

Interview with Rosemarie Beck
by Jennifer Samet

November 7, 2002

A life. A life lived. I don't know what that means. It's never what one hopes. I don't mean that it isn't what I hoped. But I feel that I could have done a lot more, if I had a better education. I didn't really have schooling as... I had art history. I studied music. I always drew and painted. And when I was in college, I made my way by doing sketches and portraits and things like that. How bad they were I cannot say. And worked in theatre, when I was in high school and college. Painted sets and did make up. And you know, you have to be pretty clever to make a twenty year old look one hundred. So I got very good at aging people. That was my big number. I always loved to draw and paint. It was a great pleasure in my life. Just to draw. I don't think I was very imaginative. I think my impulse was to make it look like what it was. So I don't recall that I ever made what you would call children's drawings. My son never did either. It was a great disappointment to me.

Were your parents artistically inclined?

My mother was somewhat artistic and my father was rather musical. Serious art never entered our problems in those days. I mean, you had to be prepared to make a living, or be a nice wife or something. Dirt under your fingernails was not a good thing.

Where did you grow up?

Westchester. I went to the local school, which was very beautiful. On the lake. We had a good orchestra. And there was a good theatre. A very good theatre. Better than we had at Oberlin. They had places where you could build sets, a wonderful stage. So I had a good experience there. I had sort of the run of the shop – the shop where you paint the sets - with the quite awful smelling water paint and fish glue. A happy time. One thing you'd have to inscribe upon an artist is aloneness. Even though painters are maybe less alone than writers. They tend to be sociable and good at bars. Still whatever you have to do, you have to do alone. So what I remember from that early time in that little room where I made the sets, is that joyfulness of being able to do it all alone.

Have you felt this aloneness throughout your career?

I have, but I think it is chosen by me. I am teaching all these many years, and I marvel at the fact that everybody can paint in front of everybody. I'd love to be able to do that. How can they do it? How can they even think or concentrate when someone is behind them? It's a rather good discipline not to be so self-conscious. I admire it. I'm trying to think of artists who were not very lonely. I think of the time that Cezanne studied with Pissarro. I mean it was the one time in his life when he was not so alone. I remember Paul Georges,

who taught one year at Queens College when I was there, teaching in the next room. And I watched him, with bated breath, because he did everything in the un-academic way. In the first place, he didn't let the students paint for many months. He talked, talked about Breughel.... I left the door open to my class; I was listening in amazement. And then he said, "Now you're going to paint. But you're not going to say anything. You're going to watch me." And he hired his model, and he put her on a stepladder. He made everybody bring in an enormous canvas. He said, "You don't have a canvas, get a sheet, put gesso on it, and paint over it." They all painted pictures just like his. And if they had any questions – they went up to see what he was doing. Wow. That's of course the way to do it. That is the un-self-conscious. The right arrogance. The right presumption. The effective presumption. Someone like — I'm thinking of my fellows — Lennart Anderson, I think, would not be able to do that. I would think he wouldn't have anyone around - except maybe the model, and the model would never get to see the picture. But I've never discussed this with him. Resika? I think he wouldn't mind being out in public painting. That openness could make one's work a little more accessible - less heavy. Titian had lots of people around all the time. I don't think Rembrandt did. He had his classes; he worked on his students' work. But I think there were screens in the room. In the Renaissance there were open studios. But there were secrets. You wouldn't just let anyone in. I love landscape painting. I love to go out into the landscape. I used to go out only in the early mornings. You'll see any landscape of mine is black, and not because I was using black,

but because it was really very dark. The minute the people come and bother you - it bothers me. I find it admirable to think of those painters who go out and work in the park. I was in France last year, and I took a trip to Rimini. I went in the car with some other people — and never in all that pretty landscape, that famous landscape, by the sea — never did I see an easel. Never did I see anyone painting or drawing. The few Americans who were in this place were out there drawing. It must have looked a sight to the townsmen. So I don't know if that tradition has vanished now, to go out with your easel and your beret.

How has music influenced your work?

