



Problems with Authority

Gerri Davis in conversation with Lawrence Weschler
in her New York Studio.

January 21, 2013



Far Window

LW: Why don't we start with this one here.

GD: Sure

LW: It's one of a triptych in this show of somewhat distorted, well not exactly distorted, let's say confoundingly reflected self-portraits, and the first of them at that. If I were to attempt to describe it, I'd start with the fact that it entails or enacts all sorts of reflections; it's a case of you rendering yourself absorbed in rendering yourself absorbed. Except that in fact what you're doing is you're rendering a reflection of yourself reflecting on yourself absorbed in rendering yourself reflective of your absorption. Or something like that.

GD: (laughs)

LW: Does that make sense?

GD: Very well stated. Yeah...

LW: So what's the deal?

GD: This is actually the third one of these dark window pieces that I did (*Far Window*, pp. 1, 9). In the first one, *Night Window*, I was sitting against a window looking out onto the street with a mirror leaning against that window, so the mirror bounced its image onto the window which in turn was reflected in the mirror, and so on, bouncing back and forth with the mirrored interior scene seemingly hanging in midair out above the street.

LW: And that one was in your last show?

GD: That was in the last show, yeah.



Night Window

GD: After that one, I moved into this studio, and I did the second one called *Window to Window* in the same spot as the one I used for that third painting, *Far Window* (p. 1). In fact, the second one was a quick sketch for the third, and it was supposed to go into an auction. Actually the curator left it in a cab on the way, but we had a great time before he went away with it. That painting is probably hanging in some stranger's house right now. We had to make a print of it to hang in the show.

LW: Aye.

GD: Yeah, another New York art story. But so, anyway, this *Far Window* (p. 1) is the third one.

LW: And you did it right over there, by the window here on the sixth floor of this industrial building, where you have your studio, a window that overlooks a narrow alley, across the other side of which there's another building with its own hive of windows likewise facing into the alley.

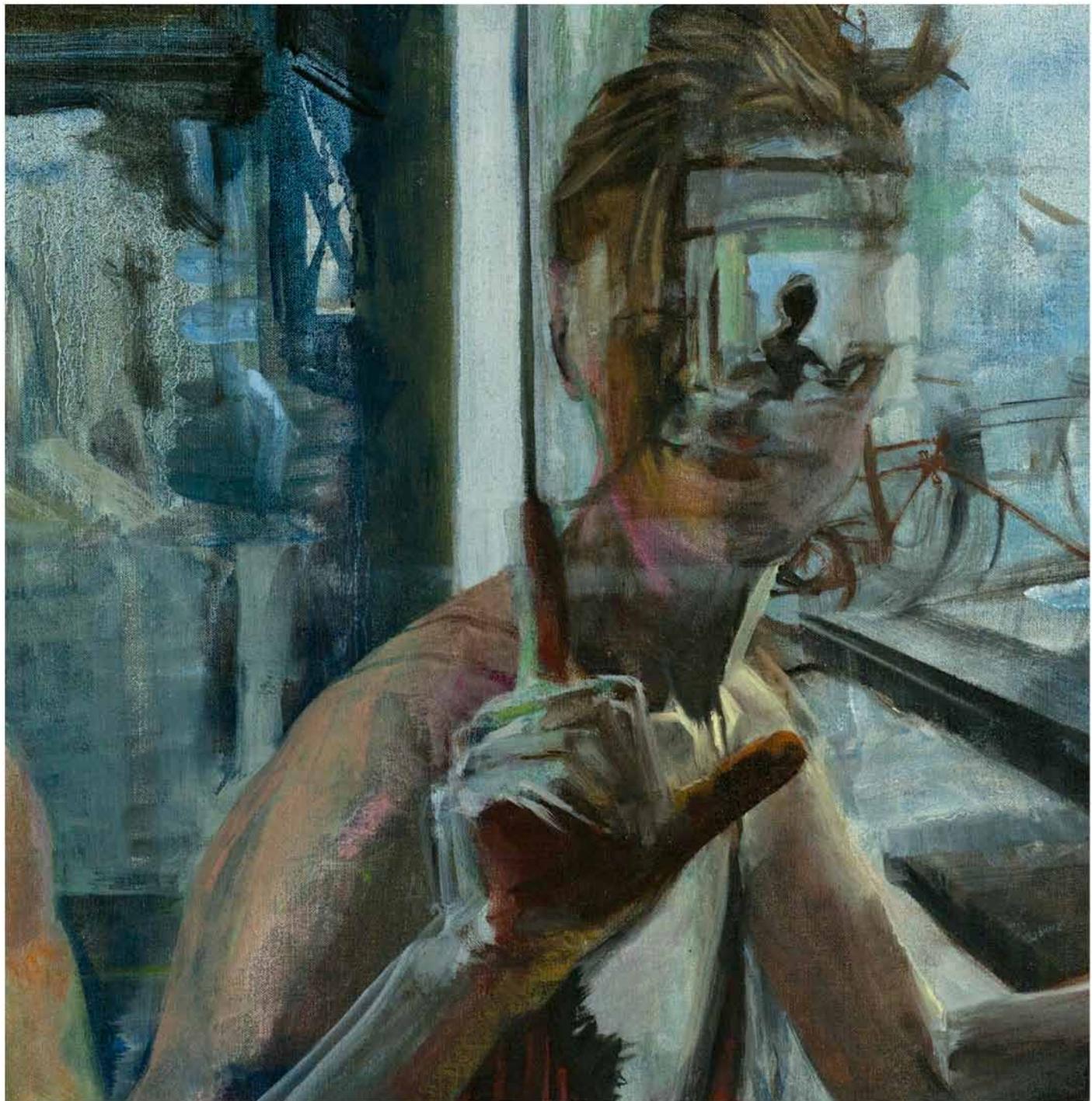
GD: It's not the first thing you notice in the newer painting, it's more evident in the *Window to Window* study, but you see how with the doubled faces, the right eye of the left face and the left eye of the right face overlap each other, and behind them, or through them, as it were, you can see a far small reflection (details p. 9).

LW: You can make out a ghostlike image of your entire body reflected through a window across an alley in another window, but in the foreground, on the near window as it were, there is a doubling of your reflection—which we have to figure out why that's happening. What's going on there?

GD: Well, this is a two-eyes-open painting looking through glass, where your eyes are focusing in the distance at the little reflection of your entire body in the far window. So they're not converging on what they're seeing on the near glass; they're converging on what they're seeing beyond.

LW: You mean *your* eyes—not mine. Which is itself interesting. Because, yes, indeed, far more than in any other self-portrait I am aware of, you are asking us, or requiring us, to momentarily inhabit your eyeballs, both of them, to identify with you in your act of looking as if it was our own. This “you-me” thing being the essence of the work. What we're seeing there on the far window glass is a reflection of that little bit of you.

GD: I used my focus on that window across the alley to map out where everything was on the near glass. You could never do a painting like this from a photograph. It has to be live.



Window to Window



Sycamores

LW: And why would you do such a thing?

