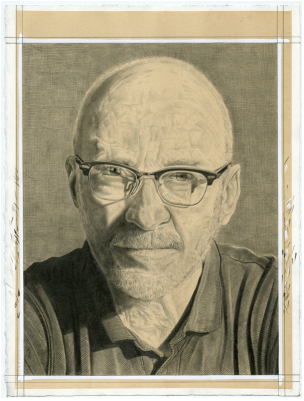
GARY STEPHAN with Phong Bui

by Phong Bui

A few weeks before the opening reception of his exhibit *The Story of What Happens* (August 26 – October 6, 2012) at devening projects + editions in Chicago, *Rail* Publisher Phong Bui paid a visit to the painter Gary Stephan's Canal Street loft/studio where they resumed their ongoing conversation about Cézanne, painting, and everything.



Phong Bui (Rail): When did your admiration of Cézanne's work begin? At graduate school at the San Francisco Art Institute, or while you were working for Jasper Johns as a studio assistant in the mid-'60s? We know how much Johns revered him ever since he saw the major Cézanne exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the spring of 1952.

Gary Stephan: I discovered an interesting thing when I went to Johns's *Gray* show at the Met in 2008. I'm sure it was completely unconscious on his part, but in one of his great paintings, "Map" (1962), if you turn it upside down, the Gulf of Mexico is absolutely identical to Cézanne's "Mont Sainte-Victoire," as well as the white cap in his "Self Portrait in a White Cap" (1882). Actually, in my next lecture I plan to show "Map" upside down alongside Cézanne's hat and "Mont Sainte-Victoire," partly because I've come to believe over time that there are no pseudomorphs in visual art. There are no false analogies. If something looks like something else it's because it is. Cézanne was an important painter for my generation. He was one of the painters you had to think about when you were at Pratt, which is where I went as an undergraduate.

Rail: But you were studying industrial design!

Stephan: True. It wasn't the industrial designers who were interested in Cézanne; it was all my painter friends who talked about him constantly. At some point I made a shortlist in my head of people in the history of Western art who actually made fundamental changes, and it is indeed short. It excluded even great painters like Tintoretto because he didn't introduce any fundamental change to the notion of what's being conducted. If you look at who really conducts the changes, it begins with Giotto, then Uccello, because of his work with perspective, and then you find yourself in the Renaissance with Leonardo, which more or less is maintained with small changes until you get to a rupture with Cézanne. The Cézanne rupture is in reimagining that this is not the neutral reception of the complete world but that it's the co-construction of reality with brain-meets-the-world; that's his incredible insight. And then the next artist who makes a fundamental change is, I would argue, Pollock, where the whole notion of figuration and ground and image and object collapses. As Jung said, this is nihilistic painting because there's no there there anymore, it's just done.

Rail: I remember very clearly in one Saturday while visiting my brother near the National Gallery of Art in D.C. I went to see one of the great Cézanne late masterpieces, "The Gardener Vallier," which was painted in 1906, the year of his death, with heavy impasto, like a late Rembrandt self-portrait. And then I went the following Saturday to the Met to see Johns's *Gray* show, which featured gray as the predominant color that emerged in the mid-'50s and sustained until the present, despite all the different motifs that materialized in the work. On the same afternoon I rushed down to Matthew Marks to see his big drawing show, 10 years of work (1997–2007) an hour before the gallery closed. All of those combined viewings deepened my understanding of Johns's work, as well as his relationship to Cézanne. I like David Sylvester's observation of Johns making a kind of allusive Cézannian synthesis by simultaneously evoking solemnity and wit, and that the feeling of melancholy distilled in the brush strokes also had the stoicism of Cézanne. He concludes that Johns's paintings always hurt and unsettle before they can induce calm.

Stephan: So you can see how important Cézanne was, not just to Johns but to endless other painters.

Rail: Surely. And you have spoken of painting in the middle, dead center, desiring both the optical effect and the emotional charge, which was exactly what Cézanne achieved. But it is a very difficult

position to be in because people can easily misread you either way.

