

# Conversations with Artists

# **Conversations with Artists**

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*to Arthur and Ryerson Vervaet*

## Jackson Pollock

*"Painting is a state of being. . . ."*

I ran into Jackson Pollock<sup>1</sup> less than a week after returning to New York from Taliesin West. There had been a party for Willem de Kooning, following the opening of his show at the Sidney Janis Gallery. The party was in a dive on 10th Street. By the time I arrived de Kooning had moved on, but among the stragglers I found Larry Rivers, Franz Kline and Pollock. Kline said: "Everybody's gone to the Cedar Bar. Let's go." But Pollock wasn't going anyplace. At least not yet. He was dancing. He had a battered brown fedora clamped over one eye, and his face was swollen and badly scratched.

I hadn't seen Pollock since a visit to his home in Springs, Long Island, about four years back, save for a brief encounter at the opening of Matta's show two years ago. On that occasion I had

<sup>1</sup>This interview took place eight weeks before Pollock's tragic death in August 1956. I have not altered a word of it, believing that as it stands it would please him. I should also remind the reader that all allusions to Pollock by other artists in other sections of this book were made before Pollock's death.

heard him mutter "Technicolor . . ." in his beard as he went out the door, leaving the thrill of rediscovery to Bernard Perlin and to me. I had heard rumors of the difficulties Pollock was having even four years ago, and they had been confirmed on my first visit to Springs. He had been trying to freshen or diversify his style by reintroducing figures, or at least figurative patterns, in the maze of paint. It was about the time de Kooning's "Woman" was attracting a lot of attention, de Kooning himself having momentarily abandoned the nonobjective for some pretty savage shafts directed at the feminine sex. Whether de Kooning diverged first, I don't know. It really doesn't matter, as Ad Reinhardt, the abstract expressionist wit, would say. Pollock's trouble was stemming from the fact that the critics, having caught up with his weblike style after ten years of protest—at least having got used to it—resented the change. "At least Pollock was unique," they were saying in effect, "but now he begins to look like a hundred other abstractionists who can't make up their minds whether images are taboo or not."

Instead of taking this lag on the part of the critics in stride, Pollock is said to have brooded over it. Of course he had painted recognizable images before. When I first met him in the early thirties, he was a star pupil of the American regionalist Thomas Hart Benton, and could paint a thunderhead building up over a hayrick, or an ornery mule, with as realistic a flair as the crotchety Missourian. Then there was a period, just before the war, when Pollock had been on his own for the first time, but he had continued to paint from nature, only occasionally moving away from plant or animal forms to seek the complex attenuations he was later to popularize through abstraction, in some Bushmanlike hunter or pre-Columbian totem.

But the net result of his effort to reintroduce the figure four years ago is Pollock's present impasse. Talked out of his effort to move forward, he had too much integrity to move backward—or coast. For the decade between 1942 and 1952 he had been stupendously productive. The now-familiar pat-

terms of streaked and dripped paint had become so sought after that he could have gone on producing and selling them indefinitely. But he refused to. For two years now he hasn't painted a picture.

Catching my eye at the 10th Street party, Pollock disengaged himself from his partner and came up to me. I had already been warned that my *Eye of Man*, with its strictures on contemporary formalism, might make me *persona non grata* at this affair. "Of course the painters won't have read it," my informant said, "but they'll all have read what Rosenberg and Hess have said about you in *Art News*."

"You—an art critic?" Pollock asked belligerently.

"Hell no," I said, "I'm just an 'aging anthologist'!"

He laughed and went back to his partner. "We'll talk about it later."

With David Smith I walked over to the Cedar Bar. De Kooning was there and ordered drinks for us. He insisted on paying for them, but Smith wouldn't let him. "Wait till you sell a painting, Bill." Smith hadn't been to the opening or heard that de Kooning's show was a complete sell-out. He himself had had a show of his sculpture recently at the Willard Gallery, the net result of which had been one piece *stolen*, and he was inveighing in his usual gruff, extremist but good-natured way against galleries, museums and collectors alike. I had heard that he had priced the sculptures himself, when Marion Willard was away—all of them high, and some over \$5,000.

"According to Mrs. Willard, David," I said, "that was the only reason they hadn't been bought."

"According to me," he growled, "that was what they were worth, just figuring my time at a standard welder's-union hourly rate."

He was going to remove his things from the gallery tomorrow, he added. "No more galleries—ever! I'll sell them myself—or keep them. It doesn't matter which."

