Numéro 19 • Winter 2020 • 23 €

Frog, November 2020

Frog

Sylvie Fleury
photographed for Frog
by Flavio Karrer

“Because frogs swallow their prey whole,
their digestive juices have to be potent.
You’re dealing with a chemical and acidic
environment that is built to pull things apart
and break them down.”
Katherine J. Wu, “There Are Two Ways Out of a Frog.”,
The New York Times, Aug. 3, 2020

Sean Landers

Interview by Éric Troncy, portrait by Vincent Arbelet

You moved to New York in 1986; what were you doing before that?

I was at art school, first at Philadelphia College of Art (PCA) and then at Yale University School of Art. Before that, I had a background in oil painting from my mother and grandmother, who were small town painting teachers, meaning they usually taught older women and kids how to paint. So I was forced to paint as a little kid, as all my brothers and sisters were. At that time, I probably would have rather been playing, building a fort or something like that. I was not too passionate about oil painting when I was young; it was just something I was made to do. However, once I settled down and got involved in it, it was usually pretty fun. Sometimes I got to choose my subjects, other times I had to paint, you know, geraniums.

—And you did not particularly enjoy painting geraniums.

I didn't. Boring subject and I remember that I found it a little frustrating to use a brush because at that time I liked to draw with a pencil, and with a brush I couldn't be as controlled as I felt with a pencil. So I remember always feeling that frustration with the floppiness of a brush, but it might have been that they just didn't have good brushes.

If I may digress a little bit about my childhood; my dad wanted me to play sports. I played American football, I played baseball, I played hockey. My football team practiced on a field that was next to my grandmother's house, where her painting studio was on the top floor. She and I had a deal. I didn't like to go to football practice, so if I skipped it, she allowed me to come to her studio but only if I painted with her. It was our secret and it became my refuge away from what I didn't like about playing football. I'd be sitting there with my shoulder pads on and painting whatever I wanted until it was time to get picked up by my parents to go home. Also significant, she was Protestant and my dad was Catholic, I was raised as a Catholic. Whenever the rules of Catholicism got too heavy she was the person I would turn to. Like, "Grandma, if I do this or that am I really going to go to Hell?" and she'd say "No, of course not, don't worry." So she was both an escape from organized sports and religion. I really appreciated that about her.

I chose PCA for art school because they gave me the best financial deal. I'm from a large family and a lot of my sisters and brothers were in college at the same time. So resources were scarce and I had to go to the school that gave me the most amount of money, I didn't have much of a choice. When I first arrived there, I didn't know whether I would major in commercial art or what. I was there for one semester and realized none of those things interested me at all. I wanted to be a fine artist, however with that decision came all of these panic attacks and self-interrogations, like "am I ever going to make money, do I want to throw my life away like this?" Because at that time there was little possibility of making money as an artist in the late 1970s and early 1980s, you wouldn't even consider it. But I ignored the fears and I majored in sculpture and as soon as I got going it was like a light turned on within me. I made lots of works during my four years there. I made enough