Stephan: Yes. I remember an early review when I moved to New York, which said that the work gave, it took back, it proposed, it undermined, it suggested, and then it refused to complete the thought. I was reading this list of equivocations basically, and I thought, this is excellent, I can't believe somebody is getting my vacillations as subject. And at the end he said: And for that reason the work is a failure. And I thought, oh, this is going to be a rocky road. What people really want is the declarative, assertive kind of work, and if some people considered it a failure, then I would take that as sufficiently instructive. I also thought, ah, that's life.

Rail: So your identification with Cézanne was both a blessing and curse. [*Laughs.*]

Stephan: Exactly. This refers to how Leo Steinberg was disarmed by Johns's first show at Leo Castelli (1958), because he understood if there was no figure/ground, there was nothing. It was the end of illusion, it was just an object. And Steinberg said, maybe we're asking the wrong question. Maybe the right question is what would it take to make a painting that met the truth of its flatness? What kind of subjects would that limit a painting to, if it was going to be authentically about its nature? But that wasn't my good fortune. I didn't get someone who said, maybe the vacillation here is the subject. I just got that maybe he just can't commit.

Rail: I can't help but think of this amazing book on Cézanne by Kurt Badt (*The Art of Cézanne*, 1956), in which he argued that Cézanne had undergone a religious conversion. On one hand he spoke of Cézanne's existentialist basis, his move from emotional absence to deeply charged feelings that transformed within the work, but at the same time, Cézanne was a churchgoing Roman Catholic who refused to paint any religious pictures.

Stephan: He painted a picture of a monk early on.

Rail: Right, his Uncle Dominic dressed in Dominican uniform, bearing a cross on his chest, which corresponds to his crossed arms. It's a visual pun. You were brought up as a Roman Catholic, am I right?

Stephan: Yes. I was a practicing Catholic until my second year of college. Even though I no longer believe in the religion, all the images are stored in my head, like Catholic furniture; certain images come out unconsciously. For example, after I did this yellow painting, ("The Spine of the Book," 2012), I realized how much it looked like a crucifix with little splashes of blood on the bottom of Christ's feet while his whole body is twisted a little. Then I was reminded of Grünwald's "Crucifixion."

Rail: So you're saying it's the power hidden behind or underneath the images that emanates some sort of haunting quality, which demands multiple viewings.

Stephan: Yes. It's interesting because a foundation of the Modernist argument is the idea that the text is open and that the readings of it are co-constructed by the object and the viewer. But what's worth remembering is how new that construction is because it's replacing, at least in France, David and Ingres, who made paintings that are completely authoritative, that were supposed to have one reading and only one reading, for example, David's "Consecration of the Emperor Napoleon I," or Ingres's "Napoleon I on His Imperial Throne." You're not supposed to do what you want with them; you're supposed to stand in front of them, in awe of their perfection. In both of their cases painting had been an instrument of state authority and was designed to tell the viewer that the state was in charge, you're in good hands, everything's okay. With Cézanne, you get something that comes along and says, no, it's all up for grabs, although Manet has started this new pictorial. The bourgeoisie are coming into the world, they're disrupting the dualism of the ruling class and the peasantry and everything is suspect, the roles, the positions in society, the very objects, including the painted objects, are all being reevaluated.

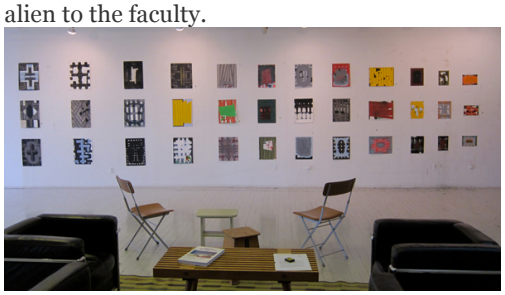
Rail: So you discovered Cézanne while you were discontent as a student of industrial design. You wanted to switch to painting but they didn't allow you, so you dropped out. Why did you move to San Francisco?

