

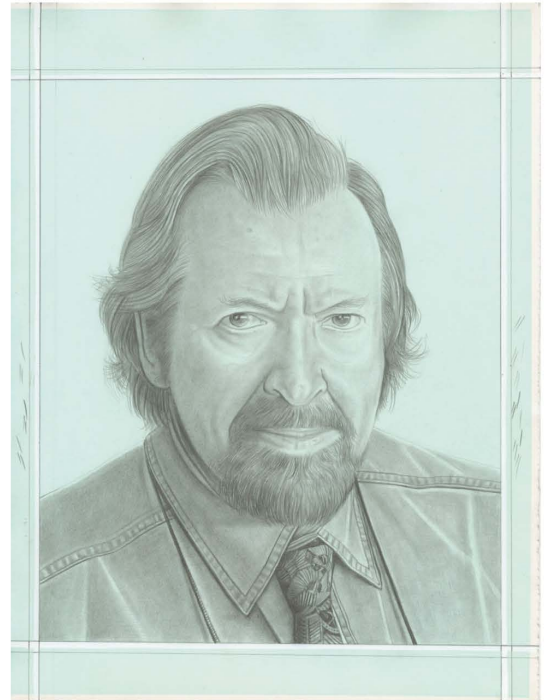
BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

Art | In Conversation

Graham Nickson with Jack Flam and Phong H. Bui

“I think the making of a work of art is about breathing. Drawing is inhaling while painting is exhaling.”



Portrait of Graham Nickson, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

On the occasion of Graham Nickson’s solo exhibition *In Black and White* at Betty Cunningham Gallery, art historian Jack Flam and Rail Publisher and Artistic Director Phong H. Bui engaged in two extended conversations with the artist about his long career as a painter and an educator. In addition to a distinguished career as an artist, Graham has been the legendary and deeply committed faculty member and Dean of the New York Studio School for thirty-four years. The following is an edited version for your reading pleasure.

NEW YORK

Betty Cunningham Gallery
*Graham Nickson: In Black
and White*
September 7 – October 15,
2022



Graham Nickson, *Rainbathers: Climb*, 1986-1996 Charcoal on paper, 31 x 67 in. Courtesy the artist and Betty Cunningham Gallery.

Jack Flam: Before we start talking about your current show, Graham, I'd like to reminisce about my experience of posing for you for two portraits a few years ago. First, you did a frontal portrait of me. Then, on a second day, you did one in profile. Each was painted in a single day. And both were fully realized. The first day, for the frontal portrait, I had the great pleasure of being able to watch you paint. I was fascinated to see that you were using almost all very bright colors, along with white. There were no earth colors, no yellow ochre, no Naples yellow, for example, which are the colors that are often used to get skin tones—and which you avoided in order to attain maximum luminosity in that portrait.

Since you are generally regarded as a painter of landscapes, or figures in landscape, I'm curious about what led you to paint portraits for your last show at the gallery in 2019, just before the pandemic?

Graham Nickson: I've had a very strange relationship with portraits for a long time. Because the idea of focusing on the head itself and trying to see that as the major force in the painting is at odds with what I've been doing for the last thirty years—which is trying to make the whole painting the portrait, the whole figure the portrait, and the whole geometry the portrait. So it was perversity that made me go against what I was comfortable with, really. I think that when you are very engaged in something that you're totally committed to, it's very important to test it from time to time and do the opposite. Which I did by going from the very large pieces to a smaller scale, by going from using a wide range of massive hog hair brushes to using only sable brushes, to working within a very limited amount of time. So I brought the portrait into the realm of the sunset, where you have to paint it quickly and decisively, and you have to try and think of it in one session, one very long session. That was one of the reasons that I started doing the portraits.

Flam: I was surprised to see that you were using only sable brushes, and yet it doesn't look as if it was painted with sable brushes. It almost looks like it was painted with either flat or bright brushes, because the strokes were so decisive.

