

Chris

Chris Martin

Martin

is

Introduction and interview by Joe Bradley

a

Portrait by Colin Dodgson

really

great

painter.

Go

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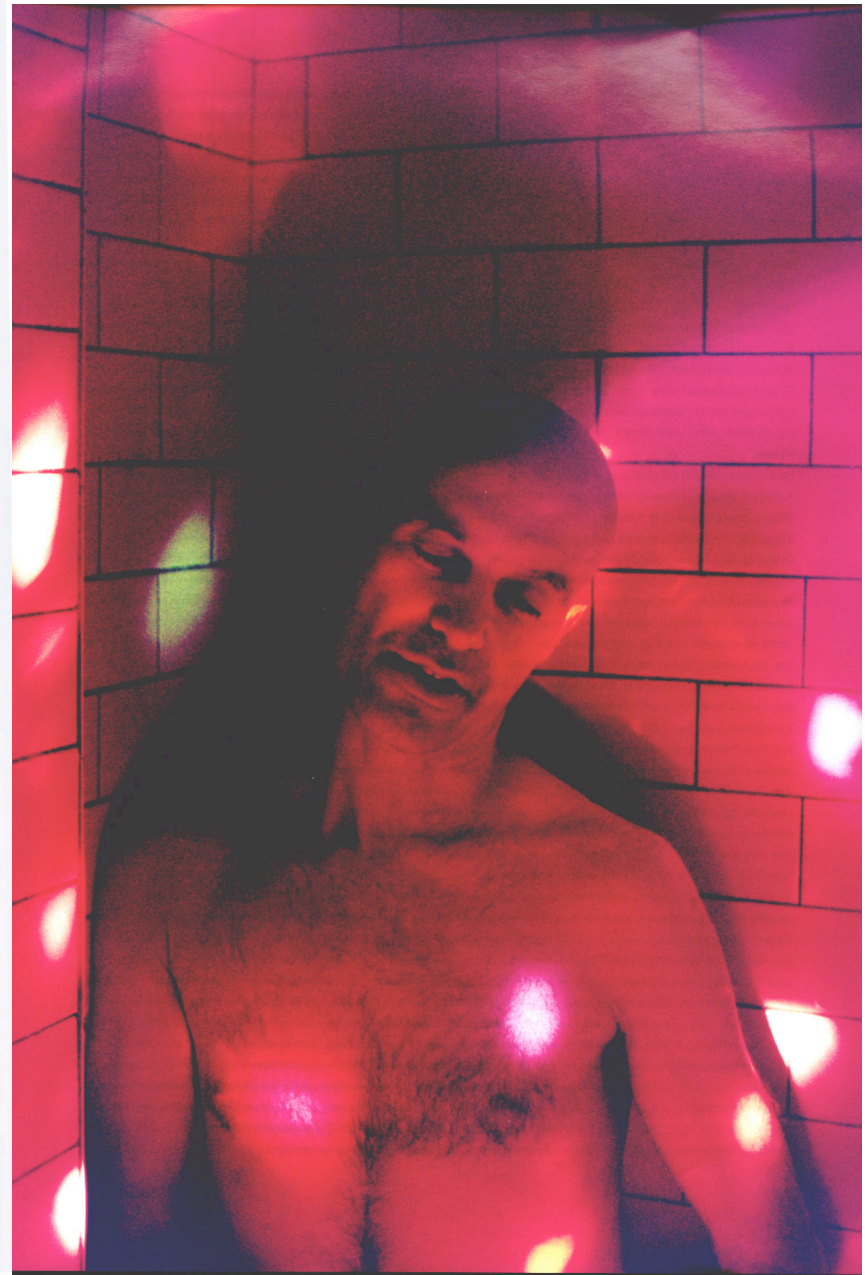
of

his

paintings

and

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MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

So what are you here to interview Chris about?

Whatever Chris wants to talk about.

Who do you work for?

The CIA.

Fantastic.

What painting is that over there? Is that Union Square?

That was James Kalm! James... yeah. His actual name is Loren Munk, and he's known as James Kalm, the man on the bike who does the video show. And it's a map of artists that have lived on or near Union Square, 14th Street...

