

# BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



MAILINGLIST

Art

October 5th, 2009

## INCONVERSATION

# Robert Bergman WITH JOHN YAU

On the occasion of his three one-person exhibitions, *Selected Portraits* at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, (Oct. 25, 2009 to Jan. 4, 2010), *Portraits, 1986-1995* at the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC. (Oct.11, 2009–Jan. 10, 2010), and *A Kind of Rapture* at Yossi Milo Gallery (Nov: 5, 2009- Jan. 10, 2010), Robert Bergman welcomed Art Editor John Yau to his New York City studio to talk about his life and work.

**John Yau (Rail):** In *The Painter of Modern Life* Charles Baudelaire characterizes the modern artist like this: “The crowd is his domain, just as the air is the bird’s, and water that of the fish. His passion and his profession is to merge with the crowd.” Baudelaire goes on to define this figure: “To be away from home and yet to feel at home anywhere; to see the world, to be at the very centre of the world, and yet to be unseen of the world.” I thought of Baudelaire’s prose poem, “The Old Woman’s Despair”: “Then the old woman went back into her eternal solitude and wept alone saying: ‘Ah, for us miserable old females the age of pleasing is past. Even innocent babes cannot endure us, and we are scarecrows to little children whom we long to love.’” In your work you step aside and let the person you’re taking a photograph of speak through their face, and they obviously trust you. It’s not like your friends. There’s what seems to be, to my eye, trust. At the end of the poem Baudelaire lets the woman do the talking. There is both sympathy and detachment on the part of the author. And that seems to me very essential to your work. I was thinking about this in relation to the portraits of the German photographer Thomas Ruff. The portraits the art world prefers are coolly detached, with no sympathy or emotion. It’s an indexical way of looking at people as if somehow they’re all just types, while in your work they’re never types, they’re always individuals. If we start to see them as types, then we’re projecting on to them and we should become conscious of that. You know, how do we see people as people. Because I think in this world seeing a person as a person is a remarkably difficult thing to do.

**Robert Bergman:** Well I think that you’re right. I

disappear from the work. I appear in the work subliminally in the formal qualities. The formal qualities which probably are what helped, what subliminally, what re-duplicates the moment of consciousness in the subject. I think the subject wouldn't seem to you to speak of their solitude, of their particularity without the formal attributes. Take the picture, change the colors and see if the person still seems to you still to speak from their solitude. I don't think they would.

**Rail:** And it's also the way you crop the frame. There is information around them but it doesn't become a prop to tell you who they are. You sense that it is usually an urban situation, and it's taking place on the street, but there's no one around. It's an encounter between the viewer and the subject looking back. In Manet's painting, "The Railway," there's the governess looking up from her book, a young girl facing away, and grapes on the bench on which the woman is seated and the girl is standing. Your work shares something with that painting: it's a momentary encounter where you see somebody, and something gets passed back and forth; but it's never named—a flicker of recognition in which nothing gets said. We're estranged from each other and yet we inhabit the same spaces. We traverse them all the time and encounter people riding on the subway, walking down the street. And how do we address those encounters without being sociological? As Baudelaire asks, how do we paint modern life? How do we deal with what's right in front of us? Modern life, or what we inhabit. One thing that's interesting to me about your work is that you can't really tell who these people are. You're always left guessing; and as you guess you begin to tell yourself something about someone else's life but then you realize you're making it up. So they maintain, in that regard, their own dignity. You can't take away something from their life and say, "oh this is who this person is." You know, it's the *opposite* of that superstitious notion that the photograph steals somebody's soul. I feel like you don't steal their soul.

**Bergman:** If you're not allowed to sentimentalize or objectify, what's left?

**Rail:** Right. The person.

**Bergman:** Yeah. The old lady's solitude. Because the escape from that dialogue, usually in our culture,



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is sentimentalizing.

**Rail:** Or objectifying.

**Bergman:** Or objectifying. Denying emotion. Or indulging in false emotions which is really just your fantasy reflecting back.

