can you guys talk more about working together?

PL: I had been talking to Amy about the role of painting as prop in sculpture. Amy offered me one of her paintings; I placed it in a sculpture, and gave it back. She changed it, gave it back to me, and on and on. In these collaborations I want to focus on the dialectic between painting and sculpture as one concerned with different spatial logics and disruptions at the same time.

MZ-H: So you haven't been actually working together in the same room, at the same time?

AS: No. I've realized that what I have to do in my studio bears no resemblance to what Pam has to do—all this lifting, carrying, wrapping, storing objects that can break in half . . . But a funny thing happened after we began to collaborate: I had this mad urge to add a ceramic cup to the side of the stretcher bar.

PL: We're finding out things we didn't even know about our own work. I didn't understand a certain relationship to bodies in my work.

MZ-H: So things are getting hairy in your studios, which brings up criteria. How do you judge sculpture? Like, why do you both like Anthony Caro so much?

AS: I often defer to Pam in the judgment of sculpture. She has a more critical eye and mind for sculptural space. I'm kind of an easy date: I like things that are there in real life. *Basta*.

PL: The thing you have to remember about Caro is that so many of his works were I beams, which speaks so much to the built world and its materials. I think his sculpture *Early One Morning*, from 1962, is so odd. It is red, and it also looks a little like an easel. It contains distortion and two-point perspective at the same time that it's a form.

MZ-H: Maybe I'm venturing into sculpture because I put too much dumb pressure on painting. I want to exhaust painting, by pushing it into real space.

PL: I don't think sculpture always equals real space.

AS: I don't understand that—sculpture is really there! That's why it has meant so much to me when I've been in periods of grief. That's why there is funerary sculpture.

PL: What the graveyard taught Brancusi is that sculpture doesn't need a pedestal. Anyway, I can't concretely argue with you that sculpture is not necessarily real space. I think sometimes I am working from within my body, yet I don't recognize that I am working in space.

AS: What do you mean?

PL: When something's really there, it makes me want to try something different—like changing or emptying, opening up or lightening something that is hollow, or abstract, or colorful. The actual properties of things can recede or disappear, or abruptly change after the first encounter. I don't know what's coming as I walk around—it's an unknown future. I think the attempt is to get sculpture to be both a fact and a fiction . . . which is really hard.

MZ-H: I don't know what sculpture is! Object-making is a wild gamble for me, but I always do it as a Painter. I wanted a home medium/discipline, and I chose painting. It gives me limits, edges, historical precedents. I call it "Dad," and argue with it. Or it's a hair shirt. I'm not thinking about sculpture formally with my hinged paintings. I see them as excess weight, as deliberate overburdening. Or something dragged, something parasitic, more metaphoric than spatial.

PL: Molly, I just saw a picture of one of your works where a painting is dragging behind a chair. I guess

there were little wheels—so not a total “drag.” Wheels are almost always good in artworks. Funny and sad and violent.

MZ-H: Pam, you seem able to say three things at once.

AS: Molly, are you saying that your forays into sculpture are not formal? That they are metaphoric or linguistic, while your painting remains more formal?

MZ-H: Yes, I’m definitely thinking formally in painting. Or trying to.

AS: But I assume that, Pam, you are dealing with all this formal stuff in your work?

PL: Yes and no.

AS: This makes me wonder if feeling comfortable with the formal language in one’s work is something that happens over time. Maybe people become more formal as they get older. Pam, do you approach the formal differently when painting, for example, than when making objects? I know you both make work in two different genres, so do you approach these differently?

PL: I like to struggle with the difference. How they are the same may be harder to come to.

MZ-H: What do you mean by that?

PL: I mean: sometimes I work in my head and sometimes in my body.

AS: I keep wanting to push you, Pam, to say exactly how you feel that painting and sculpture are different and/or not different?

PL: Amy, you are not going to be satisfied with my answer: I don’t know if I can tell you exactly. “Exactly” makes me uncomfortable. I just think that sculpture can be psychological space. Stand-in, metaphor, even illusion, or prop. It is not so stuck in time, like, say, a log on the floor. Of course it’s real in space. But that’s my struggle, and my work. It’s the push to understand those things that keeps me working.

AS: For me, the essential difference between painting and sculpture is that painting is fiction and sculpture is nonfiction. I make paintings because I am intimidated by things. I prefer 2-D to 3-D. I don’t want to be responsible for volume.

MZ-H: What’s a volume? I think about books...

PL: There are volumes in everything. I equate a painting’s stretcher frame with the armature of a sculpture—both are fundamental to the creation of volume.

AS: But an armature and a stretcher bar aren’t the same thing.

PL: I disagree: both are hard and can help slack, soft things stand up!

AS: No, that’s a fluffer! [hahaha] No, really—the difference to me is that the stretcher bar remains the same regardless of the subsequent moves on the canvas. You would never say that about an armature.

PL: Well, in these collaborations we are doing, we are dealing with your stretchers!

AS: Yes, that’s precisely my point!! We are dealing with it because we’re making a sculpture out of it. As a pure painter, I would not be “dealing with” my stretchers.

PL: That’s because you’re not a Structuralist.

AS: Well, it’s true that our collaboration has pushed me to understand the painted object in a totally new way. Still, I do like the indifference of the stretcher bars to the painting. I’ll just say it again: I don’t make sculpture simply because I am intimidated by the real.

PL: Wait! So am I! But I want to add: in some ways, I think that sculpture should be considered as having more virtual space than painting, or SOME sculptures do. You can’t always see the whole thing. This is one way to get out of the idea that all sculptures only exist in “real space.”

