John Houck: *In Conversation*
with Jonathan T. D. Neil and Candice Madey
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Jonathan: Could you give us a brief overview of this new series of paintings? – How are you thinking about them and what they're about?

John: For sure. This is my first painting show ever. It's something I've been working toward now for a number of years. In my prior work, which was all photography, there was this process of layering things, of photographing photos of photos of photos and making these very recursive, layered pictures, which comes out of my deep interest in painting and how layered it is. And so when I really made an effort to learn how to paint, I was trying to figure out how to take what I was doing in the photographs and do it in the language of oil on canvas. It was frustrating because, as I mentioned, painting is already very layered.

So last year I hit upon this motif that started to work for me. Rather than layering things as I was doing in photography, I layered different types of depiction, different types of painting. That's when it started to come alive for me. So I painted these large landscapes or dreamscapes entirely from imagination, and then painted these bells floating on top of the picture. Those are painted in a much more rigorous way, which comes out of my atelier training, a nineteenth-century French academic style of

painting. They're more "realistic." Then there's this third element, which is the shadow that bridges these two worlds of depiction. The shadow played a really important role in my photographic work, where it bridged these different layers of photography. Here it bridges these different types of depiction in painting.

Jonathan: The shadow is integral to the language of photography. If you think about analog photography, the negative/positive printing process is really a process of creating shadows. In the era of digital printing and digital photography, things have changed a little bit. But I'm curious about how the shadow functions as a mediating device or strategy in the photographic work, and how is that analogous to what is happening in the paintings?

John: It does function very differently in the photograph. You sort of get the shadows for free, so to speak; it is inherent to the process of photography. Whereas in painting, I had to learn how to paint a shadow. I had to learn where the penumbra goes, the fact that shadows are much softer. There was a lot of technical knowledge required to get the shadow to look convincing. In the painting it does something very different. I think about it in terms of psychoanalysis. There is this idea from Christopher Bollas that the shadow is the "unthought known," this feeling that we have embodied in ourselves, but that we haven't really thought out yet. And that's where an analyst would say that, through the process of free association, you can talk about what that is and begin to feel that thing. The shadow is this mysterious element that gives the sense of the uncanny to the paintings.

But then spatially, it really does something different in the paintings than it did in the photograph. Here I hesitate to use the word "trompe l'oeil," but there is this trick of

the eye in terms of these shadows floating on top of the painting. Historically, in western easel painting, trompe l'oeil happens in a very shallow space. It shows up, for example, like a board with a bunch of thumbtacks in it and pieces of paper stuck to it. It's super shallow, like two or three inches deep. But here I've taken some of that language and projected it onto a landscape that implies miles of depth. This creates a strange juxtaposition between the shallowness of those shadows floating on the surface of the painting and the depth of the painting itself, the depth of the imagined part of the painting.

And then on top of all of that, there are shadows with no corresponding object. In every painting, there is always at least one shadow that doesn't correspond to an object. I didn't intend this, but I've had a few people come look at the paintings in person and they've brought up the fact that seeing that shadow without the object makes it feel like that object is somewhere else in the space of the room. It immerses you in the picture in a way that, again, I didn't quite intend, but which I really like, because like the photography, the rephotographing made them feel three dimensional. You had multiple perspectives happening simultaneously, like you would have in a 3D movie, which the glasses then resolve. Here the shadow is doing that work rather than the rephotographing. The shadow attached to no object makes you feel like you are in the picture in an embodied way. This is super exciting to me, that the shadow can take on that work, spatially.

Jonathan: Do you see painting as a move to having agency, or exerting agency, in a way that isn't available to photography, insofar as agency in photography is often given over to what is being captured? In your photographic work, for example, with the recursive process and the gradients of color, there is an exertion of a kind of control, which is also always at the same time a giving of oneself over to the mechanisms of the medium, but there's no exit from that dynamic. Painting, in contrast, requires you to enter into a different dynamic, from which there's very little exit, because painting itself is its own kind of closed category, but inside of that dynamic, or inside of that structure, there's a new kind of agency that's available, in terms of what you can do to -- let's say -- play with the image, the way that you can choose, to a certain extent, how the shadow appears.

