

## On Working

*A talk delivered at the Yale Summer School of Art at Norfolk, July, 1977*



Alex Brown photo

---

Painting is expressed, pressed, out of what one feels, thinks, does. Its resources are more than we know.

---

by Pat Adams

With the following remarks I am trying to see my way into what is going on around me, what is going on within my work. I could not improvise these thoughts; they are too close to me, and I would be distracted by you, or by some metabolic irregularity such as shyness. And although it is awkward to write "talk" or to read aloud "writing," I will do what I can. It is difficult to extend perceptions which come to me *tout-a-coup*, like explicatives, exclamations, snatched before the epiphany clangs shut. Also, there is an impactedness to my language which I mention to ease your sense of attention to it: expect small flashes of awareness but no rational circumnavigations. Later let's have questions, statements, doubts...a conversation back and forth.

---

*A Phi Beta Kappa from Berkeley, Pat Adams received grants in 1968 and 1976 from the National Endowment for the Arts and has several times been a resident at the MacDowell Colony and the Yaddo Foundation. She has had solo shows biennially at the Zabriskie Gallery, New York, since 1956, and her paintings have been exhibited in group shows of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Hirshhorn Museum, and elsewhere. She has taught painting and drawing at Bennington since 1964.*

---

As some of you know, this is the first out-in-the-world step I've taken since January. I've been on a grant which gave me time to pull back from much of the planning, articulating, coping of which life as a teacher and (what I would call) life as a citizen consists. I drew closer to my family, to my garden and woods; I sat with myself. Coming to Norfolk is another turn; all the baggage, the impedimenta of myself (the this and that of which I am) are packed up and in my feeling posture I am as one who has not yet arrived at the next station. And when I notice that I am in transition, at a hinged point, I consult the *Book of Changes* (The Chinese *I Ching*). Let me say that during the months since I knew I would be coming to see you, I had made little notes of some of the things we could talk about together, rather intimate notions about working and painting. And I felt again the *I Ching's* incredible aptness when it reported through the trigram *chen* the following:

When a man has learned within his heart what fear and trembling mean, he remains so composed and reverent in spirit that that profound inner seriousness is not interrupted. He sets his life in order and searches his heart; reverence is the foundation of true culture.

For this is what I feel, this is what I mean to talk a bit about: that inner seriousness and reverence of spirit, which is the foundation of culture, true

---

**Inner seriousness and reverence are the foundation of culture, the stuff out of which one's work is made.**

---

culture. It is that which, at base, *au fond*, is the stuff out of which one's work is made.

But before coming to that there are facts out there that I must embrace, must include in my philosophy. The looting of New York City: 3,000 arrests during what was called "the night of the animals." A young gang member put it this way, "They don't have no chance *out here*; so when they see the opportunity, they take it." They take things, the same things that the neutron bomb will not destroy. And I think—what if *their* "out here" were here? Or if our *here* were there? I am talking *here* to *you* about things of self, of being, of spirit; how is it that the economics of freedom, that is, food to nurture intelligence, space to house one's needs, time to find one's thoughts, inspiration to undertake oneself, how is it that these are closed out for some individuals, some groups, making some men less than man? The terrible impoverishment and self-wounding is apparent in the report of the poor robbing the poor. There is not the health or imagination of a Robin Hood;

they have not, they cannot imagine themselves or the way out. I think of it as akin to the growth of the desert: were you to see Persepolis today you could not imagine that it was once a garden retreat. In Israel there are studies on methods to reverse the direction of these rolling, gathering, desert-making forces. Those of you who are compost gardeners can know what I felt last summer in New Mexico: if I could have put all my maple leaves and grass cuttings into the red sands surrounding the Navaho hogan! To begin to turn things around; the noblesse oblige of the educated and the free.

I am saying how very urgent it is to bring out, expose want, and escalate need and desire into demand, to see what is happening to the spirit in the

---

**There is true difficulty in subsuming or profoundly advancing a position, reaching out from an original perception. An easier mark to make is the smash of violence or an assault by horror.**

---

body. This is no sentimental exhortation; I believe with the French philosopher Michel Foucault who has written in *The Order of Things*: "The artist makes visible the fundamental will that keeps a whole people alive." I recall two motorcyclists, not Quite Hell's Angels, who appeared at one of my shows at the Zabriskie Gallery. In my surprise I said, "So what do you think?", which barely disguised "What are you doing here?" And one of them said, "Man, you need beauty, you need beauty." I was startled by his recognition. There is in the recognition of need a self-acknowledgment that reads one into existence; that notion that experience could assist in the transformation of the human desert.

