

ERIK HANSON & KEITH MAYERSON

Keith Mayerson came to my studio for a chat shortly after his “Hamlet 2000” show opened at Derek Eller Gallery last fall. A very generous teacher, Keith immediately started critiquing my latest graffiti paintings . . .

ERIK: Somehow the paintings are easier to do on paper, on canvas . . .

KEITH: Well, they look good to me.

ERIK: Thanks.

KEITH: One of my students did this thing on graffiti and all the terms, like tags—and then there’s graffiti that you can’t read but there are letters for it. I should look this up for you.

ERIK: Well, tags I know.

KEITH: When they make letters that you can’t quite read until you scrutinize them—there’s one guy who did that, but with sculpture. It’s really cool.

ERIK: You saw the sculpture?

KEITH: Just the picture. You’ve probably seen it.

ERIK: I don’t know. My graffiti comes from looking at Web pages or pictures from the 70s. Somehow current graffiti’s too arty.

KEITH: They’re trying to find new ways of “Kid Roboting” it into a sort of weird, commodifiable object.

ERIK: Why couldn’t graffiti artists of the 80s—I mean they made these great graffiti pieces on walls, but then when

they got a canvas, somehow it didn’t work. There was that Blondie portrait last summer. Did you see that? It was up at [DAVID] Zwirner [GALLERY].

KEITH: Oh, yeah.

ERIK: That was fucking amazing!

KEITH: Maybe it was that stigma that graffiti has to be something that’s given away or illegal, and they couldn’t wrap their heads around it. I mean, Twist did okay.

ERIK: Who’s Twist?

KEITH: Barry McGee, but that’s 90s graffiti. And he was a white guy from the suburbs. It looks good in here. When is your show in Kansas?

ERIK: March. Or, actually, the last day of February.

KEITH: Are you psyched?

ERIK: Yeah, totally, but I have a shitload of work to do. It’s going to be these fifty birch logs, with records where the wood should be, and then five signs announcing performances by divas like Nico and Liza Minnelli in a rustic, Jellystone Park style. Although they still look a long way from being done, for me, just making the shapes and getting it—

KEITH: Are you going to etch on them?

ERIK: Oh yeah, I have to scratch the grooves into them.

KEITH: You have to scratch them?

ERIK: Yeah. It’s actually pretty easy.

KEITH: As a kid, I had this fundamental dream of being in the groove of a record. I couldn’t get out of the groove, and I was meant to go to the label, which would have been the end of my life.

ERIK: Wow!

KEITH: I couldn’t jump out. A weird, paranoid dream . . .

ERIK: That’s pretty cool. That was a recurring dream?

KEITH: Well, it's one that I always remember.

ERIK: I never thought of it as a space until much later. I was never really aware that it's those little notches that make the sound. I always liked the objects, but I was more focused on the labels.

KEITH: Well, that all changes with the digital age. I mean, I don't even care about CDs. I do when I get a special limited-edition one, like David Bowie, and I want to read it, but they don't have the same object quality. What's this one with the sailor? [POINTS TO RECORD COLLECTION]

ERIK: That's Elvis Costello. It's the first edition of the British pressing of *Armed Forces*. It was designed by this French artists' collective called Bazooka.

KEITH: I remember. I had this record.

ERIK: You had the *British* one?

KEITH: No.

ERIK: This is the American one [PRODUCES ANOTHER COPY OF ALBUM]. This would have been the cover that you had.

KEITH: Yeah. Do you remember that band Gruppo Sportivo?

ERIK: Yeah, I loved them.

KEITH: They had really cool covers like this. I bet I know the name of the artist—it was Kiki Picasso.

ERIK: Exactly. I think he was part of Bazooka.

KEITH: Really? I have a whole book of his.

ERIK: Really? I think that Bazooka was three different guys who did work under that name. Did you see that record-cover show that Carlo McCormick did?

KEITH: Yeah. That was excellent. Did you lend stuff to it?

ERIK: I lent that and this [SELECTS ANOTHER ALBUM FROM COLLECTION], which is the first piece of conceptual art that I ever had.

KEITH: What's this?

ERIK: It's the first album by the Durutti Column on Factory Records.

KEITH: I can't remember the sandpaper.

ERIK: That was a limited edition, and it was released later with a Dufy painting on a black background. Ultimately, since it had sandpaper on both sides, the original would eat up your entire record collection. It would wear away at all the others. I thought it was great.

KEITH: So, what's this interview about?

ERIK: It could be about anything. When Matt [KEEGAN, PUBLISHER] told me he was doing this magazine again, and he told me that he wanted me to do something, I knew I wanted to do an interview with you, and I was thinking about the Beatles, and it really blew me away how you were able to use John Lennon in that "Hamlet 2000" project. When I've tried to work with certain bands that are so big, like the Rolling Stones or the Beatles, it just doesn't work, because they're their own thing, and it's hard to make art from them. But your portraits of John Lennon, and of the album covers, seemed to work perfectly.

KEITH: Oh, thank you.

ERIK: Then it sort of got me thinking about your project as a whole—of cultural father figures that we adopt along the way.

KEITH: Definitely—like avatars that are standing in for something else. I first used John Lennon a long time ago, when I was in California. The second official show that I had in California was called *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell!* with an exclamation point at the end. It included seven different narratives, and one of them was composed of these pictures of River Phoenix being abducted by Blue Meanies (the creatures from *Yellow Submarine*), and he's saved by a teddy-boy John Lennon in a fantastical paradise.

I thought they were both starry-eyed, utopic artists—people who thought idealistically about what the world should be. They were both thwarted by disillusionment.

River obviously did himself in with drugs and drink. He was at the Viper Room listening to bands, and he had his own band there. I thought John Lennon was the same way and was assassinated for his idealism. I think that's one of the reasons why he was so infamous after the Beatles. For me he stood for being a creative artist who didn't compromise his vision. I guess I first started doing John Lennon because of Rick Jacobsen. Remember Rick had Kiki Gallery in San Francisco?

