

Interview with Charles Cajori

November 23, 2002

When we came into the studio, you told me which paintings were finished, and which you were still working on. So, my question, is how do you decide when a painting is finished?

Good question. [A painting is finished] when it reaches a point of tension, or spatial tension. The paintings are about the interaction of the figure and the space she's in, and how the two play upon each other. She says occasionally, you can't do this, and then the space says occasionally, she can't do this - and there's a contest. So when the two forces have reached some level of fulfillment, then a tension arises. And the tension is registered as an ambiguity, so that the space becomes very fluid. Years and years ago, in an article that Louis Finkelstein did, I talked about "the swift continuity." Very often, there's a moment in the process where you should have stopped. And very often you don't, because you don't recognize it. Usually, you know something's happening, because you stop thinking, and you're in a zone. And that condition you recognize - you know that you're in that - not at the moment, but you know it. But I've ruined many more paintings than I've ever finished. There was a really terrible thing. I had a show in 1963, at Howard Wise's [Gallery], And I had a big painting, over twelve feet, and it had about six figures - several standing figures, and it was in pretty good shape, so we figured it would go in the show. I

couldn't take it out of my studio [because it was so large], so Howard sent down a huge cardboard cylinder, and I was going to roll it. But I was still working on it three weeks before the show, and everything was fine, I thought. But there was one place - there was a center standing figure - and right above her shoulder - I didn't understand the space. So I worked and worked until I killed it. So Howard had his crew waiting to stretch it and all, and it never got in the show. So the whole question is very delicate.

[Cajori then showed me the painting "The Game" and compared its current state to its state as reproduced in: Hanover, N.H., Jaffe-Friede & Strauss Galleries, Dartmouth College, *Cajori*, exh. cat. with essays by Karen Wilkin and Norman Turner, 1996.] He explains:

The painting showed in Dartmouth, and it was reproduced. So it came back from Dartmouth, and I put it in the racks. Then, before it went down to 55 Mercer [Gallery, where it was included in an exhibition entitled *Figurative Painting Now*, November - December, 2000], I did one thing. It was started in 1990. What I did was this: I took the black out, and then the whole painting went ...[gesturing]

It opens up.

Yes, it opened it up. This [the black shape in the upper left corner of the version

reproduced in the Darmouth College exh. cat.] was an obstacle or a blockage in the rhythm.

Tell me more about that - what rhythm means to you.

Everything is rhythm. When I came to New York, jazz was really a big thing. I came on the GI bill and I went to study at Columbia - not to get a degree, just to take courses and be in New York. 52nd Street was still going then - between 5th and 6th Avenues - it was a whole jazz block. It was called the jazz block, because it had all these clubs. I had been a drummer, when I was in high school, and I always followed music and jazz. I feel a connection in not only the rhythm involved, which is continuous and non-climactic, but also the notion of improvisation. The rhythm is the control, I think. When I first became interested in art, about the same time, I became interested in jazz. The Philadelphia Museum had this marvelous collection of early, pre-Renaissance Sieneese art. Notice the Lorenzetti [a postcard reproduction of Ambrogio Lorenzetti's *Allegory of Good and Bad Government*, which was pasted on the wall of Cajori's studio].

What was the significance of Lorenzetti to you?

I must have been responding to the things I'm still interested in, although I was quite unconscious of it. But I think I was responding to the incredible spatial sense and the

tension in it.

Where did you grow up?

I was born in California, but my father got a job at the University of Pennsylvania. He was a chemist. So I grew up outside of Philadelphia. My parents grew up in Colorado Springs and they would take me for summers in Colorado. In the 9th grade I became interested in art. I had a teacher named Wayne Mark. The faculty was made up of people who were quite extraordinary, but had to have some job. The English teacher was fantastic; he had been an editor at the Baltimore Sun. He gave me a reading list between 10th and 11th Grade with *Ulysses*, Faulkner, Auden. Heavy going, you know! Anyway, I took my first life class with Boardman Robinson. I was age fourteen. It was quite a shock. There was suddenly a naked girl in the room. But I got over that rather rapidly and began drawing. But that was my first experience working from the model. And it confirmed my interest in art. In high school I did a big mural, 750 square feet, which was eventually put up on the wall.

That is pretty ambitious for a high school student!

It was very ambitious – it's something I now would hesitate to do.

And what was the subject of the mural?

