

An Explanation of Intent: Jonathan Lasker Interviewed by Amy Bernstein

Jonathan Lasker is a painter's painter. His work has answered the call to move and change and be something relevant during an era when the medium of paint was pronounced dead. Lasker's oeuvre speaks to the notion of possibility and invention within the ideas of material and symbol while speaking to the experience of this time as well. Over the last thirty years, Lasker has distilled this language into something almost audible, wrought with the eloquence of a haiku. I had the opportunity to speak candidly with Lasker about his life's work at the Portland Art Museum, where his work was on view in October 2008.

Amy Bernstein: Do you see a great disparity between the east and west coasts?

Jonathan Lasker: It's not so great as people think. There is a different temperament of course. New York has a very particular environment; it's a very driven, work-devoted environment. I think that Los Angeles has a slower way of life. Because of the great distances between places in L.A., people are always in their cars, and that creates a bit of isolation. San Francisco and Portland however have centers, which is more comfortable for a New Yorker, although the pace is more relaxed. Generally the ways of life are different, but the art issues are not so different.

AB: Do you see any difference in the art being made on the east and west coasts?

JL: In touring the Portland Art Museum, what was interesting was that I saw a lot of things that I had seen living in San Francisco years ago. I had gone to San Francisco after graduating from Cal Arts. I lived there for about a year and a half, and there was quite a bit of painting that I saw there that you don't see in New York, like some of the West Coast Abstract Expressionists from the fifties. So it was nice to see these paintings again from artists like Edward Dugmore, Hassel Smith, and Joan Brown. These are artists that people in New York barely know. So, in this way, you can see that the East and West Coasts have different histories.

AB: It is always surprising and interesting to me to realize the actual strength of geographic influence when you are making things and associating yourself with a community of artists. I wanted to ask you about your thoughts on the climate of painting now as opposed to when you were studying painting at Cal Arts. Having had to answer to Minimalism's manifesto and the cries in the streets that painting was "dead", what kept you painting as opposed to joining the bandwagon of the then current trend in both theory and art making?

JL: Which at that time was Conceptualism. At Cal Arts, to be a painter meant you had to take a stance, because there was a very antagonistic attitude towards

painting there. In a way it was good for me, because it forced me to shape my reasons for making paintings. It also forced me to make paintings that had reasons for being paintings. So I think, in a way it pushed me in a good direction, although the experience was alienating.

AB: Do you feel that this attack against painting still exists?

JL: When you get such a strong attack coming from a particular position like that, it stays with you for a very long time. Then one day you wake up, and realize the war is over and painting has won, if only by maintaining the sovereignty of its borders. Yet still you feel like that last Japanese soldier who's out in the jungle and thinks that WWII is still going on. He's hiding in a cave, waiting there for the next attack. (laughing) In the seventies, you had to defend painting, and you also had to defend it again in the second half of the eighties. Yet the issue isn't so pertinent today, because I think painting is now thoroughly accepted as having a reason to exist.

AB: Yes, despite the age of technology and the trend towards digital media. I wonder how you see these works in relation or response to the age we live in now?

JL: You know, I began this body of work in the late seventies, which was before the age of the personal computer. I personally have no fluency with visual

software, such as Photoshop. However, I am told that these paintings relate to some visual programs from the late eighties, as such that you might make images that would have some of the mechanics of these paintings with those programs.

AB: Do you think of this as a sort of zeitgeist that seeps into what you make or do you consider it more of a coincidence in the occurrence of developing one's own language in any time ?

JL: I consider it more of a coincidence, but there was a zeitgeist propelling the work that made me pick up on certain issues in regards to painting and its pertinence in the 70's and 80's. At that time, for me, the painters to beat were the Minimalists. For example, for the Abstract Expressionists, it was Picasso. Picasso was their painter to beat. I wasn't really trying to beat the Minimalists, per se, but for me the Minimalists had reached an endgame. They were part of a nihilistic endeavor to make the last possible painting. Ad Reinhardt was involved with this pursuit, as well as Frank Stella, and it reached a zenith with Minimalist painters. That "last painting" of the Minimalists stressed the object reality of a painting as a flat two-dimensional object with various brushed paint applications. It was not an inconsiderable ontological accomplishment, however for me the issue was how could you paint your way back into subject matter, yet at the same time still have a picture which is self-reflexive, one that tells you objectively what it is as a painting. In other words, a painting that stresses itself as a

material object, yet also engages the metaphor of picture-making. That was what I decided would be a way forward for me as a painter.

AB: The thing that I find so interesting about this argument is that there is a personality to the forms within the paintings. The objecthood of these pieces seems to allow them to have more of a pronounced voice and more of an individual identity. They become sort of referential unto themselves. Granted there is the criteria we have for pictorial space within a painting, yet there is also a suggestion of metaphor. I wonder if you could talk about that. Do you feel as if these paintings move beyond that, or is this the conversation and space you are wanting to solely inhabit and investigate?