Candice: To add to that question, prior to working with photography, you were working with code, and I'm wondering if that was a more generative process than the photography. Is painting going back to something like a clean slate? A starting from zero? Because, in a way, the *Aggregates*, that earlier photographic work, actually could be seen as generative in the way painting is because you aren't working with "reality."

John: It was great when I discovered the rephotographing process. I worked through all of these objects that my parents had given me. I used it on the *Aggregates* as well, in the folded paper pieces, and after doing it for seven or eight years, it started to feel repetitive. Here I am photographing this thing and then printing it out and then photographing it again, printing it out, editing it on the computer. There was just this loop, this very tight feedback loop that was really interesting because it felt like writing software.That process of rephotographing things the way I was doing it really lends itself to only certain types of subjects however. It works really well with a tabletop setup, with objects in a still life. If you want to do a figure, you're really limited. I did make a figurative piece with a full-size person in it. I had to print out these massive prints, put the person back in front of a print of themselves, take a photo of that, and I thought, there's got to be a better way to do this. That is part of what pushed me more and more toward painting, a desire to break out of the tabletop setup of a lot of my photography. I wanted to, in this show, deal with landscape and larger, more expansive kinds of spatial conditions.

When I started to learn, really learn, how to paint, I would show my friend a painting and – he's a painter – he would say, “everything's floating, there are no shadows, there's no turning point on the bottom of the objects.” And I was like, oh my gosh, you're right. I have to put that in. So I think there is a new agency. I had to learn the technical facility, and then figure out conceptually how that was going to work in terms of making these shadows. They're not just cast in the way they are in my other work, where I could move the lights around and see very immediately where the shadows were going in real time and then capture it with the photograph. Here I have to use little charcoal drawings and sketch out what I'm going to do before I make the large paintings. They're in charcoal, so there's no color, no chroma, and that's where I figure out what the light is doing.

Jonathan: Is this in some way agency over not just the creation of the image but agency over the device of memory, or the landscape of memory? Does painting as a practice, painting as an activity, allow you a much more open, or freewheeling access to your own mental space?

John: Absolutely. I’m reminded of a quote by the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott that goes – and here I’m paraphrasing – the measure of psychic health is when you can surprise yourself. I discovered that I would start drawing with no intention and suddenly something would emerge, and I would be surprised by that. I would think, where did that come from? It is more akin to free association in psychoanalysis; you're just talking and saying whatever comes to your mind. That's the most simple thing you could do in a way. But it's also so incredibly difficult, and it takes another person in the room who you have a certain kind of connection with. In going through analysis, and engaging in the process of free association, and letting go of the language of code, drawing just felt more urgent to me, and more akin to what was happening when one can surprise themselves. It feels really good, and it gets at those memories in a very different way. It's more emergent than top down.

Jonathan: Was there ever a moment when you were working in code that you'd have similar moments of surprise?

John: Yes, it was different though. It was more a feeling of mastery, of being able to do something really well, as if you were, I don't know, diving in the Olympics, and you just practice this dive over and over and over, and then you just nail it and you get a 10. I know nothing about diving, so I should use a different sport. But that feeling I would get when I would code something really well, it would feel effortless, and it always felt really good when you didn't have to look at other references. A lot of time when you code, if you're doing something difficult, you would use Google or Stack Overflow see how other people solved the problem, and then you would cobble all this stuff together, and you learn a lot doing that. But when you're in a true flow state, coding, it's this feeling of complete mastery, of writing the code in an effortless way, and it just emerges. But it's not surprising in the way that a drawing is, where I ask myself, why did I draw that waterfall? Why is that consuming me? It's much more of a dream world that art comes out of rather than a world of rationality and mastery.

Jonathan: The model of mastery and the flow state is an interesting one to consider, insofar as the model of the athlete is one in which a subjectivity finds transcendence through its practice. That's a model of subjectivity that we hold up for artistic activity, but it's not the main one necessarily. Today the main model is probably more analytical or critical, or it's an intellectual model that's less about being immersed within a practice than it is about being both inside and outside of it so that one can manipulate it in whatever ways one wants to. Does painting itself model that flow state or that interiority, such that you feel more like you're working more in an athletic mode than in some alternative, intellectual way that we might see as more conventionally "artistic"?