ERIK: I never met him, but I've heard of it.

KEITH: Unfortunately, he died of AIDS and stuff. He had a show for Yoko Ono called "Oh Yoko," or something like that. This was probably twelve or fifteen years ago, and he asked me to do pieces for it, and I started getting into John Lennon that way. I did one painting that just said "yes," but in Beatles *Yellow Submarine* lettering on white with steel in the background to make it flat. I did a picture of John Lennon, Yoko, and Sean sliding down a hill. So I guess that was around the time that I started doing heaven and hell. Then I put him in heaven and hell. He's not as recognizable as he is in the latest ones. I got turned on to the Beatles again with the *Ed Sullivan Show* anniversary, the fortieth anniversary.

ERIK: I never saw it, but I saw the originals when I was a little kid.

KEITH: It was about last year around this time. It's like when you see movies about artists and they're never the same, because they're actors, and there are boring moments when they're slapping on paint. But when you see an artist perform and it's photographed, it's like seeing Mozart play his best concert for the first time. Like everyone, I am really into Hendrix, and I play *Monterey Pop* for my class, because that was a moment when music changed. The whole Monterey Pop concert, and Hendrix's performance there when he broke out for the first time, and he wanted to conquer America with his music, and you see him play—it's incredible. Have you seen it?

ERIK: No.

KEITH: I'll lend it to you, because I have the box set. D.A. Pennebaker, he did *Don't Look Back*, the Dylan documentary, and—

ERIK: *Ziggy Stardust*.

KEITH: Yep. He did that. The Hendrix stuff is amazing, and I had a cassette tape of it in junior high, and I listened to it repeatedly and I didn't realize that he's playing some of those notes behind his head or with his teeth. Watching the performance, the patter, and everything—just the way he spoke is in a specific rhythm with the whole thing. The whole concert is amazing. He comes out with a feather boa and he loses it.

The *Ed Sullivan Show* is even bigger because that is when music really changed in America, and supposedly there was no crime in the seven or eight minutes that the Beatles were appearing on Ed Sullivan. It was the days of network TV, and there were only something like two channels. Everyone had heard of the phenomenon, but no one had seen it, so people were glued to their TVs. And no one was robbing anybody. Supposedly it is the largest audience in the history of television.

There's this one incredible moment—I've done a painting about it—where John Lennon has this orgiastic moment where his eyes get big and you realize that everyone is focusing their attention on this one band, and it's a live performance—they're really playing—and so many people are watching and focusing their telepathic energy on the band and they realize that it's the band of the generation. What do you call the people on the ship's mast who look for land and say, "Land ho"? They were the band for the baby boomers who were on the ship's mast. They were really the spokesmen.

I think that there is something incredible about the Beatles—that they were able to find one another in Liverpool; that the chemistry completely worked perfectly for the time that they were together. To me, they were the Michelangelo of music. For the last year and a half, I've still played Bowie a little bit, but I listen almost exclusively to the Beatles, and John Lennon too. I think you can get worn out a little by the Beatles, but their music is really hard to tire of completely.

But John Lennon was the one who was really the intellectual of the group, and he was sort of the visionary, whereas McCartney was the business guy, or the pop guy. I think they're the first postmodern band in many ways, because McCartney came up with the idea of *Sergeant Pepper*—that they would be performing as another band for that album. A lot of their songs, especially McCartney's, are about speaking through other people, like "Eleanor Rigby," to epitomize allegorically where they are coming

from as songwriters. Speaking through another voice, to me, is a fundamental part of postmodernity—being able to realize that everything is relatable and being able to say something new through older forms.

But John Lennon, in many ways, was kind of a futurist. He was like the first househusband. He was one of the first people I am aware of to be publicly involved in an interracial marriage—and he would stand up for his wife as being an artist and take an equitable seat and collaborate with her. There wasn't that patriarchal hierarchy of men first and women second. At the time, that wasn't cool to do, and it's one of the reasons why he was so hated and demonized, because John brought Yoko in on an equal level. He retired and made his own music. He decided that he just wanted to speak for himself. His solo work is all about him or Yoko directly—*his* emotions directly. This is what I was thinking today, and here it is in a song.

ERIK: The thing that I always relate to on those solo albums is that they are not afraid to be so totally personal. I think from that, I learned that the more personal you are, in actuality, the more universal you are. If you try to take the rough edges off and you try to speak to everybody, you have no voice. But if you just get to exactly what your own voice is, and you are not really concerned with whether people are going to get it or not, I think people get it on some sub- or post-lingual way. It's like, "Oh, this is just another human being speaking to me from deep inside his soul."

KEITH: Maybe the music or the aestheticization, what it's about is the universal quotient. They say a picture is worth a thousand words, so maybe music is that too, where it transcends language, it has its own musical language, but maybe it gets you on an emotive level. Like *Plastic Ono Band*, and his first solo album (arguably the best one), is really primal and came out of that primal scream therapy, supposedly.

ERIK: Is that the one that has "Mother"?

KEITH: Yeah. And all those songs are incredible. And even though, in my own work, I speak through an allegorical context, as you do too, in a way, I was struck by the rawness of it and sort of the uncompromising vision. I was thinking with this last show I wanted to aspire to be as good as that album, just as an artist.

I think, too, politically he used his power, fame, and

fortune to be—I guess he did buy an island or two, and a lot of houses, but he really was interested in bringing his and Yoko's idea of peace to the world, with their bed in it. Which I think is one of the best performance pieces ever. They designed that as an advertisement for peace. And there are a lot of baby boomers who hate him or hate him and Yoko—that he was this guy who had no cares in the world, and he could just say "Peace," and it was an easy thing for him to say, but a lot of people were dying in Vietnam.

