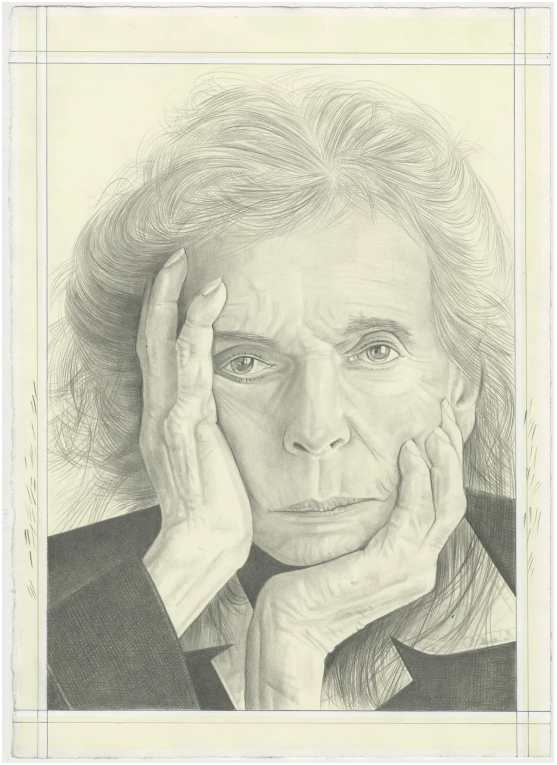
THE BROOKLYN RAIL

In Conversation: Pat Steir with Pepe Karmel

By Pepe Karmel
April 2024

LOCKS GALLERY



Portrait of Pat Steir, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui
from a portrait by Grace Roselli, Pandora's BoxX Project.

For over three decades, Pat Steir has been one of the leading painters in America. Her abstract waterfalls, with their rivulets of paint descending through cosmic spaces, discover unsuspected possibilities in the vocabulary of gestural abstraction, and reveal a profound spiritual dimension to contemporary art. In the following conversation, Steir retraces the evolution from her early figurative work to her canonical abstractions, and discusses some of the philosophical and poetic texts that have influenced her thinking.

Pepe Karmel (Rail): Your 2022 New York exhibition at Hauser & Wirth here in New York included the 2005 canvas Blue River, the largest painting you've ever made. It was magnificent, combining the horizontal sweep of a Jackson Pollock with intense color in both the ground and the drips. In the "Rainbow Waterfalls" (2022), you used different colors for the grounds and multiple colors for the drips within each canvas. The results were stunning. What impelled you to move towards this enhanced palette in 2005 and 2022?

Steir: With Blue River, I wanted to make a huge painting. And I made it blue. I've always had trouble seeing blue. Seeing a green blue from a warm red blue. I had trouble seeing the difference. And I started with Blue River to research blue.

Rail: Your new exhibition, Painted Rain, has just opened in Los Angeles. It's a beautiful idea. What's happening in these new paintings?

Steir: It is a research into the color blue. The grounds on the paintings are blue, different blues. There are many colors of blue. It's like a bigger ground—a serial thing.

Rail: Looking at the website announcing the exhibition, it seems as if you have divided the ground of each painting into different shades of blue, whereas most of your paintings since 1987 have had a single monochrome background. Is this something new, dividing the ground like this?

Steir: Yes.

Rail: What impelled you to do that?

Steir: I wanted to do something I hadn't done before. [Laughter]

Rail: That's always a good reason! Your work has at various times evoked things like waterfalls, waves, and stars. The Los Angeles exhibition introduces a new metaphor, "Painted Rain."

Steir: I painted a kind of brushstroke, and all the brushstrokes, different colors, bled down. The brushstrokes took this much space, and the bleed-down took this much space.

Rail: So the first brushstrokes were about six or eight inches, side-to-side, and then the bleed was how much?

Steir: About four feet. I called it Painted Rain so people would look down and see the rain.

Rail: The association with falling water makes me think of your "Waterfalls," especially in the 1990s, when you started making pictures that had colored grounds as opposed to the black grounds of the first "Waterfalls." How did you see this colored ground as working? How was it different from a "Waterfall" on a black ground?

