

DANA SCHUTZ: I began painting when I was fifteen. It was great, I would just go down to the basement and paint on anything. I didn't know very much about art history, but I would have affinities: Picasso, Edvard Munch, of course Egon Schiele. Everyone always likes Egon Schiele when they're in high school because of the alienation and horror of being in high school.

AMY SILLMAN: Did you go to museums a lot? Where did you see all that Picasso and Munch?

D: Mainly in books.

A: You were in Livonia, Michigan? Did your parents take you to the museum?

D: Yeah, to the Detroit Institute of Art. That's where I would see paintings in person. And my mother was a painter. She went to Michigan State in the 60s, she would make these great Ab Ex paintings, except they were pictures of Lake Michigan, or a sunset, some were abstract. So when I first started painting it was exciting because she said oh, you're a painter.

A: That was a compliment coming from her? She was sort of giving you the go-ahead?

D: Yeah, she was really supportive. My parents would let me paint in the basement. I messed it up pretty badly.

A: Would you listen to music?

D: Yeah, I'd listen to the Pixies.

A: Oh yeah, "Wave of Mutilation."

D: Yeah, that was great, being sixteen years old and throwing paint around, mixing it in my parents' wok. It

was really romantic. Then when I went to art school, it was about technique and craft, not throwing paint around like a monkey.

A: You went to Cleveland Institute of Art. Was it liberating to go to art school and be with a bunch of other basement painters?

D: Yeah, but then I realized that there is a whole other story that I didn't know about. I started walking around the halls in Cleveland wondering, "What's the movement of today?" and I thought, "It seems like people are using a lot of gesso in their drawings. That's the movement of today!" And then I realized that that was really wrong.

A: How did you figure that out?

D: Actually it was from a kid named Dan. I was in the cafeteria one day with my friend Joey, and Joey said that Dan said that painting was dead. I was so pissed!

A: So you and Joey were outraged? (laughing)

D: (laughing) Yeah, like who is this Dan? But I thought he must really know something that I didn't know, and I wondered then what he thought about-

A: your paintings!?

D: Yeah, my mucky Egon Schiele paintings.

A: Am I dead?

D: Yeah, right. So I just came up to him and said well, actually I didn't say anything because I was too intimidated. I ran into him on the stairwell and I was that close to saying something to him. I was going to say, "So you think painting is dead?" but I chickened out.

A: So what did he say?

D: He didn't say much, maybe he said hi. No one said anything. It was a non-event. He was much older and cooler than me.

A: He didn't paint?

D: Sometimes, but he was in "Drawing."

A: So drawing was cool?

D: Drawing was cool.

A: But painting was dead.

D: Painting was dead. Then time went on and I took post-modernism and I got what he meant. We read texts that were critical of neo-Expressionism. "Cyphers

of Regression, Figures of Authority" by Buchloh, and texts by Rosalind Krauss, Tom Lawson, Douglas Crimp, Hal Foster, and others.

A: What year was this?

D: 1997. But no one really thought that painting was dead, it was sort of a school thing.

A: No one was involved even in the rhetoric of critical theory?

D: Sure, but most of my friends at that time were very much into painting. The thought that painting was no longer valid was great to rub up against. Responding to those texts made painting challenging and tricky, which is good I think. Mostly, though, it wasn't too big of an issue.

A: What were you looking at then?

D: I saw painters like Laura Owens, Monique Prieto, Lisa Yuskavage and John Currin in the magazines, which was pretty exciting. Laura Owens was interesting because, aside from feeling really fresh, her paintings seemed to set something up that allowed her to paint anything. They felt very free. Around that time it seemed to me that freedom could be achieved by making some sort of art historical Frankenstein hybrid. Combining a color field here, then using something from a different language in the field there, like a minimalist cube or a splat, seemed to offer freedom or at least a loophole. Abstraction seemed to always be treated as representation. I don't really feel that way anymore. Now endlessly combining "styles" seems repetitive to me, and seems to distract from what seems really important, which is what you really want to say.