But still, why not? It was such a good vision, and kids today still know about it. But it did strike a chord, and the Beatles' music, if you believe in Buddhism at all—what's the name of the Buddha who is out in the world and is supposed to educate people? They believe that there are living Buddhas out there who aren't necessarily religious but are out in the world trying to make it a better place through education. I think that even if you hear a Muzak version of "All You Need Is Love," the music presses that button, and that music makes you want to have a good day or makes you believe that all you need is love. Do you know what I mean?

ERIK: Yeah, I do.

KEITH: I think there was a rhyme and reason for those people to exist, and that their music served a function. I'm a big believer in Joseph Campbell, that one of artists' jobs is to tell stories so that the world can understand itself better in the hope that the world progresses. I think that the Beatles really did that, and during the time of Vietnam and disillusionment with the government, their force was a really necessary one—to keep positive energy going and create a vision for culture to see itself for the first time.

It was countercultural, and the other weird thing was it was a time when capital was trying to exploit their creativity, but it hadn't yet undermined the agency of what it was they were trying to do. A lot of people say that postmodernism is about agency being reified in capital, or individualism, or in MTV culture now, it's just all about money, and the kid realizes it too. The kids I teach, luckily, are smart enough to know this—that MTV music is not the only music culture that is around now, and that MTV can serve to really undermine the quality of the music.

They find their own music on the Internet or through friends or independent labels. And they have that sort of subculture. Every album by the Beatles, I guess *Let It Be* kind of sucks, but everything else was *really* good, and

they kept pushing the envelope, but it was still incredibly popular, and they made a lot of money, but they made a lot of money making something that was really good and didn't speak down to people.

ERIK: They had the audience right along with them, just hoping that they were going to try and continue to be experimental while still making these incredible pop songs.

KEITH: For sure, and I still listen to their early albums, almost more than their later albums, because they're perfect pop songs. They take you to another place without all the psychedelic vision, and the psychedelic stuff is probably superior musically and is probably more in depth and rich, but to me as an artist, what you shoot for, or what's the carrot in front of us—it's like, how can you be an artist who circulates within a gallery system or a commodifiable world without modifying your vision? What is art supposed to be about in the first place? And I think that is what John Lennon carried a torch for up until his death—that he kept following the course of his vision, and he did have the money and didn't have to sell records, but at the same time he wanted to be popular, and he wanted to get stuff out there.

ERIK: All artists want a certain sort of fame or popularity, otherwise it's just a conversation with yourself, if you don't have an audience.

KEITH: [LAUGHTER] Unfortunately, we live in a capitalist society, and in order to have your work shown, I guess, it's got to sell. Of course, it goes through periods of not doing that, which is fine and everything. I think that art should be like that again, it should be. If there is any silver lining to the whole Bush thing, I guess it's that it gets a fire under people's butts, and maybe a counterculture will rise up against mainstream culture.

ERIK: Yeah, but has there been a counterculture? There hasn't really been a counterculture since . . . there have been little pockets—certainly in the 80s there was ACT UP, and that was great, but it's hard to get an idea of how big that was being a gay guy in New York, in the East Village. It seemed like a big thing to me.

KEITH: I'm a pretty starry-eyed utopic dreamer sometimes too, and one of the reasons why I got involved with

art in the first place was I was in college when the East Village scene was happening. And it seemed really cool. I remember when Basquiat was on the cover of *The New York Times Magazine*—

ERIK: I vividly remember that. When he was painting in his *Comme des Garçons* suit, and he had paint all over it, but what the fuck?

KEITH: And there's this book called *Art after Midnight: The East Village Scene* that I read in college and I have all my kids read it now. It seems like so much fun and is all gossipy. And it's the whole Mickey Rooney/Judy Garland thing where there were some young people with time on their hands. And it was easier to live in New York City for little money than it is now, and people were opening galleries on the street and showing their friends, and they were really doing something.

That to me represents the last kind of counterculture in America—at least in the fine-arts scene in America. What we were talking about with graffiti, there was that very generous slip and slide of graffiti into galleries. I know that I'm blissing nostalgically on an era, and I haven't seen the show ["EAST VILLAGE USA"] at the New Museum yet, and a lot of people were just interested in making money, and a lot of the stuff didn't last—or how much content Kenny Scharf intended. I think there was content, but the best things to come out of it, for me, were Jeff Koons and Basquiat, who still look fresh today.

ERIK: And Ellen Berkenblit.

KEITH: Ellen Berkenblit too, for sure. Yeah, and I like McDermott & McGough. I also like the music that came out of it like the Talking Heads and the Ramones and all the CBGB people. Where that came from with Patti Smith and all that, with punk culture. The *Art after Midnight* book says, I don't know if this is erroneous or not, but that the word "punk" came out of *Punk* magazine, which was started by SVA cartooning students.

ERIK: Oh, really?

KEITH: Yeah, and Legs McNeil and this guy Chris Halpern, I think. And Halpern was this SVA guy, and they would go to CBGB's and love the shows, and they did their own zine for it called *Punk* magazine, and it was filled with

cartoons and top-ten lists, and that is where McLaren got the name for it. It was obviously inspired by CBGB's, but it started here, which for me is totally exciting. In the late 70s it wasn't a Republican government, and it was coming after Nixon, and I think Reagan was there for all the 80s, and maybe the oppressive force of that counterbalanced with a lot of young people's energies who wanted to stick it to the man, and ironically having money in the art world because of Reaganomics enabled that to happen.

That's my hope for the future, that if we're gonna be stuck with "W" for another four years, that all the super-wealthy people who will get all those amazing tax refunds and will have to spend it on something . . . I utopically think that most people involved in the art world, many of them are rich white people, but I think that many people who collect art are better than the rich people who spend their money on yachts or golf courses. Maybe they're giving back to the system that's about giving back to people and living on the edge and reading between the lines of culture. It could happen again, there could be a counterculture.

ERIK: Well, we do have something to fight against; that's what you're saying, and you're looking at that as a good thing.