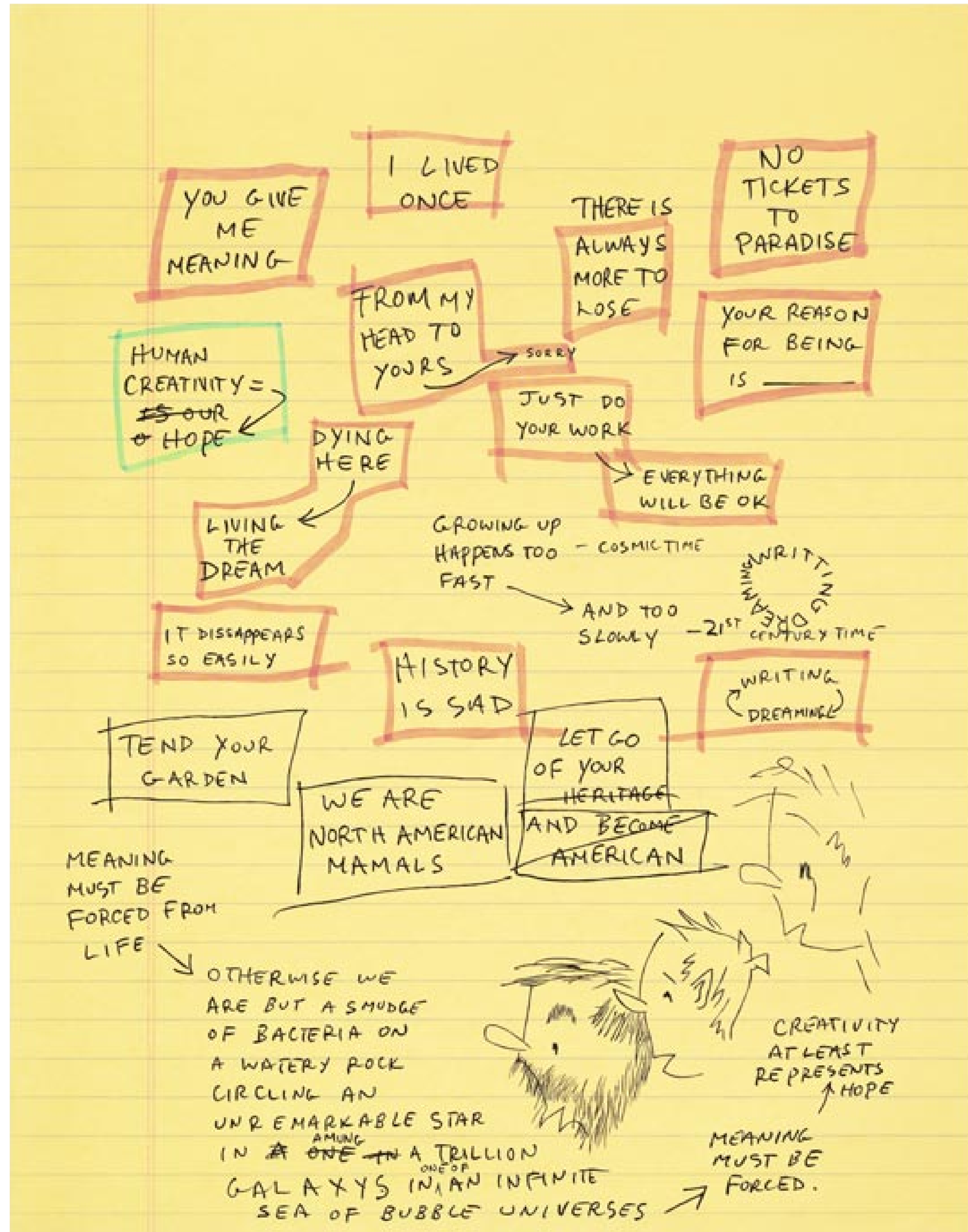
works and strong enough works that I got into Yale, which was a hard school to get into.
Getting into Yale was important for my confidence. Before then, I didn't know whether or not I would be taken seriously, or how the world perceived me, but getting into that school really helped me believe in myself. Once I began there I really went full tilt and made a lot of work. I stumbled upon the beginnings of what would evolve into some of the work that is downstairs (in the exhibition at the Consortium Museum), particularly in the painting *Patches* (1993). In my studio there I would make these giant sculptures of fighting animals, that would often fill the whole space. I used my walls to paint, to cartoon, and to write stream-of-consciousness sometimes, or to write funny vignettes. It didn't much look like the painting *Patches*, it looked much more kind of manic and sloppy. There was no rhyme or reason to it, it looked more like what an AbEx painting was, lots of splashed paint mixed in with cartoons of people, dogs, and other animals, next to funny thoughts that I had jotted down. It became a goal to completely fill the walls up. It wasn't about making a picture, but something that was more of an interior mindscape I guess.

— Did you have very influential teachers? People you can now look back at and say, "they were very important to me." Who were your fellow students?

I had great teachers. My favorites were those who could be trusted friends who were really encouraging. That's a big part of teaching: just being there to support, because you need that as a student. When you decide to become an artist you are kind of walking a plank. It's a real leap of faith in yourself. Young artists first and foremost need encouragement. I had several wonderful people who did that for me. Very early on, the first one who inspired me to become a sculptor was the sculptor Tom Butter. I met him at Philadelphia Collage of Art. And there was another teacher there at PCA, Thomas Stearns. They were both very instrumental in pushing me, in making me feel like I wasn't crazy to keep going.
At Yale, all my teachers were encouraging and valuable but there were two teachers in particular, Ursula von Rydingsvard and Judy Pfaff, that were really supportive. I just had dinner with them actually, about a week and a half ago. It was a great reunion.
The teacher that probably had the biggest impact on me at Yale, was Vito Acconci who was a visiting faculty. I was making these giant painting/drawings on my walls that I described earlier which had sort of a connection with his early works. And the sculptural work I was making for my thesis show during the time when he was visiting were giant polyester resin skateboard ramp sculptures that you could skate on. He really liked that, from the perspective of, you know, who Vito became later in his career, the architect.
Fellow students in the sculpture department were Jessica Stockholder, Ann Hamilton, Peter Boynton, Jack Risley, and Maya Lin was around a lot too. In the painting department were Richard Phillips, John Currin, Lisa Yuskavage, Carl Ostendarp and Matvey Levenstein. I met them all right away. Lisa sought me out first, she was like, "who is the other Philly guy in the program?" I'm not a bona fide Philly guy; I am a Massachusetts guy, which is very different in the States. But I had spent four years in Philadelphia in college. Probably the next person that I met was John, we met in a graduate student bar, he was trying to make fun of sculptors, saying things like "you make things that people trip over when they're backing up to look at a painting." We did back and forth jabs for a little bit to break the ice, and we quickly became friendly. Richard and I didn't meet until a little bit later, but when we met, we became pretty close friends. We hung out a lot together. His paintings were kind of like sculptures at the time, so he felt better in my program. And conversely, I felt like I was missing out on something by not being part of the painting dialogue, so I used to regularly attend painting critiques. I had never lost interest in painting since childhood and I didn't feel comfortable being too far away from it. I took painting courses at Philadelphia College of Art, as well. I had never stopped painting, but it wasn't the focus of my life for those years. Richard liked to skateboard too so we both used to skate on my sculptures. When it came time to move to New York, Richard and I took it upon ourselves to find a studio building where other artists could join us. And that became the beginning of our New York nucleus. That was in 1986.

