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Robert Berlind

“In Conversation: In Memoriam - Robert Berlind with Robert Kushner”, The Brooklyn Rail, February 3, 2016.

<http://www.brooklynrail.org/2016/02/art/robert-berlind-with-robert-kushner>



IN CONVERSATION

IN MEMORIAM

ROBERT BERLIND with Robert Kushner

Robert Berlind was a prolific painter, insightful critic, and beloved teacher to generations of students. Late last fall, fellow painter and writer Robert Kushner sat down with Berlind to discuss the long arc of his career, his approach to seeing and painting, his subject matter, and other deeply held interests, such as phenomenology and Kabbalah. Berlind finished his last painting in August and was preparing for a show at Lennon, Weinberg when he passed away on December 17, 2015.



Rice Paddy with Reflected Trees #2. 2012. oil on linen. 72 x 144 inches

think I can paint that”?

Robert Kushner (Rail): When we were in the studio yesterday, you showed me the painting of the shadows on the front of the house, and you said something that intrigued and surprised me, which was that the lattice drew you to that image. I assumed it was the shadows. So here’s the question in general: when you are considering new subject matter, or variations on subject matter, do you see any sort of patterns as to what you’re looking for? What’s the hook that makes you think, “Ah-ha, I

Robert Berlind: Usually something grabs my attention, something intrigues me, and I don’t really know what it is. The sketch or the painting is an inquiry into that. For example, with the lattice on the house, that first came up in some drawings. Partly it was just discovering that all I have to do is make little marks to show the space between the lattice and the lattice appeared. And that tickled me—a very silly situation, in a way.

On the other hand, there is a relation between the activity of drawing and seeing something come up in an unexpected way. That interests me. Having learned something in the past few years, I now hone in on that and do more with it. I incorporated something else I had looked at, which was the late-

afternoon shadow-play in front of the house. Even that had to be arrived at. There were trees in front, and other things that I was drawing because, well, they were there, and I didn't know quite what it was that would account for my interest. Very often there will be a series of paintings relating to the same ostensible subject. I am trying to clarify what it is really about. I have learned that, generally, it has to do with perception in relation to cognition. In other words, I'm seeing something that attracts me, and it's really in the terms of my perceiving those things. Perhaps two things are not in focus at the same time, yet they have a live relationship, and that's what I would finally come to explore.

Rail: Is there a pattern of large-scale versus small-scale perception? In some paintings, there's something big that interests you, and sometimes it is something extremely small that often might even be overlooked by someone with a different temperament.

Berlind: There was a time in the late '70s when I was doing night paintings. The night encompasses you when you're outside. I was compelled to make larger and larger paintings. I did the fourteen-foot painting and then I thought, "Okay. Stop." But I wanted that sensation of a huge, dark space. It had seemed to me that you couldn't make a daytime landscape that large because you can't make it actual scale. Turns out that you could. There is no actual scale. You could make it larger than so-called life size, because it all depends on where you're standing and what you're looking at. Your hand is much larger than life-size in front of your own face.

At that time I was gratified to be making large paintings, and I blew up studies of water surfaces. They were more like Abstract-Expressionist paintings in attitude—not about angst but about free-handling the paint, about revision, about discovering.

Rail: That's a perfect segue into my next question. Let's talk about the relationship between the stand-alone mark-making and a convincing depiction of space. You are making marks with a great deal of integrity; they're always very intentional. What is the interface between the actual mark-making and the resultant depiction of space?

Berlind: Sometimes it doesn't work. Sometimes I will be close and I'm just into the groove of putting the paint on and watching it from arm's length. When I step back from it, something will have occurred beyond my expectation. Or something conflicts with the space that I'm trying to make and I may go with that changing the space. I don't always know exactly what I'm doing when I make that mark. Lately, I will say, I've known better, probably since a bit before the Japanese paintings. I've been more deliberate about sitting back, making a choice, executing the choice, cooling down a little bit, and trusting myself that it will be my mark, and there's no other way it can be after all. I don't have to cultivate that.

