

Warning: Use of undefined constant SCRIPT_FILENAME - assumed 'SCRIPT_FILENAME' (this will throw an Error in a future version of PHP) in /home/kohnwo5/public_html/includes/navigation_top.html on line 1



[Home](#) [Portfolio](#) [Work with Genomics](#) [In the Media](#) [Audio-Video](#) [About the Artist](#) [Contact/Representation](#)

Conversation in the studio

We had been talking in Daniel Kohn's studio for some time when he pulled out a black notebook, leafed through it, and read aloud: *Painting is a place. The tension between the painting's actual surface and its metaphoric space creates a conflagration out of which meaning is born - or at least the potential for meaning. That is the specific place of painting.*

Daniel looks up at me wondering if I'm following his train of thought, and continues.

At least in the Western tradition, it is a place where the convention of the window through which one looks and the object on which the image is painted collaborate in a particular way which sets painting apart from other media. Form is both material and a locus for projection. Form speaks in silence, both to the mind and the body.

All around us, paintings hang or lean in stacks, against the wall or in one of several storage areas. They are in all stages of completion and Daniel has explained that he never works on a single piece but always on a series. The paintings come out of common concerns, and give answers for each others resolution.

Perhaps because of my pluri-cultural background, it is hard for me to make something that comes about on its own. The same thing is true of my polptychs, each panel gives additional information which complements its companions. One part may seem completely abstract, but the other will anchor it in a figurative dimension. It seems to me that in that way the sum is greater than its parts.

As he speaks I look at these images, mostly scenes from a house in the center of France which his family bought in 1975 and which he says has become his adopted place of origin.

The current series comes out of his wish to see how painted images can reflect the place where they come from and the places they evoke. Some of them were begun in France and brought to New York where they were completed (Kitchen 1, Breakfast Lunch and Dinner, Thierry at the Table), while others arise from a reconstruction of the place from his studio in New York (Interior 1 in New York1, Nuje at the Table, Interior 2 in New York). These latter pieces are free of the descriptive aspect of the others in favor of their perceptual or physical impact.

I am both French and American (from the US) and for me it is obvious that what we think of as aesthetics are tightly linked to our cultural history. Not simply that I am from this or that place, but how my personal choices and history allow me to put forth particular forms, colors, rhythms and ideas in which I recognize myself. In my own case this is emphasized by a pendulum between figuration (description of the experience of seeing) and abstraction (predominance of the act of painting). American art which has marked me (Rothko, Franz Kline, Joan Mitchell, Richard Serra...) is predominantly involved with how the image (or the object in Serras case) speaks to you through your body. The Europeans on the other hand (Giacometti, Morandi...) are desperately trying to account for this experience of reconciling painting with what is there before you.

Though it may seem shocking to you, I believe that one cannot paint in Europe without acknowledging history (the naming of things), while the United States is marked for me by a historical break, in which time (the mind) becomes movement (the body).

Of course what makes art great is that it can transcend these specific concern by making them material. Art embodies (gives body to) a particular world view, giving concrete existence to what is otherwise a complex, ever changing movement. It allows us to look at it, feel it, dream through it, love it, hate it, but at last to see oneself, ones own particular place through it.

The paintings I see on the walls around us seem to span this gap - between the mind and the body, between Europe and the United States - moving from relatively descriptive evocations of this house, to large and colorful paintings whose force comes from the mass of color and the way it presses up against a drawn form. Looking at these images I feel myself carried or floated around the room, except that instead of me moving through the room, it is moving around me. The objects become increasingly personified even as they loose their descriptive quality. It seems that both the room and the objects within are dancing a slow and mysterious dance, not so much referring to a place as reinventing it. They are this place. And by looking and dreaming into them we give it life.

Daniel interrupts my train of thought:

The painter places himself or herself on this trajectory between past and future from which he or she sees the world. But his vision in this case, his

present, is the act of painting itself. The painting is not a reflection of his thought, it is the thought itself.

A shadow envelops the room as clouds pass overhead. In the deep silence around us, the spirit of this place keeps spinning its dance, in, out, and through those inert objects of paint, canvas, and wood.

Albert Mark
New York,
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