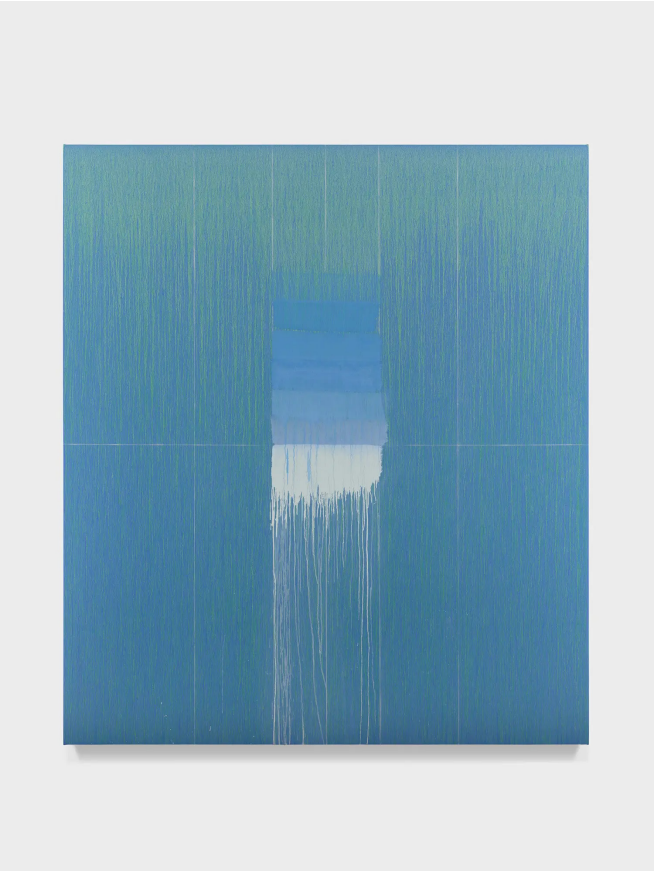
Steir: The black ground was deep space. The colored ground was much narrower space. So a figure on a colored ground or a waterfall on a colored ground is much closer to you. The color is like the sun behind it.

Rail: In a 2003 conversation with poet Anne Waldman, you told her that the colored grounds were inspired by Tibetan paintings. For instance, you said that your use of red in one canvas was provoked by a Tibetan image of the deity Vajrayogini, who has red skin, wears a necklace of skulls, and dances on ego's corpse. That's a very dramatic image! It reminds me of how the postmodern critics of the 1980s insisted that only

LOCKS GALLERY

photography and text were valid mediums for contemporary art, because painting was inherently a vehicle for bourgeois individuality. Obviously, all those people pronouncing a requiem for painting turned out to be mistaken. But how do you, personally, reconcile the individuality of being a painter with the idea of dancing on ego's corpse?

Steir: The critics weren't dancing on ego's corpse! I wasn't either. To be solitary and do one thing is egoistic. Ego always pops up.



Pat Steir, Blue, 2022-23. Oil on canvas, 96 x 84 inches. © Pat Steir. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Elisabeth Bernstein.

Rail: In that same interview with Anne Waldman, you said, "I am the painter looking from a huge distance at the huge sky and the mountain looming. Always from a distance. I am similar to the monk on the ground, a speck like a fly looking up at the sky. These paintings are simply rectangles around a piece of infinite space." Once again you evoke the hugeness of nature and the smallness of the observer. What drew you towards this idea of infinite space?

Steir: It wasn't a new idea. But I was struggling with that space trapped in a rectangle. And then I had the idea of infinite space, still framed by a rectangle, but you're looking through the rectangle at the sky. So that's different. Also, I read and reread Robert Rosenblum's book. And I was struck by his optimistic look at modernism, so I decided to put a square over infinite space. It was just a square. There was the space outside of it and the space inside of it. It was like looking out a window.

Rail: The way you're describing it makes it sound like one of James Turrell's skyspaces, like

the one at PS1. You look up through an aperture in the ceiling. On a good day, you see the blueness of the sky, and you have no idea how far away it is. It feels at one moment like it's in the same plane as the ceiling. At the next moment, it's infinitely far away. Thinking of the sky in this way makes me think of Blaise Pascal's statement: "The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me." Pascal seems to have been responding to the discovery by contemporary astronomers that the solar system was much, much larger than the universe imagined by Aristotle or Copernicus. Do you think of those vast spaces as terrifying?

Pat Steir, Painted Rain #2, 2022-23. Oil on canvas, 108 x 84 inches.© Pat Steir. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Elisabeth Bernstein.