GD: (laughs) Hm, I guess I've always been fascinated with the idea of the unphotographable. I'm always trying to cram things into the canvases that are too big to fit, or things that require a human eye, or two eyes, to be able to see. For example, the first painting I ever sold, *Sycamores* (2009), went from looking out to looking up, and I built the stretcher so the sides curved in at the top as if the rectangle of the frame went up in perspective too.

LW: That reminds me of David Hockney's comment that photography is alright if you don't mind looking at the world from the point of view of a paralyzed cyclops, for a split second.

GD: Totally!

LW: But that's not what looking is like.

GD: That's right.

LW: And we are so trained by everything we see—magazines, billboards and so forth—to believe that that is what looking is like, that this kind of looking—the sort of thing you are getting at—looks strange to us. I wonder whether it would have looked strange to somebody before chemical photography.

GD: It certainly would have looked very strange to somebody before *glass*.

LW: That's true.

GD: I mean, all of the paintings we are looking at are very glassy except for that *Three mylar balloon painting* (p. 23).

LW: Which we'll get to in a second. But here you're trying to capture something that a machine can't do.

GD: Yeah, and it's also like I'm wrestling with that historic idea of the picture being like a window. As if you were looking through a rectangular hole in a wall onto some kind of a scene or object or whatever beyond. I'm hardly alone in this: Painters for decades have consciously been trying to undo that notion, for instance by making paintings that address the flatness of the object, the objectness of the object sitting on the wall. Even Robert Irwin is kind of going down that path, although he's gone a lot farther.

LW: Well it's interesting, now that you say it, that the classic Renaissance window metaphor never included the glass, it acted as if the opening in the wall, were a hole, or rather a stoppered hole, with the hole having been stoppered by the canvas. Whereas what you're doing is taking the window metaphor literally.

GD: Well, pulling multiple windows into the field.

LW: Which in turn also plays with the notion of the eye's being a window onto the world.

GD: Definitely. The eyes make sense of what they see as a pair really quickly, whereas it can be pretty confusing when it's flattened onto a plane.

LW: If you look at it that way, this also has a whole psychological resonance in terms of doubleness: being, as it were, of two minds.

GD: One thing that I noticed about this piece, is that with the two eyes open, each eye sees a different range of colors.

LW: And you know that because when you close one eye and then close the other eye, or...?

GD: I didn't close them, no, I painted with both of them open. But the left eye, when it looks to the right, sees more turquoise. And the right eye, when it looks to the left, sees more red. And sometimes the brain doesn't know which eye to trust so it flickers back and forth. You can see it in the painting.

LW: Huh.

GD: I thought that was wild. It may have had to do with the light source coming from one side of my head, and so it was illuminating my iris and making my right eyeball glow a bit red. That was really strange. The other thing about it is that you immediately grasp that you're looking at a two dimensional image of something fragmented in a way that feels oddly familiar to our three dimensional visual mind. It's easy to mistakenly think that all of the doubling can be explained by the double-pane window, because you think that the reflected faces on the left and right are on separate panes of glass. But those doubles are happening for another reason, you can tell because the hand below is not reflected at all. That's the physical flesh hand.

LW: But wait, your physical hand has five fingers, and beyond it is a...

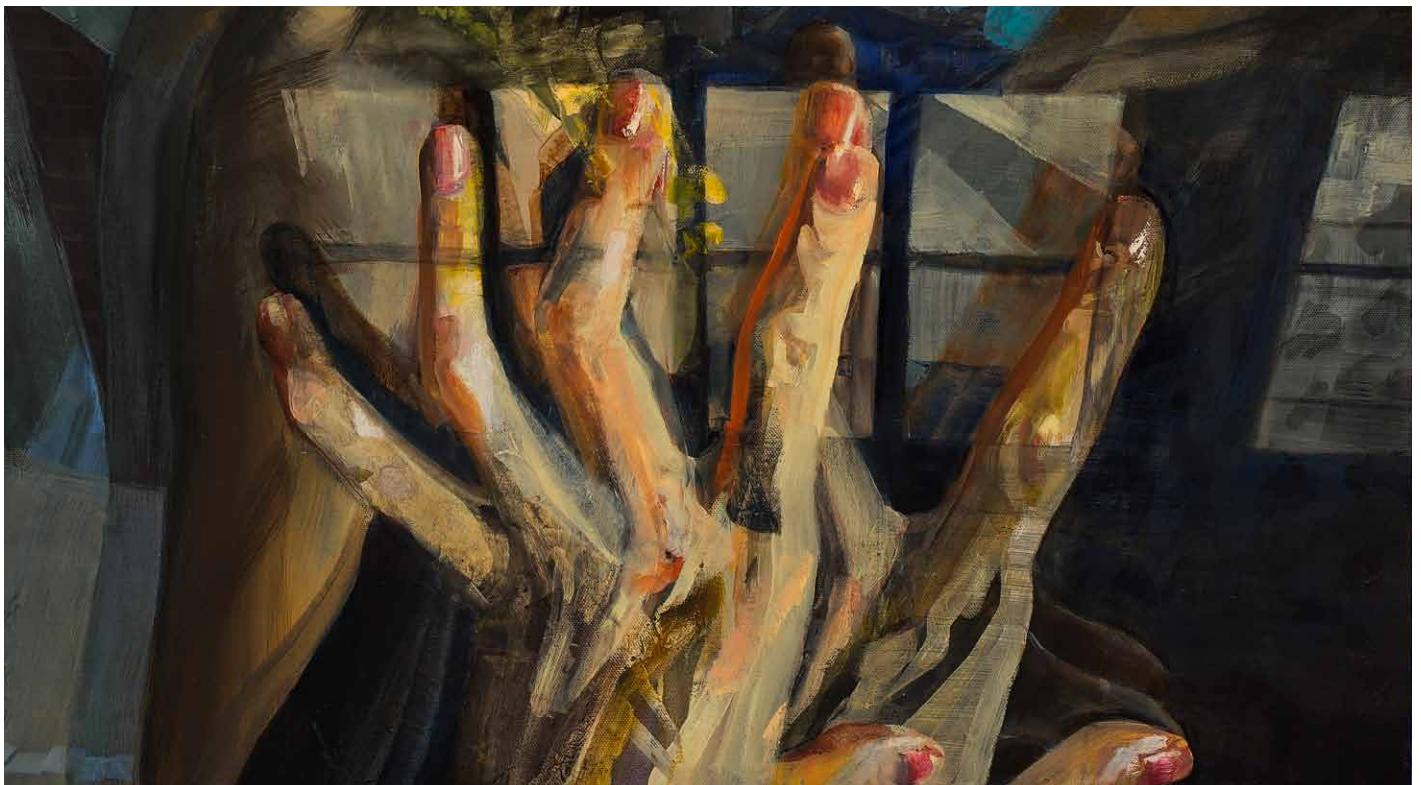
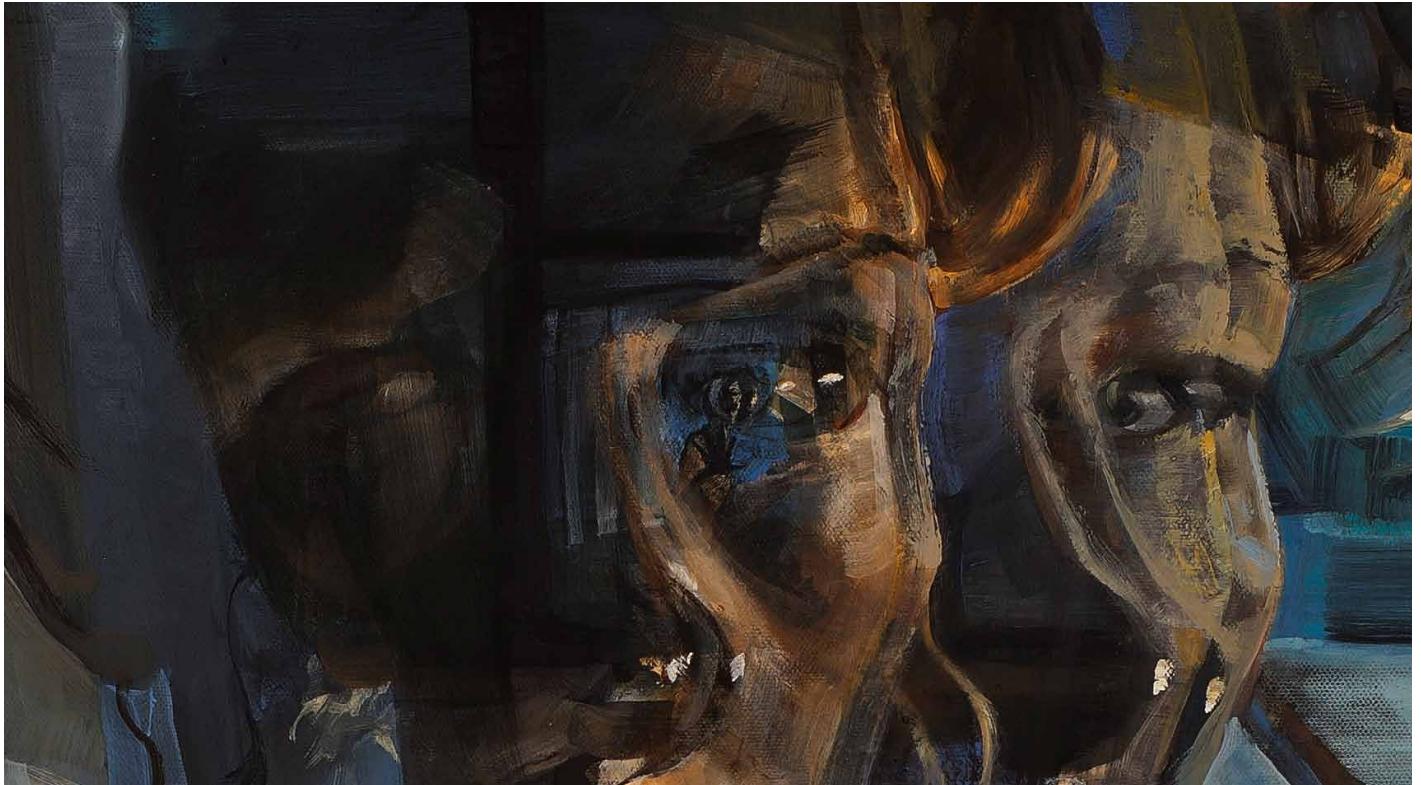
GD: There is a little bit of a reflection of it up close. But in the painting the physical hand is doubled because I'm looking past it.