Well, what happened was that in the middle of the tenth grade, my teacher showed me this wall, and asked if I'd like to do a mural. I said sure. We were going to do a watercolor to scale. I asked what would be the subject. He said, "You'd better make it education," so we did. It was corny as hell. But we submitted it to the Board of Education. And they gave me \$2,600, and this was 1936.

Wow. So you were the star of the school.

Well, yes, but there were other people studying art in the school. But I was pretty much committed.

So what did you think about working on such a large scale? You were just telling me earlier this afternoon how you prefer to work in large scale.

I like to, yes. Now I like to because I think painting is very physical. And my gesture is essential somehow, to reach the gesture of the figure and the paint. But at that time, basically, I didn't think in terms of which we're now speaking. My heroes were the

Mexican Muralists, Daumier, Delacroix, Rothko.

These were your heroes when you were in high school?

Yes. And, remember, American Scene Painting was going on then. So people like Reginald Marsh, I was aware of. Cezanne came to me much, much later. I didn't understand him at all then.

And what was it in those artists you mentioned – Daumier, Delacroix, Rothko – that you responded to then?

It was because they were all about life, birth, death. So then, I went to Cleveland Art School. I asked Boardman Robinson before I went, where he thought I should go. And he said, oh, go to the Cleveland Art School. And then he said something after that I couldn't quite understand. I got to Cleveland Art School and I was there several months, and then I realized what he had said: "If you can paint in Cleveland, you can paint anywhere!" Anyway, I was there for two years, and then I was drafted. And when I came out I was on the GI Bill and I went immediately to New York, to Columbia for two years. I took studio classes, and I got myself in to audit Meyer Schapiro's art history classes. I also went to Skowhegen for two summers, where I met Bill King.

And what were working on at this point?

I began to realize in the second year [at Columbia], 1947-48, that something was happening in New York. When I came back from the second summer at Skowhegen, I sublet an apartment from John Heliker. Heliker had the top floor, a cold water flat, the john was out in the hall, shared with the other two people on the floor. Heliker had the Prix de Rome, that's why he sublet the apartment. It was fifteen dollars a month rent. My neighbor who I lived next to was a prostitute. So all night long you would hear footsteps. But we became sort of friends; she was very nice. I at this point was living with Muriel who became my first wife. She would consult with us when she wanted to change the color of her apartment: "What do you think black would do?" It was a marvelous time. We had a child, Marion, who is now a filmmaker. But, anyway, she was born and so we moved to Brooklyn. But I needed a studio, and I found one on Broadway just below 8th Street. I shared it with a painter named Albert Swindlen, who had been one of Hofmann's students, and has had some resurgence in the last decade. Balcomb Greene owned the studio. Swindlen had job in New Jersey and he almost never came to the studio. Through Balcomb I was introduced to the Abstract Expressionists – he took me to the Club, which was at its original place on 8th Street. I remember walking in and there was a panel with George L.K. Morris, Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, and George McNeil, and Mercedes

Matter was the moderator. This was about 1950. I had met Larry Rivers and been to his studio by this time. Balcomb also took me to see Burgoyne Diller one evening.

How did you respond to going to the Club and meeting these painters?

It was very exciting and it changed my life – it changed my painting. During that period I worked completely abstractly. I met Kline at a coffee shop on the corner of Mercer and 8th Street and he invited me to his studio. We became friends. It was wide open. The older generation was completely open. It was a small community. I worked abstractly and it was on that basis that I got a Fulbright Grant in September 1952. The Tanager Gallery was started in 1952. Fred Mitchell and Ippolito found this storefront with big windows. They came to me and said, “Let’s start a gallery.” So after much hesitation we did, and we went through the summer, not understanding the art world stopped during the summer. We had a group show in the middle of that summer. We also gave Albert Swindlen a show in the beginning. De Kooning was in the group show and I went to his studio to pick a painting.

Woman I was up on the wall.

Then I went to Italy. I went to Rome.

What was your experience like in Rome?

It was fantastic. In 1952 there were almost no cars in Rome. I was apparently very rich on sixty dollars a month. I lived in Roma Vecchia. It was very meaningful.

What were you working on at the time?

Well, I brought with me all of my new notions I had gotten from my associations with the Abstract Expressionists. So I made what I suppose you could call Abstract Expressionist paintings. However, all during this time, even when I was making totally abstract paintings, I was constantly also working directly from the model. So that always persisted. I came to a point where I realized I didn't know why I was doing them.