## *Jackson Pollock*

De Kooning looked sympathetic and ordered another round of drinks on the strength of that remark, but shook his head a little doubtfully. Half an hour later I started walking back home alone along 10th Street.

Just short of Astor Place I ran into Pollock, also alone, weaving his way toward the Cedar Bar. I was weaving by that time myself. He stopped me and asked where I'd been. To California and back, I told him.

"What did you see that was worth seeing?" he asked dubiously.

"On the last lap, the Pennsylvania barns," I replied.

He grunted. "Better than the houses, 'cause it was the livestock that really mattered." He reached out suddenly and grabbed a runt of a tree that was growing out of the sidewalk, pitifully supported by wire and bits of tire attached to stakes around it.

"What's the use of going further than this?" he muttered. "This tree's got everythin'. Leave it alone and it'll grow and grow an' be beautiful. . . . No need to leave New York at all. . . . Thish tree's got everythin' . . . beautiful . . . beautiful!" And he drifted off into the moonlit fog of dawn, dropping a package of matches. I stooped over and picked it up. The words printed on it said: "There are good jobs for everyone in the telephone business."

About a month after this party, I called Pollock from Sag Harbor. Since he doesn't answer letters, I had no way of knowing whether he could be induced to talk for the record. He agreed; but a little while later I was out when his wife, Lee Krasner, called back and left a message for me: Jackson was not in a mood to see anyone; in his present frame of mind it wouldn't be good for him; call in the morning, but even then the chances will be poor. I decided to drive out next morning without further phone calls. When I arrived, Mrs. Pollock greeted me as though the phone talk had never taken place;

Jackson was still in bed but she'd get him up. Meanwhile we had a second breakfast.

Lee Krasner is an abstract painter herself. I admired a mosaic table on the back porch and she told me it was her design. In the living room hung a very long panel by Pollock: a loosely composed but expressive head next to a dense tangle of black squiggles—impressive, like all Pollock's work, in a violent, compulsive way. The house is spacious inside, undistinguished from the exterior except for the back view of lovely meadows which roll away to a distant pond. Finally Pollock emerged, in nondescript blue slacks and a T-shirt, bearded and bleary-eyed, like a bear.

This simile, coming to my mind along with the memory of photographs of Dostoevsky and Rasputin, made me ask him, after our initial greeting, whether he was of Russian ancestry. He said no; he was Irish and Scotch-Irish, via Wyoming, on both sides. "I'm a Russian," his wife said; "at least, my parents were Russian Jews." But *she* looks strictly New England, like a character in Hawthorne or Edith Wharton. She told me that they had come to Springs originally for a brief visit in 1943, "when Hayter and the Surrealists were summering here," and that when they returned to their flat in the Village she had suggested renting or buying a house in Springs. "At first Jackson reacted against it violently—all his reactions are violent—but later the idea struck him (and with equal violence) as a good one. So we moved out that winter and bought the house and have been here ever since."

She had already told me that she and her husband were spending three days a week in New York with an analyst. "For me," she had said, "it's been extremely helpful, but Jackson is still resisting it—violently. This didn't cause the break in his tremendous productivity, though," she added. "That began two years ago." I was a little surprised when Pollock told me almost immediately of his forthcoming one-man show at the Museum of Modern Art; he seemed very pleased that they were doing

it. "The idea scares me a little, though," he said.

He talks with difficulty, searching painfully, almost agonizingly, for the right word, with constant apologies "for not being verbal." The sincerity of the man is overwhelmingly apparent. He is uncouth and inarticulate and arrogant and very sure of his place in art and of the importance of the movement with which he is associated, but there is not a trace of showmanship or phoniness in his make-up. He is friendly and warm-hearted—though he resists showing it, and no doubt would like to be thought ruthless and without sentiment. In respect to his art, of course, he is; and this may be the tragic conflict that both makes his painting what it is and accounts for his inability to carry it further.

Having noticed Julian Levi's mailbox on one side of his house and Corrado Marca-Relli's on the other, I asked him whether he saw much of these artists. Levi might be called a neoromantic but Marca-Relli is an abstract expressionist, a painter of suggestive swirling figures reminiscent (but only in the fluidity of their forms) of de Kooning. Marca-Relli was a close friend, Pollock said. "Shall we walk over and see him?" We walked along the highway, a somewhat hazardous route, since he became involved in trying to tell me why none of the conventional labels fitted his own painting, and as he did so wandered off toward the center of the road—down which Sunday drivers were hitting 60—gesticulating and paying no attention to them at all except now and then to grab me by the elbow and say, "Look out! This road is dangerous!"