LW: And because you're looking past it with your both your eyes, and not...

GD: Not because of the glass.

LW: Because if it were a reflection, the left thumb would reflect into a thumb, which it's not doing.

GD: Exactly. So with the hand there's a little vertical doubling coming from the very close-up reflection in the window. Then there's the big horizontal doubling because the two simultaneously looking eyes are so far apart. All of this sounds really complicated, but we are so accustomed to seeing like that, that none of it ever registers until it's explicitly called out in marks. Then it somehow feels intuitive and illogical at the same time.



Far Window, details

LW: Right, okay. This in turn, obviously, has something to do with that picture from your last show, of the Oakes twins.

GD: Yeah.

LW: So first of all describe that painting, and then let's talk about it. The twins are identical...

GD: Actually, in this painting they're *Mirror Twins*.

LW: Ha! That's a funny concept in this context, but go on.

GD: One is right handed, the other left. They work with optical instruments, and their work revolves around, I'll call them optical exercises or optical experiments. So my painting of them was conceived as an analysis of their relationship to each other and the world using optical phenomena.

LW: In your rendition, the two of them appear to have three legs between them. Their outer legs were their own legs, and then the middle legs kind of joined up at the bottom, as I recall. And you definitely had the sense when you were looking at the canvas from one side that you were looking more at one of them in the foreground with the other one behind him; and when you looked at it from the other side, it all got reversed. There were all kinds of things like that going on.

GD: There's a term for that today, "anamorphic projection," but when guys like Hans Holbein were experimenting with it they called it "accelerated perspective," and I like that so much better. The idea is that every painting is made to be looked at from a specific distance and direction...

LW: Out in the world.

GD: Usually it's from some point right in front of the work, at a given distance. For instance I was taught that the "ideal" viewing distance is 2.5 times the height of the painting. That probably comes from some Renaissance calculations. Though with this painting, there happen to be two such specific points in space on either side of the painting, so that each figure is ideally viewed from a different side. They occupy the same *plane*, but not the same *space*.

LW: And then shortly after that you were doing the picture we started with.



Mirror Twins



The left figure appears undistorted from the right side of the painting and vice versa.



Despite overlapping on the picture plane, each figure occupies an autonomous space when seen from the opposite side.

GD: *Far Window*, yeah. (p. 1)

LW: Which is a doubling of *yourself*. Could one burrow into this painting for a kind of psycho-biographical meaning, in addition to its just purely optical reading?

GD: Oh, this self portrait definitely has a dense psychological backdrop, but I don't know if I want to go so much into it (laughs).

LW: Okay.

GD: They all do. But one thing that I think is interesting that links this one to the others in this show is that they all have like a key, which helps you to enter the painting. And the key in almost all of the ones in this show has something to do with the hand, which someone else actually pointed out to me. It's the same even with the *Annunciation* painting over there (p. 38).

LW: We'll get to that in a second. But the key to this one you would say is...?

GD: I would say is the particular way in which the physical hand is doubled. I think that you understand what's going on in the painting when you understand what's going on with that six fingered hand. It's doubled because you are not looking at it, you're looking past and through it.

LW: Let's move over to the next one over here. So what is this?

GD: This is the *Blind Spot* painting (p. 17), where I'm looking down the barrel of a 10-inch Meade LX200 telescope.

LW: So describe to us physically how this was done. There's a telescope...

GD: Pointing at me.

LW: Where are you standing?

GD: I'm standing where the stars should be. I'm looking into the drum of the telescope...

