

ARTLIES

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Summer 2005

2.76 GBP £, 4.05 EUR €, 546.85 JPY ¥, 5.00 USD \$



A Conversation on Painting

{from the editors}

This interview on the topic of painting, with five young artists from Houston, was conducted by Paola Morsiani. It took place on June 30, 2005, at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston.

by Paola Morsiani

Paola Morsiani Painting seems to be in a different place every six months. I'm interested in trying to understand where you all are in your own work and where certain canonical references, like beauty, come into play. What do you think are important sources for you—in your painting or drawing practice—outside of art history?

Robyn O'Neil I think we've all had that moment where we finally realize *our* art isn't necessarily about *other* art. In college, for example, I liked biology books more than art books. Granted, I had a really lame understanding of why at the time. Slowly I've realized that Goya might very well be the most influential artist of all time. But now film, more than anything, is the source material that makes my work happen. Movies, TV shows, stock photography—whatever I'm watching as I produce—filters through what I'm making. Since I was a kid I've wanted to develop characters and tell stories with them in the way that movies do, much more than a lot of art.

Francesca Fuchs For me it's very basic. What's happening in my life somehow always makes its way into what's happening in my work, but it's this weird process where it never shows itself immediately; it has a slight delay. I guess it's much the same as changing studios. The size of your studio will influence your work, right? Also, I'm not that interested in a super-narrative process; rather, it's a process of abstracting important images—key images of how I feel at any given point.

Angela Fraleigh I always find that a couple of months after I've finished a painting, I start to draw parallels between it and what I was reading at that time, as well as what was happening in the world. It seems crazy, but I think politics and social constructs are actually filtering into my work a lot more now than I allowed in the past. I don't think that was a conscious decision. I get a lot of my inspiration from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature: the politics and the social constructs that happen within those sources and the parallels with current issues. Especially after the last election, I've been angry and feeling hopeless. That has made the work more violent. I'm also driven by tumultuous gender issues, but such realizations always come later, you know? They feed the next body of work.

There are elements in my work that are meant to epitomize a certain ambiguous emotion or relationship. They're not illustrations of a story or anything like a storyboard. For me, the work is really about the complications of desire, and how we fit within that and deal with it on our own. I've only recently started delving into feminism and feminist theory. I hadn't really explored that before, but realized I was being irresponsible by not doing so. I think I shied away; I didn't want to make work that seemed feminist, but that in and of itself is something to examine. Why was I embarrassed to do so, embarrassed to think about such issues? I think that my work is about power struggles, the complications of wanting power, what power certain people have available to them to use and how they use it.

FF It's odd, because I only recently began thinking of my work in a feminist manner as well. I'm making these really, really big paintings of breastfeeding babies at the moment. You don't see the woman, you just see a breast and nursing baby head in the kind of perspective that you would have looking down at your baby. That's what I was doing all day, every day, so I guess that's why I started making the paintings. I was spending hours and hours breastfeeding; that was my viewpoint. Your breasts become so big when you're nursing—they become these other objects. A strange relationship develops because the breast is literally as big as the baby's head. So, partly, there is the formal enjoyment of what you're seeing and then there is the emotional involvement. It didn't occur to me that these were feminist paintings until I'd made a bunch of them and thought, "this is really weird subject matter." These could be very contentious in terms of talking about a woman's position, questioning how a woman artist deals with children more than what they are as paintings. But to me, interest is a means to an end.

RO Having a little of Gary Hume in there is what makes your paintings so different from everything else. Scale is important, but style alters everyone's emotional reaction to the work in a way that is really important. You can't think that they are just sweet portraits because of the way they are painted.

