

INTERVIEW: ROB OBER

JB: You once said to me in the studio that the trick is not to think. What rituals do you have to get yourself out of your head before you paint?

RO: I like to dance sometimes before I paint, to get my body moving. I try to get my head and body in sync. Painting is really exciting when I don't know what I'm painting. Sometimes I go in with a vague idea of what I want to paint, but often, the best paintings are a product of me getting completely lost in the creative process.

JB: Do you look at your drawings before you paint? Is there a direct correlation between your drawings and your paintings?

RO: No, not at all. I actually don't like to draw a lot. For me, painting and drawing are kind of the same thing. They should be an experience of discovery. I'm uncomfortable with painting something based on a drawing, because I'm worried that the painting won't look like the experience I had. Guston once said that sometimes when you paint, you end up creating something that looks too much like a painting. I agree with that.

JB: You once showed me a painting of a pink head on pink ground. You asked me what I thought. I said, "My eye has nowhere to land. There's too much." I was struck by how quickly you painted out the pink ground with gray. Then you stood back, looked at it, and nodded. It felt completely visceral. You weren't afraid of blowing it.

RO: In painting, I'm not afraid of failure. I don't conceive of painting in terms of success or failure, just choices and opportunities – hopefully choices I am not making consciously. When you made that suggestion, I thought, *That makes sense to me. Let's take a light gray and see if that works.* A painting can become a hundred different things. That is a really exciting part of painting. If I paint over something and think I might regret it, I actually don't, because I know that image or idea will surface in another painting down the road.

JB: One thing I love about your process is that you don't seem to edit yourself while you're working. You once said to me during a studio visit, "I don't even think about it in terms of good and bad. It's almost like I'm a conduit to nature. Nature isn't good or bad. It just is."

RO: Absolutely. I've never really mixed colors when I paint. The colors that appear in nature are largely a product of an experience we will never witness or understand. Of course, there have been some instances where I have been a witness to nature making color – the rain hitting the earth and producing a beautiful muddy translucent brown, or lightning hitting a tree and creating a fiery orange. Nature does not make an intellectual choice; it just acts. I want to be in sync with how nature would paint if nature painted on a canvas.

The same truth applies to the forms one sees in nature. I remember seeing a painting several years ago that nature created. It continues to hold a spell over me.

I was walking with a friend in a snowy field in Kent, and we witnessed a hawk swoop down and attack a mouse. In an instant, the hawk was gone with its mouse, leaving behind rhythmic marks, fresh blood against the white snow, and frenzied shapes and lines in the snow from the moment of the kill and the hawk's ascent. It remains one of the most beautiful abstract paintings I have ever seen.

JB: You said to me, "Painting is one of the few things I've done where I'm not afraid of failure at all." I disagree. You were an art dealer for fifteen years, and I went to every show you did, unless I was out of town. You didn't think a lot before you made the decision to show an artist. It was risk after risk. I've never seen you teach, but I've heard you're a very impulsive teacher, and that you're willing to take an entire class on a tangent when it's important to you. Can you see this connection between the three: your painting, art dealing, and teaching?

RO: Interesting. I've never really thought about that, but you're right: there's a strong connection. I always say to teachers, "Trust the tangent." I don't believe in borders of any kind, certainly not in the creative process. The act of teaching is a creative act. People are attracted to those who go with their gut and trust the tangent.

JB: We're bringing a painting from 2021 to the Dallas Art Fair, which has serpents coming out of the arms and a flaring tongue. I asked you about it when I saw it in your studio, and you said, "That's how I feel half the time." What did you mean by that?

RO: I'm still trying to understand my paintings. I think if I did understand them, I'd stop painting. Painting is an opportunity to explore my subconscious. The snakes and the alligators probably surface a lot because of the time I spent in Florida and India as a kid. I had a very unusual life as a child. I would come home from school, and literally every week, a snake charmer would show up with three or four cobras and baskets. He would invite me outside, I'd give him some rupees, and I would sit for hours, mesmerized. There are certain archetypes that surface in my work which stem from these early experiences. Like all of us, I live with anxiety, and I explore that in my paintings.

JB: We're bringing another large painting to Dallas, which has a humanoid figure resting on the tail of an alligator, and a smaller painting of a bright orange animal head with a green fanning v-shape coming out of its eyes, and a black protruding tongue. No matter how seemingly ferocious the subject matter is, your world seems to be inhabited by people who get along with monsters.

RO: I have – we all have – phobias. I'm terrified of rodents, and I'm not a big fan of snakes. I actually love alligators. I look at the figure with an alligator, and they seem very comfortable together. I remember painting the figure above, and the left leg turning into a snake. That was all very subconscious. I don't remember saying to myself, "I'm going to turn that leg into a snake." I remember thinking there was space that needed to be filled. After I stepped back, I thought, *Oh, my God, that looks like a snake*. It comes back to what I said earlier: it's usually a good painting if I've had an experience making it. It's not a good painting if the process is too intellectual.

JB: I had one other experience when you were at my booth at the Outsider Art Fair. I introduced you to someone, and they said, "Oh, Rob Ober, the artist? You don't look at all how I expected you to look." There's something really interesting there, don't you think?

RO: I'm still trying to figure out whether my work is an act of rebellion against the very waspy conventional world I grew up in. I think there's a very strong sexual undercurrent to my paintings. There's a beastly, hungry side that surfaces. I don't think it's unique to me, I just think that I'm not afraid to explore that side. Maybe I'm willing to explore that side more than a lot of artists. People have said to me, particularly about the very sexualized paintings that are almost comical, that I'm willing to go places other artists are not willing to go. I've made paintings of figures masturbating. Playboy and masturbation were a big part of my experience as a teenager, and I am very comfortable exploring that in my paintings. That's part of my experience growing up in suburban America in the 1970s and '80s. For me, painting is about being honest with myself and honest with my public. Jerry Saltz once said something that struck a chord with me: "You want to make yourself completely vulnerable, and you want to paint your obsessions." I don't think you can go wrong if you do those two things when you create. You paint your obsessions, and often, obsessions are things other people might find embarrassing to learn about you.

JB: There is something striking here: what's in the head of a seemingly ordinary straight, white, male artist? That's interesting to me because we're probably not as normal as everybody thinks. But what is normal anyway?

RO: I agree with you completely on that. I grew up on the streets of India, Delhi, Florida, Athens, and Russia. I see more of our common humanity than our differences. For me, the experience of a white kid from an upper middle class background is just as interesting. It's just different.

JB: You're exploring what's in your head without making any judgments.

RO: Absolutely. There's nothing that I enjoy more when I'm painting than when I step back and think, *Wow, that's really weird, or, I'm really surprised by that. I'm surprised that came to the surface.*

James D. Barron
April 2022