Why has the figure held your attention for so long? Why do you paint from life?

Well, the paintings are not from life, they are made up. But certain drawings are from life. [Cajori points to a drawing in his studio which is from life]. The tension in that drawing, is what I want to touch. It has that sense of tension. Also, working from life keeps me in touch with the body. And also, I like it. There's a sexual component. I've told this story before. I drew in the 1950's with a group. Paul Georges, Lois Dodd, Alex Katz came a couple times. Later on Mercedes Matter got involved, and George McNeil. But I increasingly became impatient with the accommodations one has to make in a group. So I

sold a painting – a big sale – and so I had this money, and I was teaching at Cooper Union, so I asked one of the students if she wanted to model. She came to my studio. First time I ever had a private model. At this point I was drawing very analytically – trying to locate things – where, say, an elbow was in relation to a chair – through the whole field. So often a drawing would just look like a bunch of marks. So she worked – the model – and she was very sexy. I knew what I felt, but I wasn't sure what she felt. So finally I said, "Let's take a break. I'll make coffee." So after a while I said "Let's draw some more." And I wasn't sure whether I felt a flicker of disappointment or not. So she took the pose. And finally the tension was so strong, I couldn't take it anymore, so I went "Arrrrhhh!" And drew the arm. It was a turning point. I never drew in that analytical style any more. So the experience of drawing from the model is central. What the story means is that the notion of how to get the volume is the issue. I was trying to take the arm and form it right away.

[Cajori compares an older painting from the 1970's with his new work.] There's a fragmentation in the older paintings, that the new things don't have. The new things are all torn up and there's a person in it. But for example the arm [in a more recent painting] has a kind of density and weight, which these don't have. Also I became involved in the notion of the anticipation of movement. But that kind of solution to the thing doesn't answer the answer the "I want the thing itself." This has been a preoccupation for quite a while – probably since my experience with the model in the studio. The reason why I paint is to find out – it's not to make a product – it's an ongoing set of issues, which seem to be very

alive, and seem to shift all the time. Although in that retrospective I had, there was a continuity that the work had which was startling. I had thought there were major changes going on. And there were major changes, and there still are major changes, but it's also surprisingly consistent. But the trick is to keep alive these issues.

And what are the primary issues for you?

How to represent us. I think that our experience of the world is no longer answerable in terms of how do we represent ourselves – no longer a perspectival issue. The space we experience and which we project is a very, very beautiful pleasure – and I think it has to do with how do we understand where we are in nature. And in 2002, we better find this out fast, because we are committing suicide. The visual language is integral to expressing how or where we see ourselves. The struggle for the artist is how to find that interaction which will not have the aggression and arrogance. We're not the center of the world as the humanists thought in the fifteenth century.

How do you create space in your paintings?

I'm not sure I can answer that. I can simply describe the process. It's not preconceived. I start dumbly... and probably remain dumbly! I make a mark. The paintings start with a

group of drawings but they are immediately totally transformed into a sketch. I refer to that just to start, but then I throw that away. The events that happen on the canvas – each determines the next move. And then at some point the issue becomes the tension I've talked about – if it's happening.

Earlier something came up in our talk that I don't think we fully resolved. You said that while you were painting abstractly, you were simultaneously making drawings from the model. You said you were wondering why you were still doing this. Maybe you can discuss this some more.

I would go to see a show of one of the abstract painters, and I'd think "Wow." And then I'd go back [to my studio] and I'd think, "I can do this." And I would do it. So I began to feel that my decision had do with taste; that they were not coming from myself. So I began to enter this set of questions. My first show at the Tanager Gallery was 1956, and it was figurative. James Schuyler wrote about it; he talked about landscape. Philip Pearlstein and I were quite friendly. He lived on Avenue B and I lived on Tompkins Square. We were drawing together once and after the model took her pose I thought something was wrong with the way her arm was positioned. Philip said it was just right. We were arguing about it, and finally I looked at his drawing. He had – in his typical way – made a few dots around to establish the general composition, but then he had finished painting the

arm! He looked at my drawing and all he saw was a set of lines all over the field. And he said, “Well, what difference does it make to you?”!

How do you move from place to place in your painting – in other words Philip had completed one area of the drawing before he started another area. How is that different from your process of working?

