

ART Richard Tuttle

IN CONVERSATION with Chris Martin

Throughout his impressive forty-year career, Richard Tuttle has pursued an artistic practice that is not easily categorized, incorporating drawing, painting, and sculpture into an idiosyncratic, intensely personal hybrid. With two successive solo installations at The Drawing Center in New York, a new show at The Wolfsonian-Florida International University in Miami, and an upcoming retrospective opening at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in July 2005 and traveling to the Whitney Museum of American Art in the fall, Tuttle's work has become highly visible recently, despite its sometimes minuscule scale. The *Rail* spoke with Tuttle at the Tribeca loft he shares with his wife the poet Mei-mei Bersenbrugge and their daughter, Martha.

Chris Martin (Rail): Richard, how did you become an artist?

Richard Tuttle: Well, I knew before kindergarten, because the first day of kindergarten became the first day of my life. When the teacher passed out paper and a box of crayons, I knew what my life was about.

Rail: Have you kept any of your childhood work?

Tuttle: No. But the first drawing I made in kindergarten I certainly retain in my head. When I had my 1965 show at Betty Parsons Gallery, and I saw my piece across the room called "Hill," I realized that it was the drawing I made in kindergarten. It was just premature.

Rail: Wow. Did you go to art school?

Tuttle: Well, I wanted to go, but my parents didn't approve. But it worked out well—I went to Trinity College in Hartford, and in my sophomore year Sam Wagstaff came as the curator of contemporary art at the Wadsworth Athenaeum. And there were so few people interested in contemporary art there that we just naturally gravitated to one another. I learned more from that discourse, I'm sure, than anyone could have learned in the best art school in America.

Rail: You were lucky to find a mentor.

Tuttle: Yes, immensely. He trained with Richard Offner, a great Renaissance scholar, and so he had all of that right up to the most contemporary thing. He had such an enormous connoisseurship, with access to the most interesting and hippest happenings in the visual arts. He just had a fabulous apartment with just stacks of catalogs and pamphlets everywhere...

Rail: So by the time you came to New York in 1963, you were a pretty sophisticated kid. Were you part of the revolutionary explosion that was happening in the sixties?

Tuttle: Yeah, I mean, all across the country, kids would just lie back one morning and say, "We gotta go to Haight Ashbury." You just heard it—there was something in the side of your brain that connected with the air. Of course Trinity and Hartford was an enormously conservative place, but I did theater sets, was editor of a literary magazine, the yearbook, and all kinds of stuff that were in tune with the sixties' search for ideas. I did the yearbook, and it is in fact the greatest yearbook Trinity has ever had, but at the time the admissions department wrote me a letter and said that I might like to know that my yearbook is the only yearbook they will never show to incoming students (*laughs*). In a sense the shit didn't hit the fan until 1967 and '68. I know that it was a revolutionary period, but I would actually say I am not really a revolutionary, because when the actual revolution happened, I was interested in harmony and finding in the middle of that storm a kind of peace.

Rail: Perhaps you were a revolutionary with a different focus. I mean the work that you made in the late sixties seems to me very radical. But it is perhaps radical in its desire for something

deeply personal and intimate. Today we're dealing with our own storm—this terrible war in Iraq. Back in the sixties you were in the middle of the Vietnam war. Did you get drafted?

Tuttle: Yeah, I did. After Trinity I went to Cooper Union because it was free, but I found after one semester that it wasn't really for me. I got this idea that if I was going to have to be in the military, I would like to be a pilot and fly at twice the speed of sound. So I enlisted and passed all the tests. The local draft board sent me a letter saying that I was being drafted. My enlistment officer put me in communications and electronics, which I didn't think was my talent at all, but if it saved me from being drafted, then fine. The whole point of this training was to take your individuality away so you are exactly like everybody else and push the button when they say so. I had this idea to study very hard for a multiple choice test and color in the answer to the left of the correct one. It worked like a charm. They sent me right to the intensive ward of the nuthouse and then gave me an honorable discharge because they thought that it was their fault that I had gone nuts. And still to this day, I don't know if in fact I was nuts. On the other hand, how could you not feel nuts in that situation, if you are a living, thinking, feeling, breathing human being?

Rail: Well, you survived. You didn't go to Vietnam and you ended up in New York.

Tuttle: Which is where I wanted to be, but I had to deal with my father saying you ruined your life and what are we going to tell the relatives? Things like that. But I had a brother and other family members in the war, and they just came back total drug addicts and insane and have never recovered from Vietnam, it was such an unbelievable crime.

