

RICHARD WRIGHT: Down on the floor here you've got some wooden panels; they look as if they might be from a floor.

VICTORIA MORTON: I like those things.

R: I have the feeling that they might lie there for a long time.

V: I just brought them out. I put them away and then I brought them out again.

R: Do you ever feel that when you are making a painting, that you make a mistake: that you do something to the painting that destroys it, or ... what happens?

V: Yeah I do, because part of what I go through when I'm making the work is like a series of attempts, and I don't really see the paintings as perfect things.

R: I'm trying to think about the process. Do you ever correct — to get back to the place where you were before?

V: Sometimes I try to take it back. I'm taking paint off all the time, but the remains of the event are there and that's maybe what I'm looking for. It's like a process of recording mental movement until you get to a point where something starts to take on a life of its own, so I don't really think of this as making mistakes. I think of it as adjustments and trying to get the work to evolve. If I've got a fixed idea for a finished piece in my head, and then do it and it just looks exactly as I thought, I'm disappointed because there's no feeling of potential about it — that's almost as bad as something that might more obviously be a mistake.

R: I think that's *exactly* what I was getting at. I was thinking about this consciousness, what is an idea in painting? In my experience, you might have something lying around that you have been kind of working on, that you think is going in a certain direction. Then you suddenly think 'ah, if I do that to it' — which is more of a conscious thing — you do it and of course it breaks or loses all of the potential that it had.

V: That word 'potential' is maybe quite an important one, because I like it when it feels like there are lots of possibilities, and when that feeling stops I'm not so interested. I shut off from it because it becomes like a dead thing.

R: ... I'm also aware that when you paint, when I do anyway, there are moments when I might paint completely over something. In part of the process you might decide that the solution is to put a certain thing on the canvas, and it is like beginning again. For example, you could have arrived at the point where the whole canvas is red from the start. What I was going to ask is how much you sense, or how much do you feel that what is not there, what's not visible but that has been visible, is part of the painting, do you know what I mean?

V: Yeah, it *is* part of it, definitely, for me anyway in the sense of making it energetic. But, it's also really important that I can radically change my mind at any point and just, you know, have the freedom to do that. To decide I'm going to start again or ruin it, and quite often you need to destroy something to break from a certain system and go in another direction. The discordance or jarring that might happen and the

space in between these two states is something that I am interested in. You could call it the moment of idealism and the reality of failure.

... in the blue and rusty coloured one over there, something's starting to happen there and I'm saying to myself 'please don't ruin it', because I could quite easily come in on the spur of the moment and decide to pour black paint all over it. That would upset me because I would think, well I had something good going there and I've just spoiled it. But, I would have to accept it, it would change and become something else and, you know, it's probably what needs to happen.

R: ... but of course in the process of painting perhaps, in a lot of things, it's not always such a straightforward path, it goes somewhere over there before it comes back here. I'm quite interested in the awareness of this, I suppose, because what may seem like a simple solution is a conscious act. I mean to come in and pour black paint over the canvas is a conscious act. But in trying to bring a view of the work into the conscious world, you actually destroy the work and you push it outside consciousness again. You push it back into the place that it has to come out of again.

I'm interested in what I would call painting's reality — it's to do with something that doesn't make sense anywhere else except in the painting — how it's achieved, how you get there and whether it can be achieved in a sort of subconscious way... When you were talking about the process it reminded me of something Picasso said, that 'painting is a sum of destructions', it's what's left after you've destroyed it so many times that somehow in the end it's something. But also there is this other aspect and even in an artist like him, where something might be achieved more consciously or practically.

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R: You studied painting. Obviously painting and indeed the canvas, to some extent, has been at the centre of your work for quite a period of time, and there have been moments when your work has moved into performance and other dimensions, and I know that you play music and so on. One thing that strikes me, looking at the work again, is that after all this time, painting is still very much there. Speaking as someone who has also been working with painting for a long time, I know very well that there are moments when painting seems inadequate, completely; and I'm wondering what your thinking about painting is. Obviously, it has changed and I know it's a huge question, but what is it about painting, that in spite of these inadequacies draws you back to it?

v: My thinking about painting *has* changed a lot over the years. At one point, I realised I was coding my activity to the extent that it felt suppressive. And then, I remember spending a year working on this one painting and deciding that it was going to be about including rather than excluding. It became about the psychedelic effect of detail... Now, I don't really have one fixed position so to speak, or else, my positions are contradictory because on one hand I believe in the idea of expression but on the other I am sceptical of this.