**Rail:** You're really walking a tightrope because you don't want to fall into objectification or sentimentality. You give us no background for the photograph. You don't say this is so-and-so, this is what they did, or suggest anything they might have said.

**Bergman:** I don't even give them pagination, in the book [Bergman's book: *A Kind Of Rapture*].

**Rail:** Right, the photographs say: "Deal with this person in front of you." You spent a considerable part of your life in Minnesota; did you grow up there?

**Bergman:** Well, I *grew up* in New Orleans. 'Til I was ten. Then I moved to Minnesota because my father died.

**Rail:** By ten you were using a camera.

**Bergman:** I was using a camera since I was about six. My cousin down the block, my older cousin, had a dark room. He taught me how to develop film, print pictures, and so we did.

**Rail:** I am jumping ahead now. When you were around 19 you met Danny Seymour.

**Bergman:** Well, no. I met Danny when he was 19, I was 20, at a friend's house where Danny was renting a room. And we had mutual friends.

**Rail:** And then later you made a pact with each other to be photographers.

**Bergman:** What happened was that he got to Minnesota because his mother, the poet Isabella Gardner, married Allen Tate. And I don't think Danny was very welcome at home. He rented a room from my friend, who said, "you guys oughta get to know each other." So then I met Danny and we became friends immediately. We were young. Young people



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are ridiculous. Young people are laughable. But he said, “I’m from the Gardner family, I’m going to inherit four million, I’m going to use every cent to make myself great.” I said, “now what do you mean by ‘great?’” He said, “I want to be a genius.” I said in response, “well that’s very interesting, Danny. I want to be a genius too.” So we dropped out of college together. I was three credits short of a degree.

**Rail:** Which college is this, Robert?

**Bergman:** University of Minnesota. And we dropped out of college together to be geniuses together. So we got a dark room in my mother’s laundry room. All the early work has lots of lint on it. The first night we went out photographing, because romantic kids often photograph at night. Danny was cold. He borrowed my corduroy coat. He predicted that he would be like Rimbaud, he’d disappear somewhere. So I remember reciting to Danny, from Rimbaud: “My soul eternal, redeem thy promise in spite of the night alone and the day on fire.” Danny said he would burn like a meteorite and disappear, and of course you know that he died young.



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**Rail:** Yeah. He disappeared off a boat coming back from Colombia. By then he’d also been the film the camera person who helped Robert Frank make *Cocksucker Blues*.

**Bergman:** And Robert helped Danny make *Home Is Where the Heart Is*.

**Rail:** Right. And then he had also had a book come out.

**Bergman:** *A Loud Song*.

**Rail:** So you knew him and you were taking photographs. But you didn’t start showing in galleries, and you have never shown your photographs in a gallery.

**Bergman:** Never.

**Rail:** In ’72 Danny Seymour dies. Disappears, as they say. You’re living in Minneapolis, you’re going to the Walker Arts Center.



**Bergman:** Well, that was a little earlier. My interest in modern art came before I met Danny.

**Rail:** And you're starting to study painting.

**Bergman:** I'm starting to study painting around '70 through '72.

**Rail:** Were you taking photographs?

**Bergman:** During this period of making non-representational photographs I was only taking photographs of painted and constructed objects. Multiple exposures.

**Rail:** These are the abstract photographs, which I think almost nobody knows.

**Bergman:** Nobody knows, John, except you and [Publisher] Phong [Bui], and a few others.

**Rail:** And you're looking at people like de Kooning. You're studying painting and you're making paintings. And this goes on for how long?

**Bergman:** Well studying painting goes on for many years.

**Rail:** By studying do you mean going to class?

**Bergman:** Oh I never go to class.

**Rail:** So you're just looking at the paintings, studying, and trying to figure something out.

**Bergman:** I'm just looking at paintings, looking at reproductions in books, reading about painting, reading Meyer Schapiro, reading whatever I could, looking at anything I could.