LW: And beyond the telescope, there's also a mirror against the wall, or on the floor, reflecting...

GD: There's a mirrored door as it happens. This telescope is fascinating. You know how the traditional form of a telescope is a fat cylinder, and then increasingly diminishing diameter cylinders until it reaches the eye?

LW: Yeah.

GD: Kind of like one big, and then smaller and smaller cylinders growing out of each other? This telescope does that by bouncing the shrinking image back and forth through the center of itself. So it's 10 inches wide, which means that if it were like the old fashioned shape it would be, I don't know, it would need to be 10 feet long or something. But they managed to get the same optical effect by compressing the cylinders into each other...they use a really strangely curved mirror at the back of it that is able to grab the image of the stars and bend it into a mirror that bounces it back into a smaller lens and then a smaller lens and then a smaller lens and then a smaller lens, magnifying at each point as it goes. But, because of the shape of that first mirror, you don't miss the information blocked out by the cylinders going right through its center. So it can have a hole through the center, yet when you look into the telescope at the stars or your neighbors or whatever, there isn't any hole at all.

LW: Which by the way is the same thing with our eyes, owing to the blind spot whereby the optic nerve departs from the back of the eyeball.

GD: Well, our eyes require our brain to do some interpolation, filling in anything that's missing. Whereas this thing is optically really not missing a beat. Our eyes could really take a cue from this telescope.

LW: Okay, though, let me see if I've got this, and tell me if I'm wrong, but the creature in the upper left hand corner of the canvas is you, looking into the wrong end of a telescope, or rather the half of you, the one eye, that is not actually looking into the barrel, that is on the outside of the barrel, and is being reflected in turn by the mirror on the door on the far end of the telescope tube...

GD: Mmhmm. I've got the edge of the telescope right down the bridge of my nose.

LW: I see that.

GD: So one eye is looking into the telescope with the strangely warped mirror at its base, and one eye is looking past the telescope.

LW: And the one eye that's looking into the telescope is seeing what we're looking at on the right side of the canvas.

GD: That's right. And in this instance it's my thumb and forefinger that bridge the gap.

LW: Because your hand is there on the edge of the telescope barrel: Understand the hand's placement and everything else should snap into place.

GD: Right, and again, there's no place from which you could make this with a camera unless you used two cameras and made a stereoscopic image.

LW: Okay. So that's good, so that's fine. And so, whereas the earlier one over there is all about you doubled and so forth, psychologically I'd describe it that way, my take on this one is you trying to get yourself more in proportion, trying to get a little distance from yourself so as to....

GD: Hmm, once again you're looking for the psychoscape in it...

LW: Well I'm just saying that's how it feels to me. You're trying to get a bead on yourself in this one.

GD: Hm, *maybe* I am getting one? I mean *Far Window* (p. 1) with its doubled images of my hand and the distant reflection of my full body, is a drastic over-complexification of this image, right? If I didn't have that cylinder of the telescope to separate what my two eyes saw, then they would produce a conflated image like that.

LW: But let me continue to psychologize for a moment. Because, as opposed to the other one, this one feels like a moment of stillness, where you're trying to get yourself in proportion, to settle down. Is that fair? Or to see yourself as others see you?

GD: Maybe...

LW: To phrase things differently, you're looking through a telescope at something which is yourself.

GD: Mmhmm. For me there's something, I think it has to do with the precision equipment itself, but there's something too sharp here that I find unsettling, in this painting.

LW: That's interesting. It accentuates sharp features in your face anyway. You have sharp cheekbones and nose and things like that. Also the mirror is making your neck very long and sinewy.



Blind Spot



Architectural rendering of proposed Alice Tully Hall interior at Lincoln Center

GD: Hm, the way that it grabbed that ceiling flatness and compressed everything down feels almost too crisp, but actually that is just the quality of the telescope mirror/lens. The center part of the telescope, for me, harks back to my Cooper Union architecture home test where I was asked to draw a self-portrait alongside a self-portrait with no reference to the body. I drew all of my drawing implements; I pulled pens and pencils apart and made hard black exploded axonometric drawings of them, the image looked just like that—bold and kind of floating like the ejected stages of a rocket.

LW: We should mention that you were an architect.

GD: I was an architect.

LW: With Diller + Scofidio for a while, working on the Institute of Contemporary Art / ICA Boston, Lincoln Center, the Highline, etc. before you quit to pursue painting. What does your having been an architect have to do with these self-portraits? The interest in the structure of your face, for instance, and things like that?



Rendering, Proposed park on the Highline

GD: Well, it has a lot to do with how I do self-portraits, I guess.

LW: How so?

GD: I think that I have a tweaked sense of space.

LW: Tweaked?

GD: Yeah. I've really had it all my life but I did a lot of 3-D modeling and rendering in architecture, especially after architecture school. Digitally you can build a building before you put the ground underneath it. And you can flip it around and rotate it and turn it upside-down, and the whole world is like zero-G. I don't know, but that probably opened up the floodgates on exploring these unexpected perceptual vantages.

LW: And would you say that you as an observer of the world become zero-G? That you in some way are without...

GD: ...without gravity...

LW: ...without standing, in some way?

GD: It's the same thing—nothing has an orientation except to the next thing. Every project that you start, you pick a point and call it zero, and just figure it out from there.

LW: Which is very much not the case with the window perspective of Renaissance painting, where there was an almost Cartesian point zero at eye level on the ground and things got splayed out from there.

GD: Right, that's one option.

LW: That kind of perspective. It's funny because Brunelleschi is credited with having invented perspective and the window vantage, and people talk about how it's very important to that process of invention that he was an architect, that he was looking at the world the way an architect would. And what's funny is that here you are, a 21st-century architect looking at the world the way a 21st-century architect would, with a point of view that's zipping all around, kind of a mosquito point of view that just goes all over the place.

LW: Let's go over here for a second and describe this piece that you haven't yet done but we'll talk as if you have.

GD: Which one?

LW: The one here, that'll be the third of the self-portrait triptych in this show.

GD: The future painting. So this one is going to be a self-portrait sitting on a convex security mirror.

LW: Show me how you'll be sitting on it.

GD: I actually will be sitting...kind of this way.

LW: So right now we have a convex mirror lying horizontally across a tabletop and perpendicular to that mirror, leaning vertically, the as-yet empty...

GD: The blank canvas, yes, onto which I will be painting.

LW: So, you're going to be sitting, legs spread to either side of the convex mirror, you're going to be looking down, and there's a corner of the canvas there that might be reflected in the convex mirror.

GD: Well, basically the painting will be framed by a large, almost life-size set of legs, and then there will be a kind of shrunken head looking down from the distance. But the legs are doubled, so there will be a bit of non-reflected...

LW: There'll be a lot of red, or whatever color it's going be.

GD: Yeah, I actually have a dress that I'll wear in this one instead of these coveralls.

LW: And one of the effects of this kind of mirror is it makes your head look much smaller.

GD: Really small, yeah.

LW: So this'll be pinhead you.

GD: Yeah, exactly, squeezed down.