The fluidity and changeability of paint makes this ambivalence possible and that's why I continue to paint. At certain points, making paintings does get over complicated and problematic but at other times it feels completely natural as well and all that uncertainty is built into the work.

Personally, painting has become a developed preoccupation, I don't see it as a set form, I see it as an engagement with an activity, a situation to put yourself in, and a situation to put others in as well, so, and then that becomes full of possibilities.

R: In some senses painting is there, you know it was there before you came along and you're accepting of that in some ways now?

V: It's part of a conversation that's gone on for a long, long, long time, like folk music – that's what I would compare it to. Songs and themes and genres are passed down through all the generations, and they still have a meaning for people; this is what I'm interested in, because it comes from life.

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... to explore what the philosopher Richard Wollheim termed 'seeing in' or the 'two-foldness' of an actual experience of the surface and an imaginary experience of the subjects represented by breaking this phenomenon down into fragmented pieces of reconfigurational and recognitional awareness.*

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R: It's also extremely interesting, the way you started to talk almost about the bodily act, the habitual act of working and that over a period of time, to some extent, you do become absorbed into yourself in a way that is unconscious and I think that may be something particular to painting. It is also how you learn to understand painting – you absorb painting in this way, by re-enacting or reliving it.

I was always puzzled when I was younger by this interest on the part of art historians, particularly those who are interested in painting, about who taught who and it's only in hindsight now, after doing this for a long time that you realise just how these influences *are* there. In some sense painting is at the centre of this. It is an act, but it's also a way of living – an approach to life.

When you talked about complicated things it implied a more pure possibility, that you might be able to approach this thing without complication

V: ... 'pure' moments might be possible but that's not always what I'm looking for. For me it's a way of representing psychological 'interiority' which by its nature is fractured and inconclusive. It's about this and engaging with a historic dialogue, so that creates complications of course. In the activity of making work a focused, non-verbal exchange becomes the main impetus. A kind of internalised system of emotions, drives and impulses that are not always connected to rational thought and speech, but that operate within a world of their own sensational purposes can be opened up through the structure of the paintings. Music does this in other ways. So in thinking of paintings as psychological objects they can take on the characteristics of personalities, like you said earlier, and they can be experienced as body representations that contain an array of absorbed information. Thinking about this as a kind of realism is something that I find essential. It makes sense to me to extend this into other materials.

I admit I am working toward the moments when I'm not self-conscious anymore, and the structural apparatus is forgotten ... making paintings can be about this kind of unconscious reality and the desire for this state; they can carry both those conditions.

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(... during the making of this body of work I took the structure of Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* as a point of reference in another art form.)*

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... there is something about the repetition, and the ordinariness of the repetition that's kind of the absurd thing about making paintings, and that it can also become part of what I would say would be a ridiculously ambitious framework — it almost becomes comical.

Yayoi Kusama said — 'I paint boredom which is more important than the sunshine the Impressionists paint.'*

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R: Something which also struck me when I was looking at your work again, particularly the group of work that's in the catalogue and was in the exhibition at Inverleith House, was also the inclusion of some other images which are obviously from your life. They're obviously photographs you have taken of things that are around you and I was wondering again, this might seem quite a blunt approach, about this relationship between how you live and painting. I was wondering what your thoughts were about that.

V: Yes, there's a real correlation; even the time I have for the studio is completely dependant on others. Making work is deeply connected to and affected by day-to-day life, my relationships and being a mother — particularly in Italy where we all live and work in the same building. So, it's partly a reflection on this, but of course I have to separate myself to do it.

I use photography a lot as a way of being focused — to stop and look at found arrangements or to try and convey a kind of distilled sense of being in a particular place. The camera creates distance but it also puts you in the moment and I like that sensation. None of those photographs were consciously taken as art works but I wanted to include them in the narrative of the exhibition — to add to the sense of a life being lived. That the galleries were once a home allowed me to allude to this ... I was trying to create an environment that supported the paintings.

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V: ... think about Giotto's frescoes — they came before the invention of perspective, and are spatially organised in a way that's very aware of people's movements in and around the spaces that they're painted within.

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R: I know my own experience is that sometimes when one is working in the studio, a sort of *accidentality* occurs. Certain events take place, which are *completely* unconscious and all of a sudden you become aware that perhaps they are also part of the concentration. I'm thinking in particular about Robert Ryman; about how he taped these things up and secured them to the wall of the studio and in the end, when he tried to show his work, he became aware that there was something missing and then had to sort of reinstate these elements which had been outside the work. This idea has an interesting relationship to the notion of realism for me.

Looking around this studio now, when you went to get the tea, I noticed the glue — the pot of glue stuck in behind the heating vent there, and I thought: is it there for a reason? My first thought was that perhaps it's there because the pipe rattles and if you push something in behind, it would stop the rattling.