**Rail:** Okay. And making paintings.

**Bergman:** And of course, looking at photographs too. And also making paintings that were made to be photographed. And I have only executed two in the proper scale so far because I couldn't afford to produce more from this early body of work.



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**Rail:** This is before Gursky's photograph of a detail of a Van Gogh painting. So then, you come back to photography.

**Bergman:** Well I'm always—I *live* photography. Back then a photographer thought in black and white and saw in black and white. So the paintings I made were meant to be photographed in black and white. But I used the entire palette available to me and the materials available to me, but with the knowledge of how they would look in black and white.

**Rail:** Were they abstract, or?

**Bergman:** Abstract.

**Rail:** Would you describe what it's like? Were they calligraphic? Did they have strong structural elements? Was it like Aaron Siskind? Did they have anything to do with that?

**Bergman:** No. No.

**Rail:** I didn't think so. I mean, from what I remember they didn't.

**Bergman:** No, not at all. They were—

**Rail:** Seurat-like?

**Bergman:** Well the surface was Seurat-like—I'm referring to the stippling of his drawings - but the energy and temperament was something else. The temperament was more somewhere between the Futurists and the late quartets of Beethoveen.

**Rail:** And then at some point you begin working at an old-age home.

**Bergman:** Well, a friend worked at a nursing home in 1976 and I picked her up from work each day, and began to photograph some of her patients. So there was a nursing home series that I worked on, on and off for maybe eight years. From '76 on.

**Rail:** And then there's the black and white photographs that are in the catalog for your P.S. 1 exhibition, which were taken previous to the nursing home.

**Bergman:** The black and white street photography that you just looked at was done between '65 and '68. And much of it's been lost.

**Rail:** So when did you get into color photographs?

**Bergman:** '85.

**Rail:** What prompted you to do that?

**Bergman:** A sort of despair. By the time 1985 came along my work had been neglected or rejected by those in power. In those days it was only MoMA.

**Rail:** John Szarkowski.

**Bergman:** Yes. So it was a period of isolation and a period of I think despair that led me to put a roll of color film in the camera. You see, I was always interested in the archival permanence of photographs. But, when I felt my work would never enter the world, would never be known after a decade of—

**Rail:** Trying.

**Bergman:** Well, I didn't try hard but I did try because there was only one place to try in those days: MoMA. And so the work was rejected and neglected at MoMA. I remember the day that I put color film in the camera. I said to myself, the work will never enter the world so why not use the most impermanent of materials: color film. So it was a really innocent, yet spleeny act when I put this impermanent material in the camera. That material, symbolically, never came out. I learned that I could do something in color. And I began to ask people's permission because I had experience asking permission in the nursing home but also because as a novice in color, I didn't move as quickly, I didn't move as instinctively as I had in black and white so I felt that I had to have a collaborator.

**Rail:** That was the people.

**Bergman:** That was the people. So the new modus operandi was that of the collaborative portrait on the streets. At the same time I was discovering what a portrait was for me, I also wanted to discover *who* was out there in America. Once I had a few successes with the color portraits I envisioned a large series of portraits of Americans. I wanted to find individuals and I wanted them to be Americans I met by chance on the streets.

**Rail:** And you didn't want it to be Avedon either.

**Bergman:** No thanks.

**Rail:** Let's just be clear about that. He has types and it's theatricality that he's after. I'm thinking of the group that got shown at the Whitney. The guy covered with bees. We never recognize the professions of those in your portraits. They're stripped bare. They're not nude but you strip them down so we don't

know what they do, who they are. I think that's essential in describing them—there's something stripped down but it's not reductive.

**Bergman:** Pick a picture of mine that you like.

**Rail:** Alright.

**Bergman:** We're going to experiment.

**Rail:** There is one here—

**Bergman:** Now, imagine next to that picture a caption saying "Alaska;" now imagine a caption saying "Detroit;" now imagine a caption saying "Ballroom Dancing." Imagine any caption you will and you'll find it interferes with your response to that picture.