LW: And what will the psychological tenor of that one be? I guess we'll have to wait and see.

GD: I think this one will play with the frame, like my earlier *Bather* painting—did you see *Bather* in the last show?



Bather

LW: Uh-huh.

GD: This one will be similar to *Bather* in that the canvas becomes a compressive element, which the figure is bound by in some way. The boundaries of the canvas will squeeze the figure down.

LW: Uh-huh.

GD: This one will be similar to *Bather* in that the canvas becomes a compressive element, which the figure is bound by in some way. The boundaries of the canvas will squeeze the figure down.

LW: Maybe we'll come back and look at that one some more when it's finished. But meanwhile, let's look at this other seeming diptych over here. We might start with what at first seems to be another one of your self-portraits, although it's in a completely different register.

GD: Well, that's—it's a little hard to make out at first, but it's a "3" balloon. It's a reflective mylar inflated number three balloon that was left over from the 2013 New Year's Eve party that we had in my studio. And I resonated with the number three for a bunch of reasons.

LW: Oh I see. So in other words, you had four balloons: a two, a zero, a one, and a three?

GD: Sure.

LW: And this is the leftover three.

GD: Yes.

LW: Ok. And, why did you resonate with the number three?

GD: Well, I mean for one thing this locates it at a very specific time. I don't know, I always like it when paintings are very localized.

LW: Localized, in this instance, in time—2013.

GD: And I guess I'd just ended a phase of my life that had a lot to do with threes.

LW: Which, again, I take it you would rather not talk about. But there are actually three little pieces of your reflected face there.

GD: And three fingers. And one very strange arm.

LW: Also it's interesting, because one doesn't really realize it at first, but a lot of that canvas is raw, right?

GD: Right.

LW: Talk about that a little bit.

GD: When it came to whatever's being reflected in or brought into the balloon, I wanted to keep the raw canvas as raw canvas in the reflection as well.



Three

LW: And the raw canvas kind of stands in for wall, I guess?

GD: No, it stands in for the linen upon which I was actually painting this painting.

LW: Oh, I see.

GD: I was holding the balloon right up against the linen. So I thought, let the linen be the linen.

LW: There you go. You're a serious, a real realist.

GD: One of the first actual painting shows I ever saw when I was a little kid was when my parents took me to California, and we went to see some Vincent Van Goghs. I remember his irises—I couldn't believe how much blank there was in those paintings. I think I was in ninth grade at the time. I was like, Whoa, you don't have to fill the whole thing!

LW: Or rather, once again, it's your brain that fills the whole thing.

GD: Right, yeah.

LW: Which goes back to the black hole in the middle of your eye, and so forth.

GD: Right. When I was doing this painting I was thinking about trying to make a drawing with paint rather than thinking of it as a painting. So I was using this really, really long, skinny brush. And using it as if it was a piece of charcoal or an eraser, making choppy marks.

LW: And it was only after you had finished it that you realized that, wait a second, it was kind of like this other one over here.

GD: Right.

LW: And what is it portraying?

GD: This is a painting of a site called Chimney Rock; it's what they call a magma dome.

LW: This is an earlier painting of yours.

GD: Yeah, this one is from 2009.

LW: And where was it?

GD: It was painted in Hickory Nut Gorge, North Carolina.

LW: So it's in the southern Appalachians.

GD: Yeah.

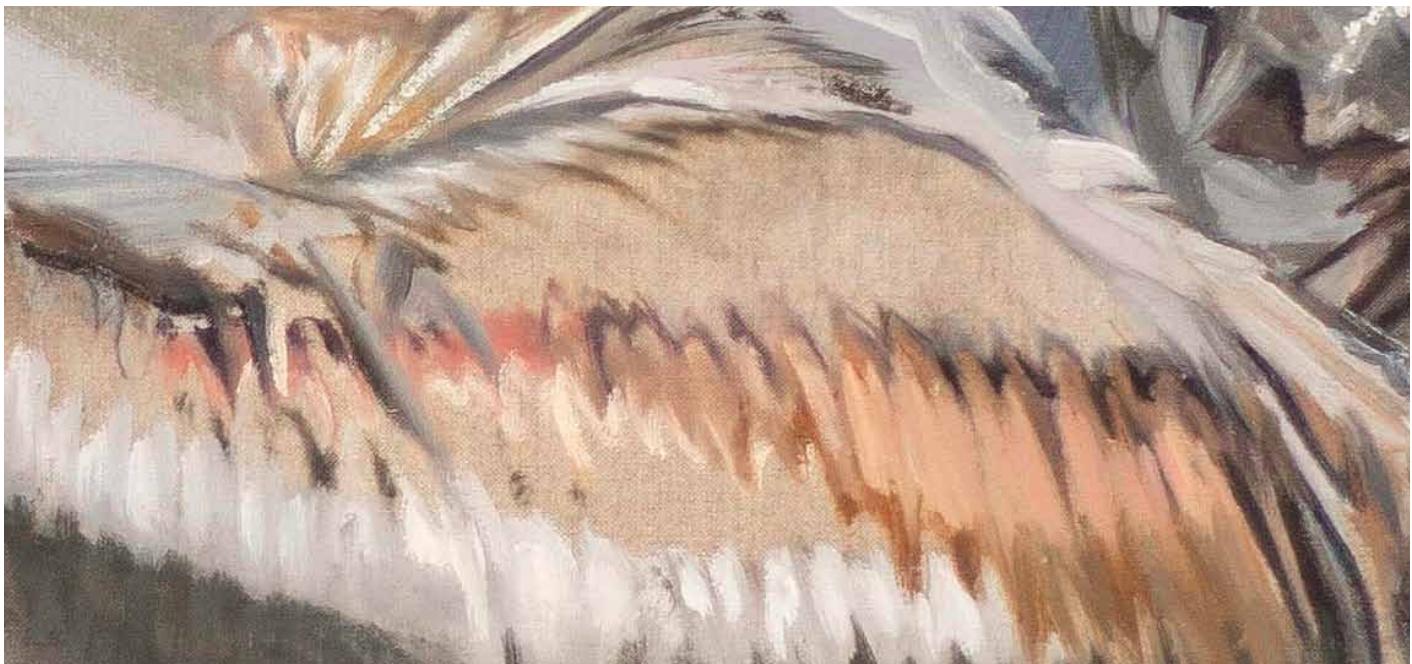
LW: And so this very old...

GD: Granite...

LW: ...old mountain, the magma inside of the crater has solidified and the rest of the mountain has kind of fallen away from it?

GD: Yeah, the rest of the mountain has washed off, and so all you're left with are these kind of facets of a slowly sheering-apart dome of rock. It's huge, it's like a thousand feet high. This was one of my earlier paintings, where I was trying to squeeze in a kind of panopticon view. I was sitting right up against the face of this thing, painting with both my eyes open and trying to get my whole peripheral vision to fit in.

LW: The painting evinces a certain Rackstraw Downes quality, you know, that guy who does the radically foreshortened bridges that kind of come together in the middle of the canvas and then arc off to both sides? But at the same time, it's strange, and it may just be because of the current context where it's placed alongside the other paintings we've been talking about, but it too has the feel of some kind of self-portrait.