Stephan: Completely random. There was an English transfer student in the industrial design department who said, I'm going to go to the San Francisco Art Institute because I'm really interested in

ceramics. So one day I got in a car with another friend and drove across country, got out at the Art Institute, and signed up for a transfer class. Next, I moved into a tiny room in a hotel for a dollar a day. I realized that I could do 4 by 8 foot paintings on Masonite, which could be stacked up right next to the bed, as long as I didn't attach any supports in the back. I could stack like 15 paintings. It took up no room. I started driving a truck for the Salvation Army and washed all the bathrooms at my hotel to pay the rent and the tuition. Anyway, at some point I said to them, "you've really got to look at this work I've been doing," and they looked at it and they said, "okay we'll take you in our graduate school." So I never got the undergraduate degree, but I have my master's.

Rail: What was graduate school like?

Stephan: To tell you the truth, once I moved out of that little hotel into a Victorian house where we shared a whole floor—it was John Duff, Randy Hardy, and Michael Tetherow, all of whom moved to New York as soon as we graduated—my peers became my support system. Not so much the faculty members who would say, "Why don't you find it in the paint?" which was their answer to everything. I had drawings and particular ideas from which I wanted to make paintings. This way of working was alien to the faculty.



Rail: So there was still a strong residue from the Abstract Expressionist School of thinking, from the Clyfford Still School to be specific.
Stephan: Yes. It was strongly and wonderfully incarnated in Frank Lobdell, who was one of the teachers. But another teacher said to me, "we're not really getting along very well." I said, "no we're not." He said, "why don't you just go home and paint? Bring your work in when you're supposed to for the group critique and we'll be done here." And I said, "fine." So the people that really helped me were my peers, who I still see with the exception of Michael who passed away.

Rail: When I first met you, in fact it was in this studio with David Humphrey, in 1998. I remember these predominantly gray paintings of quasi-cartographic forms hovered unpredictably across the surface. In 2002 or '03, those forms begin to break down slowly to make room for more frontal depictions of rectilinear forms, less of the biomorphic repertoire that was very present in the early work. In other words, there was a change that gradually eliminated the previous embrace of atmosphere or spatial illusion. Is that a fair observation?

Stephan: I would say that a lot of things moved incrementally, almost imperceptibly. In his book *Guns, Germs, and Steel*: *The Fates of Human Societies*(1997), Jared Diamond says that if you read Marco Polo's writing, he doesn't talk about different races of people—but Columbus does. And he says the difference is that Marco Polo was moving by land, where people and their cultures changed, but very incrementally. Maybe some people were a little different here, and then some people that were a little more familiar, there's just somewhat fewer of those. So by the time he got to China, he's like well, whatever. The change wasn't at all shocking. Whereas Columbus got on a boat in Spain, got off the boat at San Salvador and thought, who are these people? There were no transitional bits to his journey. Mine is more like Marco Polo's case.

Rail: But it'd be fair to say that the form and structure became more frontal, aggressive, and certainly more painterly. A lot more repainting, in some over-paint that was still wet, which created a different sense of light, and perhaps a new kind of atmosphere.

Stephan: Yes. I'll tell you what the bind has always been for me. I think that the reason Cézanne was so interested in trying to get things to sit correctly in space is because he wasn't very good at it. The problematics of my position is that it doesn't work well. Serving the two masters of the flat object and fictive space, which I accept as the fundamental question about the nature of objects and images.

Rail: And how they related to each other in between space or surrounding space.

Stephan: Yes, but with a certain emotional tonality to the painting as a whole, not just spatially formal. I feel deeply that it's possible to make some pretty emotionally inert formal objects.

Rail: That's what Cézanne criticized about Impressionist paintings: in their attempt to attain light and atmosphere through color, the form begins to dissolve. Cézanne wanted that solidness of Old Masters paintings.