**Rail:** You want no interference; it's about seeing, not about telling. You don't know why she's in that pose, except that's the one she wanted to be in. It's cropped tightly enough that in some way you can't really tell who she is or what she does.

**Bergman:** And we don't care, do we?

**Rail:** In the end we don't. In the end knowing what she does would take away from who she is, and I think also that's part of the escape that we talked about avoiding.

**Bergman:** You don't want the photograph to be an escape and I don't want to sentimentalize. I don't want to objectify or deny emotion and I don't want the photograph to document anything except if subliminally we may find out that they document a climate of our times but it wasn't an intent. The last thing I want them to document is the artist's intention.

**Rail:** So you say "climate of our time"—a lot of them were done in the 80's.

**Bergman:** They were done from 85 to 97 so that's not our times now.

**Rail:** And the color, the color seems unlike color photography. I don't know if that makes sense to you.

**Bergman:** It makes very good sense because what was it that I studied from '70 on?

**Rail:** Painting.

**Bergman:** Also, what was the conceit of modernism? One of the conceits of modernism was that



painting shouldn't be literary. Now that photography had its modernists we learned that photography shouldn't be painterly. What happened with post-modernism? The boundaries are broken and finally we are allowed to see the palette is painterly but the palette is also photographic.

**Rail:** It's painterly and it's muted. It's like you are a tonalist with color. There is a kind of close range of tones in a lot of your photographs, where each color becomes more distinct because it stands just that much apart from the rest of the photograph. The red dots on the tie stand apart from the brown coat and you see that there's a kind of quiet lyricism throughout, but it's never lyrical in another sense. By that I mean it doesn't exaggerate that or poeticize it, like Stephen Shore, who often works in a close tonal range, but there's something poetic about his choice of subject matter, and there's something poetic about his color, like the red brick of the factory building; it seems too pictorial. The other thing is that you studied abstraction; it seems to me that your photographs are not pictorial in some other sense. There's something slightly uncomfortable about them; and by that I mean the figure or the head doesn't always quite fit comfortably within the frame of the photograph. You feel like the space is intimate. You're appear to be physically close to them, but you're not familiar with the person that you're taking the photograph of. You move to a certain distance, which is the no-mans land of relationships. When I get on the bus at school, it's filled with students. Students do not like it when the teacher ends up standing too close to them. They back up or they look the other way. There's that zone of discomfort because of cities; there's that zone that we don't know about. We want a comfortable distance because we don't know that person. There's this other area that's very gray and shady, and I think your photographs step right into that zone, and the viewer has to step right into that zone. There is a willingness on the subject's part to let you take their photograph, let you expose them in some way. It's not so easy to describe with language which I think is also one of the strengths of your photographs; you can't suddenly turn it into words. It's like you have broken some zone where you are not completely comfortable with each other. There's a comfort, but there's also an awkwardness. There's something around the edges that we don't know the name of that charges the photograph. Does that make sense?

**Bergman:** Might it have anything to do with the actual rhythms of the imagery?

**Rail:** Yeah, I think it has to do with the rhythms but you don't make them stand somewhere, you don't make them take a pose. Sometimes they are looking at you or us, sometimes they are looking but not looking at us. Sometimes they are introspective, so there's never one look to their look. And you begin to notice these differences. Then you see the incredible color of the wall around this man and then this color and yet everything else seems kind of muted so there's strong color against a muted pallet. There's a lot going on that is not immediately apparent. I think one of the things that's interesting about your photographs is they don't announce themselves—you have to enter into them, you have to enter the space that you stood in, you have to figure out how close or far away you are from this person.

**Bergman:** Or how close or far away emotionally I am.

**Rail:** The minute you're standing that close or far away from someone, there is an emotion—as strong and as elusive as a smell—that seeps out. That's what I think is interesting about these photographs. Some of them you think are severe, angry, and yet you can't be positive?