Steir: Since I was a child, I put myself to sleep imagining layers of the universe: one layer, two layers ... aah! Then I'd fall asleep.

Rail: That sounds comforting rather than terrifying.

Steir: Because I can only imagine a limited amount of space, it's comforting.

Rail: Instead of counting sheep, you're counting levels of the cosmos.

Steir: I've done that since I was eight years old.

Rail: I recall that you attended both Boston University and the Pratt Institute, is that right?

Steir: I went to Pratt before I went to BU, and then I went to BU and then I went back to Pratt.

[Laughter] So it took me two, four—six years to get a degree.

Rail: You studied art and philosophy at BU. What kinds of philosophy were you interested in at that point?

Steir: I was interested in Kierkegaard.

Rail: What drew you to Kierkegaard?
Steir: The teacher. [Laughter] And I liked Spinoza because he saw God in everything.

Rail: That seems like a good reason.

Steir: My husband is Dutch, and Spinoza lived around the corner from us. Although not when we lived there.

Rail: That's too bad. I had a vision of you nipping around the corner to ask him to lend you a cup of sugar.

Steir: He was forced away from Amsterdam. They didn't like him because he saw God in everything. Later I became interested in Foucault and that group of philosophers. And they seemed better to me, more realistic. They weren't just thinking, they were looking.

Rail: At the Pratt Institute, you studied with Richard Lindner and Philip Guston. You've discussed Lindner in previous interviews, and I want to come back to him, but, first, what was it like working with Philip Guston?

Steir: I had to fight to get into his class because it was in the night school and I was registered in the day school. There were many students. We all had little cups to put the turpentine in. Guston read Time Magazine and the New York Times while we drank vodka out of the little cups. That's how that class was.

LOCKS GALLERY

Rail: Did you all manage to do some painting despite the vodka?

Steir: Not in that class. Nobody did anything.

Rail: What about the class with Richard Lindner?

Steir: Richard Lindner taught illustration. He was very good at it. The questions he asked were things like, "What was the first dream you remember? Paint it. Draw that." "What was Macy's like? Draw that." Questions like that.

Rail: Lindner had a very distinctive repertory of figures, Surrealist but also proto-Pop, simultaneously erotic and machine-like. Did you see his pictures when you were studying with him?

Steir: Yes.

Rail: How did you respond to them?

Steir: I thought they were super illustrations.

Rail: Rather than "paintings."

Steir: Well, the painting that was going on, at that time, was Abstract Expressionism. That was painting painting. And Lindner's work was illustration, even though it was painted. I was very influenced by it. I made a series of works that got out in the world.

Rail: Indeed, I want to ask you about one of your best-known early paintings, Self, from 1964. It shows a seated woman with her knees raised, her elbows lowered, and her hands raised to cover her face. She's seen from the front, inside an abstract, geometric room. The rounded anatomy of the figure reminds me of some of Lindner's paintings. Did you take his work as a starting point for developing your own images?

Steir: Yes. But the thing that you didn't mention is there's a target floating in front of her face.

Rail: Right, there's a thin blue circle around her head and torso and a pale blue disk in front of her chest.

Steir: I threw the paint at me as a target.

Rail: In hindsight, the paint that you threw at the blue disk seems to prefigure the thrown paint in your great pictures of the last thirty-five years. But what were you thinking of at the time, in 1964? What impelled you to throw the paint?

Steir: I threw paint at it because it was hard for me to decide what to do. I couldn't decide whether to be a painter or poet. My father, who is not so worldly, said, "Be a poet, you'll make more money." [Laughter]

Rail: Wow.

Steir: It showed how difficult it was going to be to make my way in the world as an artist, as a painter. Indeed it was difficult. I had five dollars from my parents. It's not because they were mean—they didn't have the money. So I started out, having to have a job in school—it was very hard to pay my way through school. I can remember registration for the second year. There was a long line to pay, you had to pay before you could register. And I said to the registrar—he was just some person who had a job at Pratt—I said, "I have no money. But I have to go to this school. I have to go." And he loaned me the money.

Rail: What a beautiful story.

Steir: When I graduated, I paid him back.

