

David Ratcliff with Bob Nickas

BN: I've always been under the impression that you didn't set off right away as an artist, that you traveled, explored parts of the world — and not so beaten paths — eventually finding your way to painting.

DR: I spent what feels to me like most of the '90s outside of the US, living in Japan and traveling around India, China, Southeast Asia, and Alaska for long stretches. But yes, the “outside world” is of great interest to me and is something I'm drawn to. It took a long time to come out from under the dominant influence of that experience, to find a balance, and a reconnection with American culture didn't happen in full until I moved out to Los Angeles. Return was a reeducation of sorts. In my first show at Team I went straight for brutality and violence as the quickest, flattest way back to America, and I have for the most part stayed somewhere within close reach. Michael Amy called me a “chronicler of glut,” which I still think is the best description of the work in that first show. It was all a direct result of spending so much time away immersed in other cultures and languages.

BN: Those paintings did address the brutality inherent to American culture, and of course ours is a country born of violence. The barbed, razor-like forms perfectly embodied this sense of foreboding and dread. They weren't so much painted as rendered with an X-Acto blade. And reducing the paintings to two colors — red and black, or black and blue — gave them a graphic bluntness. As you developed

your visual language in the paintings that followed, I didn't read your collaged imagery as representation but as abstracted in every sense of the term: an invented world of your own making, one which you looked upon with some distance, and not without a measure of repulsion.

DR: Increasingly I'm thinking that the differences between paintings can be seen as narrative, that there is no way of avoiding narrative when separating one image from another. I do work in series from time to time, particularly the "tribal tattoo" paintings, and the narrative tends to fall back in these cases. But, for the most part each painting tends to be the result of its own image-search, its own group of images, and on some level there is a narrative in this group of images. Each collage is comprised of photographic material mostly gathered from online sources.

Recently, a good percentage of the images I choose to collect are photographs of things people have made — sketchbook doodles, backyard structures, signs, decorated cakes, finger paintings, masks, and of course the photographs themselves. The more abstract paintings I make continue to be based on photographic material, so the narrative core is still evident. The abstraction remains fused to both the process of photography and the physical process of the painting.

BN: When you mention the "tribal tattoo" paintings, I'm curious. Would you say that your travels in the '90s came to bear on the work that you made subsequently? And is there some sort of collision between nomadism and the natural/spiritual world, and the isolation of the technological/secular world in which we live today?

DR: The attraction I have to experiences traveling has in a sense become, when standing in the face of American culture, something to resist. I am not close enough to any of the places I moved through to perceive them, or hate them, in any way I would consider subtle or accurate. I have a great love for these places and I don't trust it.

BN: You don't trust it?

DR: I spent more time in Japan than anywhere else, and I believe most foreigners who are there long enough find themselves being involuntarily shaped by that culture, from their interior thoughts to their outward physical movements. It's

almost defensive in the way your energy is directed towards achieving faceless “normality,” which of course can’t happen. You see this to different degrees wherever you travel, especially in places like India and Thailand, two countries where long-term Western travelers base themselves, and where a standardized ‘backpacker’ culture has developed. I probably first encountered tribal tattoos in large numbers among “liberal, yoga, meditating, vegetarian” travelers, but since then they’ve also become very common in the “hunter, survivalist, military” circles. BN: You couldn’t find more polar extremes ... except in a *Road Warrior* movie.



I find a Burberry scarf and matching coat with a whale embroidered on it (something a kid might wear) and it's covered with what looks like dried chocolate syrup crisscrossed over the front

Team Gallery, 2005

DR: Right. In the American west you see this tribal tattoo imagery painted on the sides of RVs, motocross trailers, off-road vehicles, and helmets, where it has begun to take on a very digital, pixelated quality. All are patterned attempts to graft the “natural/spiritual” onto identity. In sifting through the Internet for source material, these kinds of identity projections become very apparent. After a time, nearly all appearances of originality fall away, leaving a hollow type of failed identity. So to tie this back to my experiences in Japan, in sense it’s all a desperate effort to produce a kind of accepted normalcy, though in this case from within the

open-air, low-density of American culture, and tribal tattoos are probably the most pervasive visual example. I also find them to be extremely ugly.

BN: You're based in Los Angeles, as opposed to New York. How do you see the two cities, and how is it that you came to make this choice?