**Bergman:** This fellow looks to me to be threatening and remorseful in the same look.

**Rail:** I love those contradictions because you don't think of threatening people as necessarily remorseful; and yet you have these emotions that deny each other, they're in contention with each other. I think in our own life one of the hardest things to deal with is how our own emotions are often in contention. I feel this *and* this, it's not this or that. And I think that raises a whole set of other questions about how well do we even know each other. I think in your photographs there's this underlying sense that we don't even know each other. We haven't even bothered to look at each other. In not looking we're not thinking. There's an implicit criticism or critique in the postmodernist sense about the way we inhabit the same spaces.

**Rail:** In the democratic sense.

**Rail:** Yeah, I think it's a really beautiful phrase: the democracy of vulnerability.

**Bergman:** Danny's mother was a poet whom I was friends with and I put this quote from her in *A Kind of Rapture* and I'll read it to you: "If there's a theme with which I am particularly concerned it's the contemporary failure of love. I don't mean romantic love or sexual passion but, the love which is the specific particular recognition of one human being by another. The response by eye and voice and touch of two solitudes the democracy of universal vulnerability."

**Rail:** They and we were and are all vulnerable.

**Bergman:** So that I don't think we could reach the realization that you articulated a moment ago about the absence of something if the work didn't give you a glimmer of presence because only with the glimmer of presence can a longing for that which is absent be incited. The philosopher Richard Kearney talks about the persona in an article called "Transfiguring God" that was later incorporated into his book called *The God Who May Be* but he also talks about how people configure each other. He feels that it's impossible when one is confronted with another person to not configure them. Part of being a human is this configuring, but that when we configure we often disfigure. I think for purposes of the conversation we have been having today, two modes of disfigurement are sentimentalizing or fantasizing or typologizing and the other mode is denying emotion, denying interiority which we sum up as objectifying so that when we configure we may disfigure in one of those two ways. Or we may also transfigure. Kearney's concept of transfiguration is very interesting because it doesn't...when we think of transfiguration we might think of the artist's possessive altering of something, but what Kearney means

and what interests me is his concept that transfiguring is something we allow the Other to do to us. The Other becomes transfigured by our shutting up and allowing it to happen. That's the erasing of the authorial presence that we talked about earlier.

**Rail:** Emmanuel Levinas talks about that too.

**Bergman:** Kearney is exploring the privileging of the ethical and phenomenological dimension as opposed to most of modernism and post-modernism, which privileges the epistemological dimension. I think that Kearney was very influenced by Levinas. Kearney's concept of persona goes on to encompass the feeling of absence/presence. In fact he has talked about my work in the context of absence/presence and the persona. This is not a statement I'm making about my own work. I'm simply having a good time talking about these concepts with you. I guess that's really all we need to pursue because that was in response to the absence and the evocation of longing.

**Rail:** So here you are. It's in the early 80s you are taking color photographs. Somewhere along the line you meet Meyer Schapiro in '85 or '86.

**Bergman:** Everything I've done, not everything, but much of what I did in those years was done from my sense of isolation and despair. Putting the color film in the camera was an act of self-destruction, it was an act of acknowledging defeat because I felt the work would not enter the world, would not enter history because of the institutions that were in force and so the other thing I did out of a feeling of isolation and despair was to make a decision in the 80s to show the work to people who could *see*. Remember, I had studied Schapiro since '70 and it was evident that only a man who could see could write what he wrote. You can't write that without seeing what's in front of you. I said to a friend, "The work won't be known widely but at least it can be known to the best." I wanted to show the work to people who could *see*. I said, "we need to find this man he's retired now, we don't know his phone number," and she said "look I'll get on it." So she called Columbia to see if we could get his home number and I remember the day, I wasn't yet awake. As you know I need coffee for hours to get going, I wasn't awake yet and she said "Robert, he's on the phone." He answered his own phone he happened to be over there that day so she said, "Get on the phone." I did. I asked Meyer to look at my work, he turned me down, said he and his wife had a rule, I guess, a self-imposed rule, that he would not ever again comment on contemporary art because he needed to use every minute to finish his life's work. And also because people were constantly trying to get him to comment on contemporary art.