Matthew Sontheimer It's interesting to think about making the work more cinematic—when size seems to create this sort of intense, immersive experience—this ultra-surround kind of feeling. I understand that, but I'm the total opposite. Instead of speaking to an auditorium, I'd rather speak to people one at a time. I want the utmost intimacy in my work. I want to pull a person in as far as possible. At the same time, I'm so utterly lonely in the studio at times; I just want one person to speak to, so I bend my close friends' ears. The work is completely nonobjective—or nonmathematical—and kind of universal, in a way. I just prefer a smaller screen.

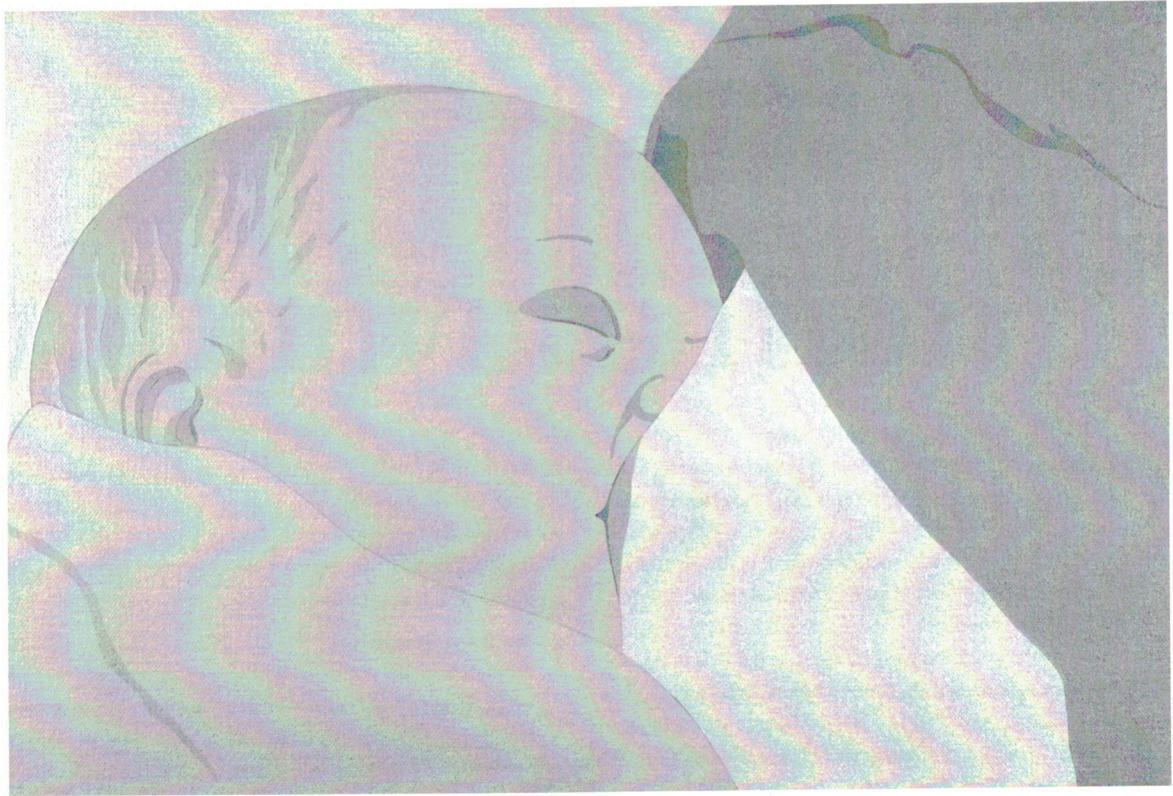
Trenton Doyle Hancock I'm much more interested in my own museum of taste than I am in looking at art books. I collect stuff—an accumulation of pop culture, film—things I've seen. I'm much more interested in adding to that—in seeing where that leads me in an organic fashion—more than looking at what's hot or how my work fits into what's trendy or fashionable. I want to make my work more like the things I collect, and I think I'm taking progressive steps toward making the work more toylike, more filmlike, but it's really a composite of all those things.

PM Is that an intellectual process for you?