—It was a rather good time to move to the East Village.

Yes, the East Village was still on. The galleries were still putting on shows regularly. They had not moved to SoHo yet. We were located on Ludlow and Stanton, it was the Lower East Side, just south of Houston, right below East Village, where the art scene was. Richard and I rented two lofts in this building and we divided them in half. Sharing my loft with me were Peter Boynton and Maya Lin, and sharing with Richard in his loft was Jack Risley. Because we had this thing going on, this studio hub, we all had a place to go after our day jobs to make our artwork. That kept our community going and we all thrived. There was even a little bit of critiquing that happened which was not always a formal thing where a friend dished out thought-provoking wisdom. Most often it was quick and simple — you might try out something new in the studio and a friend walks in and you can tell from the look in their eyes if the new thing is a winner or a loser. It's that fast. But that constant presence of having people around whose opinion you trust is really a wonderful way to start out in New York after so many years of being coddled in art school environment.
In 1988, John Currin moved to a small storefront studio across the street from us. He had stayed on for one year in New Haven after graduation and then spent a year in Hoboken with Lisa Yuskavage and Matvey Levenstein. After visiting us on Ludlow St. he saw the benefit of being around a larger group. It was great to have him added into the mix. Lisa and Matvey continued on in Hoboken for another year or so after that but then they too moved to the East Village, and it was great to have them near as well. Another person who was around in our circle and very much a part of the scene was the painter Carl Ostendarp. His studio was nearby on Orchard St. These were super fertile times, there was always lots of alcohol, painting, sculpting, whatever the medium was. Lots of just hanging out, talking, joking and fostering that productive culture. If somebody made a good new painting, we all knew about it and talked about it. It was motivating to get off your ass and make a better one of your own.
When the studio day was done, we would all go to the same bars and the dialogue would continue there and the circle soon expanded, including the painters Mary Weatherford, John Zinsser, Gail Fitzgerald, the film maker Rebecca Miller, my brother Kevin Landers and several others. This was something we all did for several years. It was quite a good scene. We had people visiting us, like Thomas Solomon, who was one the first people who checked out our group. He looked around, visited many of us and said, "there is something going on here, you all look good, I think you're all going to get shows but it's probably going to happen at different times for each of you so try not to get upset at one or



another when one of you breaks through and the other one is still doing carpentry." And he was right.

—If I remember correctly, 1986 was when the first freelance curators' shows in the East Village happened. Did you have any relationship with Collins & Milazzo, with Christian Leigh, or with Bob Nickas, people who did their first shows around that time?

I knew of all of them but I couldn't catch any of their eyes. I knew I needed to catch their eyes but I couldn't. Tom Solomon was the first person to show interest in me. Bill Arning who was the director of White Columns came over, he showed me soon after. Actually, when I moved to New York, Vito Acconci recommended me to Creative Time, a public art organization. They invited me to do *Art on the Beach*, an annual outdoor summer sculpture exhibition in NYC. I made a big sculpture in Queens on the banks of the East River, and I got a nice picture of it in the *New York Times*.

—In the East Village in 1986 the "fabulous four" (Jeff Koons, Peter Halley, Ashley Bickerton, Meyer Vaisman) exhibitions happened. Do you think you were pursuing the same idea of art as this group of people, just with another medium and other tools? Or was it really different?

It was different in that everyone in my group were close friends and we supported each other but we were all individualistic. With my multi-media background, I in particular felt this way. And to be honest, we were at times competitive, which was awkward sometimes but also kind of essential too.
But about entering the art world at the time of the "Fabulous Four", when they were getting a lot of press and attention, I think my first impulse was to make work that could fit into their world. I did a show with Tom Solomon's Garage in L.A. with that work, and a couple other shows. But it didn't feel right, and I put on the brakes right away because it didn't feel authentically me.
Another thing happened in my personal life then that knocked me into being authentic. I was dating a woman, we were together for three years and we broke up. That put me in a state of mind where I didn't care what I did or how it fit into the art world. I just wanted to write and to only tell the truth. So I picked up a yellow legal pad and I started writing a story about a struggling artist with a main character that was a thinly fictionalized version of myself. I made myself the most pathetic character I could imagine, because it was how I felt and it was the best way to get rid of the loser feelings I was having. I called my character Chris Hamson, named after Knut Hamsun's nameless main character in the novel Hunger. I set him in 1990, on the Lower East Side. Most of these stories were founded on my own experiences, but I didn't have enough shameful and humiliating material. So I mined all of my friends for some of their saddest and funniest stories about aspiring to be an artist and rolled them into this same character. He became sort of a catch-all for young artists moving to the city and struggling to make it. Which is what Hunger was, that character moves to Christiania [now Oslo] to try to make it as a writer, fails miserably and goes kind of insane and hungry. We were all, you know, insane and hungry in one way or another at that time.
That's what became my first book as art—Art, Life and God. It was my first real breakthrough into the art world. It was a huge redirection for me and it really set me apart from the 1980s works of Koons and Bickerton like you were mentioning. It shot off in a new lo-fi direction and I think started something new. It paralleled with what was happening in music with grunge emerging at that time as almost a sort of antidote to the big hair, heavy metal bands of the late 80's. It wouldn't have happened for me without the heartbreak and without me getting disgusted with making work that didn't feel authentically me.
In that early work was the seed of everything I do today. It just never stopped growing. We all have these "Eurekas," no matter what we do in life. This was just one of mine and maybe the most significant one, because it was a major redirection and I am still on that tangent today. It was a small tree and now it's a big tree with lots of branches.