Stephan: Exactly. And I want that, too.

Rail: Do your images themselves generate from some familiar object in everyday life?

Stephan: Not usually. It really is more of a high-wire act than that. I mean, I put down a set of conditions, like on some occasions I make preparatory drawings for the paintings.

Rail: Tom Nozkowski does the reverse—he makes drawings after paintings.

Stephan: I know that's probably our biggest difference. I lean much more on process. There are more facts; you can literally almost peel apart the layers of the process. Whereas his are painted the way you paint a picture. You paint it until the image comes together. It's difficult to unpack Tom's paintings. I guess if you really wanted to excavate them aggressively, you could see the complex layers, which is what makes his painting very compelling.

Rail: The opposite of Tom would be Jonathan Lasker. And they admire each other's work.

Stephan: Of course. Everything that appears in his paintings is completely process-oriented, very legible. You could say that I'm in the middle of Tom and Jonathan. I wanted my paintings to be personal and mysterious, but I also wanted legibility.

Rail: As you said earlier, you always want to be the middle.

Stephan: I do. The real pleasure is bumping up procedural things that are clearly against interventions. In the yellow painting, for example, the bands really do cross each other. Those are material facts. But all of the blacks that appear on it are all painting inventions or false coverings. In other words, I didn't paint the whole black area and then paint the yellow; this allows me movement back and forth between facts and fictions. The adjustment of pictorial ideas and material ideas, in a kind of contaminated way where there's no purity of the argument, is what I have always been interested in pursuing.

Rail: Would you say that within the last year or so the relationship between horizontal and vertical forms, which work with or against the grids while infusing them with all sorts of idiosyncratic, hybridized, rectilinear, and biomorphic configurations, became more dominant?

Stephan: That's right.

Rail: How would you describe this development?

Stephan: Like everything else I want in the middle, I'm looking for, ideally, a class of forms that is neither comfortably over here as the geometry of the architectural world, nor over here in the world of plants and animals. Something that moves back and forth with the argument.

Rail: And in order to do that you have to maintain the image centrally. Perhaps on a few occasions images in your paintings deviate from the center, but I'd say most of the time they're very centralized. It's the only way to build a strong structure, like a building.

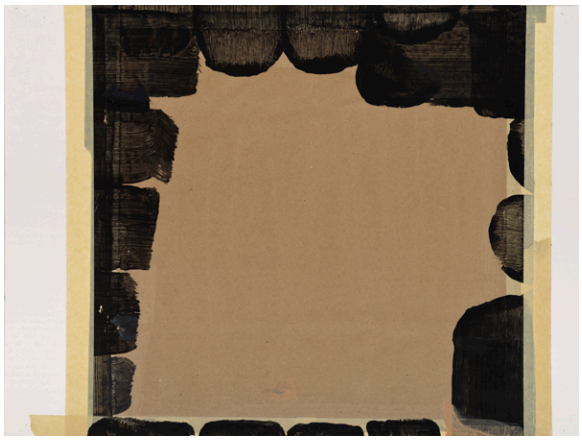
Stephan: Absolutely. At this moment in history, I think that architects are the lead artists. Which is not a bad thing. It's just how things move through creative impulse in our culture, just like there was a time, when I first got to New York, when everyone agreed the dancers were the lead artists. All of us, painters or sculptors, would go to their performances because we could actually learn how to think by watching them dance. Architects, having been cornered or boxed in, metaphorically and literally, by the international school for so long, were eventually able to riddle around that box. People like Peter Eisenman and his peers started coming up with these crazy theories on how you could break the box. And they have broken the box and given themselves a new architectural space to work in. That said to me, as a painter, there still is a place to start with something that combines both constraints and the freedom simultaneously.

Rail: That's why I would consider both Morandi and Giacometti the two closest successors of Cézanne.

Stephan: Both spatially and emotionally.

Rail: Yes, the former represents the monastic or religious aspect of Cézanne, while the latter is consumed with existential angst.