**Rail:** So many wanted his blessing.

**Bergman:** Precisely. So he said, "We just won't do it, Lillian and I won't do it." I said, "Would you look at it but not comment? Who is my audience if it isn't you?" Because I didn't know you [John] at the time [laughter]. And we talked about things we had in common which was an interest in philosophy and

existentialism and poetry. Meyer—I don't know if this is widely known—but Meyer entered almost ecstatic states listening to poetry, reading poetry. Meyer's intellect was driven by fire. We all know genius level IQs who bore us. Meyer was driven by fire. I used to think of the closing stanzas of the *Divine Comedy* “my will was moved by the will that moved the sun and all the other stars.” His interest in art was moved by will, not by arid intellect; his intellect was only in the service of the fire inside of him, the passion for art. Wouldn't you agree?

**Rail:** Definitely. It comes through in his writing.

**Bergman:** It was amazing. So I said, “If you aren't my audience then who is?” Speaking out of isolation. Somehow he agreed to look at the work if we had a mutual covenant that he would not say a word about it nor would he write a word about it. I Fed-Exed him some prints. It was only black and white. I've never seen a Fed-Ex come back so quickly. It seemed the next day. I was going to take solace that Meyer Schapiro was enjoying the work but I couldn't take that solace because the fed-ex came instantly back. I said to one of my friends, “I don't want to open it, I give up. If *he* can't see what's in it then who the hell can see what's in it.” She said, “*Open* the package.” I said, “I don't want to, I don't want to. I'll make art but I'll never show art.” She said, “Just *open* the package,” so we did and the effusive typed letter was in there talking about masterful revelations and when could he see more and when could I visit him in the village. That's how it all started.

**Rail:** So you went to meet him.

**Bergman:** We went to meet Meyer.

**Rail:** In that amazing house in the West Village.

**Bergman:** He said, “Bring work.”

**Rail:** I can't imagine him not wanting to see work. So you're coming to New York to see Meyer Schapiro. And then the book, *A Kind of Rapture*, with a piece by Meyer Schapiro and an introduction by Toni Morrison, comes out of the blue, comes out without a prelude, so to speak. It's not like the ground has been laid in an obvious way.

**Bergman:** Like a group show and then a solo show.

**Rail:** Two things I'm curious about: a) Toni Morrison, you getting her introduction because she's not known to suddenly promote someone, she's very circumspect and understandably so. And b) what was the response to that book?

**Bergman:** The response to the book was that it was praised widely.

**Rail:** Okay, it was widely praised but you didn't get a show and maybe you didn't want a show. In other words, you didn't become commercial, just to be blunt. Right?

**Bergman:** It's difficult imagery. I didn't try to get a gallery until the year 2000. And I tried in a few places and was turned down.

**Rail:** Even though the book was out.

**Bergman:** Yep.

**Rail:** That's interesting, don't you think? It may not be comforting, but it's interesting.

**Bergman:** It's unfortunate. It's unfortunate.

**Rail:** It seems to me very interesting, this book comes out, it's widely praised, it has a beautiful piece by Toni Morrison introducing it, and yet you don't have exhibitions. I mean I read the book, but there was no place to find your work or learn anything about you.

**Bergman:** No one invited me to exhibit. Actually, that's not true. I don't want to skip over something important. The book came out in '98 but Sarah Greenough, the Senior Curator of Photographs at the National Gallery of Art had seen the work in '95 and had talked about wanting to do an exhibition and acquire much of my work. It's true that this proceeded slowly but it came to pass.

**Rail:** Now?

**Bergman:** Now. The National Gallery has acquired a substantial number of my photographs and will probably acquire more and the exhibition there opens on the 11th of October.