Rail: Coming back to Self and other figure paintings that you made around that time, what strikes me is that the image of the nude body should be erotic, but the pictures feel tormented, psychologically, in a way that defuses their eroticism. It seems as if you took Lindner's work as a starting point and went somewhere else with that imagery. They also, I think, anticipate a lot of contemporary painting by women. I'm thinking of the work by Emma Amos, Louise Bourgeois, Judy Chicago, Joan Semmel, Mickalene Thomas, and Betty Tompkins in the Brooklyn Museum show, It's Pablo-matic: Picasso According to Hannah Gadsby.

LOCKS GALLERY

Steir: I would say that those paintings were what we now call female paintings. I was struggling, so there's one of me—called Woman Looking at her Reflection from 1960—where I'm floating on a little piece of something and reaching down into the water to touch my shadow. I was looking for myself. And I was looking for a place for myself when I found myself. My nature is very peculiar: nothing stops me when I want to get someplace, but I'm slow. So I did this whole series of what we now would call feminist paintings. I unfortunately destroyed all of those paintings.

Rail: I was about to say you should do an exhibition of them, but I guess that's not going to happen.

Steir: I have photographs of them, I could do a photo exhibition.

Rail: That would be fascinating. That imagery seems to have vanished from your work after some years. When did you destroy those paintings?

Steir: When I couldn't afford the storage anymore.

Rail: That is a real world problem.

Steir: A lot of people have the same answer.

Pat Steir, Thin Air, 2022-23. Oil on canvas, 84 x 54 inches. © Pat Steir. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Elisabeth Bernstein.

Rail: You were on the founding board of Heresies, an important feminist journal, and remained on the editorial board for some time. You were also on the editorial board of Semiotext(e) in the 1970s, when it was a journal rather than a publishing house. And you were a founding member of Printed Matter. So you had an intense interest in the critical and intellectual issues of the era.

Steir: Yes, that's true.

Rail: How did you balance this kind of intellectual activity with the day-to-day task of going into the studio and making pictures?

Steir: I don't know how I did it. I couldn't do that now. I think that the board meetings for Semiotext(e) and Heresies were mostly in the evening. And I worked at painting during the day. Of course, there were some meetings for Semiotext(e) and Heresies during the day, but somehow it didn't put me off balance. It was fun to go from a Semiotext(e) meeting to a Heresies meeting. They were so different. But so alike.

Rail: What were the issues you felt most engaged with?

Steir: With Heresies, it was the feminist issue—but I never liked the way other people voiced it. Like they were in the art world and they were angry at the men, the men who taught them. See, for me, the men didn't stop me. I pushed them away in my mind. It was inconsequential that there were a thousand men to seven women. Just push it away and do your work.

Rail: What about at Semiotext(e)? I have to confess, I haven't read many articles from the early issues of Semiotext(e). What kinds of things did the journal discuss back then?

Steir: The one I remember the most was a sexology issue.

Rail: It sounds strangely like a painting by Richard Lindner.

Steir: Yes, this is true. [Laughter]

Rail: By 1973, you were making quasi-abstract paintings like Night Chant Series No. 1: Beauty Way for J.B. It's a remarkable picture: there's a big black square with a yellowish border, and a mix of figurative and abstract markings. A row of shapes near the bottom includes a small white square and two flowers. Brightly colored squares and flowers in the yellow border at right. Smears and scratches in the border at left. White and gray markings inside the left and right edges of the black square. A big white X at top center. And some kind of solvent making the paint at the bottom drip. How did you get from Self and the figurative works of the 1960s to a painting like this?

Steir: I did another painting before that called The Way to New Jersey (1971). It was a quote from T.S. Eliot backward. He said the only way to get home is to go all the way away and come back. The only way to see home or to understand. ("The way up is the way down, the way forward is the way back"—"The Dry Salvages.") And so I said "The Way to New Jersey." [Laughter] The Whitney owns it. They've owned it for thirty or forty years, but they only hung it once.

Rail: It's time for them to get it out again and put it back on the wall.

Steir: I think so. Hopefully someone will read this and think about it. [Laughter]

Rail: Discussing the "Night Chant" series, Thomas McEvilley raised the question of whether the black square was a reference to Malevich and his famous Black Square (1915).

Steir: When I did it, I don't think so. But in retrospect I want to change that. Yes, it's a reference to Malevich. The markings are about illustration and painting. I paint a figure, then I paint the bigger grouping, then I paint it crushed out. The figure is a flower. The flower is an iris and my first name is Iris.

Rail: So it's also a self-portrait. I didn't know that.