Three, details

GD: Maybe everything is a self-portrait of sorts.

LW: But this seems churning and ...

GD: Well, when I was doing this painting, I was also doing a bunch of other, similar attempts at compressing information in from the periphery.

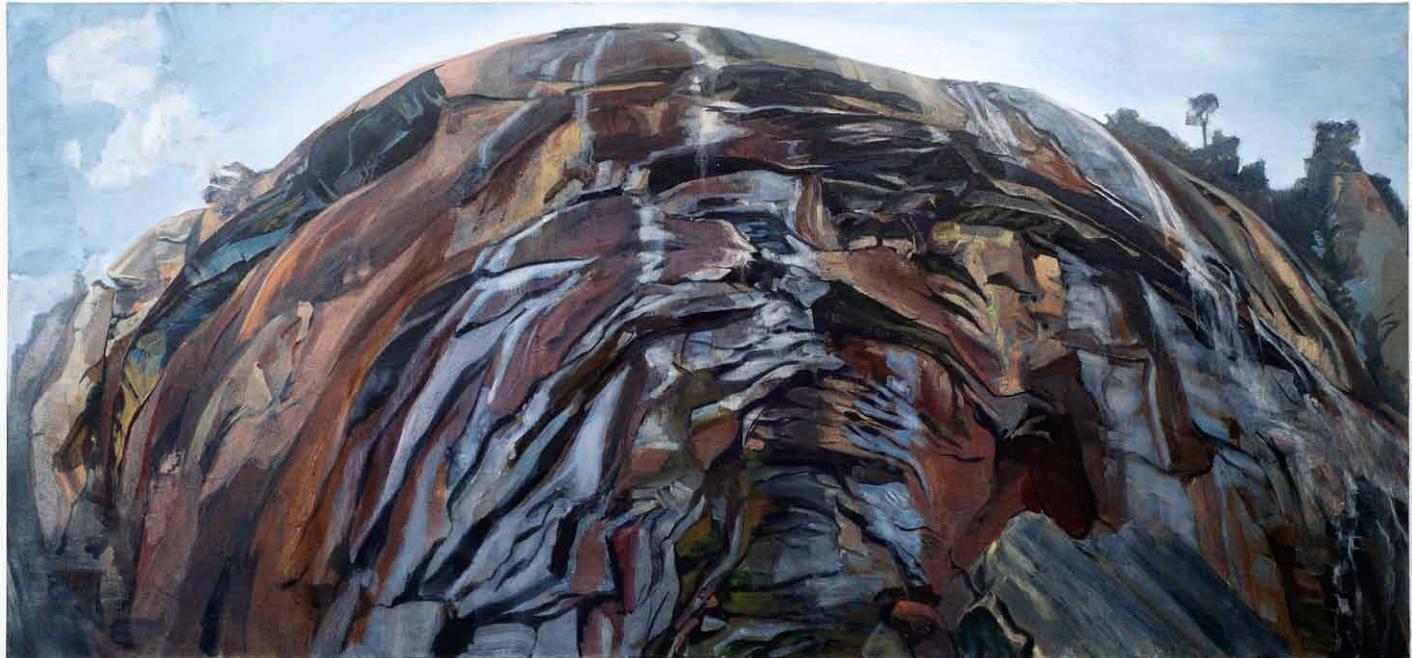
LW: Which by the way is what a volcano itself is doing, too.

GD: Right! So I was going into all of these massive landscapes—forests and so forth, that were expanding for miles, or this kind of engorged formation. And I would get right up in front of it and I would try to paint the edges of it. At some point I figured out that working with reflections would allow that same kind of density of information to happen, in a way that was consistent when you look at it as a painting. Like that first painting that we looked at, when you glance at it, you immediately read everything in the painting. There's no difficulty in understanding what's happening, even though you have four images of a person overlaid on top of each other with a fifth image through the eyes in front. It's a very complex construction, but you can understand it in a split second, because we're all used to looking through glass and we know what that looks like. And this was a kind of early stab into that direction of compacted information.

LW: With both eyes open.

GD: Yeah, with both eyes open to get more information. I used to ride around on my bicycle and try to decenter my focus, you know, to look in one direction and register not just the easy part to focus on, but all the periphery as well. Which is hard in New York City, when there's so much symbolic information to draw your attention.

LW: Okay, I take back, maybe, that this is a self-portrait, but one does speak of the “face” of a mountain, and if it is not so much a self portrait, still it is a *facing* toward the world. And ordinarily when we see a picture facing the world, most landscapes are all about how the world recedes away from us. Whereas this is all about the world right at our face and in our face. This is a road block, this is opposite of a window, this is a closed window, this is a closed door, this is... There's a great poem of Wyslawa Szymborska's—do you know it?—“Conversation with a Stone,” about just wanting to get inside the stone and no, it just won't let you.



Magma Dome

*I knock at the stone's front door
'It's only me, let me come in.
I want to enter your insides,
have a look around,
breathe my fill of you.'*

*"Go away," says the stone.
"I'm shut tight.
Even if you break me to pieces,
we'll all still be closed.
You can grind us to sand,
we still won't let you in."*

- translated by Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh

And so forth...

GD: Wow? Does she succeed in getting in in the end?

LW: No, in fact, in the last stanza, the stone declares flatly that it has no door.

GD: Huh. Well in this instance, I was there all day for several long summer days and the sun couldn't get up high enough to break clear of the mountain. It reminded me of a poem by Jules Supervielle that Bachelard includes in his *The Poetics of Space* about a mountain that wanted to go through a window:

“Le corps de la montagne hésite à ma fenêtre:
<< Comment peut-on entrer si l'on est la montagne,
Si l'on est en hauteur, avec roches, cailloux,
Un morceau de la Terre, altéré par le Ciel?”

“The body of the mountain hesitates before my window:
<< How can one enter if one is the mountain,
If one is tall, with rocks, boulders,
A piece of earth altered by the sky?”

- Jules Supervielle

GD: That mountain was just, like...

LW: ...a *massif*, as the French say. The painting has a Courbet feeling to it, actually.

GD: I love Courbet.

LW: Only, when Courbet would do this, it would either be a massif or it would be a really deep gaze into the source of some river or something—or else, more notoriously, into the Origin of the World.

LW: But anyway, now let's look at these two big final pieces. Why don't we start with this one here, which was the earlier of the two.

GD: The *Annunciation*, yeah (p. 38).

LW: So...*my God*. As it were.

GD: Yeah, this is a good one to talk about.

LW: Okay, let's talk about it. It's called *Annunciation*, which is all about Mary having the angel come and tell her she's about to have big things happen in her life.

GD: Yeah. It's basically the virgin Mary getting pregnant.

LW: And so it looks like...well, describe it.

GD: Well, this painting follows a narrative from Luke 1:27, though in non-linear fashion. It's a kind of globular cubism or something. It takes multiple moments...

LW: ...from the narrative...