AS: The one way I could describe how I would think of painting as between sculpture and painting is via abstraction. Abstraction is precisely the thing that allows me to have a dual experience, both mental space and physical embodiment. You could say abstraction is “queer” that way. It swings both ways, neither one thing nor another. Anyway, who would love abstraction more than someone who feels ambivalent in their body!?

PL: Hell yeah!

MZ-H: What about not feeling comfortable in your mind? Sculpture brings up the real on a number of levels: real materials with real associations, real bodies, real time, real social relations, class, race, gender... All of this brings up feelings of collapse, depression, failure, and sleep for me. I get really sad when I’m working outside the picture plane.

AS: Do you feel those things when you are *working* in sculpture? Or only when you are looking at it?

MZ-H: This is what makes me definitely NOT a sculptor. I always imagine making paintings when I look at them. But with sculpture I feel like a spectator: powerless, overtaken. Like with Caro, which feels so light and limber but has its own reality: I believe in it.

AS: Then for you, sculpture is fictional and painting is real.

MZ-H: Maybe.

AS: For me, the fiction of painting is simply that I can draw ANYTHING. But nothing I depict has to actually be able to stand up in real life. Ah, the imaginary!

PL: So we’re back to affect. What about the emotion of fear? Can we parse our emotions a bit more?

MZ-H: I’m uncomfortable with your word “intimidated,” Amy, but excited by your recalcitrance. You seem to need to articulate anxiety. I wonder if this relationship to anxiety emerged through grief? It feels like

that level of necessity. I hope that isn’t a rude question.

AS: Not rude at all. But no, the necessity for articulation for me is more about justice than it is about grief. Though weirdly, grief made me love sculpture! I welcomed the sheer presence of sculpture during certain years of my life.

MZ-H: Grief makes me think about this Egyptian drawing of Theban women mourning. They all have the same black hair with bangs like Olympia’s Riot Grrrls. I was one, and so was my dear friend Angie Hart. We were raw, undefined, and confusing, and there was power in that, but also I felt, viscerally, the identification and repulsion of being a woman among women. Angie was the girl who wrote “slut” on her belly and was photographed. Newsweek magazine hijacked the image and published it.

AS: So, do you think that when a Riot Grrrl writes “slut” on her body, that is a crude way to change her body, as hated object? If so, is that act like an abstract painting? In the sense that abstraction could be a gesture made from negative feelings but reclaiming the world as a positive—i.e., bad but proud?

MZ-H: She was basically offering the hatred in the culture a mirror, and saying, “It doesn’t affect me.”

PL: Operationally, are a cut and a mark the same? I use cuts in my work very deliberately. To break a surface, to reveal an interior, to get some guts on top... Writing “slut” or making an abstract mark creates a new attitude that carries the burden of history.

MZ-H: I want to cut in here and say that I think you are talking about a historical, aggressive coupling of form and content.

AS: I’d note that operationally, a cut and a mark are two different things.

MZ-H: Yeah, with the *Newsweek* photo, I think the mark was the word “slut” and the cut was the photo itself. Photography is violent.

PL: But we have to think about context. The photo in *Newsweek* is factual. Now we all look back, and what is it? A memory or an event or... a fiction? I remember seeing that picture of Angie, and how complicated it was for me that it was a collective memory, or a realization that memories are also fictions. I look at so many photos for my work as a way of questioning histories.

AS: Pam, I tend to distrust the categories that you are bringing up: collective memory, or the historical. When I saw that photo, I didn’t stop to think about it as an historical event, I just saw it... I always thought mere reversals (like claiming the word slut) were dumb politically, and therefore bad strategies. Maybe now I can see it as an abstraction. But I don’t trust images or representation; I don’t take them for facts.

PL: Maybe sculpture is for a person who lied at a very young age to make themselves more feel legitimate or important around power and intellect and bodies. But it isn’t lying. It is a way to create truths by representing real things along with the properties of fictions. You can’t lie about what is seen in a body, but you sure can make up a lot about how, who, and what for.

AS: Lying? For me painting in many layers is similar to shoplifting—hiding things close to the body and

getting away with it, cloaking a rude gesture. Is that something like the lying you’re talking about?

PL: Thinking about shoplifting and painting in layers as being similar is funny and awkward. Shoplifting is bad.

MZ-H: I’m kind of drunk. When does the ugly light come on? But I get giddy thinking about that photo of Angie as a form of abstract painting. This collision of the photographic and the fictional is why and how I make paintings: to smuggle in the past and transform its reception in the present. I thought it was fucking heroic. By the way, I DO have a sense of humor.

AS: I don’t laugh in real life. Only at TV.

MZ-H: What’s the difference between real life and TV?

AS: TV’s better. I got my whole aesthetic from Jay Ward, who created the *Rocky & Bullwinkle Show*.

PL: I got mine from *Gilligan’s Island*, which is all about loss.

AS: Well, not really. It’s about money.

MZ-H: I liked *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*.

KEN LUM speaks with ALEXANDER ALBERRO

Alexander Alberro: You’ve worked with fictional signs for some time now, including shopkeepers’ signs. What sets *Midway Shopping Plaza*, featured in this Whitney Biennial, apart from the previous signs you’ve displayed?

Ken Lum: I’ve been adapting public commercial signage since the very first series of photo-logos I made in 1984, from which the work in this Biennial derives. I suppose my interest owes much to my background growing up in an economically unstable neighborhood in Vancouver. I was sometimes

hired to paint the “daily specials” for Jean’s Grill and “semiannual sales” signs for Monarch Furniture. There was always a lot of business turnover on Kingsway, the nearby retail street, and with that came the loss of acquaintances and even friends. So the channel of work from which *Midway Shopping Plaza*