

Interview with Brice Marden

Josef Helfenstein

JOSEF: I've been reading and thinking and looking at the reproductions of your work, and one thing that is striking to me from the very beginning is the factor of time. I think it's unusual — in today's art, anyway — that time is such a component of your work. You work for a long time on your paintings. And I wondered if it is similar for the drawings? Because you have revisited some decades after you made them. There's something organic about how time almost becomes part of your work. I don't know how to describe it, but I think one can feel it.

BRICE: Well, you know, I don't deliberately put it in. There are drawings that can take a lot of attention.

JOSEF: So, you revisit drawings. You said earlier today that the *Post and Lintel* drawings made a long time ago are back into the process. How do you make a decision like that?

BRICE: It depends. Having these different studios, you go between them. I had a drawing that was started in Nevis. And it had like five sheets of paper. It was basically a study. I'm working this central part

and things were happening around the side.

Well, it's like something in *Thira*, the painting that's in the Pompidou — you know, it has this center thing in it. One side is green, the other side's orange, basically. And I've been trying to work this thing and resolve it for years.

So, I had started this drawing, it had a red and yellow palette. And what I've been trying to get is having all these things mixed together, and cross each other, and have it be very, very complete. And I can't do it. I mean, I haven't been able to do it. And so every time I would go back to Nevis, I would work on that drawing.

JOSEF: So, this notion of not completing things is a very high bar you set yourself, no? Because for me as a viewer, that painting, for example, and all of the *Post and Lintel* drawings, look perfectly settled, like beautiful, finished work.

BRICE: I keep thinking it's going to happen.

JOSEF: That to me has to do with this issue of time. And I see a link to the Cold Mountain drawings. This Chinese poet Han Shan made the



Brice Marden, *Thira*, 1979–80. Oil and wax on canvas, eighteen panels assembled in three parts, overall 96 × 180 in. (243.8 × 457.2 cm). Centre Pompidou, Paris, Musée national d'art modern / Centre de creation industrielle, Donation of the Centre Pompidou Foundation in honor of Pontus Hulten, 1983

poems maybe 1,300 years ago. And they're very ephemeral, I don't even know how they survived. And yet one can feel a certain quality, there's a breath of life in these poems; when you read them, they come alive.

I have a similar kind of emotion or reaction with your paintings, it's as if they would hum, but then when you engage with them, they start to speak. But you need to be active, of course, and not be distracted as a viewer. And today that's not so easy, because we're all completely stupefied by everything that's going on around us. But I think that's an amazing quality of your work.

I hope these questions don't bother you. The first group in the show, the 1975 *Studies for The Seasons*, were for monochromatic paintings. Line wasn't such a decisive component of the work. And then, then you started with the lines, and the lines become really important. So why did the line become such a critical element?

BRICE: I wanted it in there. You know, just because it's so expressive. And I was trying to get the line more into the monochromatic works. And it just wasn't happening. I was trying it in the paintings, you know. And I developed this interest in Chinese poetry.

And I have these ideas about drawing, that it is, in a very very beautiful way, very expressive. It's something you could never get in painting. But, then there are things in painting you could never get with drawing. I don't know if that's an answer.

JOSEF: So there isn't so much of a break, actually. The bottom strip of the painting intentionally left unfinished on the encaustic monochromes is sort of transparent in revealing how the painting was done. The line and the different layers of time are there as well. One can see the way you worked the surface of the monochromatic paintings, an enormous amount of work, of evolution in time, and fluidity. Even in the monochromatic paintings.

BRICE: Yeah.

JOSEF: I had a funny experience walking here. There was a man on the High Line who played a Mongolian instrument, I think it's called a morin khuur, a string instrument. And I thought, "I'm going to visit Brice and we'll talk about his drawings." And the music he made was like a graceful, uninterrupted

line in space, quite beautiful, you know. And nobody was watching him. And I think your lines have the same kind of quality, in a way, they're spacious and free ... I can't put it into words.

BRICE: Well, in fact anybody can do it, anybody can draw. But eventually you end up making drawings that only you can make.