That's supposed to be the river. It's very confusing to me in some ways.

He spelled Allen Ginsberg's name wrong...

He did, he spelled it A-L-A-N.

A friend of mine moved into Allen Ginsberg's apartment. It was on 13th Street I think? Allen Ginsberg's partner Orlovsky had been living there until that point. And my friend moved into this place and the furniture had been taken out, but there were little remnants all over the place. It was amazing. He found a T-shirt stuffed into a corner that had something to do with the Iran-Contra Affair or something. They found a photo of Ginsberg wearing that T-shirt. I went over there a couple of times and it was really wild. Jim Drain had a good story about showing up at Ginsberg's doorstep. Ginsberg opened the door and it was just Jim and a friend and I think they were like 16 or something. He just said, "Well, I usually don't take uninvited guests, but I'll make an exception. Come on in, boys."

I love it. You'd hope there would be a phone number for Kerouac in the kitchen. I remember when Allen Ginsberg died because he was such a big hero. But who else is here? Bizarre people like Raphael Sawyer. Rauschenberg. Hartley.

Marsden Hartley?

He was on 244 West 14th and Albert Pinkham Ryder was on 152 West 14th

in 1912. Hartley moved there to be near Albert Pinkham Ryder.

Is that right?

He used to secretly follow Ryder around at night when Ryder would get up and go look for "the nobody." Andy Warhol's Factory was on Union Square. You know, I feel that there's a moment now where there's a lot of different painters in New York that are making a lot of paintings. And they're starting to look around at each other. I think there's a sense that it's a more open situation in painting right now, that there is energy there. Maybe I'm projecting all this.

Wishful thinking?

It's wishful thinking.

But you know, wishful thinking is the way things start. It kind of seeps into reality after a while.

I wish we could all wish for not knowing what we are doing. But in a good way. I think there's a sense of freedom that comes from everybody not being too sure what they're doing. Someone once said about New York in the early 1950s, late '40s, after Expressionism was sort of bursting onto the scene: "There was a moment, maybe six weeks or so, when no one had any idea how to make a painting." And that's a lovely idea, that we don't know what we're doing. I'm also looking at everyone. I'm looking at all these old African-Americans from the South. And I'm looking at young kids from the undergraduate schools. And I'm looking at Williamsburg. It all seems like these paintings are being made simultaneously and it's kind of interesting. More than kind of interesting, it's really cool.

I was talking to someone the other day about the idea that there is this continued crisis. And the idea that maybe we'll be in a really good situation when the fixation on 20th century Modernism stops and it just becomes this conversation, "Oh yeah, well, life goes on and we can do whatever we want." To me, a happy ending to that dialogue

would be, "Oh, painting still works, art still works, life goes on."

We're all grown up now and we can do whatever we want to do. And what might that be?

You seem like you do get a lot of inspiration from outsider artists or—my favorite term—"inspired amateurs."

Inspired amateur is the way to go. I really think it's the way to go.

You look at their work and it's kind of the same as looking at a child's drawing. And it's such a humbling experience because as far as visual kicks go, you're beat every time and you know that sort of exposes how well-educated we are and how complicated you can become if you've got a PhD in painting. And these kids are seemingly effortlessly nailing it over and over again.

They're grown-ups. I go to these art schools occasionally because I'm asked to do a lecture or see students and I'm saying, "Well, art school's full of shit." And everybody laughs kind of nervously. Well it's kind of provocative. And it's actually true. You know, you tell all these graduate students, "You know you can do whatever you want?" And that just gets nervous laughter. *Of course* you can't just do anything. Because if anybody could just do whatever they wanted then anybody could do whatever they wanted, and hey! What about standards? What about quality? What? What? There would be no masters.

There'd be no quality control.