—This group of people was well organized, Mayer Vaisman was sort of organizing everything but there was a real group intention. Did you feel this with the people you were working with, with your friends?

We were, first and foremost, friends and we were each other's trusted first eyes/art audience, so yes in that way. But we were not a school per se. We were not connected by an ideology or common belief structure about what art is or should be. We had no group marketing schemes or ever dreamt of such a thing. I felt somewhat separate from my peers because I was not solely a painter. I could see how one could put a connective line maybe between John, Richard and Lisa because the subject matter of their paintings is primarily women. But that's not me. I only make art about my own being, about me moving through time and space. It never takes a female form or rarely ever does.

—Yes, but the female form is the subject. You were just four figurative painters in an era when people would not necessarily choose this form of expression.

Well, that is true. I actually began sculpting figuratively at Yale, making giant animal sculptures out of 2x4s and then eventually sculpted figuratively with clay in NYC. As I said earlier, things changed for me after that break up, but also significant at that time was the beginning of my close friendship with John Currin.
In 1989, the studio building on Ludlow St. burned down. After that John and I rented a large loft together on Houston Street, between Norfolk and Suffolk Streets, to both live and work in. We worked in neighboring studios there for ten years at that address and another two more years together at another studio on West 14th St. We shared a love for more traditional art forms at a time when, like you say it, was unpopular. John would be painting figuratively and I would be sculpting figuratively. We had countless discussions about art and what we liked and didn't like about 20th century art in particular. We both loved Picabia, Picasso, and Magritte. I think we may have parted ways on Duchamp and 1970s conceptual art if I remember correctly, he wasn't as big of a fan as I. We both believed in the notion of "mastery" but I think he felt that mastery had to be connected to the "hand" and I believed that mastery and hand can be embodied in idea and intention. I think much of, or at least some of, who we both are as artists today was forged in those years together. Not just from conversations but from just hanging out watching the other paint. We both backseat drove on each other's paintings quite a bit.
My writing also had this traditional thing going on too. I probably had as many writing influences as I had art influences, and they were equally as important to me. I mentioned Knut Hamsun already, but I would also include any writer who wrote from the inside of their head, Dostoyevsky for instance. The internal narrative was a new device in novels at the turn of the last century, James Joyce, being another example. Reading those authors inspired me to write my own internal narrative and make it into

my art. There were other "writing instructors" that I had along the way, Henry Miller obviously, if I hadn't read all of his books, I wouldn't have believed in my writing style as much. Another one of my literary influences was Bram Stoker's Dracula. What was interesting about that book was that he had his main character write a first-person narrative describing his visit to Dracula's mansion in a flowery period language, and it's the most entertaining thing when Stoker lapses into that voice. So I used to borrow this form of writing within writing a lot and made it my own with the way I used to write for my fictional character Chris Hamson.

Stoker's character's period voice mixed together well with Catholic terminology, the way it rolls out of the mouth almost as if in prayer, with reverence of Jesus, or God. I would sort of mix those two things together to give Chris Hamson his own writing voice. I had my own authentic writer voice and I had my character's fictional writer's voice, and I was writing them both at the same time.

—But would you say that somehow your intention at that time was to become a writer? Or has writing always been part of what you were doing?

I am first and foremost an artist but I have always felt part writer in my mind. In fact, I'm surprised that I kind of left that out of my childhood origin story earlier. When I hit puberty, my main creative output was writing poetry. I just became a mad poet, I would write on every scrap of paper I had available, I even wrote on my bedsheets. My poems were absolutely horrible, but I was obsessed. I grew up in a neighboring town of Amherst Massachusetts that had both Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost once living there. They are the heroes of the region where I grew up. I didn't think poetry was stupid and never looked at it like most kids I knew did. I wouldn't say I was a great reader of poetry, but I liked it.

I admired poets and I wanted to be a poet when I was thirteen, fourteen but I was also drawing a lot. So I was mixing it up, and I developed both muscles from an early age. And you know, as puberty gets to be that dark storm cloud of emotions, it became a way for me to vent. Later, when I went through this breakup I was talking about, writing was a familiar and great way to vent. I would write something humiliatingly honest just to see how stupid it sounded and immediately start making fun of myself for doing it. I quickly realized that exposing and taking back, exposing something real and covering it with something fictional, like a fig leaf, was a vehicle to make artworks.