Central to my notion of perception is the smallness of the focal area. We see barely a dime’s worth in one shot. In order to see something, our eyes move. As soon as they start moving, everything begins to become subject to that journey. Brushmarks are okay to talk about but it is this restructuring with that notion which totally collapses the notion of the schema of the painting. Therefore to finish one thing and then to move to another does not accommodate that movement.

So you move through your canvas or your drawing in the way your eye would move.

Yes, I try to. I went last summer to the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art] and I had three experiences. The first one was in the Cezanne room. I stopped to look at one of the paintings – one I hadn’t paid much attention to before – with hills, and a valley and a house. There was nobody else in the gallery. The painting started to shift and move and finally it

enclosed me. I must have been there fifteen minutes. I remember the guard looking at me, you know! Then I went to look at a Braque from the Gelman Collection. And my eye moved through it. And then I got to this place and I said, “Now Braque what am I supposed to do?” And Braque said, Oh you go this way. And again I had a long ten or so minutes, having a conversation with Braque.

Is Cezanne one of your artistic heroes?

He is but I don't think of him much directly. It took me a long time to understand him, and I don't know if I yet completely understand him – as my experience with the landscape at the Met showed. But another person is Soutine.

What is about Soutine that you respond to?

In all of these people, Cezanne, Braque and Soutine, and other older painters like Piero, rhythm is central. And in Soutine the rhythm is absolutely incredible. It's along the lines of my concerns.

We were talking about Cezanne and you mentioned that for you, the brushstroke is not the main thing. So what do you think about the brushstroke or the line in your own work?

I'll tell you this story. I had a show, and Angelo Ippolito who had a loft in the same building as I did, offered to help hang the show. And we hung the show, and Angelo said to me, "Gee, Cajori, I really like the way you handle the brush." I had never seen the way I handled the brush. And I thought, "Oh, shit, that's not what I was doing." Of course, it was part of what I was doing, but I was totally unaware of it, as an activity. People talk about, for example, they see a Degas, and they say "Wow, look at that beautiful line." And it is a beautiful line, but Degas didn't say "I'm making a beautiful line." Degas was trying, like hell, to make the line mean something. And if it became beautiful, that's something else.

Can you tell me about your process? How do you begin a painting?

I sit here, and I think of all the things I could do. I make little pencil drawings. They also sort of produce the beginning of a painting. But then I leave those quickly, and I go to the painting. Because something starts happening on the canvas. I only spend about ten minutes on the drawings. For example, I might be trying to figure out how the arm [on a figure] in a painting is going to work, so I'll make a drawing about how I think the arm would work.

...

In the middle of the 1960's, I became very doubtful. I began questioning whether I knew anything, about what I was doing, about painting. I began working with one model for three years, and I made very studied drawings of her. I would draw from her two or three times a week, and then I made it up. Also I began to make a series of drawings which were much more specific. There was this period of doubt. The drawings were okay, but the paintings went through a really rough period, where they became very explicit, in terms of describing. But then I reverted back. I was a friend of [Philip] Guston, and I remember the painting in his studio, just before he had a big show at the Guggenheim, a retrospective. When he was still abstract - big, dark shapes. He got nervous about showing them [the Guggenheim staff] things, and he was a ham, a very charming man. He would say, "see that dark shape, that's such and such. See those shapes over there, those people are going to get it." He had these narratives he was making up for the paintings. And then he had his first show of the work he later became famous for, and it was a shock. To almost everybody. I didn't like them at first. He's an example of that jump, that sudden shift, we are talking about.

Do you think abstraction and figuration are different?

No. It seems me the best of the figurative paintings, paintings that have objects in them, are good to the extent that they're abstract.

One of the articles I read about you refers to you as part of the "second generation New York school artists." Do you think of yourself as part of this generation?

Only in that I am the same age as people like Mike Goldberg. But on the other set, my set of concerns is not generally the way the second generation played out. Well, I don't think of Leland Bell as the second generation. And he didn't. While I was closer to that group, I was not like Mike Goldberg who simply carried on the same set of issues. It seems to me that my obsession with the figure, I think removed me from the second generation. The term Abstract Expressionism itself is a dubious one. There were so many variations and conflicts as a group that to make this big umbrella term [is problematic.]

Did you see the time when you were beginning to incorporate the figure more into your paintings as a shift at all?

I can't pinpoint that to a day. The only pivot I'm aware of is the one that I described about the model. But these shifts seem to occur over the years, but I pretty much gave up total abstraction.

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