There'd be no Masters degrees teaching other Masters degrees endlessly. And that whole thing about the graffiti world, which has its own very rigid qualities and the whole violent part that I'm not involved in, but there's all this great art. You take the Amtrak train from New York to Baltimore and there are incredible masterpieces. And they don't have Master's degrees. They're some of the best abstract painters around. There's a book by Phyllis

Galembo of Haitian voodoo temples and worshippers. All these temples are painted with enamel. It's so good and so powerful and it comes out of a real inner necessity and you feel that. I worked for a long time as an art therapist. And so one has the experience of working with people who are not artists making art. And more often than not, their art was powerful and sincere and terrific. And if I complimented them in any strong way, they were taken aback because they knew they weren't artists, so how could their drawings be good. But of course the fact that they weren't artists was one of the reasons why they were able to be so raw and immediate in how they expressed themselves. When someone is energized and having fun, it is in the drawing. It's naked. If someone is trying very hard and not being themselves it's boring. We see that right away. It's so naked in that way. So what do people get out of these schools? The art education is a terrible thing. The socializing of all these artists, these young groovy graduate students, the rubbing up against each other is really great, but the idea of their being taught something is a disaster.

I agree. Well, I skipped the Masters in Fine Art.

But it worked. It worked not to be master. I mean, thank God!

I had some really good teachers, but at the same time, you realize all of your work is happening when you're by yourself. I mean, one of the only things you can do as a teacher is turn students on to things that might be inspiring, but I don't think I've ever found a piece of theory that I find helpful to my practice. If anything, it just makes me nervous.

But these kids are all given books. And then they start thinking, "So how do I make the theory come true, or how do I go according to the theory?" So you and I are both, clearly, amateurs and we don't know what we're doing and we are having fun. And that's what I mean about my kind of wishful thinking—maybe there's a moment in the art world when a group of painters, young and old, are sort of coming out of their little hovels and greeting each other. And there's a sense of some kind of energy, that things are possible.

You really seem to have a lot of fun in your studio, which is one of the things that I love...

I try to tell the students that the only important thing is to have fun. No one seems to be able to come to grips with that idea. And when I say something like that, people ask about discipline. "You've got to have discipline." But I actually think that the only serious discipline that one can attain or aspire to is the discipline of finding out moment to moment, what is fun. So what can be fun today? It actually means you have to sit down and listen to what it is that you want to do. **If your studio practice is stressing you out, you have a problem. You're just barking up the wrong tree. I really think that if it isn't a pleasurable activity, what's the point of doing it? You know, you could get hit by a bus tomorrow.**

And there's also the sense that the ego says, "I am making Chris Martin paintings and I do a good job of making Chris Martin paintings." But the truer explanation would be that these paintings get made and they use me to enter the world.

So there's a sort of gnosis involved.

There's a gnosis involved. And when you're just following the fun and the body and the muck then you can find your way to the place where the paintings can paint themselves. And you can participate in that activity. And you're able to listen more carefully to what the paintings need.

Absolutely. I love that idea.

And it doesn't mean that it happens quickly all the time, because sometimes you're flailing around in some swamp and you're trying to have fun and it takes a while, because we are too thick. The paintings get born. Sometimes it's a lot of hours of labor, and sometimes you can try smoking some pot and have a C-section.

Short cut.

Short cut. Get the fuck out of here baby! Boom!

There's this Guston quote that I think is brilliant, that when you're in the studio, your friends and family are there and the ghosts of art history are there, your contemporaries are there. If you stay long enough they all leave and if you're lucky you leave. Or as Burroughs said, you cannot possess genius, but if you're lucky genius possesses you. It is sort of like what we were saying how you can sort of hit on these things and it's magic and there's alchemy, but usually if you try and repeat it... If you make pillow painting number 2 it may be an awesome painting, but it's not going to be pillow painting number 1.

Right, so the real discipline is that one goes to the studio or one goes to a space where one is available to the muse. There are no preconditions, only that you go there and you move colored dirt around. The discipline is listening to the colored dirt telling you what to do. So the discipline is showing up and staying.

That's not so much to ask really.

Which is not much to ask.

