BAERT GALLERY

REUBEN GORDON TEMPERATURE

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IN CONVERSATION WITH ANDEE BERBERICH

Reuben Gordon is a painter and writer working and living in New York City. I visited his studio on an unseasonably warm fall afternoon before his forthcoming solo exhibition at Baert Gallery. We talked about abstraction, New York, longing, color, and a myriad of other things.

AB: Color is an undeniable experience of your work. It holds primacy. When I approach your canvas, it's the first thing that I see. You have referenced color as a structure. What is the structure of color?

RG: The structure of color is temperature: warm and cool, hot and cold. It creates movement that interacts with the eye. It has a very visual, almost hedonistic quality of beauty and it's something you can't entirely put into words. In my work, color also functions as light. The light source in my paintings is often derived from the flash of my camera, and I don't want to make that too obvious. When you're learning to paint from the figure, you're taught to paint the light. A form is described through the division between its illuminated and shadowed sides. It doesn't matter whether you're painting a roll of paper towels or someone's arm; you're painting light. But when I'm depicting a figurative scene from a photograph, light doesn't function in quite the same way. So, I use color instead. It also gives me the power to completely change what's happening. It becomes a dream. Color is the engine of my composition.

AB: How does your understanding of color as structure differ from Color Field painting? Looking at *Music*, especially compared to another painting like Infirmary, I see something that resembles a Color Field painting. Is the presence of figures what distinguishes it?

RG: For one thing, its size and there's examples to counter this, but Color Field paintings are big. I went to the Frankenthaler show at Gagosian in the Spring. Those paintings were huge. It really has to be big enough so that it goes past your eye. Barnett Newman wrote something like 'you shouldn't see the edges' so the painting encompasses your entire field of vision. But with color being structure, I use color to divide the space as I'm figuring out the plane of the painting. In that sense it's a tool.

AB: Maybe you get this question too often, but do the colors have interpretive meanings? Are you associating certain colors to emotions?

RG: I do associate color and emotion, but it's not one to one. I want the colors to be strong and often warm and hot. That's how I feel about my work. I'm drawn to emotionality, and I think color can convey that. Ultimately, it's about the visual emotional experience of seeing the painting.

AB: I'm noticing how square *Music* is. The canvas and the painting. Can you describe the difference in the process of creating *Music* versus *Infirmary*? It's much more formed and geometric, whereas *Infirmary*, especially around the edges is more abstract and loose.

RG: I've worked in a horizontal format for most of my career, and I wanted to switch things up. I think it's good not to get stuck. Painting vertically is more of a pain in the ass. But I'm also interested in how the new format changes the shapes within the painting. The squareness and tighter quality of *Music* are partly because I'm still figuring out its structure and composition. The brushwork is more squared off, but that may change, its unfinished. I also think about Hans Hoffman and his works at the end there were a lot of squares and squares on squares. So I'm asking myself, what would be a Hans Hofmann painting that also has figures?

AB: In your writing you name Rufino Tamayo, Helen Frankenthaler, Joan Mitchell, Hans Hoffman, and Chaïm Soutine as points of inspiration or reference, where does your work live in that history? How does it respond to it?

RG: I think I come out of a period of angry painters who felt that everything after the end of modernism and the beginning of postmodernism was shit. I don't think that way, but that was an attitude. So, my influences skip a generation. I'm influenced by painters who were disillusioned with what was happening in their own time and looked to the past. I don't know how it fits into art history. I don't think I decide that.

AB: Jane Freilicher worked alongside the Abstract Expressionists of the 50's and even though she trained with Hans Hoffman she worked almost her whole life as a representational painter. I see parallels in your practice, including your formation of New York City as a character.

RG: You've mentioned her, the still life painter, right?

AB: Yes, and I recognized something in Freilicher's paintings that I named as a kind of longing for New York City. She often painted still lives of flowers in front of a window, with New York City visible in the background. So even though she was in New York, there was still this sense of longing for the city. A distance, an unknowable gap.