Rail: Somehow in the middle of all this you met Agnes Martin. Can you talk about how you met her and what she meant to you as a young artist?

Tuttle: Well, when I enlisted to be a pilot, I thought they would keep me for years. I felt that I had thrown my life away and that actually gave me courage to call Agnes. After I enlisted I went to the streets, and there was a phone booth and she was living near there, and so I just called her up and she invited me by.

Rail: You called because you knew who she was—you had seen her work?

Tuttle: I called because I had actually seen her and I had had a sort of intuitive response, she had something to say to me about whatever it is I am. So I knew I didn't need my savings, my little bit of savings, so I thought I'd buy art with it. So I went to Agnes and said I would like to buy a drawing. And I looked at drawing after drawing after drawing, and finally the one I found was in the pages of a telephone book where it was being flattened. When I found it I knew that that was the drawing I wanted. As the years go on, it is just a phenomenal drawing. It is really like the first drawing of the true grids, and that is such an enormous step in terms of art. It is incalculable, that if one did try to calculate it, there are so many different points of view in which you can offer a calculation. I think Agnes is truly an artist who is going to take 100 years for the world to catch up to what she is actually doing.

Rail: Was Agnes encouraging of your work?

Tuttle: Sometimes, not always. There was a period, like there was a group of work I made called the tin pieces, and she really didn't go for that at all. But then I remember when I made the first really octagonal cloth piece, and just at that moment Agnes came by and she approved of the piece. That was important; she just thought the others were slipping backwards, which they were.

Rail: Well, how wonderful of her. She was able to give you this clarity and encouragement.



Photograph of Richard Tuttle courtesy of Sperone Westwater.

Tuttle: I think we all see differently, yet being able to see is a gift or a talent that we develop, and there are certainly people who are extremely developed in seeing. But a child can also come along and see as well as somebody who has been training their entire life to see.

Rail: Right—it is not about progress or your credentials but about being open and perceptive in that moment.

Tuttle: Yeah, and the values that emerge from that.

Rail: You've stayed close to Agnes Martin and maintained a dialogue over the years?

Tuttle: Yes. I had Agnes on a drive two days ago. Many people feel bad when people get old and they can't do this or they can't do that. Actually, we go into these higher levels of illumination. We are not leaving; we are gaining, in fact. Agnes was such an extraordinary human being, and to be around her as she is going through to these higher levels of illumination... I just ask her questions. And the nurses there are like, who is this? But her answers, the freshness! One question I asked her was if she thought Picasso was a good artist. And I didn't get an answer because she forgot the question (*laughs*). But the fact that she didn't have an answer is also an answer... I asked Agnes, "Is there a special relation between women and abstraction?" And she said, "Without women, you'll never know what abstraction is." One issue that we talked about is this difference between men and women. I think that men's art is read from left to right and women's art is read from right to left. I faced this any number of times going to art school when I would walk in and try to see what was here. Zero was coming in, and then I would see that this was a woman's art. So I would go up and read it from right to left, and then I would see. So this happened many times. And finally I went to Agnes and asked her about it because she does this type of painting that seems to be non-gender specific, and maybe for that reason she really didn't like the question. After a few moments she said, "My paintings have always been read from right to left." It's fascinating when you actually look at them that way you get this heart-touching delicacy and poignancy. With Agnes's work, that is all played against this other formality, this toughness, this structure. She does make such an effort to make it even all over. Where does that come from? I am reading an essay written by Katherine Tuma, who works at the Drawing Center, who says that Agnes is on record somewhere as saying that when people go to a museum, they have many different emotional responses; they can be happy or angry, but those responses are not connected to the paintings in the museum. And Katherine says, like any logical person would, "Well, if they're not connected to the paintings, what are they connected to?" She made a great litany of all the people who have looked at Agnes's paintings and felt the beauty and all the aesthetic emotional qualities as a kind of

proof that Agnes is not correct in saying that one's response is not connected to the art. I know it is dangerous, but I am kind of for Agnes.

Rail: But Richard, I've had this experience in front of your work where in the act of looking at one of your paintings I can become so absorbed that I'm suddenly deeply alive—like I feel my feet on the floor, feel the air on my neck, and become very alert to the quality of sounds around me...does this make any sense to you? If I'm moved by a painting of yours, don't you think something came through the art and reached me?