DR: Los Angeles feels like a city of the future, primarily because it is perceptibly changing. Of any city in America, on many levels, not least of which is visual, it also most closely resembles something found in "developing" countries. The majority of buildings can be torn down and rebuilt without resistance. European influence is weak, and the way in which it is often encountered differs little from how it might be in Shanghai. Isolated areas of wealthy white populations are pushed up against the ocean and the hills, while the heart of the city is Latino and Asian, mirroring the global economic shift. I was born here, grew up in the West, and so I responded to the cold vacuum inherent in an unplanned city. New York was planned for people by people. Central Park was designed as a place of emotional solace. Here, Griffith Park is simply a group of hills that were never developed. Most of the palm trees planted in the '20s will be dead within fifteen years, and they won't be replanted. They'll be replaced by other trees that provide more shade and clean the air more efficiently. LA has a "history of forgetting." As an artist, after traveling, I really didn't find my place in the US until I moved to LA from New York.

BN: Your re-connection with American culture was fairly intense. You submerged yourself in Internet images, thousands upon thousands I would guess, and began to collect and combine them in dizzying, at times agitated, but always hallucinatory ways to compose each painting. The title of that first show at Team, which is itself excised from an external source — Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* — almost stands as a visual description of your picture-making practice: *I find a Burberry Scarf and matching coat with a whale embroidered on it (something a kid might wear) and it's covered with what looks like dried chocolate syrup crisscrossed over the front.* Can you talk about some of the specific imagery that you culled for those 2004/05 paintings?

DR: At that time I was really looking for things that I considered to be ugly and American in some way. Many of the specific images could be categorized as some kind of designed consumer object: charm bracelets, coffee-table sculpture,

leather sofas, porcelain vases, framed wall-mirrors, elaborate fireplaces ... much of it designed with the intention to project an impression of wealth. Many of the paintings were populated by fragments of pornographic images, slivers of human forms recognizable throughout the image, and for the most part on an equal level with the “material” subjects. They are objectified not only compositionally in the paintings but also in the original pornographic source material, which is drained of unnecessary content, and therefore objectified by the viewer. It was important to me that the images be populated with figures so that the viewer wouldn’t be able to detach from what otherwise could be comfortably seen as tight examples of a



Jeff Burton, *Untitled (candy dish)*, 2008

certain kind of design or era. It’s not the material aesthetic that I’m interested in but the violence in the society that supports this kind of material consumption and endless production. The paintings themselves, the look of them, embodied some of the characteristics of the subjects. In a sense, it wasn’t entirely clear, once they hung on a gallery wall, that they weren’t what they depicted.

BN: I always think of consumption as it can be related to the disease — a wasting away.

DR: That’s one way of looking at it.

BN: When you mention the sofas and mirrors and fireplaces, I can't help but think of those great photos that Jeff Burton takes on the sets of porn movies. They're often shot in the Valley in these very upscale, "tasteful" homes. He has a great way of framing slivers of human forms — as you call them — in the middle of a sexual act, either reflected or distorted in a mirror or the mirror-like surface of a pool. He's also abstracting the recognizable, and in doing so, the images/acts are libidinally inert.

DR: That's true. Once I started looking further into the porn, the more I became interested in the homes in which the pictures are shot. These environments were definitely an influence as this body of work developed. During all of this time I was in a sense forcing myself to keep my eyes on and in America. The hallucinatory aspect that tends to surface in most of my paintings is partially an influence from traveling in Asia and time spent looking at Chinese and Japanese landscape painting. The West's adaptation of "mind-expanding" drugs in the '60s was its way of coming to terms with and incorporating the growing influence of non-Western/Asian culture — much like Chinese communism was a Westernization/modernization of that country. It's been a consistent idea for centuries that "viewing a landscape painting is traveling through that landscape." And while it is a very simple idea on the surface, I believe the way space is organized "illogically" via positive/negative rather than a "logical" perspective/depth creates a condition that gives more weight to the idea than in the case of single-point perspective. Poster design of the 1960s was quick to explore uses of positive/negative space for the "trippy" qualities, and '70s/'80s punk/metal street posters grew out of that, though the cuts and splices had risen to the surface in service of a harder, mechanical edge. My compositions oscillate between the two, never comfortable with one or the other.