TDH Yes, but there is a marriage of intuition and intellect. It's very intimate and completely personal. A lot of what I have around me no one else in my immediate circle cares about or understands, and I don't know if there is a connection out there. I'm interested in hybridizing all the things I like into this concretized strange thing, which, for lack of a better term, is a painting project.

PM I wonder if that says something about the language of painting. What do you think the power of painting is?

MS It's still beautiful to see someone who can paint—who can move paint—and it's not just someone who can illustrate. It's about the materiality of the medium; it's luscious. I don't know if that furthers the cause, but it's great to see that people are still making interesting work. Perhaps it was framed differently than previous paintings. It's more than just technique. Look at certain West Coast artists, for example. They're technical freaks, but I think the mistake element makes painting more interesting.



Francesca Fuchs, *Baby 2*, 2004
Acrylic on canvas
86 x 127 inches

RO I want to feel emotion from something, and that can run the gamut. But I also don't mind painting being presented within narrow boundaries, like John Currin, who used to be one of my favorite painters. I do appreciate that someone can take on old, classic values of painting, like portraiture and landscape and bring something new to the table—where you're jarred out of a normal viewing experience, whether that's part of a dramatic reaction or social or technical.

FF To be really good, it has to make me want to think about it, so much so that I'm still thinking about it the next day or a week later.

AF I think it all comes down to belief. I mean, *do you believe in this?* That stretches across all art. I think there are also people who are attracted to two-dimensional things. Some people simply understand things better when they are presented in certain dimensions. It's about suspension of disbelief. Can you really accept it and believe in it wholeheartedly? Sometimes it's just a scribble on a piece of paper and sometimes it's something you think about for five years.

FF It's a quality of being genuine. I trained as a sculptor, so I always feel guilty saying I'm a painter—like I've stolen the title or something. But there's something about three-dimensional objects—you have to deal with them in the real world whereas paintings are in a different world. There is a kind of distancing at work. It's also different

from film, because in film you have to go through time sequencing to get the narrative; in a painting you get it at once. That's what's so fascinating. It makes film and video seem frustrating; you have to sit through it to get it.

MS Nowadays, nothing you seem to be looking at seems real, especially in video with special effects and such. It could be real, but everything is manipulated.

FF But that doesn't matter to me. Something can be totally unreal but still be genuine. Does that make sense?

TDH Painting is so strange within its own context. Sometimes I have to look at the date to contextualize a work. I'm looking at everything as a whole.

PM But is it strangeness that provokes thoughts?

TDH Yeah, it leads to a strange vibration between thought and awe.

RO Some of the paintings that are my biggest influences I actually hated at first, and I'm a person with strong emotions, so when I hate something, I *really* hate it with a passion. But a year later, if I'm still thinking about something—not in the sense that I'm still bothered by it, but there was something about it that got me confused—I think that's really important. You do want to be challenged. I don't necessarily want to look at something that pleases me. I want a painting to drive me crazy for a while.

TDH One of our professors from undergrad quoted Coco Chanel, saying, "Art is the ugly things that become beautiful and fashion is the beautiful thing that becomes ugly." I've always loved that quote. I'm constantly looking at things I think are ugly in an attempt to bring them into a project in which I turn them around and make them beautiful. I'm sure chefs do a similar sort of thing. I'm serving up snakeheads, but you taste them and they're great.

PM The word beauty comes up all the time. You might describe it as a sensuous quality of painting. How do you represent beauty through the means of painting, with a brush and pigment and two-dimensionality?

TDH I've often spoken about what I do in terms of beauty and the beast—a meeting of the brutish and the extremely delicate. That vibration, within a plane, really gets me off. And I'm invested in seeing how brutish and how delicate I can actually get. Maybe once I get to that point, I'll stop and move on to something else, but I don't think so. I have another quote—I don't know who said it—but it reads, "Ugliness can be beautiful but beauty is still more beautiful." Something can be stunning—just beautiful—but if it has a tinge of ugliness in it, it somehow interests me more.