Tuttle: I think you describe that very beautifully. But I think I don't know. I am kind of comfortable with not knowing.

Rail: Let me ask you another side of that question. I remember reading that Hilton Kramer review of your 1975 retrospective at the Whitney in which he attacked you so horribly. How have you weathered that kind of hostile or uncomprehending reaction?

Tuttle: It took me almost twenty-five years to deal with that. It was not just Hilton Kramer; there was an entire controversy around the show. I am trying to create harmony and I am also trying to make work that is for everyone. So I had to deal with the fact that it is for some people and not for everyone, which actually is still not true. One of the things I have to say is that our enemies are our mental constructs. As you go out and expose yourself more and more, it breaks down your mental constructs. I had to face this construct that was based on a tremendous fear.

Rail: What was your fear?

Tuttle: It was mixed up with a number of fears. A primal fear, a fear of my father...he had a nervous breakdown, and I think I was not treated very well during that period, and literally as a child I had to reconstruct a world of my own. It is amazing what a child can do.

Rail: Well, when I think of your work from the late sixties and early seventies, I am conscious of how courageous you were. It takes a certain ego to put such naked stuff out there; yet at the same time your works seem to embody a kind of humility and effortlessness. So how do those two things come together for you, this humility and ego?

Tuttle: I am most comfortable when I feel the polarities are conjoined. I like very much this combination where you could simultaneously make the most intelligent thing that could be made and at the same time it would look completely dumb. And between the dumbness and the staggering intelligence, it opens a world. And it isn't about making something and filling the world up. It is about making this space, like this octagonal, and I know it is quite a wild claim to say that it is the only original form made in the twentieth century, which I think is on the intelligent side, but at the same time, on the dumb side, it is just a piece of cloth that you can throw on the ground and has no top or bottom. And I'd say yeah, that art does have a place in the world, and it is to renew the human soul. But I can also say that that is nothing...When I made those octagonal pieces I remember feeling really vulnerable, and the morning of the cloth-octagonal show I went down to look at the river, and it happened to be a January day and it was snowing and there were two big ocean liners lined up at the docks, and I think I had never seen the beauty of nature so overwhelmingly strongly—so much so that I realized that what I had made was just nothing.

Rail: (laughs) Yeah, but you made a pretty great nothing! Speaking of the beauty of nature, you spend a lot of time in New Mexico.

Tuttle: We have this other life in New Mexico, in the Southwest, where it is very much about alternative things. I am very interested in this vibrational medicine at the moment. The vibrational model is that we have our bodies, and then the next body is the etheric body, and the next body is the astropheric body...We are actually evolving to higher and higher degrees of subtlety as beings. In my own work, it has allowed me to see what I think is true, that human beings are in fact mostly light. One of the problems in art is to have to guide oneself around certain energies and forces that are not in fact art—they are

other things. So the mystic world is certainly one of the worlds that comes close to art sometimes.

Rail: Do you feel that working in New Mexico opens a different sensibility than when you are working in New York?

Tuttle: Yeah. In a way, the juices are stimulated out in the provinces in certain ways, but the critical thing that the city offers is that there are people who gather and who are concerned and can exercise critical powers, which you don't find really out in New Mexico.

Rail: So you bring work from New Mexico to the city and then look at it fresh?

Tuttle: Yeah, but I also felt that you can think of the kind of work that you want to make before you make it. I think in the eighties I began feeling that the base for the work I wanted to make needed to be larger than just one place. At that time I was showing a lot in Europe, so it seemed very desirable to have the work come from one leg in Europe, one in New York, and one in New Mexico.

Rail: So you're open to a variety of working situations and places. Have you stayed involved in the contemporary art world—do you follow younger artists?

Tuttle: Oh, yes—if you can appreciate the work of an artist a generation younger than you are and appreciate it with the same intensity and the same completeness that you can of your own generation, you get art in your life that you never would have had, and you can bring that back into your own confines and improve your work.

Rail: There are people that think of you as the father of a certain kind of intuitive installation work, people like Judy Pfaff, Jessica Stockholder, and Sarah Sze. Are you conscious of your influence on younger artists?

Tuttle: Instead of trying to put one's hopes for immortality in an object, I put my hopes for immortality in inspiring artists, real artists who are younger than I. I know there are certain artists who do not want to leave anything behind and who don't open doors for other artists, and I find that almost criminal and extremely undesirable. The way for me is to open as many doors as I can. You need to get permission. I have certainly gotten permission from older artists in advance, and not just contemporary artists but historical artists. This point about the differences—the more differences one can take in, the better. A lot of times we don't give ourselves permission to know these differences. There is a lot of gender stuff, a lot of garbage, a lot of lies that stand in the way of permission. So if the artist opens those doors and gives the permission, it keeps the culture alive and is ultimately very healthy.

