

## INTERVIEW 1/04

BY STEVE LAFRENIERE

*After looking at your paintings for so many years, I was startled by the smaller scale of the drawings.*

It started out as a practical thing. I'd go on vacation to visit my wife's family in Pakistan and I would draw a lot. I began to really enjoy the portability and, even more, the intimacy of the scale. I'm not interested in making larger drawings that overlap with painting, though.

*Now they're a little closer in size to album covers or comics.*

Growing up, Marvel comics had a big visual influence on me. But that went hand in hand with my interest in Michelangelo, El Greco, etc. I saw them all as part of the same figurative tradition.

*What came first for you, the need to depict figures or space?*

Figures usually appear first, and recently I've focused more on portraits. But the space was important even then. And that space is mainly defined by lighting. I'm more and more inspired by cinematic lighting—Fassbinder, Welles, and also paintings that influenced film lighting, like Caravaggio's or Manet's Spanish-style portraits.

*Do you think of the figures as stand-ins?*

On a bedrock level they're self-portraits, but there are a lot of layers of meaning on top. It's as if my DNA was exposed to multiple sources of visual information. For example, I've been using a smile/frown mouth that I derived from a newspaper photo of Bill Gates after he'd lost a billion dollars.

*Ah, that's why it looks so familiar.*

I see them, especially the faces, as genetically spliced totem poles. I need images or subject matter that give me more opportunities to include more, rather than less.

*One part of a figure can inhabit a very different universe than another part of the same figure. It's difficult to take them in all at once, especially if there's action involved. And there almost always is.*

There's a lot of grafting going on, and sometimes things don't take. But I like that tension. If the drawing has no chance of failure, it becomes boring. Many of the earlier ones were done in India, and I think the multi-limbed Hindu imagery seeped into my head. But I also love the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*—how this hideous dead-fleshed character has a beautiful, sensitive soul. I've always seen Frankenstein as an important image and metaphor for what I do.

*I'm always intrigued by the dynamics in your work. The physical laws seem to change from one piece to the next.*

I was very influenced by Frank Stella's book *Working Space* (1986), although through disagreement. I thought it was too

literal to replace Caravaggio's dynamic and magical illusionism with three-dimensional reliefs. The illusionism is so important. There's a big difference between adjoined cylinders and someone holding a decapitated head.

*Well, your rejection of that is embodied in the work. Yet you're not afraid to use the figure as a vessel for more abstract ideas. I know you're interested in Smithson's notions of the distant past and future in continuum ...*

I see Smithson as a kind of hero. He took the orthodoxy of Stella's generation and exploded it with all these meanings and developed a narrative complexity that's reflected in the objects he made. I also find Philip K. Dick's use of time inspiring, especially when he imagines ancient Rome overlapping with 1970s Southern California, and the historical and political implications of that vision.

*The figures seldom make eye contact with the viewer. When the eyes are shown they're usually staring in fear.*

It wasn't something I initially thought of conceptually. It began as a formal problem—what should the eyes look like? One solution was to use a Robert Ryman white-out effect, which I first used for the head in a painting called *Zoloft*. But as I look at the problem now I can see other sources for solutions. The upward, heavenly gaze could have come right out of El Greco's *The Tears of St. Peter*, and the fearful eyes come from watching the news on TV. It's also symbolic of living in a country where many people don't—or don't want to—see other realities.

*There are tragic figures here.*

Well, I think they're tragic in the sense that they're like portraits of Dorian Gray for contemporary American culture. That's a lot of violence and craziness for a figure to bear, but I try to give them some Chaplinesque humor to give them some hope. Barthes describes the Chaplin-man as living on the eve of revolution, awakening but not yet invested in anything but himself. I see them in a perfect state of anarchy, evolving toward some kind of enlightenment as embodied in Tolstoy's Levin.

*Some of these drawings date from the early '90s. How was your work received then?*

I think that then, as well as now, people get too caught up in the subject matter. I see a similarity with how Cronenberg's early films were not taken so seriously because of their supposedly low or pulp narratives. When I got out of school in the late '80s it seemed crazy to make paintings, especially paintings using your own images. So at first I made photos of my paintings and then mounted things on them. I hated them. What I really wanted to do was to paint these creatures and do something more complicated and less cool. But I was very conscious of Guston with an arm around Picasso's shadow. How to get away from that? I decided to push the imagery beyond any possible realm of good taste, and in some cases, literally blow up the figure. At the time I was fueled by '80s horror movies—especially the *Evil Dead* movies—and Howard Stern, Sade, Burroughs, Pasolini's *Salò*, etc.

*What kind of vernacular art are you interested in?*

I'm a huge fan of Jack Davis.



*Who did all those wacky movie posters in the '60s?*  
Yes, he was one of *Mad* magazine's main artists.

*I can see it in the more nervous lines. But I also see Rick Griffin, especially in the color drawings. In the '60s he designed posters for the Avalon Ballroom in San Francisco. Were any of the psychedelic artists an influence?*

The whole period was a huge influence, through a kind of hazy orange-brown lens. I remember going to a movie theater for the first time and seeing *Yellow Submarine*. Or sitting with my brother and his friends listening to the *White Album* and looking at Marvel comics. It must have been 1969.

*Your red pictures have a very psych feel to them, like acid with too much strychnine.*

I love how the red creates an instant optical experience and how it has so many potential uses and meanings. It can be blood, bricks, part of a Budweiser can. Smithsonian has some great writings about the color red and *Spiral Jetty*.

*Red is really noisy, too.*

I've always thought of the red paintings and drawings as being visual equivalents to punk or loud rock music—The Replacements, Nirvana's *Bleach* album, Thin Lizzy. That was the soundtrack for a lot of those drawings. I like the idea of music that may initially be overbearing sonically but becomes more and more melodic as you get used to it. I want the red drawings and paintings to function in the same way, and the visual melody I was thinking of was something like Matisse's red interiors.

*The red and blue pictures have an entirely different tone from one another.*

It seemed like the logical next step. Hot and cold; the American flag. I was also very impressed with a Cady Noland show at American Fine Arts in the early '90s, in which she used a lot of Budweiser cans, and they looked great.

*Lately a George Bush figure has appeared in your work. Are you moving in a more political direction?*

Again, it wasn't something I planned. I would watch the BBC World news and I would sit down and make these drawings. Almost every news story seemed to involve the U.S. in some dark, destructive way. It was also a needed shot of strong meaning into my work. Especially in these conservative times, it's easy for art to become hollowed out from any progressive or radical energy and exist only as attractive bourgeois decoration.

Ultimately what keeps the work from collapsing is that I never try to force anything. It's like when you hear authors talking about their writing, and they say, "At a certain point, the character was telling me what to write." That's what happens with these drawings—at a certain point they tell me what to do. They need to become whatever they are.