In museums, the artworks I have always liked best, the ones I could best connect with were ones I could empathize with. Whatever the medium, I needed something I could engage with through empathy. I realized my new medium, my yellow legal pad works were doing exactly that. When I had those installed in a room, people would read them completely through, standing up. Perhaps they'd be reading them out of a sense of voyeurism, and they would want to see me or my character say something silly, to make fun of me or find something to laugh at. But they were reading them. I believe what they are really doing is measuring how close they are to the ostensibly pathetic character in the writing. Everyone is insecure to a degree. We all want to know if we are normal or abnormal and we do this by peeking into other people's lives. People are often looking for themselves in art, or in someone else's words. That's essentially what we do when we look at art; we're looking for recognizable things, true things about ourselves, about the world that we see. That's why we look.

—Were you conscious that you were inventing a new form, even if it probably had links to On Kawara's telegrams? That must have been very exciting.

Yes, I was. It was very exciting. I was very fortunate to have had John next door reading everything, he was my greatest fan of this stuff. I could tell by his reactions, which I trusted, that this was perhaps something new. He read everything I wrote first. As I was the first eyes on all of his paintings. He was dating Andrea Rosen, who was developing her gallery at this time but had not opened it yet. She was in our loft frequently and was reading these early writing works and was also very encouraging. Their reactions gave me a lot of confidence to keep going. Many of my friends were also encouraging me. Some would say, "I think this is a new thing." One does not dare to say those things out loud about something they're making themselves, but when many of your friends are telling you this, it becomes something that you dare to believe. So I did.

—Was it frightening in a way to have this new form in your hands? At the time, having something new was like the goal for everyone.

No, never frightening. It was thrilling. Eventually there would be growing pains with it. At one point when I wrote my extemporaneous unedited novel [sic] I felt it became like Mary Shelley's monster. But no, it was never frightening; it was exhilarating. It was a surprise. I didn't realize when I was at Yale that the writing I did on my walls would be the seed of my biggest contribution. I should have known because when people would come into my studio for organized critiques their backs would be turned away from my giant animal sculptures in the middle of the studio and they would all be reading my walls the whole time. No one was focusing on my sculptures or what was being said about them.

—When did you decide to stop making sculpture?

A few years after I moved to New York, it was too expensive and impractical. I tried to make smaller versions of the kind of giant things I was making at Yale, but I realized that that phase of my life was over. I eventually realized that the thing I learned at Yale was the power of being able to write and capture people through my honesty and their voyeurism or whatever it is, is it Schadenfreude?.

—You mentioned this TV program, An American Family. Can we really call it an influence, or was it just information?

It was a huge influence because it was the beginning of reality as a genre. It was an early 1970s TV program that was replayed on American Public television in the early 90's, right at the time when I was sort of inventing this new writing-as-art thing, and I saw the potential world that it offered me. At the time it was originally aired, in the early 70's, reality was new, not over-done yet, and it was just fascinating. What probably interested me most, besides my jaw-dropping at the truthful portrait of this dysfunctional family, was that when the program was airing in real time in the 70's, they were still shooting the footage for future episodes. This created a feedback loop between how the characters behaved and how they were being depicted and reacted to in real time. For instance, the father thought, "this fame is great, I'm going to divorce my wife and use my new celebrity to go get some hot young chicks." I felt that this vérité video medium was a similar medium as me writing. I could influence my real life by how I

wrote and acted in my art. This was certainly true for my early videos. I thought sculpting with wet clay and exhibiting them wet was kind of a similar thing. I had all of my three mediums working in this way at that time. It was my belief that they were the same thing. I think that was fairly well understood by people at the time.

—The fact that you were using three different mediums to express the same thing, was it quite normal at this time?

To use different mediums? For me it was, sure. You could say the goal was reality in any form, it was more like reality art. The writings on the studio walls, and then eventually on the paintings, were like blogs before blogs came out or social media or like Twitter before Twitter came out. If I wasn't an artist who had shows, I would have had no forum or audience for my musings, but I did because I knew whatever I was writing in my studio would one day be hung on a wall in a gallery or a museum where people would interact with it. An art show felt almost like a mini broadcast medium. My videos were like an early version of YouTube. It was the early 1990s, it was before there were any of these mediums. I didn't have the internet because it didn't exist yet, but I did have a venue; it was small but it worked, it was the New York art world which soon became the European art world too. So pretty quickly what I was showing in Soho or L.A. I'd next be showing in Germany or here in France or Switzerland and a few other countries.

—Have you ever felt trapped in this form of work at some point? Looking at your career, everything seems so logical. In terms of storytelling, it's perfect. What you've just described, the writings on the walls, the transfer on the canvas and suddenly adding figurative elements to these texts, it seems such a natural and organic progression.