John: Sports are really fascinating. I grew up bike racing and the amount of discipline and repetition you have to have to get really good at a sport definitely is something I always have thought about. When I first became an artist, I approached art in that way where I was like, I'm just going to try as hard as I can. But then, early in my art career, I came across this funny Wittgenstein quote, in which he says, "ambition is the death of thought," and I was just like, oh my god, I'm killing my artwork by trying so hard. All this ambition and treating it like a sport, nothing's going to emerge. All you can do is show up and pay attention. Trying really hard is going to derail you. I did approach it like a sport in the beginning, and I still do at times, no question. It's part of my sensibility. It's how I approach the world at times. As I've gotten older, though, I've started to see the shortcomings.

In this show, both modes of working are embodied in the paintings. There's the atelier way of painting those bells. For about five years, I took a bunch of classes at

Grand Central Atelier, and I did a couple of painting workshops with these incredible painters, incredible in terms of craft. They can paint a still life that is just unbelievably accurate and beautiful with nothing except for their own perception of it, looking at it really intently and getting the drawing absolutely perfect before they paint. There's this whole series of steps that they do. I thought that's what painting was in the beginning. I really went down that road and practiced and treated it like a sport. Then, a couple of years ago, I was like, wait a minute, this is purely a craft. I've learned the craft of painting, but there's no art in this. It's entirely a craft and I'm treating it like I was bike racing or I was a software engineer. It was all about ambition and getting incredibly good at something. With this show, I was able to back off from that and still honor that part of myself, the way that I operate in the world, but then also to include these backgrounds that are just emergent and much more creative – again, akin more to free association and psychoanalysis and what I would consider to be more playful. But then there's this tension, because there are these objects, the bells, that are crafted in a very particular way and invoke a lot of training to learn how to paint that way.

Candice: I'm interested in how, over the last six to eight years that you've been pursuing this path of painting, it has changed the way you see. There's the observational side, which seems a little more fluid and something that requires a different kind of sensitivity than the discipline and training of sport. How has looking at art now changed for you, for example.

John: There is such a pleasure in looking at paintings once you've really studied the different ways of making marks and all of those different techniques. Seeing the *Manet/Degas* show in New York recently was a transcendent experience because,

the more you care for something, whether it's another human being or painting, the more it gives back to you. As I've learned more and more painting, you're right, it has changed my perception of it and heightened it, and it's created this love of it.

I think I've always really wanted to be a painter. In graduate school, I worked with Lari Pittman a little bit. I was making these terrible paintings, but he agreed to do one semester with me. I showed him the paintings and he said, well, if you like painting so much, you should go to Skowhegan. He said it half-jokingly, and I didn't even know what Skowhegan was. But I looked into it and applied and somehow I got in based on my more interactive installation work. And once I got there, I was around a lot of painters, and I thought, this is magic. This is something that I have to pursue. This was in 2008. This show is the culmination of that spark in 2007, that began let's say with Lari Pittman. It took that long. I remember going to Skowhegan and thinking, well, I'm going to figure out this painting thing in a year or two and have a show of paintings in 2009! So it has always been there in the back of my mind, and I've always been drawing in the studio, and it has been so exciting for it to become the practice, for it to take over.

Candice: Was color an early entrée into painting? I recall you saying before that it took a little time for you to be able to introduce these luscious, vibrant colors into the work in a way that was just about pure pleasure and not about some kind of analytical thinking.

John: Color has always been an interesting topic for me. I studied architecture as an undergraduate at UC Boulder. After graduation, I was living in Boulder, and I went back and took the color theory class. I was two years out of school and I was working as a software engineer at the time, and I just thought, I want to take this color theory class. I have a grade in it and a credit; it was a funny little blip. I think now I must have been really taken with color to go back to school to take an undergrad class in color theory. This was the early 2000s, so a long time ago.

And thinking about color, I did this interview quite a while ago for an online art journal that Ethan Greenbaum started. It was an interview with my dad, and it was about the reservation in South Dakota where I was born. My dad brought this up, but it became really clear to me that my interest in color came from those early years. We would go to powwows all the time, which are very colorful events. And here we were in South Dakota, which is a very beige kind of place. It's a lot of grassland and there's not a lot of color. You can see a very long way. That's how I spent my earliest years. We're on this open prairie of just beige, and then we would go to these powwows and it was this cacophony of sound and color and energy and light. I think that's where this fascination with color started. It was so concentrated in these events growing up. I still have real sense memories of those.