I remember that when I was a teenager, I would start to get in this weird sort of zone when I would paint. And it was almost frightening. Because I was a real teetotaler when I was a teenager—I never drank or smoked. And I'd get in this weird state where my mind would be racing while I was painting. It's really hard to articulate but I do think that that's the place to be when you're making art. I mean you need one foot on turf, on land, and one foot in the cosmos. Yeah, it's like being inside and outside at the same time. On the one hand you are in trance, on the other hand you are watching yourself paint. And I think the key is that when you are watching yourself paint you don't judge, you just watch. The less I judge the more I can actually create and see what

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Pillow Painting, 2007 - 2009
Oil and collage on canvas
54 x 49 inches
Courtesy of Mitchell-Innes & Nash

I'm doing. And I hear this judging voice saying, "Oh Chris, this isn't so good," or "Watch out," or "That's embarrassing," or "What do you think you are doing," or "How dare you do that," or "You can't just do that." And the more I can just listen to that voice going, "Chris, you can't just cover pillows with paint," patiently, and think "Oh, part of me thinks that this is a really embarrassing painting," the more I can let that voice be, but continue to let the pillow painting make itself. Does this make any sense, Joe?

Yeah, it's like, Meditation 101 sort of. Being present and listening to whatever thoughts happen to pass through, but not becoming fixated on them.

Exactly.

The one thing I wanted to touch on is that there is a devotional quality in some of your paintings. Some are dedicated to James Brown or Alfred Jensen or whomever. When you begin one of those paintings, do you have in mind who you want to dedicate this painting to? Or is it something that comes up in the process of making the painting?

Last summer, Isaac Hayes died. I had about a month where I was just writing Isaac Hayes on everything and that made me feel better somehow. So for a while I kept thinking, "I'll make another Isaac Hayes painting," and I used African colors: black, red, green. But other times I'll be making a painting and go, "Oh my gosh, it looks like her!" So I'll give a shout out to some great grandmother or my girlfriend.

So you dedicate pieces to people in your own life as well as to heroes from the past.

Yeah, I can dedicate a painting to Joe Bradley or *the journal*. I think it's kind of like a shout out. Sometimes it's really powerful to me and other times I think I sound like I am holding a bad Oscar speech: "I thank Alfred Jensen and James Brown and Rothko and all the good people..." But you know, I think that it's good to thank all the good people because I think that maybe they're not so dead. A part of me is actually involved in some kind of ancestor worship. Now that's some crazy mystical stuff, isn't it? So Joseph Beuys is somebody that's sort of around. The energy of Beuys's drawings and his life and all the weird objects—that's still present and it can be acknowledged. People are around. I think these people are around. I mean we're sitting in this room right now and there are these bookshelves up to the ceiling just piled high with all this stuff.

So it's 11 o'clock in the morning and you sit down to look at one of these monographs to kind of remind yourself what art looks like...

Occasionally I take them out, read one page and then put it back. And there are some books where I read the same four or five pages over and over again. But I actually have this thing where I don't like to take the books into the studio. I want to pretend that I don't know any of this. Because as

much as we love art history, we're so fucking self-conscious about everything we make, you know? We could look at the corner of some anonymous painting and we both joke, "Oh, there's a little Twombly, there's a little this and that." We're such fucking connoisseurs on the one hand and on the other hand, we're always trying to wipe the slate clean so that we can have more fun.

Well, one of the ways to do that, and I think that you do that with grace, is just being upfront about it. You seem to have the ability to almost make a direct quote from Paul Feeley. You're sort of confident enough in your own voice that it's yours in the end. It's both a Chris Martin painting and an homage to Paul Feeley.

If I am making my paintings—and we know that we are not actually making our paintings—they are kind of making us and coming through us. But then you realize that Feeley didn't make his paintings either. So you're saying Feeley, but really you're saying Morocco or something you saw when crossing Greece. This is some ancient sort of trembling energy that some old guy picks up in Vermont, weirdly enough, five years later. And some dude picks it up in Washington, D.C.. If I don't own it by giving a shout-out to Feeley, then we don't understand it. Then nobody owns it. When I came to New York, I remember reading about the Abstract Expressionists, and those guys got so paranoid, saying how pure they were and that they had no influences at all. Clifford Still is always writing about how everybody is a fucking faggot, you're all a bunch of worthless shits. And when I met those guys—Mike Heizer, Richard Serra and that crowd, the big, macho Tribeca scene—they were always saying things like, "Serra stole my idea," or, "Heizer took this idea." They were all fighting to be so independent from each other and they were all terrified of acknowledging, "Yeah I got a lot of ideas from Smithson." They were always disparaging each other. And it makes you wonder why they do that. Why not just do the opposite and admit, "Oh yeah, we're all doing this and influencing each other." That would be the kind of Ginsberg, Beat Generation, optimistic vision.