Steir: I know, I don't use that name.

Rail: What does it mean that you juxtapose the flower with the ominous black square? Or am I mistaken in thinking it's ominous?

Steir: You're mistaken.

Rail: It's a cheerful black square?

Steir: It's a dripping black square, okay. And the drip defines this square. In my way of thinking.

Rail: The X motif comes back in other works from the seventies, like Nothing (1974), which has a flower-like black shape at the left, with a white cross over it.

Steir: Well, my idea was that in life, you can't change anything retroactively, it is what it is. If you have an argument with a friend and then you make up, the argument is still there. It's part of the universe. It's in your mind, it never goes away. You can cross it out and make it seem like nothing, but it's always there. Not only an argument. Somebody you love can go away. It feels like they were crossed out because there's an empty space where they were. You can cross out pain. But the empty space remains.

Rail: Earlier you mentioned French philosophers and critics like Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes who became very important in the 1970s. And looking at this series of pictures with Xs, I also thought of the idea of a concept being used "under erasure," which appears in the preface to Jacques Derrida's Of Grammatology (English translation 1976). For instance, the word "Being" appears with an X over it, as if to say, "this concept isn't valid anymore and yet we can't stop using it." Did Derrida's idea of being "under erasure" influence what you were thinking at the time?

Steir: I don't know if Derrida talked about that, but I know Heidegger did.

Rail: In the 1980s there's a striking return to figuration in your work. I'm thinking of the pictures of flowers that extend over a number of panels, each panel done in a different style.

You gave them a wonderful title: "The Brueghel Series (A Vanitas of Style)." How does style become a vanitas? I mean, a vanitas usually depicts a candle burning down or a skull or those traditional symbols of the brevity of life.

Steir: I change my style—my "style"—every decade. I'm researching styles in some way. And the Brueghel was perfect for that research. I saw the painting in Vienna and I thought, "I can use that." I did two years of studies, just making flower paintings. And then I painted the panels, which took another two years. Each panel of the painting is a diagram of a different flower. I have sixty-four different artists' styles in there. And I'm saying it's a vanitas. The style dies. It remains in our mind, and people ask, well, what was your style in the eighties? I can't even remember. But it was fun to study how each artist used the brush.

Rail: One thing I remember from the eighties was all the talk about the end of art, the end of painting. The idea that you can't do anything new, you can just repeat things from the past. It started in literary theory with Roland Barthes's essay "The Death of the Author" (1967) and Michel Foucault's "What is an Author?" (1969), then reached the visual arts in essays like Douglas Crimp's "The End of Painting" (1981), Thomas Lawson's "Last Exit: Painting" (1981), Arthur Danto's "The End of Art" (1984), and Yve-Alain Bois's "Painting: The Task of Mourning" (1986). How would you define your relationship to the postmodern ideas of that era?

Steir: I painted that painting to prove to myself whether there was such a thing as postmodernism.

Rail: What did you decide?

Steir: No, there wasn't. Although I enjoy Roland Barthes and Foucault, endlessly.

Rail: Barthes is a wonderful writer. I always have the feeling that he's playing with ideas, trying them on for size and having fun with them. Then, in the next essay or book, he moves on to another idea.

Steir: Yes. And I love that. And that's what the painting is about. At the time I started to be an artist, a painter chose an image and that image was himself—himself. You could recognize a Rothko immediately, because all the Rothkos look like that. Yes, you could see immediately a Tinguely because everything looked like that. He had a style, and he stuck to it. And he rejected all the other styles in the world to stick to his style. Well, I didn't like that. [Laughter] I thought I could search, I could learn. I don't have to have one style. I don't have one hairdo in my whole life. I don't have one jacket. Why should I have one style to identify myself? My groups of paintings are like bodies of work. They can last for a year or ten years. But they're all research for me.

Rail: You also used pictorial quotations in Self-Portrait, your 1987 installation at the New Museum, where you filled the walls with drawings. If I remember correctly, they were details from Leonardo da Vinci's drawings of faces: eyes, ears, noses, mouths.

Steir: No, they were second-rate academicians from Italy. But they were pretty good.

Rail: The facial features were floating on a roiling sea of lines, which made me think of Leonardo's drawings of deluges.

LOCKS GALLERY

Steir: Marcia Tucker was a close friend. She said, “why don’t you do a show at the New Museum?” I said,” good. I’m going to do self-portraits.” But then she saw me painting the walls gray, and I got people off the street to help me; I had fifteen people working for me. So she was upset. But she didn’t stop me.