JOSEF: Perhaps line is the deepest expression of that, of something very personal. When you look at Pollock – and I know you studied Pollock well – his lines are very different, they're never like your lines.

BRICE: No, he goes into shape a lot.

JOSEF: The energy of the dripping is different, it's not this enormous refinement of the line that one finds in your drawings.

Let's talk about the *Cold Mountain Studies*. I think there are 35 of them here. Does the numbering relate in any way to the sequence of their making?

BRICE: It's just that they were in a book. I took the book apart after I finished the drawings.

JOSEF: So they were made in that sequence.

BRICE: Yes, that's true.

I just did another project. I have this book of drawings that I have been working on for years. And they're basically studies of the paintings I'm working on now. And they're studies because the only sort-of constant is a grid of 15 by 15. But I drew the grid intuitively, I didn't measure it out. Because I wanted to get back into making painting that was much more intuitive. And so that's what I'm working on now. It didn't become kind of a strict rule until maybe halfway through.

And they were all in a book, so when I was working on a drawing I never got to see the drawings next to each other. It's always a unique situation. And that's sort of why I wanted to do this book project. It's like a facsimile of the notebook. So that people can just take it apart, and put up what they want.

JOSEF: In a way it is very much like writing poems? I mean, you use a book and you write a poem.

I've wondered about your adding colors. At some point you introduced a blue to the brownish ink.

BRICE: Yeah, it's a bister ink.

JOSEF: So how did you decide...

BRICE: I guess they just got harder to resolve.

JOSEF: And so you added colors? it definitely does add a completely different feeling.

BRICE: I needed another element. I mean, I remember this one – *Cold Mountain Study (16)* – it just kept going and going and going. And in this one – *Cold Mountain Study (29)* – this part of the drawing, it was the only one that didn't have this space here used, so I drew another figure here. And it never really worked out. [laughs] But there it was.

JOSEF: Obviously you have become a master of using ink and working with the nuances of different inks. What kind of ink did you choose here?

BRICE: I use an ink that's made by Kremer. From Cologne?

JOSEF: From Germany, yeah.

BRICE: Yes. I've been using it for a long time. I mean I know it's good. This is

the black, this is the blue. And there's some white.

JOSEF: Shellac blue and shellac white. Is the paper handmade paper, is it a special paper?

BRICE: Actually, it's not very good paper. They're yellowing. It was a book with samples of paper. It is all the same kind of paper – we were thinking of doing a book and I thought, "Oh, look at this." I just had it around, and started drawing on it.

People have given me nicer papers, handmade paper, and I use that too. I try to use the best paper I can. Sometimes you just get carried away. [laughs]

The paper for the *Post and Lintel drawings* has to be a heavy paper, because I find when I'm turning white into black, a lot of pressure has to be put on top of it in order not to get a lot of wrinkles in the paper. I've used this Arches paper.

JOSEF: Yes, the *Cold Mountain Studies* are much more ephemeral. It's like breathing, in a way. The paper used for the *Post and Lintel drawings* is heavier and thicker, more like architecture.

Returning to the *Cold Mountain drawings*, was thirty-five just the number you chose?

BRICE: That's how many pages there were in the book.

JOSEF: A very pragmatic decision. I'm fascinated by your resolve, your notion of resolving problems, your focus, your intensity of how you work on compositions and on drawings and paintings. Is there an end to the process, are they "resolvable"?

BRICE: Do I have to answer the questions? [laughs] I mean, it's a set of questions. And what's being resolved keeps changing. And at a certain point this turned into a book, and then at another point it became not a book, it became a group of drawings. I think I kept working them after I took the book apart.

JOSEF: And then, there are what, six or so *Cold Mountain* paintings? I mean, really big paintings.

Well, I'm really happy that in Basel at the Kunstmuseum we have a beautiful drawing, it's called *Muses 2*. And then the Daros Collection, in Switzerland, has this huge painting, *The Muses*.

BRICE: They had one of the *Cold Mountain* paintings, but they sold it. And I always thought that was the first painting. And I always thought it was the worst one, because I was working so many things out. But I've seen it lately and, you know, it's not the worst one.