The Beats have been coming up a lot these days in conversation, they're near and dear to me.

Absolutely. When I came to New York, I went down Elizabeth Street to do my laundry. I was in a building on Houston Street. I had no locks on the front door. And I had come from this whole privileged world and I asked my friend Gary, a painter, how you do laundry. He said, first you go down to the Chinese laundry. And he took me down there and he told me you hand them the laundry, they give you a ticket and then you come back and it's done. I remember thinking that Gary Lang was one of the wisest and most extraordinary men. So the first week I went down there and the guy in front of me is Bill Burroughs, and he's dressed in a suit and he's

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handing his laundry over and he has this intense cane. I stood and listened to Burroughs talk to the old Chinese lady. And as he walked out, I was too shy to introduce myself. But as I stood in line I asked the Chinese laundry lady, "Do you know who that is? That's William Burroughs, he's a genius!" She's like, "He nice man, he nice man." Yeah, I idolized the Beats when I came to New York.

I just watched that movie *Painters Painting* with my girlfriend, Valentina, the other day. She said, "You know, I always thought that as much as I love Andy Warhol, he sort of infected the Zeitgeist with a very sort of unhealthy, narcissistic vision."

Yeah, I mean Warhol's a genius and then sometimes I think he's kind of an evil genius. When I came to town he was my enemy. I thought Warhol was everything that's bad about the art world. It was '75 and '76 and Warhol was making some of his worst paintings: portraits of Liza Minnelli and paintings of dollar bills. And I was hanging out with the painters' camp—the serious painters, they were anti-Warhol, anti-reproduction. And I fell into that camp and it's really only in the last 10 years—it is so funny to say this—that I'm starting to actually get Warhol and the whole other side. And that's been so good for me to sort of come out of my camp and see the other side.

To get out of that contemplated abstraction ghetto...

Yeah, and I realize that I'm in one camp looking at the other camp and going, "They're not sincere." But then I meet people from the other side and they're

doing photorealism and they go, "Oh, those guys are fakers." So you have all these people looking at each other going "They're not sincere! They're fakes." So I'm thinking, "Wow, that's great! We're all fakes!" And I read some of the interviews with Warhol, and he was a genius. And that's so obvious, I mean, everyone knows that. Jonas Mekas told me something once about Warhol. We were in a taxi cab, very drunk, and I asked him about Warhol and he said, "Warhol was a great therapist." And I went, "What? Therapist?" And he said, "Yes, yes, Andy had all these people at the Factory and he made them feel like they were all OK. "You are all welcome here, you're all fine." "Whoever came to the Factory—however weird and whatever they did," Mekas said, "he accepted them." I had never thought of Warhol as a great therapist. I always thought Beuys was the great healer. I always thought Warhol was kind of cold. But now I'm thinking, maybe Warhol was an evil genius. And then you look around, and the things that we're both excited by is the artwork of some seven-year-old kid, some African-American grandmother, something that's scratched on a men's room wall, or all the kind of work that I did with schizophrenic people.

It's hard to compete with that.

Yeah, but you know what, Joe? These people, they don't seem to have it together. They're just fountaining this out and then one feels humbled in context. My friend Peter Acheson was very conscious for several years that his master was his daughter, Isabelle. And we both started taking Isabelle as a great master.

She was making paintings, and she was gluing a few pieces of cereal on a piece of cardboard and then working on it with a marker, making these extraordinary objects. It was sort of like seeing Richard Tuttle for the first time. And they're still fantastic things, so you start to question your own assumptions.

I went to see this James Castle show...

Ah, what a man!

And I was like, "Wow! These things are just flying."