BN: The way that you set up the positive/negative balance/appearance of your images, which is so central to your style, along with the "bled" quality of the sprayed paint, reminds me of solarized photographs, of an image that is burned into the paper. And when you mention the harder, mechanical edge, you are describing not only a visual aspect of your work, but also one that is philosophical. The stenciling technique that you use to create the overall image is mechanical in both the physical and cerebral sense. Your last New York show was titled *Cosmetic Surgery*, as if you'd taken a scalpel to the sagging face of our culture. Can you talk

about the way you make the paintings, how you came to that process, and how it relates to the content and narrative?

DR: The paintings begin as digital collages I put together using images that are nearly always gathered from online sources. For the first show, an influence on the work would be the wording — the parameters I would choose to dictate the image-search results, usually a single noun: pure-breed, platinum, stereo-remote, collage, bong. The somewhat stark limitation and focus on multiple examples of a single type of thing reduced the kinds of relationships within the paintings, creating a psychologically flat space. More recently, the bulk of the material I've gathered has been by way of random image result pages with no keyword input. Without placing language constraints on the search parameters, I find photographs or whole groups of pictures I could not have anticipated, and this has supported the work as the paintings have grown more “painterly” over time and I've become more willing to render images as nearly unreadable.

BN: What are some of the unexpected images that have come up in these searches?

DR: What ends up being really unexpected is often that which would be most difficult to categorize. I'll get a group of vacation photos from some family and one will have something that really works in a way that isn't exactly one thing or another. You have to sift. Of course I'll also run into more specific material, like a photo of a noose with an American flag attached to the top and a handwritten sign reading “for sale swing set”, or a group of kindergarten kids finger-painting, or scanned pages from some personal notebook, or a guy with his front teeth carved to read “2006,” and this might inspire a more targeted search for similar images.

BN: You were talking about how the paintings are made...

DR: After the collage is assembled, it's printed onto sheets of standard office paper which are then combined to create what is essentially one large sheet of paper the size of the canvas I intend to use. I cut the image out with an X-Acto knife and then re-assemble it on the surface of the canvas, creating the mask. The final step in most cases is then to use spray-paint to apply the image. The process is one of a gradual loss of control and step-by-step detachment. When I'm putting the image together with a select group of images, single-pixel changes can be made, and each

stage afterwards introduces chance/accident to a greater degree, ending with the damage and curling of the paper stencil, and pieces falling off the canvas sometimes obscuring or sticking to parts of the image.

BN: There is a very involved, lengthy, and highly controlled process to get to the actual painting of the work, and then, in contrast, it's a very straightforward, quick procedure with an outcome that's not entirely predictable. Like the viewer, you only really see the painting as a finished picture, even if you've been present from conception to execution. Maybe this is the "detachment" you mention. I would add as well that I've always responded to how the paintings contain the signs of their making.



Ratcliff in his studio, 2008

DR: The recent paintings often have a very gestural quality, and while there is clear violence in the cut photographs, the process has filtered out emotion, calcified the image. The viewer is not required to respond to an author's gestures. There is a confrontational relationship with the viewer, one that at times is more akin to the way one encounters a poster in the street, something industrially/anonymously produced, than the way we view a unique painting. At the same time, it's almost

anti-digital, anti-mass produced, anti-American, in that the process re-creates what begins as a digital photo-based image by hand, sometimes taking weeks when, if the image were all that was needed, it could be inkjet printed in minutes. Similar to photography, the paintings have an extremely flat surface, so in a sense they require a real involvement with the image, a real belief in that content, and from painting to painting this is initially where the narrative primarily comes into play. The second, simultaneous almost contradictory instance that could be read as narrative is the visible result of the physical process. The paint-bleeds, hundreds of marks where tape was holding paper to the canvas, the angled tilting of what originally was the paper on the canvas, bits of paper sometimes stuck in the paint — essentially the “painting” part of the painting.