I may have been pulling back to something more conservative when I was drawing what I saw. Sometimes I'll make a drawing, or a bunch of drawings, and only later do I see its potential. I play with the drawing and try to articulate it more. That seemed like cheating for a long time.

Rail: Really? Did it seem contrived?

Berlind: When I was doing those little portraits in the late '60s and early '70s, I had a notion that I was a conduit. It's silly, because I was still learning how to do it. But they were coming out better than I knew I could make them. So I had a feeling that I was a sort of conduit for the energy of the person sitting. Sometimes it was relational between me and the person. Or something would develop while doing it—an intensity. Similarly, outside I felt that the landscape was speaking to me when I would choose a subject. I often felt that I was "called" to do that. A very romantic idea, perhaps. But it's what I felt—that something spoke out to me. And I didn't know what it was, and I was trying to answer.

Rail: The answer would emerge in the process of painting?

Berlind: Not always with as literal a story as it sounds. But essentially, I think that was what was happening.

Rail: Would you say there is a lightness in your unique touch? How do you keep the paint-handling quite fresh?

Berlind: I sometimes lose it. Sometimes, I'll come back to a painting after a year and see what isn't working, and I know exactly what to do. Sometimes I paint for another month on it. It often means loosening up my paint, my brushwork, my allowance for what might appear. I may have to get away from the original idea very often.

Often when I go back to something after a long while, I see that the problem is how I approached the painting. And I've been clinging to it, thinking that it's the best part of the painting or whatever. But that's what I have to let go. I keep getting all these little lessons about letting go.

Rail: Given that we have sophisticated, intelligent, and sensitive viewers, what would you like them to derive from looking at your painting?

Berlind: Somebody once said to me, "Oh, this is full deck painting." I liked the idea of using all fifty-two cards and the joker. It wasn't that full, but it was fuller than most of what was going on that was so reductive.

People get very strong readings and they're not necessarily what I was thinking about. That's more important to me—what one gets, as opposed to understands. What you get from looking at something is usually pretty accurate. When people say "I don't get it" it often means: "I don't like what I got. I don't accept what I got." or "This is not art, this is not good, this is not whatever." People actually do get something very quickly, usually where it plugs into their own psyche. Delacroix said that art goes from soul to soul. This counters the notion of the importance of language and semiotics, that something leaped across all of that and there's a real deep occurrence. I'm interested in the phenomenology of looking at art: what happens when we're really affected, in time, in space, in our psyches, in our unconscious, what is it that's really happening.

Rail: There's a range of mood in your work and I wonder if that's part of your intention. Some of them are moody, some of them are calm.

Berlind: A great deal of melancholy.

Rail: What does that mean to you as a working artist?

Berlind: Irving Sandler once asked me about my subject matter, and I singled out water, nighttime, and trees. Nighttime came about because I was looking at those night windows with reflections and then I got outside in a way. I would love to be out at night and I always felt I must have been a nocturnal animal at some point. [*Laughter.*] Everything is so much clearer. You didn't see too much. You walk out at noon and you just see everything. You know. It's not a painting idea.

Rail: Night is not necessarily frightening to you. It sounds like it's comforting.

Berlind: No, no, I love night. I love night in the country, especially. You can see better and better. Shapes—a few shapes define themselves and they're perfect. And there's the space between you and whatever that is. How to articulate that is the question. And they tend to be dark paintings, after all. Water starts as very private. For years, I looked at water surfaces, meditating on it, without thinking it was paintable or drawable. But I would look at the water, and it kept changing and moving and I could lose myself in that. You forget what you're looking at and you forget who you are and you're just there. It's a pure meditational state. It's wonderful.

Rail: Getting back to mood for just a second, I was surprised that you brought up melancholy, because one of the primary moods I associate with your paintings is tranquility. Just thinking about

your Japan paintings, it is not stasis as much as the point just before it starts to rain. There's this moment of poise, and I wonder if that resonates with you.