They are, absolutely. Great art!

And I walk away from that as a spectator because I know that my current psyche is too compromised to ever come up with anything that's that pure, if that's the right word. So then what do you do? You can't fake it. It's just not going to work. I saw that show and I kept thinking of Guston looking at James Castle for some reason—and Philip Guston is one of my gods.

Oh that's a great connection, I never thought about that.

But it kept coming up and I was thinking, "Why is Guston a god and James Castle is, you know, James Castle?"

I don't think so! I think they're just apples and oranges. They have different expressions, but of a very powerful force. So Guston is Guston and Castle is Castle—they're both incredibly great. Look at all these drawings by Jimmy Lee Sudduth and Joe Light. Ah, Joe Light is so excellent! I just think he is a great artist for our time. No question. When we say this sort of thing people think we're exaggerating. But Joe Light is really, really great, and that's why we hate the Museum of Modern Art. Fuck the Museum of Modern Art!

Yes! Great career move.

Because they put someone like Joe Light in the American Folk Art Museum. But he should be there right next to Kippenberger! They were painting at the same time. And they both made great paintings that have profound similarities, but one is a folk artist, a primitive artist, an outsider artist. Fuck you, Museum of Modern Art.

I'm going to write them a nasty letter first thing in the morning.

Picket them. Where is Joe Light? Joe Light, Joe Light!

You should do that. I'm gonna make a sandwich board.

I think it's sexism, class warfare, racism. You could throw a lot of isms in there.

Well, we all get to suffer the consequences. It's an uptight puritanical art situation that we've got here.

I think right now Joe and I are going to smoke some marijuana, and we would urge all of those reading this interview to take the time now to find some marijuana, smoke it and then come back and read the rest of this interview.

It's like 1966 in here. This is one of my pet topics: What do you think of psychedelics and what Terence McKenna called the archaic revival? The way of healing some of these neurotic situations we have as far as contemporary art goes, you know Modernism, post-Modernism.

The psychedelic experiences that I had when I was first in college were very, very important to my development as an artist and my spiritual development. We hate this word spiritual because it sounds like religion, but we're just going to say spiritual because it comes from the breath.

Amen!

Amen to that! So as we're smoking more marijuana, we realize that we can be honest about the fact that psychedelics had a big effect on our worldview, our mechanics, our vision, because some of these sacramental substances can give us direct access into a deeper reality. Well, not deeper but further. Those are not experiences of getting high and making things better or more fun, but they're experiences of getting closer to what the world really is.

I think to say psychedelic use is a doorway to the out there is an overstatement, you know? I think that the distortions are interesting, but the best thing about the psychedelic experience is you're sort of served reality on a tray.

You know, psychedelics can function on a different social or fun level, but in the proper setting it can be a very serious experience. And I think McKenna is such an interesting, funny, funny man.

So, Chris Martin, on the record, do you think that heads of State should take psychedelics, that the situation of the world would be radically different and more tolerable than the one we are faced with right now? Ah, I feel like Tom Brokaw.

Ha, can you imagine? I don't think anybody should be doing anything that they don't want to be doing or can't handle doing. Things go both ways. It's so hard to go from transcendental reality or ultimate reality to politics. Clearly America was acting out some archetypal stuff, causing this terrible loss of life and suffering. We are leading the planet into disaster. Times are tough! And so when we are telling young artists that the only important thing is to have fun, they don't understand that the social and political implications of finding freedom, finding creative energy is a universal important task! That's what Joseph Beuys was saying about being creative. Our task is to make whatever paintings we want to make, because we are painters. Some people's task is to be creative in the automobile industry. They feel that they have some power, some creative vision for moving humans on the planet. We have the power to be really wild and creative.

It's key though, right?

It is.

That's the thing that always befuddles me. Where we are now on planet Earth, reality is born in the imagination. So we've got this situation that's like borderline hell on Earth and it has all been imagined. It's not inevitable. It's been imagined by us.

That's why McKenna is fantastic.

I mean we are sitting here on this pristine planet with all our resources and these amazing cultures and this is the direction it goes in. It's crazy.