It has influenced it in a continuous way. Because it was the first formal education I had in any artistic venture. The structure stayed with me a long time. Without even knowing it, I'm using it. Many painters were musicians too. In the Nineteenth-Century, the violin, which was my instrument, was the instrument of the times. Manet played the violin. It was an easy thing to carry around. I'm trying to think if there was a parallel in the way they work, to music. Rhythm and harmony and things like that.

Do you think of those elements in your work?

I don't think of them overtly, but yes, that is characteristic. In what key is a painting?

Maybe it's not so specific, but when I make a movement, it is not the movement that the form dictates, but it is something parallel to what music dictates. Things like that I do think of, but I try not to, because it is very different. None of the arts are like one another. But other forms of art do always move artists. They always seem more perfect than one's own. I don't know any painters who don't read, and who aren't moved by it. And I find it very different to read sentences that are not rhythmic. Even if the meaning were intense and important and splendid. So there are lots of German philosophers who I couldn't even read the first paragraph, because I could not get into the rhythm. Rhythm is very important.

Who are some of the painters that you think have rhythm?

Well, Titian has rhythm. All the great painters have rhythm. The rhythm of the way you perceive it too. The rhythm of their thought developing. And when you study them, the thing is to draw from them. And I never did that enough. But in the last ten years when I've been at the Studio School - they have a function every year - and they have a theme that is Titian or whatever - so I've been drawing from them. And the most difficult thing is to figure out, what did they do first? Because it is very important to one's education. Getting into the nature of the subject - the formal subject. Even though there were many tactics: some painters painted with a dark ground, and built on that with light. Others, like the Impressionists, worked the other way. But each one produced a different modus, a

different moment to moment. And even though painting is in space, it's in time. It's in time every time you read it. So when you ask me about this, I'm thinking about all the paintings I see differently every time I look at them. I mean, that's how I tend to test them. So when I go to the Met, my favorite painting — I have to see it every time I go — is the big Rembrandt self portrait. It seems big - it's a little over life size. I mean, the Met collection of Western art doesn't compare to the Prado's, but still, there are a few treasures. The Rembrandt - I never see it the same way. I think I do, but each time, I am seeing something else. That's very important to me. Cezanne's portrait of Madame Cezanne - sometimes it's grand, other times vertiginous, about to fall. And if I read it from one place to another, I see another set of harmonies of thought. That's a hard thing to ascribe to painting, but it does have a teleology.

I suppose the lesson I had from Oberlin... I majored in art history. I started with music but I eventually found I was not going to be able to stay in the practice room five hours a day. I was too curious. That experience, of the great works of art history, the complexity of the artist's experience, the subject matter, the meaning, the history behind it, made it difficult to settle for abstract painting. Though I was an abstract painter for many years. I had three shows as an abstract painter, and at the time, it was sufficient. And when I had to stop — I didn't mean to stop — I thought I could just stop for a little while and move on, I found out how much I really had to learn, to do what I wanted to do. So I've gone from simpler to more complex, though it really should be the other way around. I just spoke to

Resika on the phone, and he liked the head illustrated in this catalog. [Dayton, Ohio, Write State University Galleries, 2002. *Rosemarie Back: Paintings 1965-2001*, exh. cat.] He said, "That's a nice simple head," but that's only a detail of something. To be simple is a great thing. It is for most artists - or we've been told to think that way. But I don't find that to be true of me. Maybe for other people. Meaning, to be pared down, clear, dogmatic. I'm trying to think of those who aren't this way. There aren't very many. I don't even tell myself to do that.

Do you think you are more involved with the history of art because you are a representational painter?