JOSEF: That's quite an understatement.

BRICE: Yeah.

BRICE: I mean, and I did a lot of work around it. There was a lot. There's these, there's a set of bigger drawings, you know, longer drawings. And then bigger ones. We made a whole show out of it.

JOSEF: Yes. Which was shown at the Menil, no?

BRICE: Yes.

JOSEF: So, there's the question of frames. As far as I know, you've never used frames for your paintings.

BRICE: Right.

JOSEF: And, of course there are no frames here either, but in the 15 x 15

series, the unpainted paper is used a little bit like a frame, no? To contain the drawing, to give it a kind of overall shape.

BRICE: Right, yeah.

JOSEF: Unlike the *Mirabelle Addenda* drawings, where the paper left blank is not framing the drawing. I wondered about that.

BRICE: Well, you know, I like that idea of there being a number of ways to look at it.

JOSEF: Yes.

BRICE: I mean, in a certain way you should look at it almost like a palimpsest. It's like an object.

So, this becomes ... in a certain way, there's the drawing, and then there's the drawing relating to the rectangle, and then the rectangle on the rectangle. I mean, there are all these different readings. And I remember, I had a teacher, Arthur Hoener, in Boston. Boston was a very conservative school – and he was not a conservative, because he had contact with New York. And he said, "None of these guys in New York are making drawings." He said, "Oh, they just use

them as sketches for painting. But nobody makes finished drawings." And then Rauschenberg and Johns started making finished drawings. And I just really like that whole idea, you know, of a finished drawing.

JOSEF: From the very beginning, your drawings are sort of on the same plane, aren't they? They're not subservient to the paintings.

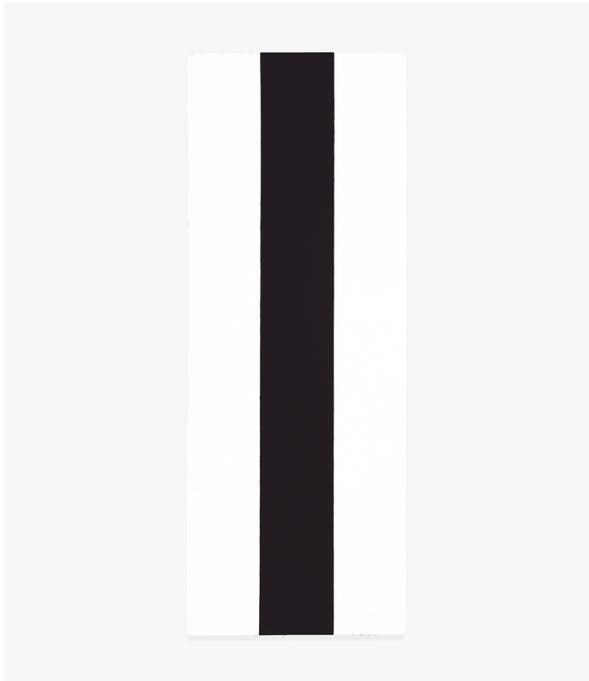
BRICE: Yes.

JOSEF: Then you started using sticks or twigs, and later on using some longer sticks to paint with the brush attached.

BRICE: I never painted with the sticks. You can dip a stick in ink, and make a line. But I couldn't dip a stick in paint and make a line. So, I never painted with sticks. I used long brushes, but everybody did.

When you're drawing with a stick, you get lots of accidents. I used to start drawings with a longer stick, and then the closer you get to being finished, sometimes you end up with a very short stick.

JOSEF: Yes. You are the maker, of course. As always. But by using this



Barnett Newman,
Now II, 1967. Acrylic on
 canvas, 132¼ × 50¼ in.
 (335.9 × 127.3 cm). The Menil
 Collection, Houston

method with the sticks, you also become more of a viewer, in a way. By increasing the distance — because you can see the whole thing better. Even with a drawing. But when the stick keeps breaking, say, and in the end it's just like a pencil that you're using, the distance has disappeared again.