KEITH: And music is a place where all that can be launched. Because we live in "the age of mechanical reproduction," a lot of people can have access to music, especially with the Internet.

ERIK: Yeah, it's amazing.

KEITH: That can be the springboard for other things. In my class we always talk about the culture wars, and I feel like maybe in the front trenches is TV, because almost everybody has a TV. Maybe music is right on the heels of television, and I don't know if computers would come next, or maybe movies. As an artist, I always feel like we are in the back. Nobody really cares about us, right? But maybe, looking at it more optimistically, we are like Leonardo DiCaprio in *Titanic*, and maybe we are at the ship's helm and really looking at culture in a way that is not about compromising yourself for commodity.

ERIK: The great thing about being an artist is you don't have to achieve this mass appeal. You don't have to have half a million people get it, or four million people like Michael Jackson. As long as twenty people get what

you're doing, and if they're the right twenty people, you can have a career.

KEITH: I think that there's power in that, and I believe in the trickle-down theory of art, that it proves that as a culture we're not robots, and it's necessary for us to be in bohemian abodes, scratching away, trying to do something. And maybe it ends up as a CD cover or something, or maybe it gets to sell, or maybe it's just necessary for artists to be around to prove that we're critically thinking people, like philosophy, but an aesthetic philosophy. You're making a picture that says a thousand words, and maybe that does reach people. The modernists were all about making universal visions that everyone would get. It takes a certain amount of knowledge to get to know how to stare at a Rothko.

ERIK: Totally. I don't think of that stuff as being universal. I think of a lot of my friends who aren't artists, and the idea of looking at a Rothko show is something terrifying to them. Because they're afraid that they won't get it.

KEITH: I feel like fine art shouldn't be like that, but it is. You realize that fine art is ideological, and it does need to be taught, and unfortunately it does circulate around, I hate to say it, these elitist and ivory tower worlds. Once you are there, I think as a fine artist you need to forget about it and follow your muse and do what you need to do. Andrew and I went into exile, because he was really depressed when we moved here. I was doing okay in the art world, but I was younger, and I had this disillusioned, Rimbaud, Holden Caulfield moment, and I was like, "Who cares about rich, white people? They were never the audience that I wanted to speak to. Fuck them."

Then, we moved out into the middle of the desert and realized that Wal-Mart people aren't any nicer and sometimes can be even more mean than rich white people. So I thought about maybe doing movies. Then I realized that you really have to compromise a lot to do movies, and you really have to do well, and, as you were saying, you really have to appeal to a large population. Initially, I really wanted to do cartoons, but I wound up getting art-world jobs, and I thought that cartoons would allow me to do fine art or write plays or whatever, but then I realized that I wasn't interested in making cartoons funny every day, and I was just interested in the concept.

And I talked to artists when I was working at Robert Miller

[GALLERY], people like Alex Katz, and I realized, oh my gosh, as an artist you don't have to keep repeating yourself, it's not like a cartoon strip where you have to have the same five characters in the same situations and tell jokes. You can do whatever you want, and you are supposed to change—that's the fundamental thing to be good. You are supposed to go deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness of what you're about. Or just be like Rauschenberg and do everything. There is a lot more freedom in it.

And I still feel across the board that I don't believe about high versus low, and I think it should be mixed. There are people in Japan, like Mono, or Animo, he designs games like Final Fantasy and he does comics and he also does fine art, and there's this sort of ubiquitous approach to art. I think that can be okay, like Warhol, and I don't think there is anything wrong with that. For me, I'm doing the fine-art thing, but there is nothing wrong with bringing in pop references. That's what we grow up with. If you love these songs and they mean something to you, then they help to make you who you are. You are what you eat, or what's the Barbara Kruger thing? "I shop, therefore I am."

ERIK: Yeah.

KEITH: If life imitates art, and this stuff helps make you who you are, then the idea of appropriation and recoding is really important. It's just another layer of information that may be more important than a color-field painting. It has more to do with our lives.

ERIK: Well, for me, looking at songs is a constant examination of who I am. Just stopping to analyze songs that I have always liked, for whatever reason, or stopping to look at the words or the arrangement and how they are put together and realizing all the different levels that I relate to it, it teaches me more about who I am, or how I became who I am. My first persona was as a punk DJ. And I didn't really have any idea of who I was in the world until I was that person. I had all these outside influences that would be like, "What do you, as a DJ, think about this band? I respect your opinion." In a sense that was what made me who I am—was the music that I took in. That's true of everybody, what you take in as you walk through the world, what may stick to you.

KEITH: Oh yeah. For me, growing up in Colorado, the Denver Art Museum was great and all, but there were a lot

of Frederic Remington statues and stuff. I didn't go to the museum a lot as a kid, and I didn't know about the world of fine art. My exposure to art was through *New Yorker* cartoons, or magazines that my dad would bring home or through comics—and music, big time.

Stuck in pretty, lily-white suburbs and going to high school, and trying to find myself as an individual and a gay person, I found that punk music was really my saving grace. Being able to go to all-ages shows in the afternoon downtown and go slam-dance with friends was totally empowering, to realize that I wasn't crazy and that there were other people who felt the way that I did, both politically and in terms of their emotive energy. It was really important. And to find out that people in those bands were gay. Like Black Flag, I think people in that band were gay, but I don't know for sure.

ERIK: Yeah, and Bob Mould and Hüsker Dü.

KEITH: Yeah. And a lot of new wave that followed on the heels of punk, it wasn't just about referring to gay sexuality, it was about ideas, of speaking to ideas counter to the mainstream. It's like listening to the Clash. Listening to them for the first time, you felt like you were the only person listening to them at that time. It was special. I was the president of the high school radio station.

ERIK: Cool, I didn't know that.

KEITH: Well, it wasn't that big of a deal. It broadcast in the school cafeteria and the parking lot. It had like a ten-mile range.