**Rail:** So that's 14 years later?

**Bergman:** Fourteen years later. Well, you have to remember when she saw my work in '95, two or three years prior to the publication of *A Kind of Rapture*, the National Gallery of Art had only shown a few living artists, and only one living photographer—Robert Frank. So this needed to evolve at its own pace. And it did.

**Rail:** Ok, so it takes 14 years, more or less, and it's not sped up by the book.

**Bergman:** Look, if I write my autobiography, I will title it, "The Guy Who Could Wait."



**Rail:** [Laughs] Okay.

**Bergman:** I waited for Meyer. I mean, Meyer wrote that initial letter to me. But Meyer wrote little fragments for almost a decade. Which is not uncommon. That's typical of Meyer. He would spend a decade fixing commas versus semicolons in essays that had already been published before he'd let them out again. So that was a decade-long wait for Meyer's piece. And it was the same thing with the show. I waited over a decade for the show at the National Gallery of Art. It was my debut exhibition. I also knew Phong throughout this time and that too evolved at its own pace and now I'm very pleased that Phong will hang these pictures in a few weeks at P.S. 1. Things seem to take a lot of time in my life. I waited a long time for the right person to write the foreword for *A Kind of Rapture*. I had many offers of publication prior to Pantheon's offer. And Toni's agreeing to write. Norton offered. Paul Gottlieb, you probably knew him at Abrams, offered. I think he wanted to have Meyer write the forward. My dear friend George Braziller wanted to publish this. He knew Joseph Brodsky and wanted him to write the foreword. But, I only wanted Toni Morrison to write it. *Only* Toni Morrison. I felt that we had to do things the right way in life, not to compromise. So I turned down all the other offers, even having been rejected by Toni. A lovely, gracious letter of rejection came from her office saying, in essence, "No matter how attractive the project, Professor Morrison wants to concentrate on her own work and cannot get involved". So I waited a year or so until a mutual friend brought her by here to look at the work.

**Rail:** And then she agreed.

**Bergman:** Having seen the work, she agreed. And then I had to wait, well, I know, not *I* had to wait, but the *book* had to wait until she did it, because she wanted to finish her novel *Paradise*.

And she turned her attention to the introduction to *A Kind of Rapture* almost to the day that she approved the final galleys for *Paradise*. I'm the guy who can wait. As Toni wrote in *Jazz*, "being chosen to wait is the reason I can." Waiting isn't always pleasant, but—

**Rail:** —It's necessary.

**Bergman:** It's necessary, and maybe, in life, if one is lucky, there are appropriate moments. Maybe this is too much to hope for, but perhaps my waiting brought my work to the appropriate moment in time for it to enter the world. Maybe this is the appropriate moment that the three shows come together. I'm deeply gratified that Toni has decided to go to Washington to lecture on my work, to do a reading of *The Fisherwoman* on November 1st [*the Fisherwoman* is the introduction to *A Kind of Rapture*]. Now we'll see what else I'm waiting for.

**Rail:** [Laughs] What projects are you working on now?

**Bergman:** I'm working on large color abstracts. And I'm working on a personal narrative using pictures and words to tell a story.

**Rail:** About your life?

**Bergman:** Well, it pretends to tell a story about me, but, I think, I'm so uninteresting that it would be the world's worst memoir. But if it's successful artistically it will tell a story about something other than me.

**Rail:** Ah, that's why I wanted to know.

**Bergman:** We'll see if I can achieve it.

**Rail:** It seems unlikely for you to tell a personal narrative. I was surprised that you said that.

**Bergman:** The personal narrative is the pretext.

**Rail:** That's what I thought.

**Bergman:** [*Laughs.*]

**Rail:** And does that require you taking pictures or using pictures that you've taken?

**Bergman:** Using pictures that I've taken, using pictures that others have taken, using childhood pictures, using maybe newspaper clippings.