Marca-Relli, who was building an addition to his house, came to the door, and provided us immediately with cans of beer. His beard is black, and perhaps because it is much more luxuriant and curly than Pollock's brown one, gives him a more benevolent appearance. I told them that they reminded me of the Smith Brothers and that I'd like to photograph them together on the sofa, which was just big enough for two. I asked Pollock, meanwhile, to elaborate on this business of labels.

"I don't care for 'abstract expressionism,'" he said, "and it's certainly not 'nonobjective,' and not 'nonrepresentational' either. I'm very representational some of the time, and a little all of the time. But when you're painting out of your unconscious, figures are bound to emerge. We're all of us influenced by Freud, I guess. I've been a Jungian for a long time."

"When you start a picture," I asked him, "do you have any preconceived visual image in mind, or is the result wholly spontaneous, something that happens in the process of painting?"

When Pollock prepares to answer, he squints, screws up his face, tilts it to one side. "How do I know? I have and I haven't. Something in me knows where I'm going, and—well, painting is a state of being."

"You mean 'being' and 'becoming' are one?"

"Exactly—I guess."

"I don't blame you for guessing," I laughed. "I'm not sure what I mean myself."

"No. This is what I'm trying to get at. Painting is self-discovery. Every good artist paints what he is."

"I'm painting figures—human relations, if you like," Marcarelli said, "in most of my pictures."

"But you're not communicating anything about specific people, are you?" I said, "—or their relation to the world?"

"Not in the sense Shahn and Levine are," he said, "if that's what you mean. But I hope I am communicating my emotion and my feeling about the world, both of which involve people."

"Whereas they—?"

"Are illustrators. Shahn is a great illustrator, at least he was in such work as the Sacco-Vanzetti series, which I admire very much. But it isn't painting. Painting, even in times when the artist was preoccupied with reproducing aspects of the visual world accurately, was something else again. Take Uccello's battle pieces. What makes them great painting is not what Uccello has to say about any specific battle or personages involved in

them, but the excitement of what goes on in the picture in terms of images and their juxtapositions and *paint*. With the realists of today, nothing *happens* beyond the story they are telling. The surface isn't alive. It's not *today*."

"Then you think it's impossible," I asked him, "to achieve this kind of visual excitement in our time by manipulating the objective data and the people we know in any kind of a recognizable form?"

"It's a different age we live in. It's an age of indeterminacy, perhaps. Morals are indeterminate compared with other times. You don't call a thing or a person 'good' or 'bad' the way you could once. We know there's good and bad in everyone. This indeterminacy comes out in our painting. Perhaps it's why we're not interested in making portraits. That would be too precise a statement to lend itself to painting as we practice it."

Pollock nodded his head and seemed to go along with this. He did add that when you try to emulate the old masters, as Benton, Grant Wood and Curry had, and more recently painters like Levine and Tooker, "yes, and Larry Rivers—you get corn, real corn. Bits of Renaissance pastiche are still bits of Renaissance pastiche, no matter how blurred you make them."

I told them of my debate with Jules Langsner of *Art News* at UCLA, and of how his statement that you couldn't paint like Rembrandt in an age of fragmented forms and atomic destruction had made me ask whether Rembrandt's themes—birth, love, humility, compassion, old age, death, etc.—were any less concerns of life today. I asked Marca-Relli whether, for example, he was moved by the compassion expressed in Rembrandt's "Prodigal Son."

"We may feel compassion in it," he said, "but did Rembrandt's contemporaries? Probably they didn't go for it at all. We don't know what Rembrandt felt. And we don't know what emotions people in the future will read into our paintings either."

They asked me whom I had interviewed recently, and when

I mentioned Wright and Philip Johnson, Pollock remarked that both architects hated painting. "What's Johnson got in that glass house of his? One painting, a Poussin—if it is a Poussin. And as for Wright, he's a great architect, I guess, but what a ——! That museum! We've had all this trouble in doing away with the frame—and now this. Paintings don't need all this fooling around. The hell with museums! Put the paintings in a room and look at 'em—isn't that enough? You remember that old building where the Museum of Modern Art started? What was wrong with that? I was in a house designed by Mies once; I felt so taut I couldn't say anything."

We were all supposed to meet on the beach but couldn't find each other. I drove back to Springs late in the afternoon to say goodbye, this time accompanied by my wife Maia, who had been at the beach in the morning with the children. The Pollocks insisted we stay for a drink.