ERIK: It was like a drive-in radio station.

KEITH: Yeah. And I would play "O Superman" so that I could have my lunch, and I'd run down to the cafeteria and get my lunch.

ERIK: Even if it skipped it wouldn't matter. [LAUGHTER]

KEITH: All the jocks would be banging on the door, and they'd be like, "Dude, put on Buffet man." And I'd be like, "NO!" For me, that gave me a sense of identity, and it was really important. And for me, fine art has always had a relationship to music and poetry. And I read some poetry. I mean, Rimbaud is one of my main men. Music is more accessible.

I always equate blues music to postmodernism. You know how you always have songs like, "Oh my baby left me, and now I feel so bad," then there is the twing-twum of the guitar. The music for me is what gives you a grounding of what the song is about. You get that lead-in and know that this song is about heartbreak. It's the instrumentation that fills that world and completes the picture, and it's the music that reaches you deep inside, but you don't know what the lyrics are. There's that phenomenon where you misunderstand songs and for years you think that the lyrics say something that they don't say. But it almost becomes unimportant.

But in fine art, I think the lyrics are the concept and whatever appropriate baggage comes in, or anything that is a recognizable figure if it's a figurative painting, or the stuff that you know coming into it, whatever that represents. But the instrumental part is the aesthetic of it, of how you put it together, what the colors are, how things come together with form.

What you were saying about how all that music is created—I think all that layering is about process. It does tame the wild beast, with music. That's why they have Muzak in airports. I think with art, visually there is a point that transcends language. Oil painting has its own language and history. But there is a language of colors. McDonald's makes you eat faster, because of the weird colors of orange and red together. It has that synesthetic quality that makes you eat faster and makes you hungry. Art can do that too.

ERIK: Music does that too. There are always certain sounds that I respond to. I don't like James Brown, because I don't like horns. I totally respect him, and I like his words and his singing style, but I don't like the horns. Also with Earth, Wind & Fire, my boyfriend, Evaristo, loves them, but all those horns bug the shit out of me.

KEITH: Maybe it's like the color green.

ERIK: Totally.

KEITH: Or maybe it's just genre.

ERIK: Well, as far as that goes, I am all over the place. I love opera and I love Millie Jackson. I just don't like James Brown, and I think it's just the horns.

KEITH: Both you and I have this interest with music in our art, and maybe the music quality is the talisman that allows us to make it visual. Kandinsky was trying to make music into colors.

ERIK: What's going on in your abstract paintings? I'm always wondering where they come from, or if they come from a land of pure abstraction.

KEITH: I used to do things that were way more photo-realistic, or ideas of appropriated style. Coming from my education from postmodernism, I thought that style was something that you just appropriate. If I wanted to do something that had symbolist things, I would work in the style of Odilon Redon. When I did the Beatles thing for "Heaven and Hell," I used the words "yellow submarine" on metal. But then, I felt that maybe there was something more. When I was doing that work, there was the first John Richardson biography on Picasso, and I was like, "Wow, if Picasso felt like doing a still life one day, he'd do a still life, and then later that afternoon he'd do a portrait." He would switch and vacillate. He would be working through different bodies of work, and the styles could change.

Why was I assigning myself these ideas, and why do I assume these styles? What's driving all that? Is there something about the de Kooning scrawl, where you knew it was de Kooning based on the mark that was being made? Is there something about automatic drawing or painting? At the time, I was listening to a lot of *Pet Sounds* and I love that album, and anything that Brian Wilson touched. The thing about *Pet Sounds* was that the music and the lyrics were all one piece. He has that song like "And I cry . . ." He's singing the word *cry*, but it comes out like a baby's wail. He seemed like he was stripping the pop idiom of early Beach Boys and getting to a real feeling—and of thought patterns too. The whole *Pet Sounds* album and the newly released *Smile*, they go in waves, and they remind me of walking down the street, and one block you may be angry thinking about stuff, and the next block you may be happy, because your thought patterns change, and that is actualized in the music.

I thought, "Can I get to the core of that in my painting or drawing?" Instead of making things look photorealistic, I was really putting spit and polish on what I was doing. I was like, "I know what I'm doing, see." I was very conscious of how it looked. I wanted to get to the batteries of what was operating that and not put on all those production values of it. I was driving to California from here, and I just

started making drawings of figures and forms and was trying to let my hand go.

I'm the son of a psychoanalyst who was Freudian, and I was looking at what was driving the subconscious of all of that too. I was looking at weird stuff that was happening in the negative space of old-master paintings and in Picassos and Caravaggios and stuff too. In modernism too, there is stuff you can't control that appears, with faces and sexual things that Gorky and all those guys were going for. So, with my abstract things, I was just trying to let my hand go where it wanted to go with the paint. And to try and make something that was what a dream looked like. I thought if I could do it more automatically, I could get more into dreams and memory. I also listen to music, and I have really bad hearing because I play my music too loud in headphones while I'm working and trying to get to that core.

ERIK: Me too.

KEITH: I like how in my figurative paintings, how they break apart in abstraction, and I hope with my abstract paintings that they come together as figures. I get this a lot more from people, not necessarily art-world people, but people who walk in off the street and they say, "Oh, I see a woman in there." And I'm like, "Good, that's what I want." I'm trying to realize that subconscious space more plastically. How can you realize those forms in a more Gorky-esque manner? When you start seeing it but it's not illustrated—that more optical and Uffizi kind of space of another world.

When I went to the Uffizi Museum, it was a big moment for me in painting, because I was like, Oh my gosh, all those painters really believe in the power of drawing and painting as windows into another world, and they really believed that. When you see it, it works like that. One of my favorite paintings of all time is da Vinci's *Annunciation*. That's the one that's like a heavy metal album cover of an angel and there's that weird fleur-de-lys and in that world you can zoom around. It's like a PlayStation game.