Los Angeles studio, 2006

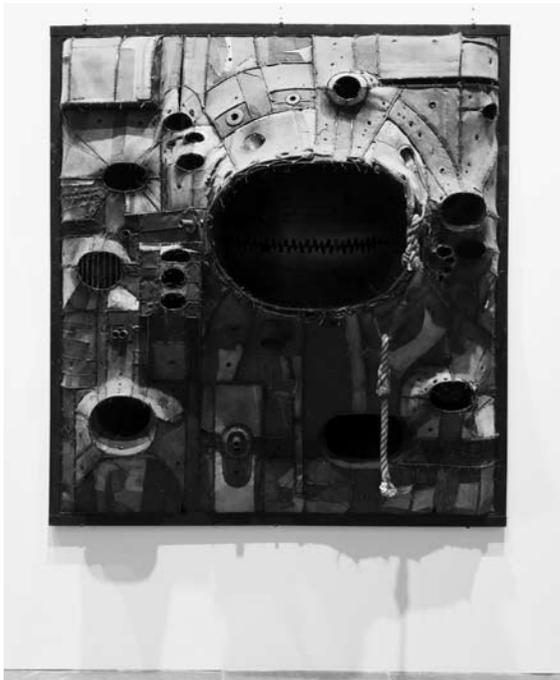
BN: Haven't you also begun making paintings by reusing the template, which after the fact is in a fairly distressed state?

DR: Yes. Over the past year or so. They're what I call “second paintings”. After the original “first” painting is sprayed, I take parts of the damaged paper mask and attach them to a new canvas. The mechanical detachment remains — spray-paint

and mask — but the loss of control is extended several steps beyond the original process as pieces of the paint-drenched paper tend to tear apart when being removed from the original canvas surface and multiple colors are applied. While they are completely reliant on the first painting, on that original painting existing before they can be made, they further dismember the images in the original work which is sometimes nearly unrecognizable in the younger sibling.

BN: By embracing chance in this way you introduce a whole new level of abstraction: fucked-up perfection. I would describe these paintings as delirious, and your choice of wording with these recycled, second-generation paintings shouldn't go unremarked: they dismember the original images. You painstakingly put the pictures together and then you take them apart.

DR: Yes, and then it's as if I've woken up with amnesia surrounded by all these shapes and I just start placing them on the canvas one after the other. The results



Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1961

of this straightforward process can sometimes echo “tribal” images. Lines of dot-shapes traversing the picture-plane, or organized in some sort of rough pattern. The white unmasked canvas can at times be bone-like in appearance. Because the tape is weaker the second time it's used, the canvas is flat on a table and I'm circulating it during the composition which lends the finished work a feeling that the gravity is weak — you mentioned “delirious” — a suspended state, utter confusion, complete disorder, uncontrolled distribution. The “second paintings” are also sprayed while lying flat. The earliest “second paintings” I made had a very limited earthy palette which in the end resembled a kind of angular apocalyptic camouflage, and surprisingly, some of the first work that came to mind as I began to consider these

new paintings were Lee Bontecou's early military canvas and metal relief sculptures.

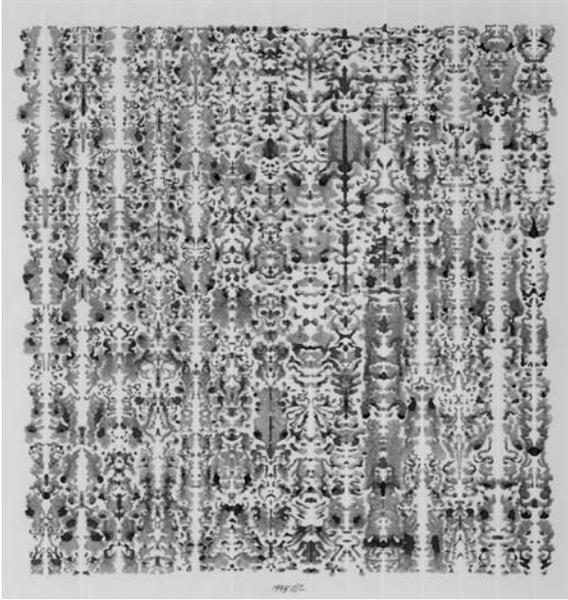
BN: I wouldn't have thought of Lee Bontecou, but as you bring up her work I really can't disagree. In fact, I've been wanting to ask you: who are the artists you think about, the ones who are somehow always present in the studio — even if you don't want them to be there, and you're able to make them disappear — who are in your mind, and have an effect on your work?

