

# An Excerpt from a Conversation with Peter Plagens & Jim Lee

<http://paranoid.jimleestudio.com/images/jimlee-paranoid-catalog.pdf>

*What about the nuts and bolts of painting?*

**Peter Plagens:** For me, right now, I know maybe 60 percent what the painting is going to look like. I know it's going to have a great big grey floating grey shape on a more or less white ground, little "invasions" and "punctures" in the grey shape, and a bright, hard-edge "color badge" somewhere on the grey shape. Those are the elements I know I'm going to work with. But the actual painting of the painting is improvisational: no drawings, sketches, or work-ups. I do proceed, though, from arbitrary/messy to thought-about/neat in each painting.

**Jim Lee:** Sounds like good times.

**PP:** No, I'm always tense...and scattered, and overscheduled, and over-caffeinated, and anxious. I live my life by making lists of things to do and then crossing items off the list as I get them done. Without a list, I don't know what the fuck I'm doing. The studio—and good ol' nonlinear, left-side-o'-the-brain painting—is about as relaxed as I can get. Sometimes I can slip into a zone and a couple of hours in a row go by without my realizing it. But I even sometimes make lists of things to do within a painting, and I'm usually painfully aware of time in increments of fifteen minutes or so.

You, you just bop happily along, don't you?

**JL:** Hmm...not sure my wife would agree with the happily part. It's funny, I make lists too but I rarely use them. I start by making a whole lot of things, but very few of the ever make it through the complete process—my studio is a disaster. I listen to a lot of lo-fi rock and roll—Detroit and rust belt stuff and love to collect sketchbooks (I have them all over the place: big ones, small ones, square, rectangular) and do work I them. But it's rare that I actually make a study or a sketch, and then create directly from it. Those pieces will arrive at some point in time, but further down the line. If I know what my next move will be before I do it, it comes off as phoney. If I don't see the painting taking shape after about 20 minutes, I stop and put it aside and start another one. Sometimes, I'll go back to those castoffs at a later date and continue working. Other times I'll cut them up and "Frankenstein" them together with other castaways. I imagine this to be a product based upon my distrust of conventional habits of organizing the world. I usually tend to embrace the unpredictable, as well as the incongruous.

The physicality and images of a city that is

in constant construction coincides with my visual instincts. A lot of my work actually takes place on my walks around the neighborhood. I look for found materials and end up carrying a lot of stuff back to the studio. The more pitiful the material appears the better. On foot, I can only acquire smallish items. I've been thinking I need a pickup truck or something so I can drive around and acquire larger items to satisfy my Big Mac Aesthetic.

**PP:** O.K.

**JL:** What do you find yourself looking at these days? I mean contemporary art, the kind you see in the galleries, not just the famous stuff in museums.

**PP:** A while back, I really liked the Ryan Trecartin video, I-Be Area. I honestly don't remember much about the rest of the show at Elizabeth Dee. It was one of those granny's-attic-on-acid installations, wasn't it? The gallerina told me I couldn't sit on the bed (there was a bed in the piece, no?) in order to watch the video on the small screen in the wall. So I had to go into the Darkened Chamber (all galleries have Darkened Chambers these days) and get all dizzy on account of the camera work and the bigger screen. Physically, I didn't think I could take the whole thing without barfing. (I had the same trouble with the first ten minutes of Baz Luhrman's Moulin Rouge.) But I watched maybe half of it.

Funny, though, about the corruptions of being a critic: I didn't want to allow myself to go gaga over it. I want to save

my real swoons—like the kind I had over the first Sidney Nolan show I ever saw, in San Antonio, Texas, of all places, in 1968, or the Lee Bontecou retrospective as it was installed at the UCLA/Hammer Museum in L.A. I actually teared up when I entered that final room and came upon that mystic extra-terrestrial-looking piece. That's an O.K. reason for damping down my enthusiasm. The bad reason, though, is that I could foretell that everybody else was going to like the Trecartin video, too, and that I'd be on a bandwagon. That shouldn't matter at all, of course. I mean, what the fuck should I care about what other people say—the work is the work—but it does. My ego, and my not being Buford Pusser. I've got to do some work on that pointless, destructive vanity of mine.