There's only one country for art. So it doesn't matter. I have to tell you frankly - the pared down, abstract paintings, even the greatest ones - I have to say Mondrian is great - but I find it very difficult to look at a very good abstract painting. It is one image, grand as it is. Rothko or something like that, I don't really want to look. The only abstract painter that interested me more recently was Joan Mitchell. I don't mean I liked her paintings, I just was marveling at her fertility. And it seemed to me that she was borrowing from everywhere - not figuratively - but from everything that was around her, and folding it into the greatest luxury, which you couldn't do if you were painting a figure - you couldn't have a splash - that would destroy the other side of your argument. I mean, how much does the

image require? It does require something. It doesn't mean stripped down, it means it has to be strong, bearing up - to keep this tension going. Which in her case, to call it "Onward To the Sea" or "John Was Happy," it's not enough for me. But that's me. Here's this tremendous talent. And in the age she produced was the right age for her to be. She was made for that age. But after about fifteen minutes [of looking at her work], I felt as though I were in the delicatessen. Nothing held me as awkward or uncomfortable or memorable. The sheer painting magic wasn't there - it never is. But it did for a little while, except I was never so luxurious. I was never a luxurious painter.

What drew you to painting abstractly?

I think being a young mother, though when I first married very young my husband and I we got a little bit of money and someone lent us a house upstate, on a lake - in winter. The house was really a summer house. So we lived in two little rooms which were heated. I thought I'm going to learn to be an artist - I'll start with Giotto. And I started studying. But very soon thereafter we moved to Woodstock - and that was a sort of artists' colony - we met Philip Guston, and a few other artists. Thinking about the nature of making art, and whether we had to be figurative. Whether finally it was about itself. So it seemed to be the most blissful state. But I have to say that all the while I painted abstract paintings, a large part of me was doing other things - making sketches. But it doesn't take very long to be a

very good abstract painter. It takes a very long time to become a good figurative painter.

Because of this burden you're carrying - of the image. These issues confuse - and should, I think. But the formal issues of painting seem to be clearer when there's something to construct. Something in front of your eyes, or in your mind, something that belongs to the world, like a tree, or a figure.

What are those formal issues that are most important to you?

I'm going to say space is the first issue. To create a space that is believable - not a surface. I'm dealing with this now with my students. But issues about how to go from here to there are important issues of style.

What does that word mean to you - style?

I haven't thought about this in while. There are styles - and then there is Style. By "Style" I mean possession of place, the sense of mystery, your being inside. It's a big issue, instead of something like "I like your style," or "He has a good style." That is more manner, or *metier*. But it does mean that even if someone may look arcane, or anachronistic. I'm taking a chance - but I think that anything painted between 1960 and today would look of its time. I can recognize for example, in the early works of mine - this

is what was going on at the time, this is how people were painting. But I can see in this painting [*Self Portrait*, 1958]- my figurative urges were coming out. For Philip Guston too - I can see that, while he was always an abstract painter. But if one were to do a picture like that today, one would say, "Gee, you can't do that." It doesn't mean that you're not in it. And that that's the way you think. And the intervals, and the scale, would go right through your work all through the rest of your days. This painting [abstract painting illustrated in exh. cat.] is not so different from all the rest of my paintings - in terms of how far this is from that, where this is, how it moves back and forth.

So, in other words, you were dealing with the same formal issues?

I don't really think I was so much dealing with the formal issues - I mean I apprehended them - as that those were my issues. And they remain my issues. The same issues.

At this time - in the 1950's - who were your painter friends?

Bradley Tomlin was a very good friend. And Philip Guston. They were my teachers - in the sense that I hadn't been to school. They were very generous and encouraging. I mean you learn a lot from someone not because they are instructing you, or because you're in their class, but because of the way they drink their coffee! You identify and imitate and

listen and want to speak, and that's how you grow.

When was it that you began to paint more figuratively?

Well, it was many years - many paintings that were slowly moving toward a more normative mode, but I hate that word normative. Gabriel Laderman uses that word.

Do you consider yourself part of a generation of figurative painters?

Yes, in a way, I do. Though we didn't know each other. I didn't know any of them. I met them subsequently. I don't mean I am close friends with all of them. But I am very close with Paul Resika. I mean, we're practically brother and sister.

Actually, that's what he said about you. That you were like his sister.

I was introduced to him by a former student of mine, and when I met him, I thought he was my brother! I was pregnant with my first child.

What were you thinking about at the time that your work began to move in a more figurative direction?

