In the Mud with Brian Rutenberg.

Twenty-five years of the South Carolina artist's electric meditations.

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Brian Rutenberg, *Reeds Rise II*, 2021, oil on linen, 56 x 79 inches, © Brian Rutenberg, courtesy of Forum Gallery, New York.

Twenty years ago, I had few heroes in the world of art writing.

Arthur Danto wasn't just the critic for *The Nation*, [1] he was also a professor of philosophy and wrote heavy books about Hegel and Aristotle. The man was *rigorous*, and

I had the impression that no one spoke to him that didn't have to answer to profound questions of the True Essence of Art—so when he walked into the gallery in the early 2000s, I found something that needed doing in the back room, and cowered.

When Danto knocked on the door to the backroom to ask for the price list, I was immensely relieved by the banality of his request, and only over the course of several visits did we get into the heavier lifting: what *is* an artwork, anyway?

Danto sketched his position a few different ways: "Imagine," he prompted—and I emphasize this is extreme paraphrase—"an exhibition of all-red canvases." The first is a painting about a rageful mood, the second is a feminist painting about lipstick and menstruation, the third a meditation on the Russian revolution, the fourth, a swatch of Benjamin Moore house paint. How do we know which is an artwork? [2] Well, when you consider the Wittgensteinian, or perhaps the Hegelio-Aristotelian line—

"But Arthur," I wish I had said, "'What *is* an artwork?' is only a riddle in *your imagination*. You see most paintings the same way *I* do: by walking in the front door of the gallery, and looking!"

But of course I didn't say that, and a few years later, his final book arrived: *What An Artwork Is*.

II. The First Rutenberg.

I saw my first Brian Rutenberg over the shoulder of Nicola Lorenz, executive director at Forum Gallery. I was there to see other things, but thick lines of alizarin crimson and diaphanous webs of moss-like viridian glowed in the soft light behind her—and I couldn't take my eyes off it. It's not such an easy thing to do—make a novel, beguiling abstract painting—and I didn't know when it could possibly have been produced—1943? 1973?

"2021," she told me.

"Is there *more*?"

There was. And after sinking into a dozen ecstatic canvases, I reached out to the painter for a studio visit, and accepted a gracious counter-offer of a talk over waffles. Rutenberg, to my surprise, is one of the rare breed of painter who speaks as eloquently about his work as his work does. His paintings have what Danto would call "aboutness": he has a story to tell in paint, and he has a story to tell in his writing and delightful video "studio visits." [3] He avoids, seemingly without trying, the pitfall of telling the viewer what to see in his work—but the work has a way of telling you what to think, even as it invites an open conversation.

Everything in Rutenberg's work seems to be an invitation, a way in. He describes what may be the first Rutenberg:

> "Long before I knew what an artist was, I'd scoop up fistfuls of marsh mud, splat them on the dock under the savage Carolina sun, and carefully arrange torn bits of colored paper across the muck, followed by another handful of mud. The frond-lipped tip of an oyster shell was an ideal tool for skimming the translucent slime to reveal jeweled flashes of color of varying intensities . . ." [4]

It's a pretty sophisticated practice for someone who doesn't know what an artist is, but there's a sense in all of Rutenberg's remarks that he's still excited about the openness of the the question. He gives tips, he offers anecdotes, he makes strange references to oblique inspirations—major sparks fly from the pianist Glenn Gould and a poem about a Grecian urn—and beneath it all is an invitation to join in the creative act. When he quotes Emerson, it really resonates: "The best picture makes us say, I am a painter also." I left the waffles wanting to pick up a brush.

But the magical part is that Rutenberg's pictures are incomparable. They draw you in for their freedom and spontaneity, an abiding flirtation with Jolly Rancher reds and Starburst pinks—and then they slowly reveal how carefully-constructed and guiding they are. If talking to the man makes me want to paint, talking to the painting makes me want to look.

And anyway, I came to realize, the resonance of the Emerson quote is not so much a Bob-Ross call to make your own confections, but rather that the painting really wouldn't be complete without the viewer doing part of the work, too.