I never feel trapped, I feel very free to change whenever I want to. Yes, it is an organic progression, I see it as growing like a tree. But we're seeing it in retrospect. When I was going through it, it was like driving in the desert at night with no headlights on. You don't know where you're going. So I just have to trust that if I want to do this new thing, it's going to fit even if I don't understand why it fits now. It will fit, by virtue of the fact that I am quite honest about what I write and what I want to see in a painting. I paint what I actually want to see, and I write what I need to write for whatever reason, and the two things, because I'm being honest, they just connect all the time. The more things I make the more complete the picture becomes. So I'm the opposite of trapped, I am very very free. I keep compiling more menu items to pick from. I can pick up the thread from my stripe paintings, then pick up another thread from the text paintings, I can mix them together and make a book painting. And now I have a whole new thread to work with, the book painting thread. I can put crystal balls on the shelf and then refer to two other bodies of work inside the balls. It all goes together, the wood grain on the bookshelves matches Plankboy's wood grain. And all of that harkens back to the stream-of-consciousness writing on paintings that was wavy and looks similar to woodgrain when viewed from far away. So with all of these things, I start to see them becoming part of the bigger picture and once I recognize its coming into the picture, then I can move in and force it more into the picture. I can tailor it in even tighter.

—Do you remember how it happened?

Most of my ideas come from either walking some place and thinking—walking is a good way to have ideas especially in the morning—or working on something that might have a repetitive element to it where the mind is free to wander. Often I have that opportunity while working on a painting. It's a great time, while making a painting, to think about the next painting you want to make. The third way is at the end of the day when I am going to sleep. Frequently I review what I was working on that day and think about how it all fits together in the bigger picture. I think about future shows and what I want them to encompass, and often something new will just pop into my head, just like that.

—Because you seem to be the kind of person who would reject a lot of ideas.

I do. Well, I consider them ideas that are not ready yet. I have way more ideas than I'll ever get done. Luckily, I think I've got at least thirty more years of production in me! Hopefully I'll get to them all.

— Would it mean that you go on with not 100% good ideas, would that be a burden? It looks like you stick with some ideas. There aren't that many categories of artworks in your career in fact, probably ten or twelve groups or types.

I've never actually counted them, which is silly, I should. I am not sure of the number, but they just seem naturally to have a point when they phase into existence and they slowly stumble into life. I have a bunch of "one off" paintings in my storeroom that never made it into becoming a series. The first prototypes of every series are always really rough looking. I have sort of a fondness for the first examples of each series. As I do them the series become more refined and whatever the original impetus was to go that certain way becomes almost secondary. The originating impetus was there to get me going in that direction, but once I'm on it, the series acquires its own life and needs. As it multiplies it becomes more about making that series better and richer. But eventually that series yields a new branch, and from the new branch will spring another branch. So while I'm working on one series I'm imagining the next. I guess some series are more successful than others, but they are all my children and I love making them all. Some series will yield more paintings than others, some number as many as seventy paintings, while other series only get up to twenty or so. It depends on a couple of different things. Ease of making them is key and if the series allows for sufficient variety to keep me engaged.
There is always a feeling in every series that it is time to move on and that is when they end. There is only one series where that was not the case, the image and text series 1997- 2000. We have a few examples of these downstairs in the exhibition, Idea Man, Bubble Boy, etc… I was well into the mid-seventies in numbers of this series, and I felt at the time like "I've got another seventy of these in me, no problem." I loved making that series. But Andrea Rosen and my wife Michelle, who used to work for Andrea, told me it was time to move on. They didn't say it for any reason like for selling, it wasn't anything to do with that. They just felt it was time to let some of my other ideas out. So I listened to them, and it sort of broke my stride temporarily but it eventually made me return to the stripe paintings. Which in turn lead to the "Picasso" paintings. It was a weird time because I felt it wasn't my natural process. It was the one time where I let someone else suggest to me that it was time to move on, and it took me out of my normal sort

of natural tree-growth-like process, which quickly resumed. The stripe paintings eventually returned again as the bookshelf paintings. Most of the time, when I'm finishing up a series I can't wait to get to the next one or two other ideas that I have in waiting. This is the way I like it, it's an urgent feeling of never being done or completely satisfied.

—Would you consider the bookshelf paintings in the same way as the text paintings? If these kinds of paintings like the unframed one downstairs in the exhibition [Patches, 1993] have a name, do you call them "text paintings"? Because to me they are probably the most abstract paintings in their conception. Somehow the bookshelf paintings also are abstract in their composition. Is it like you would want to try to make an abstract painting?