DR: The Sigmar Polke retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum in the early '90s has probably had the greatest lasting influence of any single show I've seen. Warhol's *Death and Disaster* paintings and his Rorschach works are always present. Definitely John Heartfield. Bruce Conner's ink drawings. Kippenberger's work with collage and text. Christopher Wool. Richter in thinking about photography, abstraction, and the visible physicality of process. Baselitz. Depending on the type of image I'm dealing with, California photographers like Edward Weston. Richard Prince's joke paintings. Picasso's harsh Cubist paintings and his forcing the rational mind into irrational psychologically compressed and frightening spaces. I've done work that ends up looking like de Kooning to me — in the cuts and shallow spatial differences. Recent artists that have had a more or less continuous presence would be Thomas Hirschhorn and Isa Genzken, partly because they seem to be dealing so much with American violence in a media-centered way.

BN: Looking at your new *Mirror* and *Totem Mirror* paintings, I can immediately see the connection with the *Rorschachs* and with Bruce Conner's drawings, which are like curtains of myriad Rorschach patterns. Those are incredibly beautiful. The Warhol paintings are somehow emblematic and mute at the same time — no



Richard Prince, *The Way She Looks #2*, 1999



Bruce Conner, *Inkblot drawing*, april 1995, 1995

doubt a reflection of the person who made them, and actually he made them up. They're not based on the ten standard abstract patterns used in the Rorschach test. When I interviewed him about these paintings he told me that he had wanted to hire someone to interpret them, to pretend that it was his reading of them because, and I quote, "All I would see would be a dog's face or something like a tree or a bird or a flower."

I recently read that when Buckminster Fuller was a young boy his parents were worried about his emotional and intellectual development, and they sent him to psychiatrist. The doctor showed him a Rorschach pattern and asked what he saw. Fuller's answer: "I see an

inkblot." There's a lot to see in your *Mirror* paintings, and they are very different from Warhol and Conner. These new paintings of yours are very dark. I would even go so far as to say that I see them as reflections of evil. At the same time they're really stunning.

DR: Fuller's response is great. He's right in a sense. That's a lot of what I see and love in both the Conner and the Warhol. In particular Conner, the way through that further step of repetition he emphasizes the action of blotting the ink, simultaneously bringing himself into the process visibly and allowing those works to sit contextually with clearly authored pieces like the "mandala" drawings that resemble mazes, or the film *Looking for Mushrooms*, which is very home-movie in appearance. It really seems to all be happening at a time when the attitude toward the unpredictable mind was rapidly being transformed from something that had recently been suspect, under scrutiny, feared, into something that was eagerly embraced. The inkblot was a kind of bridge. In contrast to the Conner works, the Rorschach test and the Warhol paintings have an authorless appearance and

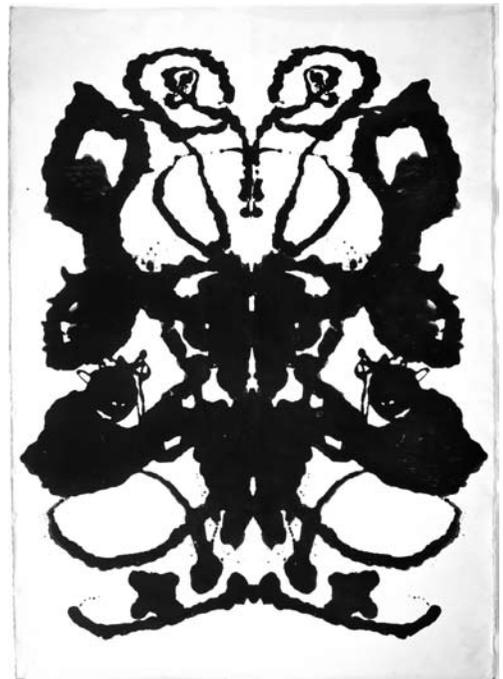
the pressure is shifted unevenly towards the viewer. The sensation of looking at something that no longer seems to be in the service of the culture can be very dark.

These works are too recent for me to be clear yet about what I am after. I'd been working with completely chaotic compositions, and then immediately imposing a broad structure through the mirroring, which simultaneously seemed to erase the little evidence of my hand or intent that may have remained in the collage while simultaneously creating a very cold, inhuman image, but an image that was also familiar.