I think this is not just a sociological emergency or a political emergency, but it's a psychic and spiritual emergency. And in light of these serious times, in order to summon creative energy we have to realize that nobody knows what form this new energy can take. That if we're going to try to make a new painting on this planet when the populations are being

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Bread Painting, 2006
Bread, gel medium, galkyd and powdered pigment on wood
24 x 18 inches
Courtesy of Mitchell-Innes & Nash



Seven Pointed Star for Isaac Hayes, 2008
Oil and collage on canvas
45 x 37 1/8 inches
Courtesy of Mitchell-Innes & Nash

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slaughtered, that this is a very important project. We have to make a new emergency response painting. And who knows what this might look like. We really have no idea. So people are thinking about a standard. Fuck standards! It's like we're living like turtles. Maybe the turtles know what the humans are supposed to be doing.

This isn't your interview anymore.

I think that you sound like Allen Ginsberg. It works that there's this sense that the community can be gentle and fun and loving with each other. It's kind of a sexual Garden of Eden—everyone can be sexy and have fun and rub against each other. And we make our work.

And it's not goal-oriented the way the 20th century is goal-oriented because it needed to be in some way or another. You know what I mean? We fix these minor problems. We realize we're in a fragile ecosystem.

Yeah, and also there's a certain degree of just, desperation. You just have to make the paintings you got to make. I feel a personal amount of urgency about making paintings. It's important to record all the stuff that's coming through right now. We are just going to honor whatever happens. And we're going to make a hell of a lot of paintings. And I know that there are people who are very defensive about it. I think they feel like if you can make so many paintings then it's easy to do and it is not or could not be so valuable. There's someone who makes a painting every day, how could he possibly be as im-

portant as someone who worked all year on five? There have to be some standards! I mean Josh Smith is a madman like that. I like that. He's just painting all of these paintings. And he's less worried. Less concerned with "this one's much better than these, well I'm not going to show these."

I think that's a healthy attitude. Damn, I lost it there.

That's so good that we lost it.

I think that you look like you're having more fun than any painter in New York. Well, thank you very much.

I think that that's one of the things that makes your work powerful. When I look at your work, I don't feel that kind of pressure coming from the artist. It's a pleasurable experience.

I want to talk to you about Richard Tuttle. I was asking him about artists that he feels influence him. He said it's all about permission and he kept talking about Agnes Martin over and over. But obviously something about her gave him the permission to do whatever he wanted to do. And he said he hoped that what he did gave other artists permission. And I do think that is what we can give each other. Like how Mekas described Warhol as a therapist. We just give people permission. And we also give all the different people inside of our heads permission to come out and make their paintings. So I come into the studio one day and I'm like an uptight grandmother so I make uptight grandmother paintings. And instead of going like, "Oh, I don't make paintings like that," I just leave that painting. And two

days later when I've got it all together and I'm loose I look at them and say like, "Oh you know, these are my good paintings." The next morning I come in as the fragile hung-over painter who can barely focus and I think, "Well, I'll just paint this pain."

I think it makes more sense to diversify in that way rather than try and make everything conform to the Chris Martin way.

Yeah, because who would be judging what's the good Chris Martin way anyway? And who would want to do that job, that's not a fun job. You know whom I think about in that way is Dieter Roth. That guy had the ability of just making everything that Dieter Roth thought of doing. He was making jewelry, he was making posters, he was playing piano music, he was making book pages. I look at Roth and I think, "Yes, you can just fill a suitcase with cheese and that's your show." Permission.

I totally agree with you. It doesn't matter what it is, but the stuff that always sticks with me is work that I see and I'm like, "I want to make something." You know what I mean? You're allowed to keep doing it. It's not like an end game sort of thing where this is throwing down the gauntlet. You know, it is open-ended.

Yeah, that's right. God, we sound like a couple of old Beats. If you are reading this now, we don't know what we're talking about, and we don't know where this is going. Just like our best paintings. Thank you.

And goodnight.



Untitled, 2008
Oil and burlap on canvas
37 1/4 x 29 1/4 inches
Courtesy of Mitchell-Innes & Nash