GD: ...and smoothly morphs from one into the other as you look around the painting. The right side is the beginning of the action, where the angel comes to Mary and she's terrified, and she's like, "What do you want with me?" Kind of pushing at the formless light of the angel with her outstretched hand. And the angel says, "Don't worry, don't be afraid, you've found grace with God, God likes you." And she's says, "Oh, okay." And he says, "You're gonna have a son, and everybody is gonna call him the king of men," and she's like "but I've never been with a man" and you know, whatever. She finally says, "Okay, have your way with me." Which brings us to the left side of the painting: The hand on the chest traditionally represents being in accord with what an angel is saying to you, so she's gesturing, "Okay, I understand, I'm in agreement." And then that same hand gripping her leg is the obligatory sensual element.

LW: And the angel is this kind of mosquito-like...

GD: Or dragonfly-like. So with this painting, too, the hands clue you in to what's going on, the split arm tells you that it's not intended as a camera's snapshot portraying one moment in time when there was a person and she looked like this. Rather, it's a story unfolding and you have to follow it around. I think you can understand enough to intuit what's going on even without knowing the narrative.

LW: But to go back to what you were saying about the form of the angel (p. 38).

GD: Okay sure—I don't think the Bible ever mentions angels having wings. The concept of an angel having wings is from some ancient Hebraic texts where there were a few different kinds of angels that I'm aware of. The seraphim had six sets of wings and were these flaming givers of light. I think you would even die if you looked at them. It's funny to think of them as able to kill you through your eyes. That happened in Greek and Roman myths, too. There were also other kinds of angels that all get described as rays, or sparks of light, or hazy clouds. And then there were the thrones that were like wheels with eyes facing outward in all directions. So this painting is from the point of view of the angel Gabriel, who isn't described physically in Luke, so I went ahead and took liberties like every painter who has ever painted an angel, and gave him the characteristics of all of the above. He has the six sets of wings, and he's a flaming light-giver, who's casting his image in light the same way we are used to casting a shadow, onto his surroundings. Mary might even be getting a bit scorched from exposure. And then the type of vision is like aerial spider vision.

LW: There even seems to be an eye over there, by her elbow. Is that...?

GD: That's a ripple in the sheet. But it does look like an octopus face! (center image)

LW: And up above...

GD: That's the action reflected in the window behind her, beyond which we can make out a cityscape receding down and back into the distance. And then you see her being reflected. And there, where you yourself would be reflected above her, there's a silhouette...

LW: So were you religious as a child, or as a young person?

GD: Oh, I was taken to church as a child, yeah...

LW: And did this story in particular interest you?

GD: No, when I went to church as a kid I saw paintings of this subject matter, and I thought the paintings were horrible. But then I saw them again when I was in Florence, versions of the same subject that have been done by a lot of different painters...

LW: Sure.



Annunciation (details)

GD: So you have the gamut of painters tackling this same narrative, and as a single thread that goes throughout art history, it seemed like fair game.

LW: So you're not drawing on earlier thoughts about this event from when you were young and a believer, or were you ever a believer as such, or...?

GD: I wouldn't ever have called myself a believer...

LW: But when you were sitting there in church, would you fantasize or think about the stories?

GD: I knew these stories, sure, but I thought of them as lore.

LW: And was this one that you would immerse yourself in more than others?

GD: Not especially, no.

LW: So this is coming more out of you being in Florence, for example.

GD: Yeah, this is for me more like dropping an art historical taproot into a fundamentally human tale that crisscrosses around different cultures and epochs.

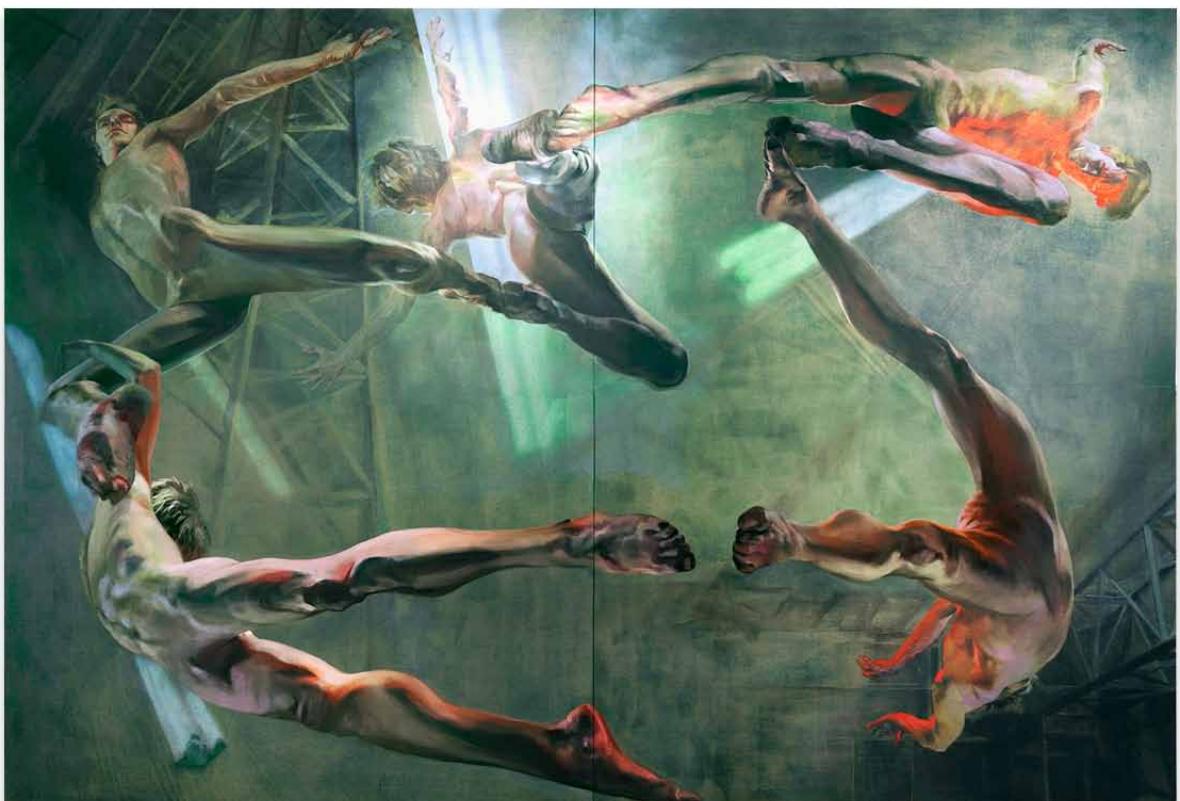
LW: And in that sense, it's much like that *Desmoiselles* homage you did in your last show, *Bordel*, or the Matisse homage, *Dance*—more playing with art history than with autobiographical reference?

GD: Yes. I mean, I did do quite a bit of research into the different texts when I started painting the *Annunciation*, the original being the Old Testament Hebrew text relating the Arc of the Covenant story, and then Luke's Byzantine Greek text. I went back to the Byzantine Greek and asked a Greek scholar to retranslate it to get thorough descriptions of the meaning of the words. In part because those windows in the cityscape outside the room on the top spell out part of the text in Morse Code (p. 31, bottom).