MS To me it's like the chill you're supposed to get if someone walks over your grave. That happens occasionally—a physical reaction. Once that happens, it doesn't go away.

TDH The uncanny....

FF I think beauty is that thing that stays with you. It's such a difficult thing to pin down, like the image of the Twin Towers collapsing was stunningly beautiful, in a way—shocking and horrifying, but beautiful. That's why they kept playing it over and over again. In a way, it's the ultimate art piece. It's a terrifying image, but it stays with you always.

AF I always wonder about beauty because everyone talks about it so differently. It's tricky. To me, it always feels like longing. Is it something that provides a sort of completeness for you? Is it something that satisfies or is it something that creates a want?

TDH The latter I think: the unattainable.

RO I think I have a sort of internal resistance to talking about beauty. I don't know why. When I think about it, I think of images—things that break my heart. I think about visual images all day, but maybe I just can't put that into these terms. I don't think I realized this till today, but I think I have a problem determining what I think is beautiful.

TDH Beauty can be tied to memory and nostalgia. When you see it, it'll tap into something latent within you—a place you normally can't reach. It speaks to that.

MS ...like the Twin Towers that Francesca referred to earlier. Someone made a painting about the Challenger explosion, an abstraction, but everyone in the room knew what it was. It wasn't like a mushroom cloud or something, but everyone knew. Those kinds of images don't just go away.

PM Beauty is certainly one aspect, but I wonder, within the arenas of your lives, what is painting for you?

TDH Those of us who paint and those of us who don't, could we live with it if someone took our paint away? Could we do it? Do we care about painting—the big, capital P painting? Some people do, but I'm not sure about any of us.

RO We all recognize there are painters who do feel like it is the be all—

TDH Purists—

MS Like people who say if you paint on paper it's not a painting?

TDH If someone took your paint away, could you still make art? How concerned are you with the capital P of painting? Do you care about the progression of painting? Is that your *modus operandi*? We seem to keep straying from the subject of painting. Is it an unnatural subject to dwell on?