A: But at that time, these young painters were an important response to the critical language that you were reading.

D: Yes, well, I think that they combined both sides of the painting dilemma. They seemed to have an ambivalent relationship to painting instead of an antagonistic one.

A: At that time, ambivalence was one step closer to painting-friendly. What do you think of earnestness and ambivalence now?

D: Painting can be a complicated activity. When you're

painting, many associations, attitudes, conversations or experiences float through your mind and can be triggered by any mark or resemblance in the painting. All of these feelings towards a painting's earnestness, ambivalence, and irony are not exclusive. They happen on a continuum during the making of a painting. Some of those painters I mentioned had absorbed the painting is dead thing, but obviously figured that that was old news and went along painting anyway, fully aware of its role and self-reflexivity.

A: You talk a lot about searching for ways to "freedom." Yet you have read a lot of critical theory, along with making paintings. How have you incorporated critical ideas about "freedom" now, as a painter, knowing what you know now?

D: Freedom is a tricky word too. I like to feel that I can make whatever type of painting that I want.

A: Was there ever a time when you weren't painting?

D: No, I was always painting.

A: What were the paintings about?

D: Well, I would always get what they were about wrong. For example, I would think that I wanted to do something smart, so I would paint a girl in front of the earth, with a Hawaiian shirt. It was supposed to be about location, reality and representation. But then she would have this big bump on her forehead, like a mound of paint that had migrated up from where her nose used to be, and I would talk about everything except the fact that she had a big bulge on her forehead.

A: There's a comedy to this sort of bungled sincerity, or perhaps a persona at work here. Which is it: real or a persona? And how does that figure into your work?

D: It's not a persona. I don't consciously try to make funny paintings. That would really suck, like someone desperately trying to make someone laugh. There has to be something else there. I think humor happens when there is a build-up of belief that is then disrupted or contradicted. Painting can be great at that.

A: Were you looking at the Surrealists as a young artist? Surrealism seems implicated, both in the collaged spaces you were using and the comedy of getting things

wrong.

D: No, not so much. It was always one of those things that was edited out of art history class. We spent like a day on Surrealism, and then we spent an entire two years talking about Greenberg, and then Neo-Geo was like a month.

A: Yikes, one day on 20 of the most amazing artists of the 20th century, two long years on the idea of flatness and finally a month on Peter Halley. Talk about academic!

D: I was really excited about any contemporary art or modern art I could find. I was just trying to sort out why I wanted to paint.

A: What's going on with you and color?

D: Just recently I started looking at a lot of painters that I loved early on like Derain, and Van Gogh, and I started to get really excited about the color. Color has always been hard for me.

A: What's hard about it?

D: Well, for a long time I was making paintings that were either blue or yellow, with a lot of grey-purple, like a lot of Alex Katz and Luc Tuymans paintings. The paintings were getting really subdued.

A: In your solo show at LFL, you used color in a really garish way, and I mean that in a positive way, as though you were testing the limits about how much color you could get away with. I felt like it was really pushing the border of bad taste, or both trying for garishness and believability.

D: I wasn't trying to be "bad". It was really exciting, a huge liberation, to realize how much I could exploit color.

A: You were also trying to paint a believable space, an outdoor space with shadows, and deal with it in a way that any painter does to get the stuff right. Are you working on the technical aspect of painting?

D: Sometimes I'll make sketches. I just want the painting to feel right.

A: Your LFL show was also crammed full of paintings. Do you feel that having more paintings hung than in a usual show was in the same spirit of testing the limits?

D: I guess it's the type of thing that you just don't realize if you're the one who made the paintings. That's how

they were in my studio. Plus I was just really excited.

A: In the paintings you are working on now, what's going on?

D: They're getting more abstract, or I'd like them to. They're different from the ones at LFL- the color's more focused, the imagery is gearing more towards these sculptural forms. The last painting I did was two girls in the park, but one was more like a monster. They were kissing or one of them was eating the other.