Phong H. Bui: How do you go about locating images in space—I mean within your field of vision?

Nickson: I think, first of all, about the interior geometry, then I think about the idea of the rectangle being something that is changeable, either expanding or retracting. In a portrait, I like to start the painting from the eyes of the sitter. It's an anathema to me, but I had to do what was an anathema to me anyway; this was very rewarding. Instead of settling for life-size, which I think is the most intellectually and pictorially intelligent decision I can make, I went for slightly over life-size in all of the portraits. I tried hard to keep that as a feature in most of them. That was a crazy feature of opposites again. I should add that for the most part I wanted to paint the frontal view because I wanted to deal with how the painted image can relate to aspects of its strong symmetry and its subtle asymmetry. Whereas in the profile, it's always about transience. The sheer fact of looking at the side of the head is bringing that movement across, and it changes the whole phenomena because suddenly, instead of the eye being the focal point, the ear here becomes a huge subject, it becomes something wonderful and magical, and I end up looking at the ear as if I've never seen an ear in my life before.



Graham Nickson, *Large Bridge Bathers: Ritual*, 1994. Acrylic on canvas. 93 x 159 in. Courtesy the artist and Betty Cuninghame Gallery.

Bui: Cézanne often diffused the sitter's aura or their personality for the sake of the overall distribution of the image itself—it's as though he treated them like an apple. How do you mediate your portrait? For there exists a hierarchy between certain people you select to paint from, be it a friend or a family member.

Nickson: In these portraits I wasn't thinking like Cézanne, which I normally would do, trying in a sense to get their personalities coming through the architecture of the heads. What I wanted to do was to paint heads, maybe closer to Bonnard's *The Boxer* (1931) where he painted himself as the boxer, and his head is like a bruised plum. It's a fruit, it's solid, it's round, it's got spirit in the mass, it's got color of a different kind, emotive color which evokes the aroma of personality.

Bui: I like that description, "the aroma of personality."

Flam: One thing that I would like to point out is that when you were talking about the focus on the ear, I thought that those of you who are painters know that usually the ear is the part that you fudge, down-play, try to cover with hair, get the head turned in such a way that you don't have to show the ear. It is such a difficult thing to work from the small scale of the ear to the rest of the face. It's fascinating that you started the profile portrait with the ear. Was it planned in advance, or was it spontaneous?

Nickson: What I wanted to try and do in all of the paintings was to try and be as uncontrolled and as nonjudgmental as possible. I wanted to be open to new possibilities and not to control any of the image other than what is presented to me, and try to be as innocent of an eye as I can. It's very hard to be an innocent eye, but it's worth it, because then the journey becomes a great adventure, and that color journey becomes something very special.

Flam: Do you ever work from photographs?

Nickson: No, I like to work from direct observation, not for any moral reasons, as I think there have been great paintings made from photographs. One of my favorite paintings is Cézanne's *The Bather* (1885) at the MoMA, painted from an anonymous photograph of an adolescent boy with his two hands on his hips against the blank wall behind, to which he added the watery landscape in the background of the painting that made the figure even more pensive within such an

ambiguous space. I think the photograph has a different reality, a different truth. In fact I grew up with photographs all around me. My father was an amateur painter and photographer. He was probably a better photographer than he was a painter. There would always be the signs of film being developed and the evidence of images. The image of photographs I am well aware of, and color I am very interested in, but it's a different story. The relationship of flatness to an image in film or photography is different from the relationship of flatness to an image in painting. It's about two different journeys. The painting journey is slower. If you look at the slow sequence of the tree at the end of *The Sacrifice* (1986), Andrei Tarkovsky's last film, even with J.S. Bach's powerful aria "Erbarme dich, mein Gott" ("Have mercy, my God") as background music, it was still faster than any painted images.



Graham Nickson, *Cape*, 1986. Acrylic on canvas, 32 x 54 in. Courtesy the artist and Betty Cunningham Gallery.