There were some rules that were fixed upon us at the time, like the Holy Grail. Namely, that art had to be flat. That you couldn't be illusionistic. That was a rule that I carried with me, it was a rather good issue in a way. In other words, I didn't want to fly into ambiguities. I wanted to be sure that two things are working together. Sometimes I turned my pictures upside down, not because of the subject matter, but because of my issue with the space. It's all formal. In this painting [another painting in the exh. cat.] in the background is another painting turned upside down. I was thinking - this is an arrangement - this is not nature. Some painters are more naturalistic, like Paul Georges, don't you think?

In a way, yes, but his paintings are never completely from nature.

No, not from nature, but they don't have to be from nature to be naturalistic. For example, one of the greatest naturalistic painters, I think is Velazquez. But his paintings are not from nature, I don't think. When I say, from nature, I mean, all in one. I never paint that way. For example, if I want to put in a boy in my painting - and I have a boy I'm painting, that's all I have. Or I might have used a drawing for a certain part. In other words, my paintings are put together. And yet the impulse is to make it real. Not necessarily naturalistic, but natural enough.

I'm thinking more about color now than I was then [earlier in my career]. I have very symbolic colors. My early ones are easier to read. The difference between my early work and my more recent work, is that in the early work, the fragments are more "thing-like": the things themselves are moving the form, whereas later on, aspects of the form are moving themselves. This would move through that to something else — according to my eye — I don't know if anyone else would see it. But if I have a passage here, it's a passage there. It isn't that I've got a figure against a drape. Rather more it's about the internal rhythms. I'm going to use the example of Titian, whose life trajectory is very clear to us. When we think of the early Titians (they're always so very great) one thinks of this figure, that figure, and later it's all a flame, or it's all water, or it's all earth. Something begins to happen, it leaves the real "thing-ness" and becomes the vapor. You couldn't take anything apart from anything. The total unity of the spirit goes beyond the confines of the object. I'm bound by edges sometimes too. But the music in me tells me to let it go - you don't need that edge. You need something else. But that's always a question with me. To go further means which way to go further. As a confined, defined form, or as part of an ongoing situation? It becomes subject. Language and subject become one. That's what "Style" really is. If one could ever reach it. When you undertake something that is so precarious as an old fashioned narrative — this is a self portrait with the stuff in my studio — it doesn't have that implication. This [pointing to illustration of *Studio*, 1999 in exh. cat] is my friend, [who] I shared the studio with, when she wasn't there. These are the stuffs that I had

around. Made-up sculptures. It was a still life that I rearranged. I wasn't looking at them. When I am working on a still life, I look at the objects. There is a still-life in here [in exh. cat.] which was done from life, and only from life. It is very different. And not from a different point of view. The still life is seen. But that doesn't mean it's not abstract. This is a very big issue. It's a big issue in teaching. How do you get from A to B. Usually when there is something in front of you, you can find a way. When there isn't you have "Style."

How do you see your brushstroke?

I see it as a note of music. As not very important. Well, important in terms of how it is going and where it is going. Up or down or this way and that way. But not in terms of it being limpid. I can be [limpid] in the sketches, where I am not building. If you are going to paint on a picture for a long time, and you don't want to be in the same place, this is a good way of moving. Moving is very important to me. To be able to move this away from that. You've taken off, and you've put it on. Erasing is very important; it's a form of taking off and putting on. It seems to me that it's a very simple-minded way of dealing with very complex things. There is something that is simple, and that [the brushstroke] is the simple thing. In 1960, I went to Europe for the first time, to study realist painters. Particularly, I was going to study Caravaggio. Because I thought I would have to learn chiaroscuro. I found myself looking at the primitives more, but it didn't matter, because it was a very

instructive time for me. Those few months, I really studied painting. Learning names and dates, I didn't realize I was doing that, but I was. I felt the closeness to the great 16th and early 17th century painting, closer to my own temperament more than the primitives or Mexican art, so it was important. But I wasn't really happy until eleven years later when I went to Amsterdam and saw the Rembrandts *in situ* - the etchings - and felt that I'd come home to my daddy! A funny thing, very presumptuous of me. But artists have the right to eat other artists - I mean, to devour them, cannibalize them.

How long do you work on a painting?