"Do you know Katherine Kuh?" Pollock asked me.

I said I did, and that I'd seen her in Chicago a month ago when she was assembling the Biennale show for Venice entitled "American Artists Paint the City," in which he and Marca-Relli had been included.

"What a ridiculous idea," he said, "expressing the city—never did it in my life!"

"I don't think it's so ridiculous," I said. "Aren't you all doing it—consciously or unconsciously? I feel it in your painting, and in Kline's and Bill de Kooning's, not to mention artists like Tobey and Hedda Sterne and O'Keefe, who admittedly are doing it. What are you expressing, if you're not expressing the turbulence of city life—or your reaction to it?"

He thought hard, grimacing with the effort. "Nothing so specific . . . My times and my relation to them . . . No. Maybe not even that. The important thing is that Cliff Still—you know his work?—and Rothko, and I—we've changed the nature of painting."

"You leave out de Kooning?"

"I don't mean there aren't any other good painters. Bill is a good painter but he's a *French* painter. I told him so, the last time I saw him, after his last show. You were there at that party, weren't you?"

"French?" I said.

"You know what French painting is. If you don't, you won't see what I mean. All those pictures in his last show start with an image. You can see it even though he's covered it up, or tried to."

"Why does he cover it up?"

"Style—that's the French part of it. He has to cover it up with style. But why do I say this to you? You're against all this kind of painting, aren't you?"

"I'm against making a cult or a dogma out of it. I'm against ruling out other ways of painting as Hess does in *Art News*. That's what I was trying to say in *The Eye of Man*."

"I'm with you there. None of the art magazines are worth anything. Nobody takes them seriously. They're a bunch of snobs. Hess is scared—scared of being wrong. I hate to admit it, but I prefer the approach of *Time*. I'd rather have one of my pictures reproduced in *Collier's* or *The Saturday Evening Post* than in any of the art magazines. At least you'd know where you stand. They don't pretend to like our work."

"But to come back to 'French' painting," I said.

"Come out to the studio," he said, "and maybe I can show you what I mean."

Maia and I went out with him while the children drifted off into the field picking daisies. The studio was padlocked and he searched frantically in his pockets. No key. We waited while he went back into the house. In about five minutes he returned, shaking his head. "Lee hasn't got one either. There just isn't any key," he smiled wryly. "There's something for the analyst!" he said. "The painter locks himself out of his own studio. And then has to break in like a thief."

Before we could stop him he had smashed a pane of glass.

"Couldn't we force the window?" I said.

He tried, but without success. There were wedges nailed in from the inside.

"Damn!" With his elbow he smashed another pane, and then another, tearing away the wooden strips between them. "Wait. I'll get a hammer and really go to work on this." He ran back to the house while we collected the splintered glass in a pile. Returning with the hammer, he finally managed to raise the lower half of the window and, shoving a table covered with dusty sketches out of the way, stepped in. We followed him. The main studio was an extraordinary sight. Huge paintings, some of them twenty or more feet long, demonstrated clearly enough what he had meant. They weren't French, or even American. They were simply Pollock. Paint laced, slashed or dripped on canvas after canvas, but always arrestingly, authoritatively, as only he can do it: undeniably the expression of a tormented but vital personality. Even the patterns of paint on the floor itself, where lines and drops of pigment had spilled over from the edges of the recumbent canvases, were recognizably "Pollock."

I asked him how he got the effect of a powdery white line that crisscrossed one brown-and-black canvas dazzlingly.

"Don't tell him," Maia said. "It's a professional secret, and if you tell him he'll start doing it!"

"I couldn't tell him if I wanted to," Pollock said. "I don't know."

Probably he knew very well. At any rate, the stacks of drawings, going back into the thirties, indicated beyond contention that Pollock can draw fluently from nature, or in the realm of nature-derived fantasy, if he wants to.

As we were going out he lifted from the rubble a massive toy locomotive, three feet long, very cunningly made out of iron, but badly rusted. He had found it in a field nearby and wanted us to take it for the children. It was clear that he wanted chil-

dren, and it was clear that he thought a good deal of the locomotive, and Maia declined it on these grounds.

"I never give away anything unless I love it," he said.

"I'll send you something I feel that way about when I get back," I said. "One of my daughter's paintings, for instance."

"I hate paintings," he said.

As we walked toward the window to climb out, he took a look back into that lair of creative devastation.

"These paintings, the ones I've kept, are my securities. They're all I've got left." He leaned out the window and looked at the view of the distant pond.

"Painting is my whole life. . . ."