I think that's why oil painting was invented, because you can make an apple look more real than in any other medium. So, what if you transposed the plastic quality of painting and drawing, but you were able to adhere that to subconscious forms? For me, when I'm doing figurative paintings, a big epiphany came when I saw that movie *Rembrandt* with Charles Barrymore as Rembrandt.

ERIK: Oh yeah, that's brilliant.

KEITH: I love that movie.

ERIK: When he's impoverished at the end and they don't like his painting. He's homeless, right?

KEITH: Well, basically all the tax assessors want anything that he makes to go—

ERIK: That was because of the painting that he made of the town fathers?

KEITH: Yeah, *The Night Watch*, or whatever.

ERIK: They were shocked by it.

KEITH: Yeah, because it was doing things that painting wasn't doing before. It has crazy light and weird space, and it does make the people look good. There was that moment, I think I told you this before, where he hires a homeless guy to pose for him, because he can't hire anyone else, and the homeless guy says, "Why are you painting me, I'm just a bum?" and he says, "Oh no, you are dressed as King Saul, and King Saul represents *this* to me." And he was thinking about the portrait as this allegorical situation, when you are painting it or drawing it, and you just think about what it means to you.

And like a Stanislavsky method actor, for me I don't use an optical projection or under drawing, I just go for it. And when I'm negotiating that right brain versus left brain stuff and I'm trying to gauge the space, and when I think about what that means to me, I hope that magic comes out. The appropriated source or influence is just a map that I am grafting all this other stuff onto. And hopefully it transcends its original context and becomes something else. You can't make art in a vacuum, and with all the stuff that has influenced me, I can have my cake and eat it too—I can have the postmodern and allegorical context of a contemporary culture, with modernist ideals of space and emotion and beauty or ugliness and colors and mark-making coinciding in different ways. It's the music behind the lyrics.

ERIK: I would love it, when I first met Evaristo, and I would have him over to my apartment, and he was fascinated with that big abstract painting of yours. He was asking, "Is it a tunnel, is it a vagina?" I would never

question it, because of how we are trained to look at art and understand that an abstract painting can just be what it is. But I would love it. He would always try to find something else in it. You touched something in him with that painting.

KEITH: Cool.

ERIK: I guess he wants to understand it. He knows what you're doing. All of us humans just get it some way when it's abstract and it's really right on, and when you are in touch with who you are and because you are in that state of letting your hand dip into the color that it wants to go to. But I guess, as human beings, we want to find meaning, we want something concrete that we hold on to and can walk away with.

KEITH: I guess that's one of my frustrations with it. One of the reasons why I started having a stake in figurative appropriation is because it does give me something to hold on to. I can be like, "Oh, this is John Lennon. I know what this means." As a painter it's like going through a mogul field, and changing styles gives me something to hold on to. When I was first displaying them, like at the Jay Gorney show, people were like, "What is this? This is like thrift-store painting. Is this some sort of joke?" When I did those abstract paintings at Mary Boone, people were like, "This is somehow ironically talking about the New York school of abstract painting, and this must be some weird joke."

ERIK: How does it feel when people twist it into something like that?

KEITH: It's okay. I mean, I always tell my students you can try and direct the way a viewer reads your work, but you can only strategize so much, and you just hope that they will go down the right path. If your painting is about pink elephants but people think it's all about green giraffes, then you have something to think about. But if they are sort of on the right foot, it's okay, and they were sort of on the right foot. It was sort of frustrating at the time. It's hard to be an outsider.

ERIK: I think it comes from a sort of fear as a viewer. They're afraid to accept it for what it is and look at its aesthetic merits, and they don't want someone to tell them that you're poking fun at painting.

KEITH: On concrete terms, it's frustrating commercially, because people are less prone to show you, if people aren't buying the work . . .

I wasn't feeling a lot of that 80s work. It was too illustrative. There were all the outside texts. I don't know about you, but when I go to a gallery, I will read it out of duty sometimes. You feel like you look at something and you need all kinds of other information to understand it, especially theoretical information. To me it kind of kills the piece. Sometimes it makes it better. I like the idea of a Mondrian painting; you can appreciate it for its aesthetic value. Also, when you are more informed about what it's about, you like it even more, but there's still that thing.

To me when people say something is illustrative in the fine-art world, it's about something that's not already in the piece. Or the screenplay adage, "Don't tell it, show it." It's telling it more than showing it. For me, most postmodernism would be about showing it—or the golden ratio thing of 60/40, 70/30. Sometimes I think it's almost 60 percent about form and 40 percent about content.

Louise Bourgeois is always my example of this kind of thing. Like, that work is definitely coming from a specific place. She always says that she has these fantasies of her father eating her, and that's where all the work comes from. Or someone just told me the new stuff that's at Cheim & Read is all about her family and trying to bring her family together, because everything contains these five rings, and they come from this specific place, and she has her ideas of what it's about, but ultimately with Bourgeois, for me, as drawings or sculptures, they stand on their own as objects, they look really good.

We went to New Orleans for a family reunion after Christmas, and there was this okay sculpture garden, and they have a Louise Bourgeois spider there, and it's amazing. It is well made and well built, but it also has the formal qualities of it. It looks good as sculpture, but it also has this animated quality, it looks like the spider is about to pounce or jump or run. You could also attach all these things, like feminism—a black widow eats her young—or the idea of a spider being this abject thing but you need them around—be nice to spiders. All that, you could add on to it. It gives you a lot to think about, but it gives you something interesting to look at while you're thinking.

ERIK: That sort of description is one I always apply to David Bowie, because you can turn his songs into whatever you want them to be about. There's just

enough there, there's just enough structure there for them to stand on their own. Once you start to interpret them—like "Rebel Rebel," there's no definite way that it's meant to be read. You can make it into whatever you want it to be. That's what has the real longevity. It's like what you were saying about the Jasper Johns flag. It seems like people will be fascinated with that forever. There's just enough there. You can get an idea of the artist's intentions but never really come up with a concrete reading of it.