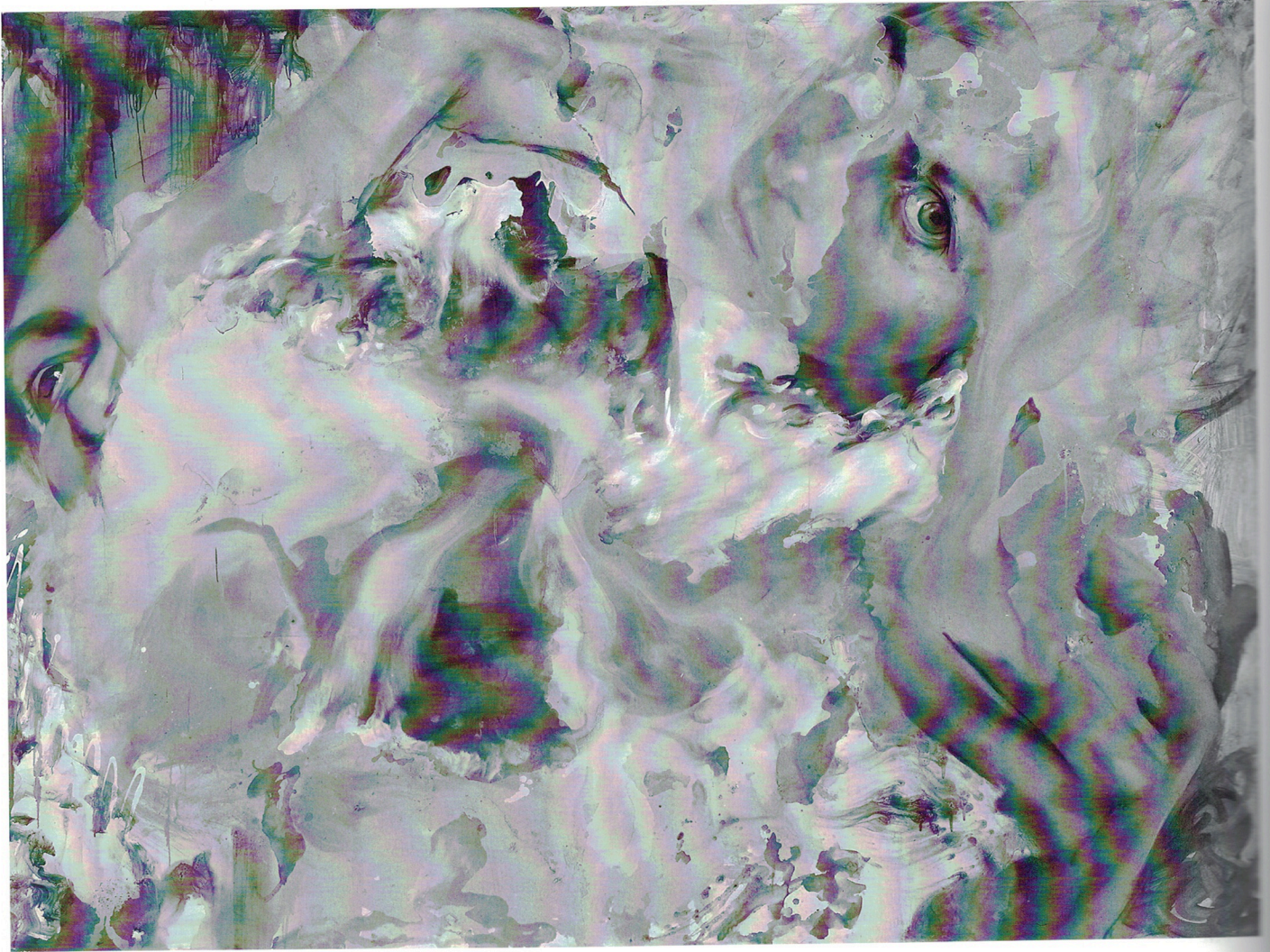
FF I think we all agree that we wouldn't mind if our paint was taken away. We'd find a different mode of expression.

AF I had a bit of a crisis when I entered grad school because nobody was painting at the time. I actually stopped painting for a while. I'm not sure if I could find another way to express myself; I have before, but I don't know if I could now.

RO So you care about the bigger context of painting and what its history means?

AF I do. I think about it all the time, but I don't necessarily want my work talked about in the same manner. There's all this anxiety painters have about painting: the baggage...is it relevant? I don't think about that anymore. I think it's a tired argument but it's not going away. I'd rather look at what someone is doing than to decide if it is "important."

PM So, basically you're saying you are painters, but you're just making your work and have certain things that you want to say?



Angela Fraleigh, *Nevertheless*, 2005
Oil on panel
6 x 8 feet
Courtesy of the artist and Inman Gallery, Houston

TDH For me, painting is just one part of the mix.

AF For me, there could be more powerful ways to say what I want to say. For example, I think I'm serving a very small audience by being here. There aren't that many people who care about what I do or care about the art world. I should just be an activist or something. I always have something inside me that says, what the hell are you doing? You're not going to change the world doing this. But I have something else inside me saying painting is really powerful, and the people who see it could have a powerful moment that could change their lives.

FF I don't think painting was ever a force for change. I think painting is a force for reflecting—a reflection rather than an active social force. It gives society a way to look at itself. Has there ever been an art piece that has revolutionized culture or politics?

PM During Fascism, painting was very important—

FF But do you really think *Guernica* changed people? It's more a reflection of how people were feeling.

MS What about Diego Rivera's murals? I think those had a massive effect on people.

TDH I think when people go to see paintings, it's a certain group of people. You have a shield up—you're in a different mode. It's not like going to see a Michael Moore film or something.