LW: Oh really?



Bordel



Dance

GD: Yeah, so I wanted to get the meanings right, and have the translation be really accurate and not just use whatever King James's guy thought might be a safe idea. So it says, "The holy spirit will come upon you, and the highest potency will overshadow you." Which is...it seems minor, but there's a big difference between "higher power" and "highest potency." The Greek word that is used to denote God actually has a sexual connotation, which is kind of interesting.

LW: As in English we say, "You will have knowledge." "Did she have knowledge of him?" or, "Did he have knowledge of her?"

GD: Right!

LW: There's also that little bird at the top, "the shadow of the waxwing slain / by the false azure in the windowpane," as Nabakov says at the outset of *Pale Fire*, "I was the smudge of ashen fluff—and I / Lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky." It occurs to me, looking at it right now though, that you're playing not only with Nabokov, but another association I have is to "Leda and the Swan," as envisioned by Yeats, where she is having intercourse with Jove in the form of a swan, as opposed to a sparrow. And...

GD: Actually, that's a snow owl.

LW: A snow owl, okay. Oh, I see, that's interesting: The owl being a carrier of wisdom. But the great question that is asked at the end of "Leda and the Swan" is effectively whether at that moment of his having knowledge of her, whether she took on his knowledge, and could see the future, and could see everything that was going to come and so forth.

*A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.*

*Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?*

There's a quality of all that in your version too, it seems to me.

GD: There are probably more things that we haven't mentioned about it, like the face removing itself into a mask... which can be interpreted as both the painting telling on itself, and Mary (or Leda) constructing her own image.



Annunciation (details)

LW: Well, then let's finally go over to this one here, which you are still working on, which is...

GD: This is Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, or of course, more accurately, the non-sacrifice of Isaac. (p. 39)

LW: And this again is more coming out of art history than out of any particular religious epiphany?

GD: Yeah, well, this really came out of reading Kierkegaard. A friend gave me the book *Fear and Trembling* so that I could read *Repetition*, it being a two-part book, and I haven't even gotten to the *Repetition* part yet, I got stuck on *Fear and Trembling*. And I was fascinated with Kierkegaard's imagined psychological responses that Abraham could potentially have had to that situation. Like how did Abraham deal with God telling him to kill his son? And the one that I really got stuck on is the one where Abraham doesn't want Isaac to hate God and so he shows Isaac a sort of maniacal, murderous, transformed version of himself. He projects this monster so Isaac will think, "Oh my God my dad's lost it," rather than thinking...

LW: ...that God's lost it.

GD: Yeah, that God told Dad to do this and therefore I hate God. Because Abraham doesn't want Isaac's soul to be wounded by realizing that God ordered his slaughter, which would land Isaac in eternal hell.

LW: So the real or at any rate first sacrifice of Abraham is his sacrificing his own standing in his son's eyes.

GD: Right—that would actually be a great title for this painting...

LW: And he has to cleave himself in half in order to be able to do that?

GD: Right, and this is a painting of that break. By the foreshortening of elements in space, he cleaves himself in two with the knife.

LW: And the one at the top is good Abraham, and the one peeling off to the right is monster Abraham?

GD: Yeah, the one at the top is the real Abraham, it's the inner, distraught, "Do I really have to do this?" one. And then the one on the right is his mask, it's his "I want you to think that I'm a bad guy, so I'm gonna project this kind of monster at you." It's the matador's red flag. Looking at the painting, you are in the position of Isaac.

LW: And you see yourself—or at any rate, Isaac—reflected there in the blade, for that matter.

GD: You see yourself as Isaac reflected in the upper blade. And then you see there are two facets of the blade, so one facet reflects you, and the other facet reflects the goat that ultimately will get slain instead. And here there will be some mountains.

LW: Hmmmm! It's interesting that when you have the two paintings side by side like this, here in the studio, they're looking at each other, Mary and...

GD: ...Abraham.

LW: And it becomes all about God messing around with people and their kids...

GD: "Who *is* this God anyway?"

LW: Who is this God, messing around with these kids?

GD: "And what does he want with my little boy?"

LW: But again, it sounds like this is more you playing with art history than you playing with issues of...

GD: Definitely. Well the Judeo-Christian myths are, for starters, not particularly Judeo-Christian. They generally come from older stories that, who even knows how long they've been told? One way to see these stories, especially the Abraham story, is that organized religion is an ancient system for social control. The stories are created to instill a moral code that people will take on themselves in order to not devolve into unruly citizens. I mean, what does this Abraham story fundamentally tell you, for example? Above all, it tells you that you're not supposed to ask questions, you're supposed to do what Authority tells you, and that Authority will have the kindness and good judgment to make the wisest decision, or whatever. Which is, of course, absurd.

LW: Which in turn brings us full circle back to those pictures over there, which are all about questioning yourself, and trying to get your own bead on yourself, without the interference of any authority or antecedent.

GD: Right. Can you tell I have a problem with authority?

LW: (laughs) That sounds like as good a note as any for us to end on.

GD: (laughs) Yes, sir!



Annunciation



Sacrifice of Abraham

List of Works

- Cover, 17 ***Blind Spot***
2012 Oil on linen 27 in x 27 in
- 1, 9 ***Far Window***
2013 Oil on canvas 27 in x 27 in
- 3 ***Night Window***
2011 Oil on canvas 20 in x 27 in
PRIVATE COLLECTION
- 5 ***Window to Window***
2012 Oil on canvas 24 in x 24 in
- 6 ***Sycamores***
2009 Oil on canvas 48 in x 48 in
PRIVATE COLLECTION
- 11, 12, 13 ***Mirror Twins***
2011 Oil on linen 77 in x 56.5 in
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST
- 21 ***Bather***
2010 Oil on canvas 36 in x 36 in
PRIVATE COLLECTION
- 23, 25 ***Three***
2013 Oil on linen 24 in x 55 in
- 27 ***Magma Dome***
2009 Oil on linen 30.5 in x 65 in
- 31, 35, 38 ***Annunciation***
2012 Oil on linen 90 in x 80 in
- 33 ***Bordel***
2010 Oil on linen 96 in x 92 in
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST
- 33 ***Dance***
2012 Oil on linen 111 in x 159 in
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST
- 39 ***Sacrifice of Abraham***
2013 Oil on linen 60 in x 68.5 in

Paintings © Gerri Davis

*Unless otherwise noted, color
photography by Andy Gauthier*



Photo Claudia Hehr

Gerri Davis is a New York City based artist whose paintings delve into implausible conditions and positions, expanding the visual-spatial-temporal field to a viscous dreamscape of transfigurations.



Lawrence Weschler was for 20 years a staff writer at The New Yorker. His books include: Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees; (a life of Robert Irwin); True to Life (a life of David Hockney); Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder; Vermeer in Bosnia; Everything that Rises; and more recently; Uncanny Valley: Adventures into Narrative.





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