You probably just have a high old time with everything, I'll bet.

**JL:** Well, during my gallery walks, I like way too much of the art that I see. I can easily sit down and watch an entire video. I have terrible recall ability, but off the top of my head: Douglas Gordon, Sarah Morris's Los Angeles video and, this past summer I couldn't get enough of Ragnar Kjartansson crooning about Sorrow Conquering Happiness. Typically, there has to be some sort of a sound track to entice me to sit for a spell. However, painting is still front and center and checking out the latest from, Mary Heilman or Dan Walsh, sound track or not, also gets me jazzed. And I love the way Jessica Stockholder transitions from, say, a yellow nylon rope to a metal grommet that supports a salmon-colored

shag rug. But I like more slight adjustments, too, à la Schwitters. I guess I'm interested in work that returns us to the mundane world from which we are always inclined to drift away.

**PP:** You sound like you get around a lot more than I do.

**JL:** I try to go on my walks once every five weeks or so. I rarely walk up stairs or take elevators, so I see mostly ground-floor shows. I'm a lazy viewer, so the show has to connect with me within that first fifteen seconds or I'm gone.

But back to the famous ones. I think artists can be divided into pro-Rauschenberg and pro-Johns. Which are you?

**PP:** I'll go with the conventional wisdom (after all, I did work for Newsweek for fifteen years—sorry, bad joke). For me, it's Jasper Johns. It's probably arguable that Rauschenberg, at his very tippy-top best (Monogram or Canyon), is slightly better than Johns at his (the Targets, Diver, The Critic Sees). But it's also arguable that Rauschenberg turned out a lot more high-end crap, e.g., the whole Guggenheim SoHo portion of his two-venue retrospective years ago, while there's a higher floor over a smaller basement at Johns's house. But I'm anal-retentive like Johns, and I go for the pared-down. I once said in print that there's a kind of "Rauschenberg sauce" that you can pour over any materials or any configuration thereof and have the result come out recognizably "a Rauschenberg." It's like salsa: Pour it over

anything, even lemon sorbet or Wheaties, and what you've got tastes like Tex-Mex food.

On the other coast, there's always been a similar question of who's California's greatest postwar painter, Diebenkorn (like Johns, a very high floor and very consistent) or Sam Francis (like Rauschenberg: real masterpieces such as *The Whiteness of the Whale* and *Blue Balls*, but also tons and tons of negligible, even shitty, acrylic-on-paper stuff, and the whole *Edge* series of canvases). In that case, though, I go with the oral-expulsive guy, Sam Francis.

You, you've got to be a Johnsian.

**JL:** Well, that's a tough one for me. They both have had such an influence on my thinking. Johns is so big. *Diver* is for sure one of those paintings that once the image gets inside your head, you can't forget it. It's the same with *Painting with Two Balls*. But on the other side...I'm not big into his *Seasons* paintings. And I agree that Rauschenberg was spotty after his *Cardbird* series and *Glut* series (which are some of my faves along with the 1951 white paintings and of course the erased *DeKooning*). I read a review once that said something like... "If Utopia could be built on a foundation of simple spiritual generosity, then Mr. Rauschenberg is your architect." But, if I have to pick one, I'll go with Johns because of the drawings. I don't really understand drawing, so I'm attracted to the elusiveness of Johns's. Johns and his marks are simply memorable. They definitely look like "art," but at the same

time they feel like a search is occurring. A search for exactly what, I've yet to figure out, but I suppose that's their appeal.

**PP:** We've bounced around merrily here, haven't we?

**JL:** I'm distracted today. The Eagles on Monday Night Football is a big deal in this household.

**PP:** I won't be in serious distracted mode until spring. Lakers over the Cavs in six.