Rail: What did all those people do?

Steir: I made... what do they call them... tracings with little holes in them....

Rail: Cartoons for pouncing. It’s a medieval technique. The artist’s assistants pat little bags of powder over the holes to transfer the design to the wall.

Pat Steir, Garden, 2022-23. Oil on canvas, 84 x 54 inches. © Pat Steir. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Elisabeth Bernstein.

Steir: People could hold the tracings up to the wall. My rule was you had to have straight lines of images. So the drawings didn’t float so much. Well, some of them did.

Rail: I remember seeing the installation firsthand. It just blew me away.

Steir: It was like the inside of an Egyptian tomb. It was like the inside of somebody’s head.

Rail: Yes, exactly. All those images whirling around.

Steir: My postmodern question was: is there something as opposed to modernism? I did this and the Brueghel series. Self-Portrait was in fourteen different museums, here and in Europe. Maybe somebody will ask me to do it again tomorrow.

Rail: I hope so. I would love to see it again. 1987–88 was a critical period in your development. You made paintings of waves, inspired in part by Hokusai's Great Wave, in part by Courbet's paintings of waves. Which gradually evolved into what I think of as your classic paintings with drips, like Everlasting Waterfall (1989) in the Brooklyn Museum. The "Wave" paintings are in a figurative style—if just barely—while the "Waterfall" paintings are the result of a series of actions—throwing paint—that yield an abstract image. How did this transition happen?

Steir: I was thinking about abstract painting. And I thought, the drippy brushstroke is the icon for Abstract Expressionism. And I thought, if I let that dribble all the way down, it looks like a waterfall. Hey, wait a minute! The drippy brushstroke easily becomes a figure. There's no difference between the abstract and figurative!

Rail: I have two questions about this. Let me start with facture. Back in 2011, in your interview with Phong, you said that you use primed canvases rather than raw canvases, which is a break with the tradition of Jackson Pollock or Helen Frankenthaler, who used unprimed canvases. In their pictures, the paint sinks into the canvas and stays put. In contrast, you told Phong that you used primed canvases so that the thrown paint would slide down the canvas. How did you make that decision?

Steir: If I put paint on my jacket, it would sink into my jacket. If I put it on the wall, it would float down a little bit. If I put it on a primed canvas, it will float all the way to the bottom.

Rail: Thomas McEvilley added that you put water on the canvases, which made the paint slide even more. Is that right?

Steir: I sprayed water on them, sometimes. But you know that abstract painters use mayonnaise and different things.

Rail: De Kooning got himself in trouble that way. He mixed mayonnaise into his paints because he liked the look of liquidity. But the mayonnaise never dried, so those paintings have never completely settled. But I wanted to ask you about de Kooning versus Pollock. As you know, Pollock worked on horizontal canvases. So when he dripped paint on a canvas, it stayed put where it fell. Whereas de Kooning, in 1948, made drip paintings on vertical canvases. He would overload his brush with white paint and make a horizontal stroke on a black canvas, so that the white paint ran down in drips. Were you thinking about de Kooning when you made your first drip paintings?

Steir: I wasn't. On the other hand, I always loved de Kooning's black-and-white paintings.

Rail: Maybe we can say they were an unconscious influence. My other question has to do with subject matter or meaning. I want to talk about the different interpretations that people put on the dripping liquid quality of the marks in your paintings. For instance, Anna Chave, in 2011, published an essay on "Steir's Flow," associating your work with that of Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, Lynda Benglis, and Hannah Wilke, and arguing that such work expressed a corporeal identification with liquidity particular to women. What's your feeling about this type of interpretation?

Steir: Well, I don't agree.

Rail: Why not?

LOCKS GALLERY

Steir: It's too petty. It's too small to say feminist painting deals with liquidity. Now there are more women painting. How can you say they all have liquidity as their primary interest?

Rail: It seems like an overgeneralization.

Steir: They didn't come out in an army against it. But it can't be true.

Rail: In his 1995 essay on your work, Thomas McEvilley talked about water as a receptive or feminine force in Chinese art. This was part of a broader interpretation of your work in terms of the Chinese tradition of shan shui: "mountain-water" painting. Where did you discover that tradition?

Steir: In the Met.