Rail: When I go to a Richard Tuttle show, I never quite know what to expect. Your work has an element of surprise that seems to be pretty consistent. Are there certain techniques that you use to constantly reinvent what you are doing?

Tuttle: Well, I like to think of myself as a very hard worker, but it is very rare and unusual for me to be able to get to do the real stuff. One of the ways I know of that is when it's an occasion where we feel that we didn't make something, that it just came through.

Rail: Do you draw or paint on a daily basis?

Tuttle: Yeah. I was very proud of something Adam Weinberg said once. He said, "When you talk to Richard, you always feel like he's working." I think I actually carry that too far sometimes. I think that there is a certain energy, and I just make something on a day-to-day basis. Then there's the question of whether the work is the rare masterpiece or whether it is the day-to-day thing. And when it comes time to show, you know—what is the work? The quandary is whether to show something that's exceptional or to show that work that you think of as invisible, like invisible daily life...

Rail: Well, the size of your work seems to mirror the invisible intimacy of daily life. Have you ever been tempted to make really large-size pieces?

Tuttle: Well, I guess the issue isn't size; it's scale. And each of us has our scale, which I find also quite remarkable. Early on, part of my thinking was economic because I just said I'll sacrifice, I'll live cheaply, I'll make all the sacrifices I need to as long as I can make my art. And the small size kind of came, out of those parameters, to be connected to my scale. But I actually have an idea at the moment that my scale, which I think is much more important than size, also has a relation to supersize, really, really big stuff. I have been doing some projects that are supersize, and they have been very successful, but that is even more paradoxical because when you get to supersize, people don't know that it becomes invisible.

Rail: What do you mean by supersize—something that takes place over an entire city?

Tuttle: Yeah, I did this show in Spain and Portugal, with two cultures, two languages, two museums. Because one part of Spain—Santiago de Compostella—really wants to be more politically connected to Portugal, some of the structure was about advancing that side while at the same time accepting differences. This is a case of using that country and outdoor situation in the same way I might use a room in some gallery...Right now I am doing a project down in Miami with 137,000 tiles and a 14-story building, and it's millions of dollars, and it involves many different levels and structures that are all part of the project.

Rail: Let me ask you about Betty Parsons. She gave you your first show in New York?

Tuttle: Yeah, she did. It was a gallery with a very particular vision. I don't think most people know how important she was in producing that vision. Betty was completely irrational, but her vision was about the relation between art and the actual development of every part of the human. One time she had this line about me: "Richard is someone who is listening in the corner of the room." I have actually made corner pieces. I think it is a pretty accurate estimation of me.

Rail: How old were you when you had your first show with her?

Tuttle: About 21 or 22. Betty, who had all this experience, said to me she wouldn't think to show an artist under 35 because it takes you that long, at least that long, to find yourself. This was the phrase of the moment, finding yourself.

Rail: She made an exception for you?

Tuttle: Well, there were examples of young people in their early twenties who had showed, like Frank Stella in 1959 with the black paintings. He was in Dorothy Miller's American show very early. Betty had a sense that things were coming to the youth age.

Rail: So now, like forty years later, you have a major retrospective coming up at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Can you talk about that?

Tuttle: Well, after a certain length of involvement, one does have a past. I mean, in preparing this retrospective show, I am being forced to deal very much with past things, which is not normal, really. I think most artists are happy to go forward and think about the future and forget the past...

Rail: I think of some of your important early work as site-specific installations—almost performances. Are you are going to re-perform, as it were?

Tuttle: Yeah, the wire pieces. I actually see those more as performance pieces. One of the questions I ask with those pieces is, how much can you be outside of your own work? The actual steps to make a wire piece are like simple steps. And for somebody watching you, it seems like a wall that you can simultaneously put yourself into and take yourself out of.

Rail: Did you ever perform in front of an audience consciously?

Tuttle: To me, what this is all about and where it comes together is using the body as a critique of technology. I am a pretty shy and discreet person. It would be just out of character to go in front of an audience. But the wire pieces really are performative, and when I make them I really check out. People ask if I mind that they are there, and I don't mind if there are 5,000 people there. I am out. ■