JL: The dichotomy of the work being both a thing unto itself, and at the same time a metaphorical piece has always been a primary objective. But there is a lot of other subject matter in the paintings. A wide-ranging visual vocabulary and various discursive themes. For one thing, there is the subject of the hand. And with it the subject of automatic markmaking. The automatic marks are very consciously placed within preconceived boundaries in set forms in my pictures. It is a markmaking which is both conscious and unconscious, at once. Yet in other ways my works can become dialectically self-destructive, such as when I set up a pattern and then disrupt it with an aggressive painting gesture. The title of a painting from 1985, "Beat the System", alludes to this process.

AB: Do you set up these conditions for yourself, always, as limits or rules?

JL: There are intentions, but not limits or rules. For example, I knew when I painted "A Portrait of the Artist's Father" that I wanted to do a background something like the one in that picture where there would be a black shape in the background and a horizon line and then these forms that seem to create puzzle elements, and so I drew automatic scribbles up to those boundaries to create those shapes.

AB: Do these shapes ever become so referential that they cross over too much into one realm or the other? What I mean to say is, does that dichotomy between objecthood and metaphor ever become too lop-sided for you?

JL: That is something I watch out for. I try to keep things from becoming so defined that you can actually see specifically identifiable forms.

AB: I also wanted to ask you, because all the paintings in the Portland exhibition had such a pronounced 'horizon' line, Why the horizon? Why not the sky? Why not an aerial depiction? Why is it the bottom edge that you choose to ground these paintings in?

JL: Well, because these pictures refer to pictorial space. Even though the forms in my pictures are laid on top of what seems to be a flat surface, there are clues

in the pictures which are there to establish traditional pictorial depth. These clues include devices such as patterns of similar forms which are larger at the bottom (therefore foreground) of the picture and smaller at the top (therefore background), bar-like rectangles which contract in length as they recede in the picture, concentric background patterns which suggest recessive spaces and triangles with apexes which suggest vanishing points. Also, there are rudimentary table tops, pedestals and walls as well as horizon lines. Once people locate these clues to my paintings, the works come into focus. The pictures then go back and forth between being landscapes or interiors and being flat modernist pictograms.

AB: Does wanting to sort of trump this pictorial space without destroying it determine your color choice at all?

JL: I often think of natural light in these paintings. For example, my scribble paintings have some relationship to Post-Impressionism. I think that there is almost a Post-Impressionist light in them. It's the way perhaps a brown would play against an orange and give you kind of a chiaroscuro, and then you also have complementaries like blue against orange and cool / warm juxtapositions. But it is the white of the background which gives you the backlight and the forms become as light or as dark as they are filled in, so there's a mathematics to the amount of light that you have. In the colored scribble paintings, you are working from the positive of light to negative dark colored-in forms.

AB: Does the color choice ever have a more philosophical bent? Is there ever any aspect of irony or decoration in your color choice?

JL: Well, I have done patterns in the paintings before, which had a decorative beauty and which worked in those particular paintings. However, it is how the colors are working against each other formally which I find most interesting.

AB: Does the notion of beauty play into your decisions at all?

JL: I am quite in favor of beauty. I like it. There are a lot of artists and painters who are afraid of color. They use black and white consistently. But I fully engage color, not merely to the ends of making the picture beautiful, but there is an activity of color that I want to be in the paintings. This has to do with the full experience of vision.

AB: Can you describe your process in the studio? I know you do a lot of drawings.

JL: Yes I do. I do drawings and also miniature paintings on paper, which are studies for the larger paintings. Almost every painting has a study that precedes it. The painting can be fairly close in composition to the study. It's never mark for mark the same image, but there is a game plan before the painting starts.

AB: Does the change in scale ever destroy the image?

JL: Scale is very difficult. The miniature paintings are small models. Yet in going from small to large, the density of the mark changes entirely. When you're painting with very thick paint, you have to think in three dimensions as well as two. A certain mark can carry itself up to a certain size, but no larger. It's an unconventional way of making a painting in relationship to the concept of Action Painting, which has dominated thinking about abstract painting over the last sixty years. However that method is only one way of working. These paintings aren't like that in the sense that they involve an aspect of design and engineering, and in this way they set their own convention, at least in the art of painting.

AB: Do you feel as if there are any other painters now who are working in this same convention?

JL: I feel I'm a little bit of an oddball in that sense. Above all for me, it's not the act of painting that's important, it's the picture. The studies are a means of perfecting composition.

AB: Would you say that the viewer's experience is foremost in your mind when you are creating these images?

JL: Well, I am very concerned that the picture is successful unto itself. But, I am extremely reception oriented. I really am interested in the viewer. I want the viewer to see him or herself in the act of viewing. I want them to be engaged, and I want them to work on the problem of the painting. These are very hermeneutic, interpretive paintings. They make a proposition to the viewer and then the viewer has to work on what they mean to him or her. Stephen Westfall had once written that these paintings ask the question of the viewer that John Q. Public would ask about an abstract painting, namely: 'What is that supposed to be?' These pictures wish to ask that back.