**Rail:** So it's a portrait of something larger than you?

**Bergman:** I hope so.

**Rail:** And you're going to use words for the first time?

**Bergman:** Uh huh.

**Rail:** Your words or other people's words?

**Bergman:** My words and other people's words.

**Rail:** The plot thickens.

**Bergman:** Perhaps quotes from my mother’s diaries. My own words. My own words won’t be about the pictures. The pictures and the words will work together like they do in cinema. But it’s frightening. I haven’t done it before.

**Rail:** Yeah, that’s good. We like you frightened. It’s good. Frightened is good.

**Bergman:** It’s great.

**Rail:** Remember when I talked about Baudelaire and Manet in the beginning. Writing about Manet, T.J. Clark advances that what he’s trying to do in his paintings is preserve the dream of freedom in the practice. That alone becomes a kind of resistance to the prevailing idea that you have to tie yourself to an academic discourse. So you can see why so many people hate painting because if it can still have that practice or that central to its practice, then it resists academia.

**Bergman:** We must resist academia as artists. We really must. When Matisse was near death a young man visited him and as he turned to leave Matisse said, “Remember one thing: guard your naiveté. Some day young man, that’s going to be all you’ve got. And now I’m packing my bags for the next world.” Do you know that?

**Rail:** That’s a great story.

**Bergman:** So we must resist. Sarah Greenough has a chapter in her astonishingly informative and beautiful catalog for Robert Frank’s last show there [*Looking In: Robert Frank’s The Americans*], has a chapter called “Resisting Intelligence.”

**Rail:** That’s more or less what Wallace Stevens said.

**Bergman:** Precisely, it’s from there.

**Rail:** Here’s another thing Matisse said, “He who wishes to become a painter first must cut out his tongue.”

**Bergman:** That’s a perfect end to this interview. [*Laughter*] As Wittgenstein said, “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent.”

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#### CONTRIBUTOR

John Yau

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#### RECOMMENDED ARTICLES

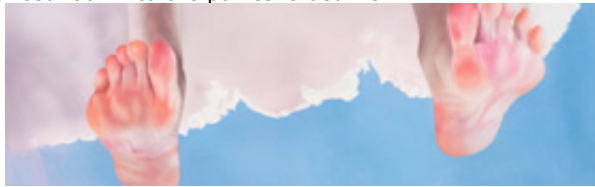


## *Life in Death: Still Lives and Select Masterworks of Chaim Soutine*

by Anna Tome

**JUL-AUG 2014 | ARTSEEN**

On view at Paul Kasmin this past June was the under-represented Belarusian master Chaim Soutine. *Life in Death: Still Lives and Select Masterworks of Chaim Soutine* featured 16 paintings of dead animals, landscapes, and a few portraits, giving a limited but nuanced look into the painter's oeuvre.



**INCONVERSATION**

## ROBERT FEINTUCH with Phong Bui

**JUNE 2014 | ART**

On the occasion of the painter's recent exhibit of six new paintings at Sonnabend Gallery (May 3 – July 25, 2014), Robert Feintuch paid a visit to the Rail HQ to talk about his life and work with publisher Phong Bui.

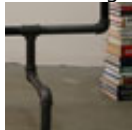


**INCONVERSATION**

## JOCK REYNOLDS with Phong Bui

**MAY 2013 | ART**

After the successful renovation of Yale University Art Gallery, Jock Reynolds paid an early morning visit to the Rail's headquarters to talk to Rail Publisher Phong Bui about his adventurous life and work.



**INCONVERSATION**

## G.T. PELLIZZI with Nathlie Provosty

**FEB 2014 | ART**

G.T. Pellizzi spent his formative years as an artist with the Bruce High Quality Foundation, of which he was a founding member, before venturing into his own distinct domain in 2011 with his first solo show at Y Gallery. On the occasion of *Financial Times*, his third solo show and first with Mary Boone Gallery (currently on view in the uptown location), Pellizzi met with Nathlie Provosty to talk about his life, his work, and the interwoven constructions of fantasy and reality.

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winter-2014