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## **Abstraction and Representation on Equal Terms: A Studio Visit with Denise Green**

by **Jonathan Goodman**

To greet the publication of *Denise Green: An Artist's Odyssey* from the University of Minnesota Press, artcritical sends contributing editor Jonathan Goodman to the artist's studio for an in-depth discussion covering the Australian artist's time in Paris and New York and her contributions both as a visual artist and a writer and editor: an odyssey indeed!



Installation shot of Denise Green's paintings at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York's 1979 exhibition, "New Image Painting" discussed in this interview. Courtesy of the Artist

**How did living in Australia contribute to your decision to become an artist? At what point as a child or adolescent did you know you were bound to be an artist?**

When I was young, my initiatives in art came from myself. My family did not take an interest in either art or creativity; as a result, my feelings for art arose spontaneously. I followed my own lights in becoming an artist since there was no one in the family to mentor me.

I found my first studio at the age of eight or nine; it was the space underneath my home in Brisbane. Local homes were built on tall pilings in response to the hot, regional climate; the pilings enabled the air to circulate beneath the houses. Our own home had the additional advantage of privacy, in the form of a picket fence. Safely enclosed behind the fence, I drew for hours on end—I was alone but very happy.

In 1959, when I was a young adolescent, my father enrolled me in weekend morning drawing and painting classes, run by the town's Youth Welfare Association. This was a transforming experience that led to further development. It happened because my father in fact recognized my increased interest in art and resulted in my increased confidence as an artist: I could indeed draw and paint.

**Who made a difference in your first paintings?**

Although I saw, as an adolescent, such painters of western landscapes as Roland Wakelin and Sidney Nolan at the Queensland National Art Gallery, I was not inspired by them. Instead, I liked the indigenous paintings I came across, especially the Groote Eylandt bark paintings from the Queensland Museum. These works had a directness and simplicity that have remained with me; the paintings referred to local marine life: a shell, an island, or a fish against a dark background.

Even though I did not yet understand the incorporation of ancestral stories into these artworks, or how the space manifested the sacred, these works resonated powerfully with me. Even now, many years after my emigration from Brisbane, I still seek the paintings out when I return. I am moved by them still.

**With whom did you study in Paris? What were the reasons causing you to move to New York in 1969?**

I worked with an American painter there, Millie Lachman, whose ideas formed an important basis for my art. I then completed three years at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. But I

decided to move to New York because my work couldn't grow within the rigid conventions of French academic art.

**New York has been your home for more than forty years. How have New York artists—or any artist—influenced you?**

As happens with most artists, my influences change over time. Some, but not all, I experienced in New York City. My current museum show in Germany, *Denise Green: After Ju Chao, Ju Lian, Richter, Wiebke, LeWitt, Albers, Manet*, names those artists who have had an impact on the development of new work. Not all the artists are Western; the two Chinese painters I refer to in the title, Ju Chao and Ju Lian, are 19<sup>th</sup>-century Chinese artists whose work I saw at the Hong Kong Museum of Art a year ago. At present, I want to mention Dan Flavin, whose works on paper have influenced my way of making process drawings.

**The late 1970s "New Image Painting" show, mounted at the Whitney Museum, played a major role in your recognition as an artist. How was the show important to you?**

The Whitney mounted the *New Image* show in 1978. This was an era when the formalist control of art writing was breaking up, and post-Minimalist art, including Conceptual and Process art, dominated the scene. The *New Image* exhibition broke new ground in several ways. Until this point, the Whitney Museum had shown established artists—their exhibitions were retrospectives, mostly. By way of contrast, the *New Image* exhibition presented ten painters who were young and as yet unrecognized; they were allowed to show a good amount of work, from six to eight paintings. Also, previously, the major retrospectives at the Whitney had showcased only recent developments in abstraction; in the case of the *New Image* show, figurative art made its way into the exhibition.

Thus, *New Image* show documented recognizable, personalized imagery. The exhibition's group of artists looked to everyday themes: people, landscape, animals, plants, birds, houses and boats – the stuff of mundane experience. My own paintings contained images that fluctuated between the abstract and real; this interest has persisted up to the present.

**What were your further stylistic developments as you proceeded as an artist?**

The mainstream commercial galleries at the time did not support explorations in style. My own manner of working was turning toward exploration and experimentation. Indeed, I wanted to probe the unknown, rather than repeating motifs and imagery. During these years I was represented by Max Protetch Gallery, then a cutting-edge gallery, who supported my approach. In the beginning of the 1980s, largely through my association with *Semiotext(e)*, the influential cultural journal, my work came to reflect French critical theory. This meant that I was supporting a new style of painting, one that turned away from the forms of representation in art. So my style changed significantly. My versions of houses, chairs, and vessels were flattened and reduced to their essence, without sharp detail. I set the imagery into a background of single color.