BN: Speaking of dark, and in terms of interpretation and familiarity, I was recently looking at an earlier painting of yours, *Tack and Gentry*, which features five young women, attractive, smiling, and obviously posing for the camera in a party situation, and a young man wearing a tuxedo and bow tie, very proper looking and well turned out. They're surrounded by horse ropes, and to me it suggests nothing more than a serial killer — the young man — harnessed to his victims. But maybe this is an example of how, in a sense, every painting is a Rorschach, every painting elicits something from the viewer that may or may not actually be there. In other words, the painting sets up a situation in which the viewer reveals something about himself or herself, freely, and perhaps unwittingly.

DR: Yes, that's true, and it's one of the great strengths of painting. That kind of floating freedom in the mind of the viewer; what happens when the inkblot takes on or changes form? But as you can't blame the Rorschach analyst if you see mass murder, in using photography, and the fact that the closest thing to touch that's evident in the paintings is the tape marks, I hope to allow the viewer's response to really be their own.

BN: You've just mentioned "the closest thing to touch," and a moment ago "erasing" the evidence of the hand. How does your desire — maybe a



Andy Warhol, *Rorschach*, 1984

more appropriate term would be your “need” — to distance yourself from the final appearance of the work relate to the subjects and narratives, as well as to the work’s reception? Because I don’t think you’re simply getting out of the viewer’s way, or your own way, and I have to wonder if on an image level you register some disgust with the very material and events that directly inform the work.

DR: Disgust and hatred often play a large role in how I choose images and I do think the process seems to suggest that I’m less responsible than perhaps is true. It’s a way of really using images without getting close to them.



Thomas Hirschhorn, *Superficial Engagement*, 2006

BN: I’m wondering, further, how your approach ties in to the politically charged “evidence” and associations we find in a number of the paintings. There’s the painting with the “Swing Set For Sale” sign, which is particularly gruesome; the *Fuck Deer* painting that has a military assault rifle in the image; the *Wholesale Slaughter* painting, which has the text, “dude where IS my car?” I relate this image to a car bombing. And then there’s *Tourist Quarters*, which you said looks like a beheading.

DR: The process does allow a detachment from the images, but they're certainly not as point-and-shoot as a Warhol. Hirschhorn is an artist I think about a lot, in particular his unflinching belief in art and therefore culture, and his willingness to use truly horrific images of war and carnage. I don't think feeding these kinds of images back into what's responsible for them always makes sense. Nothing Hirschhorn has done contains any sense that he's ashamed of the culture, and this may be why he is able to employ these kinds of images. Joan Didion wrote, "Americans are uneasy with their possessions, guilty about power, all of which is difficult for Europeans to perceive because they themselves are so materialistic, so versed in the uses of power." I think this hits on a very important point, the fact that many young American artists are ashamed, disappointed, and mistrustful of their culture, society, and government and an undercurrent of that shame runs through their work. I have an emotional reluctance to use photographs of "real" death, partly because I think they can be too closed, but also because of that shame. I'll point towards death, I'll simulate death, I'll create an image that appears to be the second before death, and the viewer can complete the picture if that's what they see. I use images from the violent culture, not so much the violence itself. And you are right, it's probably a reason I erase evidence of my hand from the images, out of an almost self-destructive desire on some level not to take part.



Darby Crash of the Germs, 1977

BN: There has always been an act of abstracting central to your work — the retrieval and reanimation of images, the reordering or disordering of images — but I've noticed an increasing level of engagement with abstraction, and in many cases this relates, if not to violence, to a sense of violation. This is certainly true for the

“second paintings.” In these works, an image may appear to have been hit by shards of glass, and a figurative element becomes disfigured. In the *Mirror* paintings, the original representational image is split open and, doubling in on itself, is rendered unrecognizable. They make me think of the Germs’ song, “Lexicon Devil.” Darby Crash sings about himself and his fellow misfits as “defect in a defect’s mirror.” How do you see the element of abstraction as operative in your work?

DR: The differences between my works can be seen as being narrative on some level, and I think the element of abstraction operates here, tearing a hole in that Warholian vacuum, a hole through which everything is sucked into a more interior, amorphous, claustrophobic space. There is an element of fiction, and the fear is inverted.