KEITH: At the new MoMA, one of the great rooms in that place is the Johns/Rauschenberg room. Johns, perhaps a little bit more than Rauschenberg, has a formal quality to that stuff. I mean the green target looks really good. It has that oil painting fetish. For me, I want to run my nails through it, or eat it, or lick it like ice cream. It has that kind of thing.

ERIK: [LAUGHS]

KEITH: And it's a readymade, it's smart too. It changed art history, that room, from modernism to postmodernism, by bringing in Duchamp, and making it formal, and erasing de Kooning, and all that—such a smart idea. But they're really aesthetic and good. And what you were saying about Bowie too. I was listening to last night—I want to say it's *Hunky Dory*. Which is the one that has "Major Tom" on it?

ERIK: The first one or the second one?

KEITH: [SINGS].

ERIK: Oh, that's *Space Oddity*.

KEITH: Yeah, that whole album is really good. There's that whole Todd Haynes view of Bowie, which I think is probably true, that he got a lot of the batteries that are operating his engine from Iggy Pop and that Iggy Pop is the more raw and pure version of what he's doing, like the whole rebel thing. Bowie was so smart. He's kind of like Warhol, musically. He was taking the stuff that previously existed and packaging it but also bringing nuance to it, and musical acumen. I love Iggy Pop, don't get me wrong. I think he's a genius and he's great, but I probably would be more inclined to put on Bowie than Iggy Pop. Bowie has more repeat-listening pleasure. Do you know what I mean?

ERIK: I do know what you mean. I recently got into the early Iggy and the Stooges stuff. I resisted him for a long time. He's one of the guys I always respected and admired but never got that much pleasure from listening to, the way I do from David Bowie. The thing that you said about the Todd Haynes movie [*VELVET GOLDMINE*]—

KEITH: You think it's tainted, right? 'Cause Bowie didn't let him use the music?

ERIK: No, that didn't bother me in the least. I couldn't care less. I thought it was really cool that he was taking these historical figures that did exist, or do exist, and he was making a fiction with it. I don't think that he has a particular point of view that David Bowie is this viper or sucked Iggy Pop's blood. I just think that he was creating a story. He was creating an allegory. I don't think that it was meant to be a final word on what that period was like. I think it was more that that person was a character, not that it was David Bowie.

KEITH: I think you're right. I guess the moral to that story, if I remember the movie—I haven't seen it in a while, and I only saw it once—was that the character who was supposed to be Bowie wasn't interested in making as much money as possible or selling out. He wasn't interested in compromising his music. I don't know what happened to Bowie. I think after—

ERIK: I think he tried to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. I think he was just tired of being labeled "this weirdo" and wanted to make some money. I don't think there's anything wrong with that. I think that *Let's Dance* is actually a really great album. He just stopped creating these characters. Like that song you were singing from *Space Oddity*. There are all these specific characters, like that person who doesn't have an arm and goes shop-lifting. Is that the song you were singing?

KEITH: Maybe so.

ERIK: He was embodying one character and then embodying another character. In a really specific—each song was written from a specific point of view. I mean, "Let's Dance" was not written about a specific, fascinating person, but it's this general thing. "Let's Dance," everyone can relate to that.

KEITH: Maybe in the early days, he was building on the Beatles, in that way that he assumed different personae. Maybe he was the first quintessential postmodern rocker, and instead of, like, John Lennon, who was going from his soul, he was just eschewing content and just started making danceable music—that’s fun to dance to and is really good, though.

ERIK: Yeah, it’s great stuff. But there is something there about creating fictions that can be really honest and really truthful. That’s a perfect comparison when you compare that John Lennon stuff, when he was completely mining his soul. Then you have David Bowie adapting all these personae, even in the course of one album—especially in the 70s. When I was a kid in the 70s, I was mildly curious about David Bowie, and my brother—not so much my brother, but other sort of hippie dudes—hated David Bowie because he was so inauthentic, like somehow John Denver was more truthful, because he was supposedly stripping away all that artifice.

It’s the same with Fassbinder. It’s such total fiction and it’s all completely fantasy, and on movie sets. The characters are all these allegorical “types.” There’s so much honesty and there’s so much truth in all that artifice, and how did that happen? That’s just complete magic.

KEITH: Well, maybe I am thinking out loud while we talk about this, but I teach cartooning and illustration at SVA, and for me that’s a great thing to do. I love doing it. A lot of people in the fine-art world are able to eschew comics, and I almost have to apologetically say that, only a couple of my students are interested in doing super hero stuff, but most people are doing really avant-garde, strange things.

In reality, the bridge between what I teach to my fine-arts classes—I teach Craig Owens to my sophomores, in a seminar that’s really about postmodernism. What Craig Owens was trying to do, in his essays about allegory, was synthesize what was going on at that time in the early 80s with media-inspired stuff and appropriation with earth-works and collage, and what he was saying was that it’s all allegory. Allegorical painting in the time of modernism really meant historical painting, like Washington crossing the Delaware.

ERIK: Yeah, I’m really curious about what you mean with this word.

KEITH: I think the modernists were trying to get rid of all that. Like, “Wait a minute, why do we have to make a painting of Hercules to talk about ideas of power? Fuck history painting,” because of all the baggage that it had, in terms of salon painting, and what was acceptable at that time and having to have a story in order to understand what the work meant. And trying to get to all the batteries that are operating badly, like Arthur Dove just doing a landscape that didn’t look like a real landscape, or Marsden Hartley going a more primitive means of making a portrait or a landscape to try and get to that feeling aspect, without working with filters.

What Craig Owens talks about is the late 70s, I guess Smithson and on. They were taking ideas of concept—my interpretation of *Spiral Jetty* is that it’s this man-made thing, that ring or spiral that, in time, can get subsumed by the Great Salt Lake, and other times the water can recede away and you can see it, and it becomes conceptual art about man versus nature and how that’s an allegory. If allegory means just a fairy-tale myth or fable, the life span of that work becomes its own story.