Jonathan: How relevant is the biographical or personal information for someone who's just coming to one of these paintings, who finds themselves standing in front of it trying in some sense to figure it out? What is the place of the observer here, in your mind?

John: The philosopher Bernard Stiegler talks a lot about absorption, and how important that is. Looking at a painting is the opposite of checking your email 10,000 times a day or sending 10,000 text messages, this very fractured attention that we so often have. In all my work, I'm always trying to find a way to encourage that kind of deep looking. In this case, it's the shadows; it's the bells floating on top. These different modes of depiction hopefully encourage a deeper kind of looking than if it were just all one thing. To get back to your question, the specifics of my biography are not as important as looking and asking, what is that person's inner life? Do they have an inner life? Are they in touch with it? It can remain very mysterious, and I can know nothing about a person, but looking at someone's work, you get a sense that there's something going on there, that this person really has something that they're working through. That's the most I can hope, is that a viewer will come to these paintings and say, wow, this is somebody with an inner life. I don't know what it is exactly, but it's helping me as a viewer access my own kind of unconscious desires and thoughts and inner life.

Candice: So psychoanalysis is one way of accessing that inner world. Is the process of learning something new another way? I know in recent years you have attempted to learn how to play the violin, or in this case you have learned to paint. To me that process of learning becomes as much a part of the process of making art as anything. How does the pedagogy of that fit into those goals of reaching an inner world?

John: That's a great question. I definitely have such an interest in the art of learning, if that makes sense. How do you approach a new topic and get good at that thing? Now there are a thousand podcasts dedicated to getting good at things, and how you practice something. There are all these books and a whole industry around this idea of learning. But I've always just been really taken with going off and learning a new subject on my own. It's a way of entering a world and trying to, I don't want to say master it, but...

Candice: Get it's language?

John: Yes, learning that language. I don't know how to link it to the work exactly, but I just can't imagine doing the same thing for 40 years or 50 years. I just really like learning new things. Part of it is having that beginner's mind. Starting over in a sense, approaching something with fresh eyes. That initial excitement of learning something and not knowing too much about it is pretty thrilling. I'm old enough now to realize there are things I just always come back to. And painting and drawing are one of those things, as is software. Right now I'm really into tennis. I'm obsessed with tennis, and I'm taking two tennis lessons a week. I found this incredible coach. I'm watching old footage of the Australian Open, and I'm just like, wow, this world of tennis is incredible! -- but I'm not going to become a professional tennis player. I read this book about Caravaggio and tennis as well a while back, so there's this funny link to the art world.

Candice: If you decide to have this disciplined approach to learning to paint, to this idea of mastering a new skill, what was it about the atelier style of painting, or the French nineteenth-century style? -- was it the most foreign or challenging or the most difficult in some way?

John: They have a real procedure laid out for how to do it. At first I thought I'll take one of these classes and that'll teach me how to draw because my drawing's a little off and I want to have a little more control over how I'm drawing these things before I paint them. But then I got hooked. I thought, oh, this is a whole world and you can measure yourself very easily against everybody else who paints this way because it's all about making it look realistic. There's a fidelity. You're not using photography. There are all these rules, and it's this particular language, and I was seduced by all of that. I think

the programmer side of my brain thought, this is it, you can do this. You can just keep practicing and hone this skill until you're like a magician with this.

I did this painting retreat in Menorca with this Swedish painter, and we were doing figurative paintings from a live model. I was just in disbelief. He started with the eye of the model and just started painting out from there, and within a day he had this complete beautiful likeness to the person sitting in front of him. He didn't even make marks for the edges or any kind of procedural abstraction. He just could do this thing, and it just seemed like a superpower. So I thought, okay, that's what I'm going to do. But then I had to step back and say, wait a minute, these paintings, this is not what I want to be making. This is interesting to some people, but it's not the art world I'm a part of, and there's not as much play as I would like, and not as much surprise. They're genre paintings and they're a known thing. That's where I had to take a step. I learned a lot about painting, and it saved me a lot of time in the studio. I was no longer wasting paint and canvases and just flailing. I learned how to make a color study and work up to the larger painting through a set of steps, and that's incredibly valuable. I learned a tremendous amount from it, and I really like it, but I had to make it into my own thing.