I think there might be something similar in your paintings, although you might disagree. There's a sense of longing for a New York that once was, maybe. And again, this is just my interpretation, but you reference so many artists from mid-century New York City, and it feels like you're occupying a space that no longer exists. At the same time, we are here, and we're making art in New York City, so we're occupying our own version of that history. There's something about that tension, or intimacy, with the city as it exists now that I'm trying to understand.

RG: Yeah, it's funny. Everyone says that, but I think that we're living it. I mean, what you and I are doing right now doesn't feel like a fantasy of the past, where the Abstract Expressionist painters were hanging out and getting into drunk arguments. I do that with my friends, so I don't think that it's nostalgic.

I think the art world is still like that, at least in my experience. Even just being in class and talking about art, that's still happening. The city has just gotten extremely expensive but Joan Didion said that in the '70s, too. So, it's always been like that. In the '50s, during the Abstract Expressionist romantic period, it was cheap. You could have a huge loft with no money. So yeah, it can be tough to be romantic when shit is so expensive.

AB: But you're not longing for anything? Your paintings are entirely present?

RG: I don't know. What do you think I'm longing for in the work?

AB: I'm not sure, maybe I am longing for what I see in your paintings.

RG: I'm definitely longing. When I'm painting, I'm alone. The harder I'm working, the more alone I am.

AB: You often paint from photographs, right? So, you have to go outside to get the material, that inspiration.

RG: Yeah, I think this process of painting from my own photographs is a way to force myself to do interesting things. If I want to paint something interesting, I have to do it.

AB: If I left the studio and you started painting right now could you give me a verbal glimpse of what might happen if you painted a scene of New York from memory?

RG: It's a great question. I can't answer it really yet. Maybe I'll answer it by painting. Part of me thinks like I should have been doing that for a long time, and maybe I would get shit done much faster too. But there's something about the photographs that I like. If I got rid of that and it were just my memory, I don't know what would happen.

I do want to paint from the model more. Figure drawing should be part of a painter's routine, but there's also something special about the human interaction. You're physically with someone rather than staring at a photograph by yourself. Alice Neel is an influence of mine, and she did that incredibly well.

AB: Can I look through this ["Alice Neel: I am the Century"] as we talk?

RG: Yeah.

AB: I've seen this one before and I've always loved it. He [Frank O'Hara] looks so horrible.

RG: Yeah, he does. But he looks cool. He has character.

AB: I bet he loved it.

RG: Yeah, I wonder. That's another thing that comes up is like when you're painting someone, sometimes they'll not like how they look in the painting.

AB: Is that your problem though?

RG: No, but it would be.

AB: I think it's flattering to be painted.

RG: Yeah, I guess it is. But I do feel bad if I make someone feel bad by how I painted them. With Alice Neel she painted all sorts of people, but she tended to paint interesting people, people who were psychologically suffering in some way, or she painted people who were you know, neurotic, and you can see in some of her paintings, it's like other ones are just cool people, but a lot of them are like people who are kind of encountering the existential.

AB: What do you consider to be the language of abstraction, and how or when is it present in your process?

RG: It's the foundation of the same language as figurative representational painting, stripped of symbolism, narrative and religious meaning, so forth. It's the base. I can look at, say the *Book of Hours*, medieval manuscript and see the color and composition before anything else. And I want my work to succeed or not as an abstract painting, regardless of how obvious the figures are. I look at paintings through the language of abstraction. I was looking at a painting with a friend of mine, an upside down cityscape, and I was talking about it for a few minutes, and I didn't even realize. My friend needed to tell me that that was what it was.

AB: Do you look at your work through the language of abstraction as well. Because you know what you're painting, you see the photograph, and other people don't get to see that.

RG: Yeah, exactly. What I'm depicting is secondary. For the viewer, I generally expect the subject not to be secondary, but I want their experience to become closer to mine. I wouldn't want someone to think I paint like people at bars or bridges. Maybe that's what people think. But the reason for instance that I was painting the Williamsburg Bridge was that it was a formal challenge. It had this really interesting geometry that I knew would be difficult and would relate to an Al Held kind of painting.

AB: There's a tension that your paintings hold. There's crisp detail met with fantastical color, and a blurring of boundaries. You are both commanding of what you're painting but then explore the boundaries into like abstraction. Where did that approach come from?