PM My next question is, what is the ideal way for your work to be exhibited, not in terms of career but *where* will your work *work* better?

RO I think about having a small piece in a dark library (laughter)... It's based on what two-dimensional work provides as opposed to film or video—that contemplative notion. Seeing something that communicates about how we live in this world and how we relate to each other in this format is what a library provides but in a much bigger, better way. It's just a fancy of mine.

MS I just had this terrible image of that televangelist who always says, "Let's have a quiet conversation." That's exactly where I'd want my work to sit—in a very quiet space that goes back to what fueled the work. That's the impetus for me. I just want to have a conversation with someone. I don't want to be yelling at them.

FF I like the white box—the neutral setting—but I'd like a *more* neutral setting than a museum, if there is such a thing. Museums have a sort of imposed neutrality. I'm always terrible in group shows because I'm always concerned with context, with how things work together. Having said that, I have a painting in a hair salon, and you can see it as you drive by. They've done their whole décor around the painting. I like the idea that it's in the waiting room. I like semi-public spaces where people are waiting for something to happen and have time to contemplate. Those are great spaces for art. It's like you are seeing it in a casual moment rather than in a museum where you're looking at art. I've always been interested in the de-sanctifying of art.

TDH Right now, all I think about is how there are all these circles that tangentially influence and overlap art. I exist in the art world; there is all that. Then there is the toy world, and I know all the toy websites, toy geeks. I collect. Then there are the film geeks—there's that

version of me. Then there is the comic book version—all these worlds that overlap. I'm interested in my world infecting, like a disease, these other realms. Or, if you will, giving them back what they've given to me in a strange way. I guess I exist between the classical and the romantic because I *do* want people to experience the paintings, get close up to them and see that there are a hundred marks here and just a splatter of paint there. I want you to feel that and be *in it*. At the same time, since I'm speaking to these other circles, I have to figure out how to translate that to other audiences. I'm working on a comic book format at the moment. That's a whole other audience, with different expectations, different ways of reading imagery, so I have to format what I do for them. I'm concerned with how my work reads in all these different spaces.

PM So you're saying that you're interested in pushing your work further and further away from the museum. You're happy when you find other ways.

TDH Yeah. I'm also working with a toy designer, having some of my work turned into action figures. I'm working with a ballet company to have work turned into a ballet, and I know nothing about ballet.

Coming from art school to where I am now, it took jumping over some idealistic hurdles. I had to break down some walls in my head about what my work is and about what kind of artist I am. If you had asked me this stuff back then, I'd have said, hell no, I'd never contribute work toward certain circles.

PM I think a lot about how painting is changing, and where the work is placed is symptomatic of this. For example, painting tied in to architecture becomes just a design on the wall. Where your work is displayed is a very important question nowadays. That doesn't mean it eliminates museums, but museums are just one experience and art—even painting—requires many more ways to experience it.

FF It's really about the studio. When it goes out of your studio, there is a process of letting go because you don't have control of the circumstances in which the work will be viewed. It changes. Sometimes it changes for the better and sometimes you're horrified. It's as if it isn't even the same piece as it was in the studio. I'm sure that has happened to all of us, right?

MS It is conceived in the studio, but it takes its own path once it leaves. That can be a nice element of seeing your work in the gallery; you get a different take on it. In a controlled environment, you can only see it in one way.

PM For me, one question still lingers. Which new horizons—subject matter, ideas, expressions—have you seen introduced into practice by younger generations such as your own?

TDH You see more art these days that may seem old fashioned. I think that is because this generation of artists has learned how to ignore ideas about the "avant-garde." We are looking at the very far reaches of art history for tutelage. Also we're not as concerned with our work aligning with certain theories or isms.

AF I think when you have a sense of where you are—when you're more comfortable in your own skin—you start to look at things not in terms of yourself against "them." You are no longer concerned with where you stand in relationship to others or their work.