Critics understood my style as an innovative approach because it combined abstraction and representation on equal terms. Yet even before these paintings were shown, I felt myself drawn in another direction. I had been reading the French theorists Barthes, Deleuze and Guattari, the consequence of which was that figuration was gradually abandoned in my painting. Instead, I favored abstract markings, dots, lines and grids. Shadowy outlines of figures and furniture gave way to ciphers and linear markings whose meanings were multivalent and indefinite.

**Since the 1990s you have been teaching graduate students at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Is there a conflict between teaching and painting?**

I teach one day a month, so it really isn't heavily influential, but I really enjoy working with the students. It's very gratifying to be engaged in a dialogue with young artists and sharing your experience and perhaps taking them a little further in what they are doing.

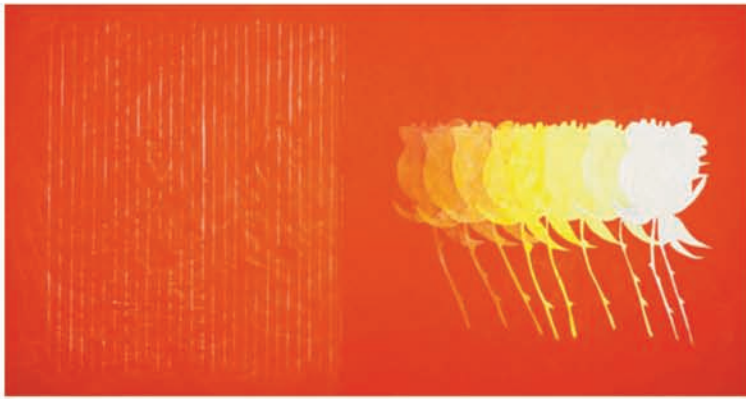
**You worked as an editor for *Semiotext(e)*, an intellectual journal of a leftist bent. You have also written on contemporary art. How has editorial work influenced your painting?**

Although I made the decision to move from France to America, my engagement with French culture was ongoing—I continued to travel each year to Paris. Additionally, I became an editor for the postmodern journal *Semiotext(e)*, whose politics were radical and whose influence was strong.

I had met the journal's publisher, Sylvère Lotringer, at a party in downtown Manhattan in 1978. Lotringer wanted to expand the publication beyond academic concerns and invited me to join the editorial board. Lotringer's contributors included such major figures as Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard and Antonio Negri. Interested in the politics of art, Lotringer asked me and another artist, Pat Steir, to join the editorial board in 1978. We introduced him to prominent figures in the New York downtown art scene and collaborated on several editions of this quarterly journal, including "Schizo Culture," "Autonomia" and "Polysexuality."

Being an editor for *Semiotext(e)* meant interacting with the other members of the journal. I was introduced to Barthes, whose argument against figuration fascinated me. In response, I called my *New Image* paintings "configurations" rather than representations. My defense turned on the argument that I did not expect the paint to build a believable image; instead, I was thinning the paint to create one—this position was gratuitous and even Jesuitical. I remember doing translations of texts by Lacan for *Semiotext(e)*. I also experimented with Deleuzian ideas, which influenced me to the point of making rhizomatic paintings for a few months; the experiment was not a success. Deleuzian aesthetics, with its ideas of multiplicities, intensities and "becoming," had implications for media, network and cultural theory, but could not be applied to painting. During this time I also published a book, *Metonymy in Contemporary Art*, which considered the implications of substituting an attribute of an object for the object itself.





Denise Green, *Evanescence (Red)*, 2007. Wax crayon, pencil, marble dust and acrylic on canvas, 72 x 144 inches. Collection of Robin Bade and Michael Parkin. Image courtesy of the artist and the Sundaram Tagore Gallery.

**Over the years, you have changed your painting style extensively. Can you explain how and why?**

My painting style has changed continually, thank God! It means that fresh ideas are coming into the work.

**How does serial repetition function in your art? Did you turn to repetition as a strategy that was influential among the Minimalists in the late 1960s, when you first came to New York?**

I think it is a result of being in New York City in the late 1960s. I have always felt that my paintings had a conceptual bent to them. This was because I moved to New York during a time of intellectual ferment and exploration and was exposed to Minimalism and theory. My process drawings are an example of serial repetition carrying into my current work.

**What would like to do in the future? What's next?**

How can any artist state with any certainty what she is going to do? I respond to events both private and public: the attack of the World Trade Center, the divorce from my first husband, my mother's death, and the threat of being evicted from studio. My art continues to change; at this point in time, I use scale and color to convey my sense of wonder.

I anticipate surprises. One unusual experience in 2008 was attending the opening of my show in Perth and seeing for the first time a group of black fella (Aboriginal) artists attend my show. Since early on I was influenced by at their work, their interest in my art was like a circle being completed. I continue to hope that painting can communicate beyond race, class, and place.

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