BRICE: But also, you know, it was the whole thing. There are photographs of Matisse drawing with a bamboo pole. Just the idea of trying to make a drawing in a different way.

JOSEF: You both reduce control, but at the same time, you also increase it?

BRICE: Yes.

JOSEF: You have studied the art of the past. You gave a lecture at the Rothko Chapel, you have seen those Rothkos; and you have studied Pollock, and you have looked very carefully at people like Franz Kline, Jasper Johns, and many of the old masters. Today, I see you very much in this tradition of the great painters — painters who don't depend on a trend or a mood or a contemporary fashion. What about Barnett Newman? Has Newman ever interested you, or not so much compared with the others?

BRICE: I remember seeing Newman, especially at the de Menils'. I remember going out to Christophe's in the Hamptons one summer, and to see one with the big black stripe. Just to go someplace and see that in somebody's house, oh my god. And so beautifully done. But there was always this kind of singularity in Newman's work.

JOSEF: Are there any living painters now that you feel close to? I mean you dedicated a work to Sigmar Polke, but he has died.

BRICE: I find it strange. You get older, you become more isolated.

Polke was the last one I would get on a plane [*laughs*] and go to see a Polke show. There are probably other artists. But now, I go to look at things, mainly to just sort of keep informed.

But I could practically enumerate the visits I've had with artists, to their studios. It didn't happen a lot. I remember going to Richard Diebenkorn's studio, and he was so absolutely wonderful. He showed me everything he had worked on. And we talked about it. It was great.

Polke, we never really conversed. His dealer would be there, and he

would say, "Naah." But he knew that I really liked his work, so there was an understanding.

JOSEF: Yes, I think friendships like that are rare for every artist, as big and important and great as he or she is, it's probably rare to have deep relationships.

BRICE: Well, I would say David Novros is my artist friend. I go to his studio. And I go for a number of reasons. He's a very slow painter, so it's nice to follow the progress in his paintings. But we basically get together and complain.

JOSEF: [*laughs*]

BRICE: But he is the one.

JOSEF: And for very long time, no?

BRICE: Yeah.

JOSEF: So, coming back to the slowness of working. I'm really intrigued by this notion of creating work slowly, to work on a piece for a long time and go back to it.

You've done that all your life, right? Is there something very ... *meditative* is a tricky word.

BRICE: Yeah.

JOSEF: But there's something about it that's mind work, it's not just handwork.

BRICE: Yeah, yeah.

JOSEF: I believe nature is important to you: is nature an inspiration? It's funny, you know, of course nobody would say today that "nature is an inspiration," but many great painters in the history of art said that. Cézanne and many more have said it.

BRICE: Nature is a huge influence. I mean, you know, nature is reality.

We painters deal with this weird aspect of reality. Every painting you make, you really want to be a real thing, not just a real painting, and you're always sort of hoping for this weird kind of apotheosis, where it all comes together. I think I talked about it in my talk at the Rothko Chapel. I quoted this passage from Rothko's *The Romantics Were Prompted*, where he says "I adhere to the material reality of the world and the substance of things. I merely enlarge the extent of this reality, extending it to coequal attributes



Brice Marden, *Untitled*,
1964–65. Oil on paper
mounted on canvas,
21 × 27½ in. (53.3 × 69.8 cm).
Collection of the artist

with experiences in our more familiar environment.”

JOSEF: Well, I think that’s beautifully said.

BRICE: Nature is ... I always loved the Pollock quote, “I am nature.” It’s too bad he said it, you want to be able to say that. [*laughs*]

JOSEF: Well, you just said it in a different way. You said, “Nature is reality.” And that means it is actually everything. But usually we separate the two.

BRICE: I have this little library upstate. And, I have this little monochromatic gray painting from the mid-sixties.

JOSEF: One of the very first ones?

BRICE: Yeah, and I look at it, and I keep thinking, “What is this thing?” You know? But then it starts exerting itself as a painting. And it becomes really enjoyable. Enjoyable is not the right word: the inspiration revolves around you. It becomes this thing that can only be what it actually is.

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