AB: When you talk about wanting an image to be successful, where do you think these ideas of a 'successful' image come from? Do you think it has to do with a sort of criteria based on this language you have created or do you believe it to stem from outside influences?

JL: Well I guess I can only use myself as the primary viewer. I get opinions, but not that many. Basically, I am pretty much on my own in the studio, aside from having an assistant there. So, it is very much how I see them. If I feel as if they're resonating in such a way that they're making the statement that I am trying to get them to make, then I feel that they're successful. Then of course, I feel that they are particularly successful if other viewers have that same experience.

AB: It's interesting because it becomes sort of ironic in the emphasis on the two dimensional surface, when in viewing these works, the experience can become almost three dimensional as your perception moves in and out of the ideas of a flat plane versus illusionistic space.

JL: I am very interested in the things in a painting being things unto themselves, which I would call "things of paint". It is in this literalness that I feel my pictures have a dialogue with Minimalism. The objects within the paintings are things you can think of as being in real world space, such as an abstract figure on a background, which is also a thing unto itself and has an almost autonomous physical presence. It is almost as if you could lift a form or even brushstroke off of the painting and set it down in front of you on its own two feet, so to speak, and then the picture plane could exist elsewhere. That was my thinking about my work in relation to Minimalism at the time I began doing these pictures. I was trying to beat Minimalism at its own game. What I was proposing is that the Minimalist concept of "specific objects" could be re-applied to the objects in a picture. Even a picture which has some of the characteristics of a landscape, albeit an abstract one.

AB: All of your titles are very poetic. How do they reference this sort of argument of the ontology of impasto and flat line?

JL: Sometimes the titles are about picture-making such as: “Sensible Arrangement” or “Hermeneutic Picture,” but mostly they are not directly about that. Mostly I think of the titles as being parallel to the spirit of the paintings. The paintings tend to be ambiguous and the titles are often ambiguous. They deal with oxymoronic propositions and the paintings are also like that.

AB: Do you ever think of this ambiguity within the titles as being ironic or humorous or even making fun of itself in a way? Or do you consider this ambiguity to be more honest?

JL: The titles are really my one line shot at being a poet. They are often ironic, but not particularly for the function of humor. Irony is mostly a serious matter. After all, life is rendered ironic by the condition of death. Although, I guess that there is a ridiculous side to that too!

AB: For me, these paintings seem almost linguistic, in a way, as if they are sort of humming in their own language. Do you think of writing, or script at all when you’re making them?

JL: My original intention was to make the paintings dialectical and to have them be conflicted images which would create a dialogue. I wasn’t thinking so much of fully articulated language, but over the years, as that subject of language has been introduced and reintroduced by others, I am sure it has influenced my own

thinking about the work and I have approached my painting a bit more from a language point of view. But the big issue was not originally, specifically language, but the idea that there would be conflict and argument within the picture. Aside from this, my work is unusual in that it is involved with two major discourses which are usually exclusive of one another in art. One is the discourse of visual language as signification and the other discourse pertains to issues of painting space.

AB: Do you think that the issues that were relevant as an answer to Minimalism, are still what keeps you painting now?

JL: Well, I am not actively thinking of that any longer. After a certain point, you kind of have your own voice and are in a discourse with yourself. So, at this point, I guess I'm sort of talking to myself. (laughing)

AB: Which painters do you think have influenced your work and who do you look at now?

JL: Two painters who had a strong influence on me, primarily in my thinking rather than the actual appearance of the work, were Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. The way they related to markmaking is something I feel sympathetic to, the way they would take a gesture and isolate it, or use it as a

kind of an index or commentary within a painting, rather than as a mark unto itself. I was impressed by their distant and cool approach.

AB: As if these solitary marks were characters instead of being the architecture towards the greater notion of the painting as a whole.

JL: Yes, precisely. There were two other painters who influenced me very much in art school. Richard Artschwager with his thinking about the picture plane was interesting to me, because he is a painter just as much as he is a sculptor. Also Susan Rothenberg, who taught at CalArts for one semester while I was there, interested me. She brought the issue of figure ground relationships up at Cal Arts, because that is something that she and certain other painters in New York were engaged with. Subsequently, a lot of these other painters who were doing that then went on to other things, and I kind of became the guy who carried on the project. In a way, I'm the guy who wrote the book on the subject. Those two artists as influences were a jumping off point to help me start these paintings.

AB: How do you perceive the world of art criticism these days? Do you read criticism about your own work or allow it to influence you?

JL: I read most things written about my work. It doesn't influence me in any particular way, but I'm definitely interested in seeing what people think, and above all what they see.

AB: Do you feel as if the current art market as a sort of strange, but resounding critic will be affected by this current economic crisis at all? And if so, how?

JL: Sometimes it is good when the world has a time-out. The world needs a certain amount of entropy.

AB: Do you see yourself moving into other visual languages in the future?

JL: I think that I continue to find different ways to make these paintings, and this keeps the work going. However, above all, I seem to like this little world of paintings which I've created for myself and, for now, wish to continue inhabiting it.