Bui: And he knew it, as he often referenced painted images quite frequently in his films, especially in his 1966 epic *Andrei Rublev*, made after the 15th century Russian icon painter with the same name. He also wrote extensively in his classic book *Sculpting in Time* (1987) referencing the philosophy of filmmaking into his love of painting, poetry, and other things.

Nickson: One can say that he was an artist whose medium happened to be film. In any case, in regards to working directly from life as opposed to working from photographs, as well as having people I know, such as you Jack, posing for the portraits, there's a saying: "When X did one thing people didn't take it very seriously. When X did ten of those things, people took it a little bit more seriously. When X did one-hundred of those things people took it very seriously. And when X did one thousand of those things, people were absolutely committed to the seriousness of X's pursuit." It doesn't matter what the source is, it's how the obsession comes across. It's the intensity of the obsession in search of something that counts, don't you agree?

Flam: And that intensity of obsession usually lies below the painted surface, just like what D.H. Lawrence said of Cézanne's apple, which "like the moon, has still an unseen side."

Bui: Indeed. There's always a psychological implication to how frontal and profile get portrayed. Take the iconography of Christ, for example, how he was represented in all the great mosaics or frescoes in the Middle Ages, always frontal and monumental, while everyone else was small in relation to him. How shocked people must have felt when they saw Giotto's *Betrayal of Christ (Kiss of Judas)* (ca. 1304–06) at the famous Scrovegni Chapel, for both were painted in profile, looking at each other from only one inch away in the eye, saying, "which one of us has committed wrongdoing? And who is betraying whom?"

Nickson: It's also about different truths, isn't it? Even when I make portraits of friends, like Jack, I'd look at them as if I've never seen them ever before in my life. That's why it is incredibly intense. The palm of my hands gets sweaty, my throat gets dry, my heart is beating, and you feel the tension. If you're eyeball to eyeball with someone, stranger or friend, it's a very electric endeavor, which hopefully gets revealed in the portrait.



Graham Nickson, *Bridge Bathers: Vertical Conversation*, 1990-1991. Acrylic on canvas, 40 x 60 in. Courtesy the artist and Betty Cunningham Gallery.

Flam: Which is true in this case when you are painting the same person more than once. For example, you made two portraits of Fran O'Neill, a friend and fellow painter, who in fact I know pretty well. In one portrait she is very austere and almost aloof, and in the other she's full of vitality and life. And I recognized something essential in both portraits you did of her. What I realized was that there is a great complexity in the way you were perceiving the same person. In the way that as we move through life, people are not constant. You realize that there are different aspects that come across. I sometimes think that is part of why Matisse in the early twentieth century often painted two versions of almost exactly the same composition, but with very different senses of expressive meaning. Part of what I want to ask you is that when you were painting the two portraits of Fran, and you did them in relatively close proximity, I believe, in time, what was your awareness of the fact that here is the physical person, Fran, and here are these two images that you are painting in proximity to her?

Nickson: I'm at odds with the idea of identifying who the sitters are, because I want them to have a kind of general surprise. You don't see this as your neighbor, or your husband, or friend, but you see it as almost a kind of mirror of yourself in some way. All of us are two people, or three people or four people. Sometimes it's seen on every different day, sometimes it's every year, and sometimes it's just on weekends; that ability to have many personas I think is very real. What I found very fascinating is the nature of how much narrative you can stumble across in painting a head and a face, and that is something you have to decide how much you want in a painting. I'm very fond of a painting by Georges de La Tour at the Met, called *The Fortune Teller* (ca. 1630s). There is a figure of a pale-faced girl, who is clearly not like the fortune teller and her two fellow Roma accomplices, being depicted as thieves; yet she is the one standing behind the young man stealing the coin purse from his pocket. Her head is one of the most emotive heads ever painted during the Baroque period. While she is