Stephan: When I first heard about existentialism and phenomenology, I thought "Ah! This is just fantastic!" They made so much sense because they let you talk about the world in such a powerful way, but they didn't have for me the burden of the hierarchy of my Christian upbringing and I thought, this is the way out.



Rail: Yes. And you wouldn't have Cézanne the still life, landscape, and portrait painter without Cézanne who painted from his imagination full of destructive and violent themes like rape and murder. This is one of the reasons why people have a hard time re-identifying the notion of the sublime in his work, because it's often blurred between religion and nature.

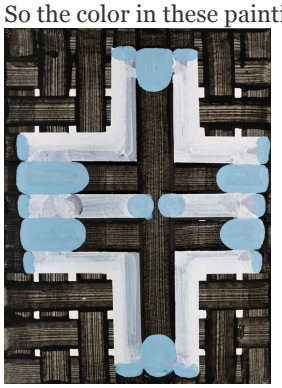
Stephan: Well, everything I know about the sublime I learned from my wife Suzanne Joelson who taught a class called "Grappling Toward the Sublime." What she said, in a nutshell, was that the sublime in art brackets terror in such a way that we can negotiate it. There is a difference between standing on a cliff overlooking the sea and viewing Caspar David Friedrich's "Wanderer above the Mists."

Rail: It's very *schwarmerei.*

Stephan: Yes, it is. There's very little industry in Cézanne but every now and then we see an aqueduct, a smoke stack from a new factory, or something.

Rail: We all know that Cézanne detested technology, any form of commerce, industry, and so on. In fact, he was very upset when the beautiful site of landscape he had lovingly painted was destroyed in order to build a new soap factory. In your painting you allow both architectural forms (perhaps culled from your city life) and organic forms (perhaps extracted from your country life) to co-exist. How do you see those two differences informing your work?

Stephan: Well, the very idea of the sublime and the very idea of painting nature as a subject is a function of civilization having basically subdued nature. You don't get nature as a subject when it's scaring the hell out of everyone. When everyone's fighting off the bugs and bears everyday, they don't think, "Oh, isn't this so delightful to contemplate?" There is no contemplation because it's a nightmare. As somebody said, "It's a nasty bit of ingredients." The truth is that the landscape Cézanne lived in is the fruits of man being on that land for a thousand years and shaping it, cutting woods down, and building towns. I'm sure that when Constable saw the watermill he was very excited, enough to paint it more than a few times. I just think that there are people who hate change, and those who love it. When you talked about those gray paintings, you know how I would know when I was doing them correctly? I would turn around, literally, and look out the window. If the palette out there was roughly the palette in here, I was okay. In some sense I'd kept faith with the way the world looks because even though that's the built world, the colors of the bricks or stones are essentially minerals that have been reformed. A lot of the color out there is the color of nature systematized, if you will. I've given myself, in the last year or so, permission, for no good reason, to no longer conform to any particular constraint. So the color in these paintings is now allowed to get unnatural. I just think it's okay now.



Rail: And your use of the grid was never a grid! It's very subtle.

Stephan: In the last few years, what I've done, which thrills me, is return to the structure that affirms the object as a way to cue the viewer, let the viewer know that we are now going to rupture it. I recently said to a studio assistant of mine, you know the problem with abstraction is, if I paint a hand, and I paint it without a thumb, everyone knows because they have expectations about hands. But, if you paint a piece of geometry and you take part of it off, nobody cares because they have no expectations. What I needed to do with these was set up something that had expectations so that then when you violated the expectations you had something that people

could compare it to.

Rail: That again goes back to the idea of accepting the reality of the canvas being flat but not being pleased that form is being flatly painted. Am I right?

Stephan: That's absolutely right.

Rail: So, does that refer to the differences between those who are world-builders and those who are object-makers? Those are words you've used to describe the struggle of artists of your generation—I mean presence and object-hood.