I don't think of them as very similar. With the text paintings, yes I do call them that, I was definitely thinking about abstraction. With the bookshelf paintings, I was not, but I see what you mean. With the first text painting in 1993, I was thinking that I was making an abstract painting. It was, in fact, almost the exact idea. I was thinking about a Pollock painting. When I look at one of his paintings I imagine that he had thoughts during every single little drip. As he painted his mind was running, he was witnessing the thoughts that his mind was generating as he did this painting, meanwhile all his thoughts were being lost into the ether.
So I thought, what if you could make a painting that was an abstract all-over painting, where you could read every single thing that the artist thought while it was being created? And that's what my early text paintings were. Again, like it was a sort of reality painting. They were very honest, I could write "beer" over a hundred times because I wanted to have a beer and I could not get it out of my head. And there are these other times when I wrote touching things and other times I just say overtly immature, moronic things; it's just the way the brain goes.
Sometimes I think, when people see text based art on a wall, especially during the early 1990s, they were going to assume, "well if it's text art then it's got to mean something," and then people read them and they are like, "these are just the meandering thoughts of a guy in front of his canvas." Yes exactly! That's what they are. It is me moving through time, this is what I was thinking as I moved through time and space.
The whole thing about stream-of-consciousness and why I use it so much in my work is because I think it is our primary experience of life. Wherever we go, it is the screen through which we look at everything. And that's what those image and text paintings downstairs are about too. There is this surrealistic character in the front which is one form of stream of consciousness, and there is a stream-of-consciousness text going by in the background.
My readable thoughts as I painted it, as I imagined it. All these thoughts are constantly passing through us as time goes by. It's in everything we do, you look out your window, you look into this room, while your thoughts are continually going by, it's a constant. It is life passing through us. It is the granular content of our lives. It is the most abundant art material ever, and no one else is using it in paintings that I know of. I do.
But for the bookshelf paintings, these are not about stream-of-consciousness at all. Those texts were written separately from the painting, heavily edited and then applied to the painting. I write those texts while listening to the saddest Icelandic music, like Jóhann Jóhannsson, Olafur Arnalds, Nils Frahm, or one of these other film score composers.

—Is it what you're listening to when you're painting?
No, only when I am writing the texts for bookshelf paintings or tree paintings. The texts for those two series were not extemporaneously written onto the canvas. It is pre-written on yellow legal pad while I listen to this mood-altering music on headphones. It is almost exclusively Icelandic contemporary composers like those I just mentioned or Sigur Rós or Hilmar Orn Hilmarsson. Warning, it's not for the faint of heart, they can be very sad. I don't want anybody to go too far into despair on my recommendation… it quickly can get like "I'm crying, I cannot deal with this" but I like these composers for writing. They are recognizable, they score movies, mainstream movies. Their job is to manage viewers' emotions throughout these films as much as the narrative does. So I allow them to manipulate my emotions while I write; it's out there, it's free, and it's almost like having wings to sit on.
The tree paintings I mentioned are of Aspen trees —I have three things coming into my head that I want to say all at once about this series.
First, writing on trees is a historical folk-art form in the US. It comes from the westward expansion over the Rocky Mountains to the west coast. As the early settlers were making that passage a lot of them carved their names into these Aspen trees, and the carvings have lasted until this day. Essentially, it's making a mark, it's like cave painting, it's that primal of an instinct for human beings to make a mark that will last. When people see fresh cement, they might put their initials in it, it's the same thing.
Second, every Aspen forest is one giant plant, with every tree in the forest connected to each-other underground by their roots. The whole forest shares one giant root ball. Every tree is part of the same plant. The biggest living organism on Earth is in fact an Aspen forest in Colorado. So I thought this was a great analogy or allegory for my whole body of work, because it's all the same thing in the end and every series or every painting is a new tree in the same forest that belongs to my artistic output.
The third thing I want to mention is about why the writing done while listening to the Icelandic composers can be maudlin. It's an expansion of that idea of the settler passing over the Rocky Mountains, carving his name. It's an existential gesture to make a permanent mark expressing that you once existed. It is human nature to want evidence of your existence to last forever. And that's the basis of art of course. So I wanted all the writings to be completely zeroed in on that sentiment. These sad music composers keep me on that track, which is why it is important for me to mention their role in my process.
OK, about the sign paintings. I had gotten myself into this sad and existential place with the trees; I needed to find a new way out. That's where the directional sign paintings came in. I wasn't going to make the writing for these sad, these were all going to be light again because I also need to write that way too. I felt like I sort of got myself into this darker area with the trees and I wanted to look for a direction out, and these sign paintings are literally giving directions for me to turn around, with directional arrows and brighter bookshelf painting or stripe painting colors. Whistling past the graveyard perhaps but still lifting the mood.

—You always seem to manage to combine the qualities of a figurative painting and the qualities of an abstract painting. I would be very excited to show these big, double forest paintings next to Barnett Newman's "zip" paintings. Did you have in mind this history of abstract art as well when you were doing them?