Long sometimes, very long. But intensity varies day after day. And I work on more than one painting at the same time. But lately, the older I get, the more I am stuck on one picture. I used to be able to move from one to another. To be very frank, I can see why. The harmonies were closer, the colors were closer. So I didn't have to change my colors every time. Later on each one was slightly different in terms of their harmonies.

How do you know when a painting is finished?

I don't know any more. I used to know. I could know when everything was tied up. Now I don't know. I want to open it each time. Closing wasn't, I would say, more important to

me, but I could close. I would say I can't close any more. You should talk to Gabriel Laderman about this, because I think closure is very important to him. I don't mean closure like Philip Pearlstein, where everything is closure. You mention this and I think it is a component of every artist - whether one is closed or open. And of course I teach by trying to open them - to get more.

Why do you think it has gotten harder for you to "close" your paintings?

More ambiguity. It's something about what I said earlier - that I haven't gotten simpler, I've gotten more complex. Now if I had three minutes to do a sketch - I could decide this goes here, that goes there. But if you were going on and on, and remaking - it could go on forever. It would be wonderful to have one that you could go on forever. And the only reason to stop would be that the canvas got icky. I don't paint heavy, but they get heavy.

Do you scrape your paintings down?

I take them down sometimes, but not every day. So at a certain point it gets uncomfortable - that thick surface. So there's a point at which I just can't go any further.

Do you use mediums in your work?

Very little. I don't use any of that fancy new stuff.

Do you mix colors or use them straight from the tube?

I rarely use paints straight from the tube. Except certain colors - like cobalt violet, you can't mix it, it's so fragile. In the very beginning I used certain yellows - like a Naples yellow - I used straight from the tube. But the odd thing is, I have changed my palette drastically over the years, all these reds in my paintings - they all look alike anyway. I got fed up, and reduced my palette to burnt umber, a little black some white, yellow-white. When I see how the students paint with Graham [Nickson] at the Studio School — they have mixed colors and tints — they're all terribly expensive they've already spent about seventy-five dollars and then with the linen - it's already three-hundred dollars they've spent. I suggest to the students just using the colors in Guston's painting - cadmium red with light, black, ultramarine blue and maybe a little yellow. Take away the primaries. And when I do that they are in trouble. You can make very rich harmonies with very few colors. I think of Resika as being a colorist - but it is layered. That's why the small stroke helps in keeping the color still in there, underneath. So I'm using thick and thin too. So I haven't done this much, but I have, in the past, used glazes. The color overlaps. That tends to fade in time, but it gives a different quality to the movement of color. Maybe it's more about light than

color. I would say that light is more important than color.

Is it more important to you now, or has it always been?

Always. I'm not a colorist. You might suspect it. I should suspect it. Because anytime something goes wrong in a class, I think, I could fix that in no time at all. I'll dip into some cadmium yellow light, and suddenly everything is beautiful. But it doesn't satisfy me.

Maybe I'm not letting myself indulge myself.

It sounds like you deliberately want to make challenges for yourself.

I do. If you take a narrative subject - it's a great challenge to not make it obvious or dopey.

...

What happens if you don't have talent but you have instead passion, understanding, hunger? Maybe you're better off. In the old days, that wouldn't have happened. But in a funny way, today, you could be an artist without having any desire to paint a picture, or having talent for it. This is a very peculiar age, when ninety percent of the artists are not naturally gifted. What do they teach in school? I had a girl in my class who said she was an art major. But what did she study? She said she had a photography class, and then she had conceptual art. You sit in the corner and decide what your art will be. But you never draw

from life, you never paint. You never worry about your color and how it moves, you never make a study after Degas. That's why the Studio School is important. One of the students said, "God. It's like the old times!" The Academy or something.

What are you working on right now?

I am working out of the theme of Phaedra.

Maybe you could discuss some of the different mythic themes you've depicted in your work:

The Tempest, Orpheus. What draws you to these stories?

The Tempest was very obvious. I carried that theme along in my head for a long time.