III. Completing the Picture.

Rutenberg's pictures are fun, but he's also serious about the viewer's role in the party. He describes the process of building that experience: the picture is a physical object, hung in a physical space, and the most important line is the one between the viewer's body and the painting's. He uses Hans Hofmann's push/pull technique [5] to develop that spatial relationship, to beckon you into the space, let it envelope you. He piles up paint at the edges, masses something for the feet, leaves air for the head to breath and hollows in the chest, and what begins as electric cacophony settles into something very musical, [6] geographic, maybe even biographical. He has painted very literal landscapes, but most of his work flutters in that ether between landscape and abstraction where you don't really care whether you're seeing right but can't help seeing *something*. I feel the trees and the mud, and if this is the South Carolina from which he hails, [7] I take him at his word; it feels familiar.

So while there is an about-ness to the piles of sumptuous paint, there is first and last a thing-ness to them, too. They are objects that show their work—no tricks, no mystery, just paint piled, scraped, dripped, incised, lifted and painted some more—what you see is what you get.

And *that's* how we first encounter a painting: we walk in the door, maybe to see something else entirely, and there it is—a thing. Not every picture is going to be for you, or for you right now—but Rutenberg's work, and the many favorite paintings I have in the museums around town, don't push away with indissoluble riddles, but invite you in—whenever you're ready.

As we were finishing waffles, [8] Rutenberg offered, in an offhand sort of way, an answer to Arthur Danto, of such sweetness and simplicity, that I could never have said it to the philosopher even if my fearful young mind had known it. Rutenberg was speaking about a postcard of Emmanuel Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware*—a tiny, crummy reproduction of a vast painting, a bit of ephemera that inspired his young mind to go see the genuine article. You might think the craftsman in Rutenberg would have thrown away the postcard after seeing the painting in the flesh, or that the modernist in him would have discarded the academic restraint of this tidy history painting—but he had a

very different response. He walked away observing that the artist loved you—the viewer—so much that they put this much care into the making of the object for you to see.

I have Danto's books on my nightstand and I cherish his memory, [9] but I can't find a better answer to the essence of art than *that.*

If you have yet to experience your first Rutenberg, consider this your invitation: in addition to the opening of his retrospective of 25 years at Forum Gallery on May 1st, I'll be leading a conversation with the artist on May 7th. Both the opening and the conversation are from 5:30-7:00 at 475 Park Avenue at 57th Street. No waffles, but I'm excited to share with you the electric experience of seeing, hearing, and conversing with this relentlessly refreshing mind. An online viewing room of Brian's work can be found here.

Thanks for reading.

Jonathan

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1 "Critic at *The Nation"* may sound a modest post, but he was sitting in a chair that Clement Greenberg had made Very Important—and adding to its luster.

2 The answer is either really short ("aboutness") or really long (*Transfiguration of the Commonplace,* 1981), but at any rate, he was putting his thoughts in order for what would be his last book, the ambitiously and specifically titled, *What Art Is*, which came out the year of his death, in 2013.

3 In quotes because they can't capture the fun of an IRL studio visit, but also because they do so much more. Dip into them here.

4 As quoted in *Brian Rutenberg: A Little Long Time*, 2020, p. 136.

5 Our article on Hans Hofmann here.

6 Rutenberg takes a lot of inspiration from Glenn Gould, but I hear Thelonious Monk—piling up chords at edges, unwinding dissonances with singsong melodies—and swinging all the

way. That's how *I* finish a Rutenberg, anyway.

7 Interestingly, Rutenberg studied briefly with South Carolina's modernist mentor, William Halsey, who also taught Merton Simpson decades prior—more on Halsey and Simpson here.

8 Full disclosure: I had an omelette, not waffles. I felt bad about it—I understand people take waffles very seriously in the South—but my kids have ruined waffles for me. Just can't do it.

9 I hasten to add that Danto's project in these books was to open our eyes to more—and few had eyes wider open than Danto himself. He looked at, listened to, read, and attended a huge swath of bizarre human activities, and engaged with them deeply—not for nothing was he a superstar in my book! I do not have any confidence that he would be content with my straw-manning him here, but he also seemed very forgiving.

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