It wasn't a forethought or a conscious thought. Perhaps, it's just in my head? If you're seeing those things there, I cannot deny that they are there. It is possible that influences percolate up into our art without us artists realizing it's happening. But no, I don't think it was a conscious thought. I always felt that I was combining figurative painting with conceptual art. But I am open to it all being within the realm of abstraction as well. What I think was clearly based on abstraction were the first un-stretched text paintings, I really thought those were abstract but I soon felt that I needed to add to them so I threw cartoons into the mix and then eventually painted breasts and chimpanzee heads floating among the text… again, I was being young and moronic when I did those. I don't want to digress and talk about that though!
But those were just my first attempts at stepping away from just text/abstraction and into image paintings, which was a subject we discussed downstairs yesterday. As you know, I had oil painting in my background, I had that history of painting when I was a kid and then again in art school. With the familiar material smells back in my studio again from linen, the paint, the oil, and the turpentine, I caught the bug again. The brushes were all there, the paint was there, so I just felt like, "it's time." I wanted to create a pictorial world for my words to fit into.
At that time I was reading a lot of true accounts of solo circumnavigators who either made it or didn't make it and needed rescue. I liked the idea of a journey around the world signifying a journey through life. I liked the amount of solitude and how their stream-of-consciousness was their only companion. In the writing of their journals, many sailors describe how their stream-of-consciousness is like another person on the boat and they'd talk to it. I loved that idea. That's always been sort of there in my work a little bit, there's always this other voice that I am kind of in conversation with. So I thought the perfect imagery for me to paint is ocean beneath these text fields. Timewise we are talking about the 1995 show in Paris, the Jennifer Flay show. I had to learn how to paint ocean to pull that off, so I started looking at Winslow Homer. I was learning how to paint ocean from him; it was an effort. I think I was unconsciously trying to create my own sort of pictorial world to start from, where I could locate all the things that I do. That's why so many of my characters are standing in front of the ocean or are in the ocean. The first purely image paintings I ever made were of ocean. And then soon after I made some with my stream of consciousness going all over it.
In 1969, there was a sail around the world alone race sponsored by a British newspaper [the Sunday Times Golden Globe Race]. Seven participants set out, but the story really focuses on three participants. One was a guy who was never before a sailor, Donald Crowhurst. He had the clever idea of sailing a trimaran because it's so much faster. An electrician from the North of England, he was sort of a big talker at his local pub. A tabloid discovered him and sponsored him to get an exclusive on the story. They funded him and prodded him on, trapping him into going. Privately he was terrified, he knew that if a trimaran capsizes it cannot right itself again. He was particularly afraid to go into the treacherous Southern Ocean where waves are huge and relentless. He decided to cheat to save himself by sailing in large circles off the coast of Brazil while radioing in to the race authorities false positions of a fictional circumnavigation. He planned to wait for the fleet to pass him by on their return up the Atlantic, and then he would return to England safely in last place, harming no one. Unfortunately for him, so many participants dropped out, and others were so slow that he emerged as an inadvertent front runner in the race completely fraudulently. When he realized he was falsely in first place and other sailors still in the race were pressing to catch him, he felt so guilty that he killed himself. He jumped off his boat and took his real logbook with him and left a fake. No, he left his real logbook onboard too I think. I forget now. Anyway, that was one participant.
Another was a French sailor called Bernard Moitessier. He was in first place almost the entire race, he was going to win the race and when he was almost done, sailing northward above the Equator coming back up the Atlantic toward the South of England to finish, he thought, "what is winning?" He turned around and went back around the world again. Isn't that amazing?
And then finally, the winner Robin Knox-Johnston was the slowest of all! He was in last place for the entire race and was the only participant to actually finish the race. By that virtue, he won. He had the shittiest old boat covered with barnacles and it constantly needed repairs. It took him 312 days. I made a painting of him, the clown painting, the one drinking the beer [Around the World Alone (Knox-Johnston), 2011] downstairs. There is a famous photo of him right when he got off his boat when he's on the dock and somebody hands him a pint of beer and a cigarette. That was the photo I used for that painting. He is a personal hero of mine.
These three sailors, their very different journeys and their different characters were all in my head. These were the kind of journeys around the world I wanted to be a part of my artwork somehow. I wanted the tragic fraudulent dreamer, the philosophical wanderer and the determined never-quitter all to make their appearances in my work, in my allegorical solo-circumnavigation. I wanted my stream-of-consciousness to be the sailor and my life span to be the world in which it circumnavigated.
I was sailing at that time too, racing in New York Harbor with Richard Phillips and the painter David Reed. It was David's boat. Richard is a really good sailor, he grew up in Marblehead, Massachusetts, and he was a champion sailor as a kid growing up. So when Richard would be on the boat, we would win every time.

—You would go out for long journeys, or just like one day?

Just for a few hours in the evenings usually around sunset. We'd sail right in front of the Statue of Liberty. A sailing club would set up these bright orange buoys and we'd race around them against a small fleet of J-24s. It's a complicated place to sail because the Hudson River is flushing out into the ocean right there and when the tide is going out it's pretty intense or, conversely when the tide is coming in, it can stop the downward flow of the river. So it's a really dynamic place to sail, you're not only looking at the wind. The water beneath you can be even more powerful.

---

p. 64/65: *Elysium*, 2016. Oil on linen, 70 x 192 in. Two panels, each 70 x 96 in. Courtesy the artist and Capitain Petzel, Berlin
p. 66: *History Is Sad*, 2017. Oil and archival inkjet on canvas, 71 1⁄2 x 55 1⁄2 in. Courtesy the artist and Petzel Gallery, New York
p. 69: *The Extinct*, 1999. Oil on linen, 64 x 52 in. Courtesy the artist and Petzel Gallery, New York
p. 70: *Circumnavigator*, 2012. Oil on linen 60 x 89 in. Courtesy the artist and Petzel Gallery, New York
p. 71: *Venerable Seafarer*, 2012. Oil on linen, 48 x 72 in. Courtesy the artist and Petzel Gallery, New York