

## In Conversation: Joshua Abelow Interviews Ted Gahl

Joshua Abelow: One of the things I like about your work is that it is both abstract and figurative. Can you elaborate on how you began working this way?

Ted Gahl: I've always responded to both kinds of work. Like a lot of people who paint and draw, I grew up trying to represent the world around me. I was looking at some drawings the other day that I made in 1990, and although they were shaky, the attention to small detail was pretty wild. I was drawing people of all shapes and sizes, tiny insignias and logos, all the little gauges in the instrument cluster of a car, etc. I was obviously spending a lot of time just looking and enjoyed rendering what I saw.

When I got older, I looked at a lot of books at my grandparent's house in New Haven. Artists like Albers, Klee, Rothko, and a local painter named Alfred Tulk. These artists showed me different approaches to drawing and painting that continue to influence me.

I enjoy the subtle palettes and pictorial simplicity in a lot of abstract/minimal work. At the same time, I am a sucker for purely figurative paintings. I continually employ elements of both to keep it interesting for myself, and hopefully, the viewer. I don't believe the genuine abstraction is without the concrete, the ordinary, the figurative. I'm not convinced that there's a clear line between the two. I think there is always a real beginning or reference, and then a personal interpretation.

JA: As a younger artist, I remember feeling a certain type of pressure to choose one or the other. Looking back, I wonder why I felt like that since artists have been working in a multitude of styles for over one hundred years. This idea that an artist can make different types of work, both abstract and figurative, still seems to create confusion or ruffle feathers. Did you feel any pressure to pick one over the other when you were a student?

TG: When I was a student, there were definitely professors, critics, and visiting artists that were in favor of finding a "style" and sticking with it, kind of like creating your own visual brand. This is not a concept I truly understand, nor is it a way I could ever create work, even if I tried.

This idea that you have to pick sides is a far too political for a practice that is based on breaking rules. When Guston ditched his AbEx roots for the style he is now renowned for, you read that he lost a lot of friends and



Ted Gahl, Untitled (Sails), 2012. Acrylic, colored pencil, and stretcher keys on canvas, 14 in. x 11 in.

**NY ARTS**the international guide to the **art world**

June 2012

support at the time. They express their anger and distaste, but I think it was more suppressed jealousy than anything else. He was doing what he wanted and not worrying, and I think people were in awe of that. I think that's inspiring.

JA: I love that you say art-making is based on breaking rules. Are there any young artists working today who are breaking rules in interesting ways? Perhaps you are breaking some rules in your own studio -- what have you been up to since your New York debut at Dodge Gallery last October?

TG: Ironically, I think a lot of older artists that I look at are successfully pushing the envelope when it comes to that aspect. People like Jim Shaw, Henry Taylor, Chris Martin, and Dorothy Iannone continue to impress me, because they seem to really live inside and embrace these worlds that they create. I picture them as artists who would be making the work they make regardless of the prestigious shows they do, the galleries they work with, collectors they have, etc..

In my opinion, Carroll Dunham's last few shows have conveyed the most raw, erratic, sexually, and politically charged images I have ever seen. They stand out from the crowd; they are completely honest. That isn't to say that there aren't plenty of younger artists making phenomenal work right now. If anything, the percentage of talent out there is at an all time high. I'm a total pushover, if it has paint on it, chances are I'll dig it. But I think it takes time to develop your own narrative, your own story. To me, fit and finish is not a stand-in for experience. As far as my own work, it has honestly been a little tough since that show. Before that, I was making work without a care in the world, because chances are, I wouldn't be showing the bulk of it, let alone all of it. Then you start working with galleries, and you see what collectors respond to, what sells and what doesn't, and you realize that art is, in fact, a business. I'm coming to terms with that, and I'm grateful to be working with people that give me tremendous leeway. My goal for the rest of the year is to just crank out work like I used to and not analyze every move so much, and maybe break some of my own rules along the way.

JA: You just reminded me of that great quote by Andy Warhol about art and business: "Being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art. Making money is art and working is art and good business is the best art."

TG: Yeah, he obviously had it way more figured out than I do. I kind of veered into painting and fine art because it seemed so distant from, business and promotion, which is what my father grew up doing and still does (advertising). I now understand what a naive, idealistic assessment that was. I'm glad that the artworld seems to have this relentless buoyancy, funding, and interest. With the Internet, more galleries, and more collectors than ever, it gives artists the chance to connect and exhibit, whereas twenty years ago a lot of them would have gone completely unnoticed.

JA: I recently reread Paul Feeley's Bennington Art Policy (which he wrote in 1959). Number 20 on the list is particularly inspirational: "To emphasize the notion of the study of art as a way of leading to a way of life, not the study of art as the acquisition of a vocational technique leading to immediate success." Are there any particular books or texts that inform your work or inspire you?

TG: I remember sitting with my grandfather when I was little. He had been a Prisoner of War in WWII—the kind of guy that had seen a lot in his life. A butterfly was outside the window, and I asked him "Hutch, what is the point of butterflies?" He looked at me, then glanced at his glass of bourbon for a moment, and replied: "I don't know...to suck the stuff out of the damn bushes?"