This will seem like a jump but it isn't.

The problem of style and the sociology of art.

How is it that one makes the pictures one makes?

Painting is expressed, pressed, out of what one feels, thinks, does. Its resources are more than we know—the latency, the subliminal processing, the unconscious stuffs (what is the cumulative being-state resulting from the unrelenting fall upon us of items like OPEC, "Star Trek," blue sky, parenthood, grid cities, drought, *Annie Hall*, kitsch, boredom, loss, running, etc.?) What appraising, emotional, situational vision is amassing in us? What must we say/make?

Robert Altman, the film director, said in an interview for the *New York Times*, "I don't paint what I think I should be. I paint what I don't ap-

prove of. I don't paint a sunset because a sunset is true and right and perfect in itself. I cannot enhance it so why should I show it to you?" I can't untangle all that this sets off in my mind. Why is he quarrelling with himself, or is he quarrelling with his parents (the parent implied in that "should"); is it an authority problem? Whose authority dominates? Or is he nervous about beauty that is in and of itself not avant garde? Does he know himself? Does what he "doesn't approve of" (all the anger, violence, seaminess) actually give him salacious, tumescent delight? Or is it merely and again what we have so much of all about us: cheap imagination. There is true difficulty in subsuming, or profoundly advancing a position, reaching out from an original perception. An

**Every choice, every gesture acts out one's preferences. In that sense, every act is political.**

easier mark to make is the smash of violence or the now nearly used up assault by horror.

There is a certain chic that accompanies talk of shock, gratuitousness, or the disjunctive, and a sense of justification in alluding to that contracted definition of modernism which reads the "self-generated apartness of the work of art with its own rules, its own order, independent of its maker, its audience, of the world in general." (Tucker)

Sociological analysis (scrupulously not looking at individual works of art) would turn to the institutions which surround the artist: the marketplace, the museum, the PR establishment, art publications, the collector—to give the tradesman's view of what influences, determines, generates the subject of the artist. But this is an after-the-fact view—the genesis of works of art has little to do with product-making and distribution systems, but rather with the inner pressure to find, to make visual the reality of being in this time. What is intoned by the absorption of sociological material into the general culture is the understandableness of the passive or reflexive artist. Unthinkingly we are all caught between antithetical reports: the overdetermination that Freud ascribed to man's condition and the uncertainty, the indeterminacy of Heisenberg's principle. We might be misled to conclude: No Way Out.

Much art of the '70's is characterized by attitudes of discontinuity, of non-knowability; it is episodic, discrete, non-referential. I notice and ask why this art strives for qualities so contrary to the general longings of man? Is this really another time? Or are these defensive constructs put forward by the middlebrow who is too impatient,

too discomforted to persist in the effort necessary to extract some insight, some overview from the facts of our nuclear age? Or is it a reflection of the flood of print, anybody/everybody's hearsay which one scans cheek by jowl with rare apperceptions brought back from the edge of knowing? Or is it all those dislocated excerpts or simplistic compressions of information that distort as they are shorn of context and qualification: pithy distractions such as "it is not what you believe but what happens to you."

And what about painting: very well crafted by artists so well taught; very sophisticatedly naive or calculatedly outrageous, so led on by art magazines and curator's selections; seemingly monosyllabic in wit or most brightly deduced as-



semblages of art history, or pastiches of the appearances of the most recent painting or revivals of ancient visual virtues. One feels the narrowness of professionally-lived lives.

I feel thirsty for work which has about it a great inflowing rightness through which, as the Sufis say, "the way opens."

So it must be asked again: what are we doing? What is this solitary effort?

It seems to me to be about the hearing of the self, the knowing of it. I am not talking about "I," "me," but of a particular bead of awareness, of a self in colloquy with all else, which attends to the givens of place and time, reads reactions from itself, makes instinctual quirky leaps, lays them out as ingredients upon the table of understanding and questions them—what are they, how do these impinge each on each, what attracts or holds,

what remains discrete? The self watches the traffic back and forth of occurrences, memories, predispositions, inventions. I think of the great scourings on the walls of Zion Canyon—how like the self's awarenesses which abrade and cut upon each other, presenting ultimately to view that which does not give way, cannot be reduced.