And it was stimulated by reading the first line. And the writer's aside "Enter Mariners, wet." I was fascinated by how one could paint that. So that was a fun time for me. I spent five or six years working on that. Very rich, with seascapes, full of characters, wedding scenes, death scenes. Some of the Greek stories I was using out of Antigone and Phaedra, are pretty much alike - as far as who's in it - there's usually a father figure, and a young lover. I love the story of Phaedra. And I love the lines - but mostly I love the lines of Shakespeare. Just the lines, they haunt me. "The fringed curtains of your eyes advance." Wow, from open your eyes, which is what he means. Shakespeare has a beautiful freedom

with language. It really excited me very much, as much as music. And in Phaedra, the human misery - the helplessness of human creatures and the gods screwing them up so. And then there are these heroic women characters. Phaedra is not very nice. Antigone was good. It's also the set. The subject matter in Phaedra requires me to paint her with her nurses and children around her. So some of it comes out of that. If someone asked me to paint the story of *Anna Karenina*, I could do that. But I couldn't do fantasy stories, like the *Lord of the Rings*.

So is it maybe about human stories?

Maybe it's something one can identify with, maybe it's part of one's life, maybe it isn't. It doesn't really matter. The story of Phaedra — in love with her husband's son — it's a terrible story. But it's all about jealousy. Jealousy is a powerful emotion. I'm really using more Racine than I am Euripides, because I barely talk about the father. Actually, Euripides doesn't call it Phaedra - he calls it Hippolytus. Who doesn't interest me as much. What interests me is the character who is killed by Poseidon as a great wave or a bull coming out of the sea. That's sort of a challenge that I don't think I could pull off. But I'm going to try it. I had the luck of a friend practically my age, who posed for many of these figures of Phaedra. She posed for all of these figures [in *Phaedra*, 1998-99 illus. in exh. cat.]. I mean I didn't paint it from life, I made drawings. But if I needed a pose or something like

that.

So when you work from a model, you are usually drawing at that time?

Yes, I am usually drawing.

What other themes did you depict?

I did works that I called "The Earthly Paradise." There's only one reproduced in here, but I worked on those for four or five years. And then I moved back into the musical theme.

My brother has this charming house in Tuscany. Like in this painting - [*Concert in Tuscany*, 1998.] And I painted at my friend's house on Lake Winnepesaukee.

The musical theme is of particular interest to you?

Yes, well, for one thing, I know how musicians look. And I would go to concerts and sketch.

Who are your contemporaries that you particularly admire?

Leland Bell was the one I admired the most.

What is about his work that you admire?

It's the exact reverse of everything I do. But it's very musical, and it's very rhythmic. It's very classical. And we're very much alike – he wouldn't admit it. Except that I'm open and he's closed – he's doing it with shape. And I love his austerity, his assurance, his toughness.

Do you share some of his artistic influences, such as Derain?

No. Not Derain. I mean, we both were interested in Giotto. And there are some very good Derains – I was just looking at a book of his work recently. But Leland was much more scholarly and passionate about the things he liked than ever I am. I'm not a hero worshipper, like he was. My husband [Robert Phelps] was a hero worshipper. I'm afraid I love a master like Rembrandt. And Cezanne is my teacher – I should have said that. I didn't have a teacher but I have Cezanne. He is wide open to learn from. It's all there to learn. Even if you imitate him, you truly learn. I've always been fond of Manet. I don't always like all his paintings, but I love his style. He had style. An astonishingly elegant painter. I love the way he looks at things. I don't know if you could say that about Degas

– he was a very good portraitist. But there was a sweet tender melancholy in Manet – he keeps a distance but he gets up to it in a way. To me he was a marvelous portraitist. So I’m not loving the same artists as Leland did – like Héliou. I find him bad. And he liked Leger and Giacometti too. I fought with my old friend Mercedes [Matter] for years over Giacometti. Because he’s kind of the god of our school. So I didn’t really like Leland’s book of heroes that much. He was a narrative painter – his paintings had a subject matter, I mean, maybe not a narrative, but they’re not totally abstract. Once we are on a panel together – and in his paintings there’s a woman and man in bed – and I said, “Am I right in thinking that this means the loss of innocence?” And he was furious. But the reason for narrative is to represent those basic human things.

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