Cindy Sherman would take the idea of film stills, and women’s place within film, and re-allegorize it by taking it out of its original context and putting her own spin on it. Or Laurie Anderson by taking words or language and telling them as stories to tell something else. Joseph Campbell says all cultures understand how they work via these stories or fairy tales or myths. They are an important component of how we understand things.

By extension of that, maybe people need stories to get stuff. I was talking to my cousin’s friend who worked for Bill Moyers, and she was saying the news is all about making stories of real events to make it more accessible for people. Everyone loves a story. So maybe in some ways, all art is allegorical. Even Rothko painting his paintings is a story of a guy in the 50s who was ultimately suicidal and depressed but trying to enter the sublime consciousness via color and painting. When you historicize it, the story of modernism is about the subconscious and painting, but it’s also about stepping back and seeing how it operates in the larger context, and in that it tells a story.

I’ll tell my students that even when you’re doing an abstract painting, you’re using a brush and a board in the future, but there’s a whole history of oil painting that you can’t deny. All *your* references for how you make a mark have references, and there is no way of escaping that. And even if you’re a kid in college making something, it’s the

story of a kid, at that age, with that level of education, making the stuff informed by that. If a Martian was looking at that work, it would be the story of that person doing it.

So, all artwork, in some way, is an allegory—it's a model that stands in for greater things, like the Bowie song about the shoplifter. He's talking about the idea of kleptomania and wanting to rebel against the system in a little way. I can't remember all the lyrics to that song, or what it means. For me growing up, Bowie represented a different kind of state of being, of sexuality, or whatever glam rock epitomizes, including a little snippet, a little story that's enough to hang on to. It's a map, and through his musical acumen, he was able to graft onto it things that resonated even deeper.

So again, it's the lyrics that invite you into that world and tell you a little about it, but ultimately it's the music that carries you through. And maybe all art's like that. Like for cartooning, maybe all art's a cartoon—not that all cartoons are art, in the sense that some are junk, but maybe that's just to make money. But all art in some ways is an iconographic or more simplified, stripped-down version of reality put into a model-like form—that hopefully is representative of a larger reality. And that form itself is a story, or is an allegory, for something that it stands in for.

ERIK: So, you're saying that when you buy a Rothko painting, you're not just buying the painting, you're buying the whole idea of the tortured artist alone in the 50s.

KEITH: I think especially now. Even in its time, I mean, Pollock was definitely marketed that way. He was the cowboy from Wyoming; he was nature and all that. All that Clement Greenberg stuff was packaging it. You'd buy a Pollock and you were buying "freedom" somehow. I think, a lot of postmodernism was about putting quotes around everything and saying, "Look folks, it's just a story, it isn't about going into that other space."

Hopefully it has opened a window now. I think it was also necessary, politically. There were just all these white guys who said they were straight who were in art history and doing painting in all the galleries, and sculpture, and maybe drawing and nothing else, and thankfully, through postmodernity, the politics and beyond language. And post-Marxist stuff is about cultural idioms and points out that everyone has been making art since the history of humankind and why aren't women let into this system? And why aren't people of color and people of different orientations? What about all these different formats? And it's

all about content too, and not just about looking pretty.

All that is super important obviously, but hopefully we've reached a time in the twenty-first century when we can make stuff that has content and is smart but is also about putting your brains in a bag and going [MAKES SOUND OF BLENDER] and transcending. Ultimately, for me, the power of that punk music or slam dancing was really about that ecstatic feeling of being in a pit and going like this, and being a gay person, and the sexiness of that, and the rebel spirit of it—and when you hear music in your headphones when you're walking through the street and it makes you feel ten feet tall. Or walking out of a really good movie and being like, "Wow!" Just transcending yourself for even a moment of your pithy existence, and going to some other plane.

I think that's the function of art and something that art can do—something that fine art is about in many ways. It's something that commercials have exploited by trying to reach out to people on a deeper level through aesthetics, to sell you things. If it's a cigarette ad, where you see sexual acts in smoke, I think that is extending from Gorky, Pollock, or de Kooning or something. The art world is all about denying that, but there is something within us as biological animals that music moves in ways, and art can too.

ERIK: In ways that you're not able to articulate. You can try to parse it out with music. "I like it because the strings are uplifting," and that may be a small part of it.

KEITH: It changes it. It's like when you try to describe a dream to somebody, it's like, "Yeah, the alligators were chasing me through the tunnel and yadda yadda." It changes it. Art has that ability visually, or aurally now with installation art or audio or video, where it can reach you on that level. It's ineffable. It moves you, and you can't put it into words. For me that's what I try to do with my stuff. I have the seniors read *The Critique of Judgment*, or an excerpt from Kant, and he talks all about the *sublime*, and that you're a smaller part of a much bigger thing.

When you look at a picture of the Grand Canyon, and when you see it in person, it's like, "Wow! This thing was here before me and it will exist long after me. And how did that gorge get there in the first place? And my tongue is getting so big that I'm choking on it." I think that art can do that. Maybe not as powerfully as the Grand Canyon, but hopefully it can make you lose yourself for a time and enter into another world, and another consciousness. That's what Chinese monks were after when they were creating their

landscapes. They entered their world of landscapes when they were doing it, for their own transcendent point-of-view world and hopefully for the viewer too, when they were looking at it, they would go into that world and that space. I mean, comics do that. Why can't fine art? I think it could.

For me that's a connection between fine art and music. I mean, the reason why I play music so loud in my headphones is that it's a method-acting thing and it puts me in that space. If a painting is about something, I put on the music that most tunes me in to that. It could be the Smiths if I'm feeling wanton, or romantically desiring something that I can't have. Or if it's the Beatles, it's about achieving something that puts me, or the viewer, in the same space that the Beatles do. 🎵