Berlind: It does. It does. My Asian friends and students have always told me that the paintings look Japanese or Chinese. In obvious ways, they don't. But there's something about them. People assume that I'm into Zen and so forth. And I am, but I don't do that deliberately any more than I try to make a Jewish painting. But things become distilled, and sufficient. When I leave it at that point and let the implications arise, it has that quality.

Rail: What is the tie-in with your spiritual life? Not your specific spiritual practice, but your generally well-expressed and deeply-felt feeling.

Berlind: When I first started learning about Kabbalah, which was in the early '90s, of course I thought, "Should this change my painting?" I had no desire to make paintings that illustrated that. But I understood my painting process a little differently—it's been in accord with this all along, just as my meditation and yoga practices have been in accord with Kabbalah.

We have the four worlds in Kabbalah. The world of *doing*: of body, of pragmatics, of getting at the paints, and going out looking for something, or deciding to get up and paint that day, and working. The world of *Yetzirah*: of emotion and connection, of discovering my connection to what I was doing. The world of *Beri'ah*: of intellect, of thinking—coming to an overview of what I've been doing, what I think of as a studio mentality, where you sit back and think "Okay, where are things now? Where do I want to go?" And the final stage of Kabbalah is just the stage of *being*, where I can leave. I hadn't articulated it that way before, but that's what the process looks like. So, I thought, "Well, it's true. I've been doing it, I understand it."

Rail: It's beautiful to hear you say it so clearly. What do you think anchors your work in this moment in time? One could look at your work as a continuation of the French *plein air* school, or even Corot. But I see something that feels like it could only have happened today.

Berlind: Good. I think the contemporaneous character of the work is just inevitable. I remember when the bass cellist and French horn player, Willie Ruff, put his group together, it was the French horn, a bass, and a piano, and he asked Miles Davis whether it would sound like jazz. Miles said to him, "Well you're driving a 1960-something car, you're wearing these clothes, you're doing this, you're doing that, what do you expect will come out, ragtime?"

I've relied on that in a way. I have asked myself why I am not just making 19th century hold-overs. But I am living now, and the deepest stuff I get into now is about being alive now. Maybe it's an existential question.

Now I'm much more deliberate about the question. In the late '60s, I had not been living in New York. I was aware, in a broad sense, of what was going on. But I was away from schools and away from magazines for a few years. I came back and ultimately got a job at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, which was a conceptualist stronghold, and I had a few weeks before classes started so I read everything there was to read on it.

I made it a point to look carefully at minimalist work and Pop-Art, after a lot of resistance, mind you, at whatever was coming down. I just felt that I should be looking at everything all the time. And I was intentionally writing about a diversity of styles and approaches, because I didn't want to just be writing on behalf of my own thing. Other people like Leon Golub would say, "Oh, you're so generous"



Ginkaku-ji Coins #1, 2011, oil on linen, 54 x 60 inches

when I said something nice about someone's work that I didn't think much of. It was just an open attitude that I had cultivated. Now I don't need to see as much.

Rail: So it came back to the original question about what anchors your work today. Are you saying that the hard, heavy lifting that you did as a younger artist is still in you? And that you don't actively try to locate it in this context today?

Berlind: Yes, although now I'm more conscious of the larger context and art-world context. So much has to do with the shifting focus of critical thinking and taste, because, you know, for years you could be doing any kind of representational work and nobody cared. And there was great work out there all this time.

Then suddenly I discovered that people and dealers are liking my work. When I showed the Japanese paintings to people, everybody thought they were terrific. "What does that mean? Did the work change? Did the zeitgeist change?"

It's wonderful to think, "I'll just keep doing what I'm doing." We used to say that! Just do what you are doing, it'll come around again. At the moment there's a little bit of liveliness in the response to my work which I'm grateful for.

Rail: When I was an undergraduate, many times at a group criticism Miriam Shapiro would say in this heavy New York accent, "In the cathedral of art, whatever that means to you, where do you place what you're doing? That's the question."