Rail: We all come out of there, don't we! When did you start seeing Chinese landscape painting as something you could use in your own work?

Pat Steir, Friday Circus, 2022-23. Oil on canvas, 84 x 54 inches. © Pat Steir.
Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Elisabeth Bernstein.

Steir: I didn't see it as something I could use in my own work. I just loved it. I loved the way that the viewer was like, half an inch big at the bottom of the painting. The painting was eight feet tall. The mountain was seven feet tall. The waterfall was six feet tall. And you were half an inch tall. And I simply thought, I can make "mountain-water" paintings. When you stand in the studio and look at them, the viewer will be outside the painting and become small. I made the paintings very big.

Rail: In a conversation you had a couple of years ago with Sarah Sze, she mentioned Fan Kuan's Travelers among Mountains and Streams (Northern Song Dynasty), which very much fits your description. It's a very large landscape painting with a waterfall and mountain and tiny little figures near the bottom.

Steir: Showing a tiny figure in the universe is showing the relation to the universe. And the figure should have been much smaller, but then you couldn't see it in the painting.

Rail: When critics talk about waterfalls in your work, they often discuss Chinese painting because it's obviously something you were thinking about. But waterfalls are also an important motif in European and American Romantic painting. From J.M.W. Turner's The Great Falls of the Reichenbach (1804) to Albert Bierstadt's Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California" (1868), which later helped persuade Congress to create Yellowstone National Park. It's a big Technicolor painting with a waterfall pouring over the edge of a cliff; the clouds are parting and divine light is coming through. Does this Euro-American tradition of waterfalls and sublime landscapes interest you?

Steir: Yes, it does. The Brooklyn Museum has a painting of mine. I don't know if it's hanging now. But when it was hanging, it was hanging among those paintings—the American Romantic paintings.

Rail: And at what point did you get interested in that chapter in art history?

Steir: I've always been interested in it. I found it very attractive and also very annoying.

Rail: [Laughter] Why annoying?

Steir: Because those Romantic paintings are annoying. [Laughter] They're too positive. One point of view. Of course, every painting has only one point of view. I'd like to think about them more.

Rail:

I want to ask you about poets. In your conversation with Sarah Sze from 2022 you

mention your favorite poets are Rainer Maria Rilke and C.P. Cavafy. I sat up when I read that because those are also two of my favorite poets. I'm curious to know why you like them so much. Earlier you referred to T.S. Eliot. So can I add him into the pantheon?

Steir: No, you can't. He's no longer a favorite.

Rail: I'm sorry to hear that.

Steir: He failed the quiz.

Rail: Okay, what about Rilke and Cavafy?

Steir: If you do something, it has to be from the heart. The heart shows up in great art and poetry. And Rilke has a true voice that seems contemporary. I don't actually speak German but my whole life I've heard a lot of it. And I show my work often in Germany. My copy of Rilke—

LOCKS GALLERY

M.D. Herter Norton's Translations From the Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke—has a translation that's true to the German. As in German, "Ways will I elect that seldom any tread" maybe it says, and "ways will I elect"—a writer in English would never say that. This is from the poem "Do you know, I would quietly." Some other translations say, "I would go a way." And I hate that! [Laughter]

Rail: Cavafy's poetry is a strange mixture. On one hand, there are the historical poems where he takes an episode from the Hellenistic or Byzantine periods—something that ought to be dry as dust—and makes it heartbreaking and funny and sad. The most famous example is of course "Waiting for the Barbarians." Then there are the other wonderful poems about contemporary life: a poor office worker goes into a shop to buy a handkerchief and falls momentarily in love with the salesman. They touch fingertips while examining different handkerchiefs—nothing more—but it's a passionate encounter. It's heartbreaking. How do you think those two sides of Cavafy fit together?

Steir: Well, they fit together for everybody. But for Cavafy, he lets us see it: the poignancy of being. My favorite poem is "Ithaka."

Rail: "As you set out for Ithaka / pray that your road is a long one."

Steir: It's the journey, not the arrival. I'm old now. So that is very important to me, that poem.

Rail: It is a lesson for us all to keep journeying.

Steir: I will stay alive as long as humanly possible.

Pepe Karmel teaches modern and contemporary art in the Department of Art History, New York University. He has written for the New York Times, Art in America, Brooklyn Rail, and other publications. His most recent book is Looking at Picasso (2023).