RG: I can never figure draw too much. It's like going to the gym for an artist. It could be humbling looking at other people's figure drawings, and I saw that they were better. It struck me because I thought of myself as like a really good artist. It gave me a reason to keep going and the feeling that I had work to do. Then, I realized, through getting the right feedback from the right people at the right time, that there was something to the way I was drawing that could be more interesting than that kind of drawing that I thought was better than mine. It's about character. It's mysterious. It has to do with character as opposed to perfection.

AB: But why do you return to representational painting rather than staying with abstraction?

RG: The longing comes out in the figurative more. It's there in abstract painting, some abstract painting is like all longing. But I think that the particular kind of longing that I have right now makes me need to paint figurative. I sort of see myself as if I'm an abstract painter.

AB: Do you experiment outside of painting?

RG: Photography is a part of my practice. And writing is a thing I do aside from painting, even though it's part of it.

AB: The compositions remind me a little bit of theater and old movies, there's elements of cinematography and choreography. I know that it was based on a photo, but you took that photo and you created that scene, even if you didn't like quite literally set the people up you waited for that moment. And maybe as I've like pulled out a little bit, the experience of the viewer with your paintings is knowing that room, being in that room, and the feeling they had. Do you ever consider, theater, or cinematography, or even storytelling a part of your process.

RG: Cinematography is definitely an influence. I love Italian Neorealism and French New Wave, anything from the 60s: Fellini, Antonioni and Godard. The visuals are striking. I think that the theatrical influence is an unpulled string of my work that I'm interested in developing. The history of theater and the devices that for instance Picasso used in his paintings were characters of theater, like the Saltimbanques and jesters. I'm not sure we have those universal cultural references.

AB: Or we have too many to keep track.

AB: I keep returning to *Music*, probably because its right in front of me, but I'm just curious as how much of like the color field-ness, the abstraction, are you go-

ing to leave, or is the deck going to be rendered into wood? Are you leaving that lightning strip? What's left?

RG: In my mind, the whole thing is unfinished. That's how it stays until the very end. It has to stay open. That's another thing that I learned from figure drawing, if you're trying to paint like a full figure or a full scene, and you fall in love with the feet. You've painted perfect feet, but now they're too big. You have to do the whole thing at once, and it's part of the challenge.

AB: I'm very moved by the colors and the shapes as they are now. But then I'm also excited to see where you take it.

RG: I need to get it done. It's gonna be an adventure getting it out of this fucking room, and across the country.

AB: Other people spend a lot of time trying to grapple with abstraction, but it seems like you're more challenged by figuration. Do you think by being raised by two abstract painters, is there an inherent knowledge of abstract painting?

RG: Their studio was our apartment, and so I was watching them paint as I was doing my homework. I do wonder how that you know affected me. I also think that I didn't need to discover abstract painting. For a lot of people, they know about representational painting first, and then abstract painting comes later, and it's a question when they encounter it. Either they react to it one way or another, but for me it was always there, and it forms how I look at painting.

So many of my teachers, including my parents, but also my teachers in school at all levels, were abstract painters. One of my figure drawing teachers was Pat Lipsky, who is a Color Field abstract painter, and she was teaching figure drawing. Some of those folks they had years of training with the figure, and then they started doing abstraction. I'm painting the figure from a historical background of abstract painters, even if it's in a figure drawing class. It has to affect the way I work.

AB: I think that goes with the tension that I see, where there's parts of it that are very rendered, the detail maybe of an eye, but then your ability to like loosely select color that looks good together or create a corner of abstraction. It's like paintings within the paintings.

RG: I'm caught up in the particular challenge of figurative painting. It's a technical challenge, and abstraction is an intellectual challenge. Abstract painters have come up with all sorts of philosophy about their work, you know, and I'm interested in both. I feel a sense of allegiance to abstraction. As a New Yorker and obviously, my parents are abstract painters. And it's the kind of painting that I like the most when I'm walking through a museum, but I think that figurative painting has like a lot of untapped potential in terms of theatrics and storytelling. That's why I've always been working on bringing them together and trying to make work that is both even though it is at odds.

- Andee Berberich
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