Berlind: That's quite a question.

Rail: [*Laughter.*] I've thought about that for years now, and it maybe is unanswerable. But I just wondered what a first stab would be.

Berlind: During the war, many cathedrals were blasted, and large parts of them destroyed, and there had been theories about what made them stand—you know, the flying buttress, or the way it met the ground, and so on. A part got knocked out, but it continued to stand. Why?

I've been all over the cathedral. I've spent a lot of time on every part, as a college student and even before that. And I've been moved by so much of it. Pierro della Francesca, Fra Angelico, Giotto, Masaccio. I suppose there's some dust from everywhere, on some level. I see Tintoretto in Venice and think that we're all occupying a very small zone, in a way. But it has to be a zone that is alive today. I want to get more singular and focused on whatever it is.

Rail: So, when you're in this hypothetical cathedral, would one of your landscapes be an altar-piece? Would it be part of a predella?

Berlind: One was, practically. One of my water paintings was in a very large show at St. John the Divine, hung over a sepulcher. It was like the dead man's dream.

Rail: It's interesting how we self-identify. For me, it might be one of the stain glass windows or the floor. But I don't think that's your temperament. It would be a more private space, where you could go in and commune little bit—it's kind of a corny question. But over time, when I've reconsidered it, I've had very different answers. Where you are now in your painting?

Berlind: There is a synthetic quality that I'm allowing in my painting that comes out of various studies, and perceptions. As I said, I used to have the feeling that I'm a conduit, for example; I'm doing a portrait of a tree and if I leave anything out, I'm being unfaithful. Now I have been somewhat influenced by Japanese culture, which is synthetic, meaning that pieces of this and this put together right make a statement. If you get it wrong, it doesn't carry. Not that it hasn't existed in the West—it has. We've always done it to some extent, but I'm doing it more deliberately and willfully, and enjoying a whole realm of choices that suddenly is more conscious.

Rail: Do you mean allowing the painting to be discontinuous?

Berlind: If it needs to be, sure, yes.

Rail: Being responsive to the work at hand rather than your preconception?

Berlind: Yes, and really not feeling like I have to control meaning. Not that I ever get to control the reading of it. For example, I did a painting looking through a door, and I didn't know if anyone would make sense of it. I was worried about that. But lots of people who didn't know the space loved it. And I thought, "Well, what it means and what you do with it, that's not my problem." That's the attitude I have now. It's not my problem, what you see.

Rail: It sounds very free.

Berlind: It's much freer, and truer to reality. Because you don't control it anyway. If someone loves landscapes and hunting, they'll get that from a woods painting. There's no wrong reason to like something, or to dislike it. You could look at things for a longer time, but there's no wrong reason to be attracted. If you allow yourself to go with it, you'll find out if the attraction has depth or not. That's why collectors are lucky, because they can really educate themselves and spend all the time with the work.

I insist that painting is a time-based medium. And looking at it is a time-based endeavor. Whatever you get all at once, that's part of it. But what you get after years of looking is even more.

Rail: Even though your participation as a painter has a shorter time duration?

Berlind: Well, we spend more time on Shakespeare than he did. Or on anyone else who we say is great.

Rail: What are your thoughts about Fairfield Porter?

Berlind: I had seen his first works and thought they looked like what my mother does—a backyard or a nice landscape. And then I started seeing what he was really doing, and how complex and process-oriented the works really are. The whole development of the focus of the painting is incredible. He has a totally original mind, which is interesting, because the work doesn't necessarily look like that at first glance. That always gave me courage, in a way, to stay with representation, as it did a lot of people.

Rail: What does landscape give you that nothing else can?

Berlind: Ultimately, painting the space from which it is seen. It's painting of the self, painting of the perception. Sometimes, people will say, "I saw your paintings! I was out here or there, and I kept thinking about you." That's realism, when the world starts to look like your work. You've had some effect on the viewer's psyche.

Rail: You've altered their way of looking at what's already there.