Then I went over to see if it was wedged in — which it's not — and just looking at it amongst this little group of things, I've no idea whether you just put it there because you were doing something else with it (and you just put it up out of the way) or whether you put it there also because it might have been part of something (an idea). What's interesting about that is the fact that it's almost a natural part of the process of working. One assumes a consciousness that almost includes things which are outside it. What becomes difficult of course is when you try to translate that to a gallery, as soon as you take this thinking (which is action) out of this context it becomes a more self-conscious thing. I'm interested in this difference between the *natural* thing — what may be unconsciously natural, and what happens when one looks at the thing and suddenly thinks about what it is (or might be to somebody else). That really struck me about the work. It's a very difficult thing, or a balance to find.

v: ... very difficult, yes, and soon as you place it in a gallery it becomes objectified. I find that hard.

R: When the thing goes out of your life and into someone else's.

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The painting called *Provocative Biology* is part of a series of works that deal with trying to represent the space of the body in several ways. In one sense as a colour field geometric painting and in another as an animated entity in itself that contains the energy of figures. *Provocative Biology* incorporates part representations of two figures. The right part reduced to a giant startled head/eye ball, the left one a more swollen full figure, these two are engaged in a heightened exchange. The image directly addresses the observer in its confrontation. It's an attempt to draw him or her into the psychological drama of the painting, and then to slow down the act of engagement as the repetitive, concentrated composition unfolds into a softer experience of modulated colour and light. They then become the subject of the painting's gaze and its desires.*

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R: I can paint something on a piece of paper, cover it up in some way, partially or totally, and then it might lie dormant as this empty, hopeless thing for a while and then, in a certain condition of mind it reveals itself and it continues. And that's something I feel has crept back into my work more in the last few years, an aspect of things whereby the act is somehow freed. It is to do with this relationship between thinking and un-thinking, or a *kind* of thinking, that is painting.

... but I don't think it is 'not thinking', like the kind of thinking that places things accidentally. We see more than we know and what seems unconscious becomes intentional in a certain sense. Not only intentional but real, it actually is a kind of reality, which is not removed, it's completely connected, a reflection of looking, of how we look, it is *us*, in a way.

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v: When I went to work in Fossombrone for that year I was disengaging with a certain aspect of being part of an art community and having that kind of thing going on and I just went into the world of making the work, and I found that that really suited me (laughs).

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v: I'm not very good at throwing things out but I do. I've realised that it takes me a while to finish paintings. I like them to feel like they sort of come into being in a way that's not too forced — so that can take a lot of time. It's a very slow progression, a kind of extended concentration. The piece *You Go No You Go* was painted over an older work, called *Hammock*, and it turned into something completely different of course, because this was about two years later. This took a long time, it's not even one of the ones that have a lot of tiny detail on it. It's more like this one here, with lots of fine layers of thin colours. It had to become something in flux that was resolved but not resolved, a sort of stuck relationship, in a kind of resting point, or stalemate and so that took months, to get that with a feeling of permanence.

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v: Well it's a human element, is it not?

R: Yeah.

v: I love those Mondrian plus and minus paintings, do you know them?

R: Yes, I do. They're among my favorites — the pier and ocean ones, are they the ones you mean?

v: Yeah, I remember really looking at them a lot at a certain point because it felt like they operated, well, they used the construct of language *and* painting — it felt like you were thinking and looking at the same time and there was something about that. I found them fixating.

R: I think that what he achieves there is a kind of visibility or factuality, but also it's about the thing that is beyond *there*. They seem to achieve it in this very visible way, I think that's quite unusual, and I suppose maybe it's connected to the conversation we've just had. It is almost like an invisible process in the painting, somehow it's not about ideas, it's about actions. It's not necessarily about something you might see, as in 'oh yeah that's the result I'm trying to get'. It's almost like a solution to a problem and the thing comes out of that. Each mark is visible and visible down to the canvas, but this concreteness expands into a sensational porosity. It's like seeing the atoms of your eyes.

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v: Somebody once looked at one of my paintings and said it was like a mandala, and in a way I quite like that comment — it could become something you could reflect, use as a mode of reflection, for reflection.

R: ... you feel almost as if they're personalities or something, that are exposed in some way... I suppose in a way they have to be like that, and that perhaps it's just it's embarrassing for them, even though they may never ever leave the studio.

EXCERPTS FROM A CONVERSATION WITH ARTIST RICHARD WRIGHT,
DECEMBER 2010 AND * STUDIO WRITINGS