In my work a question that comes up again and again is that of the lion and the lamb; what is the fair share of each, given the nature of these creatures? Would we all be lions in appetite and need were there a possibility of obtaining that share? Is the term "innate nature" an outgrowth of *laissez-faire* politics as is the description of the system called "natural selection?" And does it justify disproportionate demand? I think of Schopenhauer's remarks on color, that to be equivalent in visual force the ratios amongst would have to be uneven, that while equal amounts of red and green would be read equally, a painter would need to use  $\frac{2}{3}$  blue to  $\frac{1}{3}$  orange to achieve equal effect, and  $\frac{1}{4}$  yellow to  $\frac{3}{4}$  purple. Can you see that I am talking about the content in my work? I have said elsewhere that red/yellow/blue, black and white, up, down and across, and the diagonal are what I have to work with; yet as soon as these items are set in relation to each other, consequences, analogies start up which transform these playful, pleasing operations into experiential metaphors and political proposals. Every choice, every gesture acts out one's preferences. In that sense every act is political. While I make my pictures, I learn. In the process of working, the *I*-fabricator wills form, and yet in the course of work, the work—the picture—begins to demand, to delimit, to constrain what the picture situation will be. To override, to decide not to recognize the authority of the work itself, its integrity, would then be to break the picture in two or other works. The artist is displaced by the vision of what is coming to be realized. One watches very closely and does what is necessary to establish certain specific qualities. There is a most careful receptivity to what is in fact now out there. How indeed to know what to do, where to place what, how to continue. The situation is high with self-alertness, insistence, and at the same time attending to surface specifics which are setting off affects: curious situation, the self and the nonself in conversation. It is a vulnerable balance of attention and desire. I have to learn again and again that it is not as other acts are, a manipulation of external items, but rather that of mind quieting itself so that what is there can be sensed.

At times, what is there is the collision of information, experiences, intuitions held in forms none of which can be discounted. How can they pertain to one another, these truths so partial, so uneven, so angular? There was a little incident the other day in my studio about deciding. A red undulation had been placed on the right side of a large canvas. We cut out of paper parallel curves,

first in black and then a run of curves in white, and attached each beside a section of the red. The black at once looked wrong; the white worked better; it illumined the color. Hearing me mutter that the black was "all wrong," Jan said, "Well, that makes it clear; it's the white." At once I had to say "no, not yet...there is in the black the sense of peripheral vision, the curving edging of the lower right side. I want that, I want both the color light and the weight of the darkness. I'll have to see." What I have yet to see is some way to get it all, to subsume several allusions into one relationship. How will I know when it is right? By the exuberance of it, the ongoing stretch of spirit, the sense of nothing shut off, of each possibility opening out.

---

### The artist is displaced by the vision of what is coming to be realized.

---

There is early in life a primary delight in distinguishing the like from the unlike. It is a life game: questioning distinctions yet at the same time heightening them. At the same time we feel loss in the separation, in the differentiations, and yearn for wholeness, oneness, allness. It is a confounding paradoxical desire for the entire compendium of particularities, and yet simultaneously for a healing over of the intellectual fracturing of experience in the logical construct of either/or.

I have chosen the visual stuffs of color, surface, place, extent, direction, and amount to find out something about the impersonal self, about the parameters of being. It is in the order of a mute ontology (about the origin and development of the individual being). The painting bodies forth from my touch and intent and gives me evidence of my being. I stare into it, learn from it what is missing, what do I need, what do I want...it is of me, out of me, out of my time. I make it and it creates in me the questions that continue to excavate and imagine my being.

As I watch the work, trying to know it, recognizing what is there in the half-wish state of the paint, I wait, other paintings move and deepen toward their closure. So many paintings unwilling to conclude themselves—there is a reticence, a holding off, and then a notion cracks the obstinacy, and either this painting then is realized, or yet another factor is set to include in what is forming itself—or the spirit of the work is gone, irretrievable. Possibly it can return again to its state as a piece of paper, a support for a surface. An action across it may begin something. Or now it is merely a colored, textured, inanimate surface, not yet begun.

I think I will end in words with what has not yet begun, not yet started up in vision. □

Bennington College  
**Quadrille**

fall 1977

volume 11  
number 4

Theatre at Bennington and Beyond



Pat Adams: On Working    Ben Belitt/Bill Troy Lecture Series Established  
A New Commitment to the Non Resident Term