A: That Breeders painting also had two girls in it. Is two girls a theme for you? It seems like a charge of some kind.

D: Well, I've been interested in painting female rock musicians that I like- not in a hero worship way, but as sort of sculptures. I was painting people's undergraduate sculptures before, because it was an area where you could make up any kind of form, but it was still an observable object.

A: But it mutated into people as sculpture?

D: Well, I was also interested in portraits, so it just seemed like a cool idea to paint people I know or like as forms.

A: What's more comical to you, painting or sculpture? The shaky, awkward sculptures in the work seem like a stand-in for people who are downright ridiculous.

D: I guess sculpture is more comical because you can't ignore it and it can tip over and kill people. I like the idea of painting sculpture because of the potential for abstraction. Sometimes the sculptures in the paintings can be humorous other times I feel like they look very powerful or maybe scary.

A: Tell me more about The Breeders painting.

D: I'm not sure what the specific interest is for me. I was listening to music recently...

A: What bands, specifically?

D: Like The Breeders, P.J Harvey, Kim Gordon... I was listening to other stuff too but specifically I was thinking about these female musicians. And I was wondering if there is something specific to female angst that I am responding to, different from female hysteria.

A: Can you elaborate on the difference between angst and hysteria?

D: I guess I think of hysteria as a feminine negative,

something scary and threatening like a disease, and about angst as something more self-possessed, self-empowered, and gritty... that sounds masculine. But, I don't want to be an essentialist. I don't know if I have it totally worked out yet.

A: But it is worth talking about. You are messing up the categories by combining female and angst.

D: I never really thought of myself as a girl painter until recently.

A: What brought this on?

D: I started to realize that other people would bring it up. I don't know if I want or don't want that category for myself because the public conversation about it is sort of inadequate. The idea of female angst is a private conversation with myself in the studio, different from the public one.

A: Some of the ambiguous gender things that your paintings call to mind are really cool. You don't know if the characters are women, men, fiction, portrait, sculpture, painter, rock stars, castaways, cartoon characters or Dejeuner sur l'herbe. There are a lot of things that the viewer doesn't really know about your paintings just by looking at them. They seem to show a world that may or may not exist and if that's the case, then the openness of not really nailing it down means that you are also not nailing down any identification process. And I think that is feminist.

D: I agree. I would never want to make paintings that tell people how they should respond.

A: Evidently, from the look of them! Your paintings also look very intuitive.

D: Yeah, there were a lot of people who I went to school with who worked that way. We would feed off each other in a way that I thought was really exciting, supportive and encouraging.

A: Do you think there is more intuitive painting going on than previously?

D: I think that it is an exciting time for painting. This is the first time that I have ever experienced first-hand what I feel is a shift in the way that people are looking at painting. People seem to be more open to different

kinds of painting, particularly the kinds with drips.

A: Do you worry about the idea of just regressing?

D: In some ways it's sort of unnerving because the thought of being looked at as regressive is scary. I was worried that I was liking painting from the beginning of the 20th century a little bit too much. When I went to the Matisse/Picasso show, though, I realized how different things really are from then. The space among other things is totally different from paintings now. The same is true about painterly paintings from the 80s and today's painterly paintings, they just don't look the same.

A: I feel that a lot of painting has become too fashiony and designy and I don't like much of the discussion around it either.

D: I worry about that too. It's a problem, not only with the way that paintings are made but also how they are read or received. It's beginning to feel redundant constantly relying on a language-based read of a painting or an index of references. What happens when that fails- then, how can you read the painting?

A: Exactly.

D: I think that artists will change first and then the framework of how we read or understand a painting will change. The worst is when you can see the system of how to read it right off the bat and then the whole painting solves itself in a matter of seconds.

A: Right, and then it feels like a Hollywood pitch. They say "this will be GHOSTBUSTERS meets WILLARD" and then they can go get the movie made. That needs to be resisted in painting.

D: You have to start to think, what's really important?

And realize how great a painting can be. **Sk**