Stephan: The object-makers are people who treat the canvas as though it were, which it is, a thing in the world. It has real qualities. They don't so much surrender to the real qualities but rather let all their activity flow from that understanding, that it's a real thing in the world. Then there are other people who see painting—in the most extreme case would be someone like Edwin Frederic Church or even more extreme would be Thomas Cole—as a window into a world. They are world-builders. But somewhere between the world-builders and the object-makers lies the unsavory problematics of the object because the more you make the object, the less you make the world. The more you make the world, the less you make the object.

Rail: Like Albert Pinkham Ryder?

Stephan: Ryder is a fantastic example of somebody trying to solve the impossible puzzle of making this thing completely satisfying as an object and also completely satisfying as a view into a world. It's extraordinary. As Pollock says, "The only American master who interests me is Ryder," which makes perfect sense because Pollock is wrestling with that same kind of fundamental problem, which is that you want to conduct this thing with integrity as a thing of the world and you also want to make a fiction that opens up and has internal movement.

Rail: And Ryder painted small canvases in order to achieve monumental scale. Pollock did the opposite: he employed monumental size in order to get the intimate scale.

Stephan: That's true. It's unfortunate that people use those terms as though they were interchangeable, like "Oh, he works small-scale." You mean he works small-size. Scale is a notion about the relationship of the mind to the object. In other words, when you go up to a tree it has a presence. But you don't say to yourself, "What's it about?" You just say, "What is it?" Let's say you and I go to a comedy club and you don't find the comic funny, we're done. Because experientially, that's it. There is no argument to another level of knowing. You can't say to me "Well, tell me, how is it funny?" or "we'll try it again."

Rail: That only applies to Americans, not foreigners, especially when they haven't lived in the country very long.

Stephan: Oh, how is that so?

Rail: Very simple. Humor can be both universal and local. And it's the local humor that's hard to get.

Stephan: What do you mean?

Rail: I can tell you one example that took me a whole month to understand when I first came to New York. "What are the names of Puerto Rican fireman's twins?"

Stephan: What?

Rail: Hose A and Hose B. [*Both laugh.*] Your new show includes nearly 100 paintings on paper. What prompted you to arrange 39 paintings on three horizontal rows, moving from largest to smallest on 13 vertical columns, on one big wall?

Stephan: It started out about two and a half years ago when I was the visiting artist at the Vermont Studio Center. I was there only a week so I brought a little bottle of acrylic, one brush, and one pad, and thought, "Well, we'll see what happens." Then this whole group started. Within the first couple of days I thought, "Oh my God, these are very good." That was the first time I've done something for a

while that I thought was quite good. So I went back to our country home and continued to make more paintings on paper, which I kept running out of, so I went over to Suzanne's studio and asked her if she had any more. She gave me another pad, but it was a different size. And it kept happening with various sizes as time went on, so then I started thinking, well, if I installed them by sizes, I could go down the wall, say starting at the upper right and moving back down to the little ones and I can start the next row with the big one there and go back the other way and it would zigzag down the wall. And I thought, "That would be interesting but a little gamey, a little pointless." Then I remembered meeting Philip Johnson when I showed at his partner David Whitney's gallery. I became the custodian of the Glass House when they travelled, so I lived up there quite regularly. Philip designed a boathouse down by the pond at three-quarter scale to give false perspective and create a bigger property than he had. I always liked that idea. It occurred to me, because of the space that Dan Devening has, that I could recreate that very illusion if I ran them down little, little, littler because the doors at the end were where the big work would be. Then, at the very end, I'd have even tinier photographs that I'd taken. You could say, "Well, that's all very amusing but why bother?" The purpose was to see if I could, in visual terms, make clear to the viewer that visuality is the subject without resorting to language.

Rail: It would, in fact, encourage viewers to look at the work more closely for sure.

Stephan: What I'm hoping is that when they see it, they recognize the very essence of it is what can be known in appearance. That is, what can be revealed requires careful and thoughtful viewing.