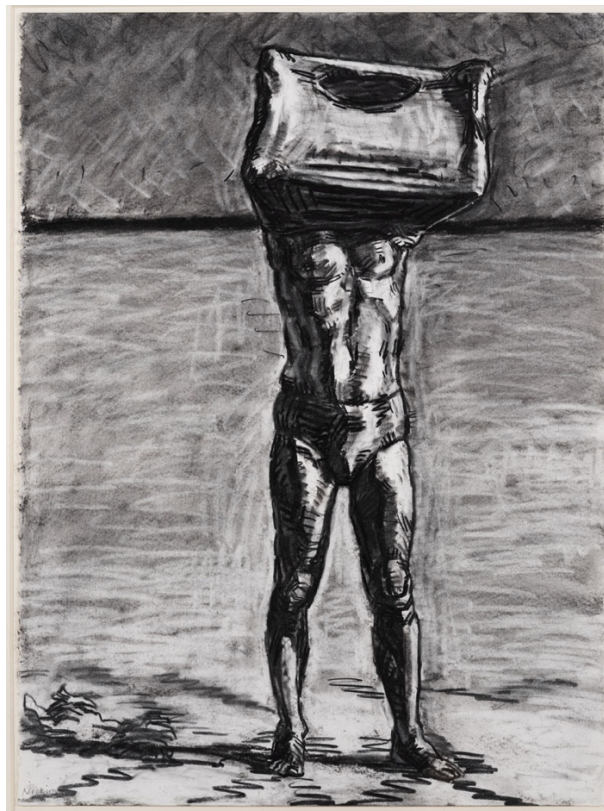
frontal, stationary in her head and body, poised in her facial expression, her eyeballs are looking at him on the left. There's so much going on in her face. It's incredible.

I also love Fayum mummy portraits. They're very moving, not only because they were the first perceptual paintings ever painted from life, but they were also used in their lifetime as decoration for the house the person lived in.

Then when the person died and people forgot what they looked like, they were put on the mummy, which went on to the next world. They have a very intriguing story in themselves, but they are very moving and I wanted to try and attempt something that aimed at that sense of likeness. There is a lot at stake, high stakes, in that likeness, or how to capture a presence of a likeness.

Flam: There's a theory of portraiture, of likeness, that according to some modernist interpretations holds that portraits, often to a large degree, are related to caricature. What are your thoughts?

Nickson: I would re-spell "caricature" as "character"—both enigmatic and psychological. Character as in linguistics and character as in being moved by an image that will take you to the ends of the earth to try and find out about it. When I was about nineteen, I went to Amsterdam and then to Rotterdam and went to the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen to see Malevich. I was rushing because the museum was closing quite soon. And as I was rushing through the museum to go to the Malevich room, on my way there was a room which I hated, full of three-quarter length heads and torsos of musty eighteenth century figures. But, in spite of my desire to get through that room very quickly, one of those images was really riveting, so riveting that I had to go and look at it. I ended up spending the remaining hour and a half just looking at that one painting and then the museum closed. I realized later it was a portrait by Goya. And Goya is a painter with a rare ability to move beyond mere physical appearances to capture the essence, the inner life of the sitter, be it a portrait of the king, or queen, or himself.



Graham Nickson, Sphinx Bather: Shirt Over Head, 1983-1984. Charcoal on paper, 30 1/16 x 22 3/8 in. Courtesy the artist and Betty Cuninghame Gallery.

Flam: Yes, both the character of the sitter and the character of Goya himself are simultaneously projected, revealed. What do you think the hardest part of painting portraits is?

Nickson: Um, keeping your cool when the sitter is talking all the time. [Laughter] To me, the challenge of portrait painting is just the same as the challenge of making the big paintings. How can I make a convincing metaphor? How can I make an image that will move a viewer, make a viewer want to spend an hour looking at it—and be touched by the experience?

Bui: As Walter Sickert once said, there's two types of portraiture—there's portraits that are made by painters who are servants to their customers and then there are portraits that are made by painters who are the masters of their customers. I suspect you're the latter.

Nickson: I'm thinking now of one of Cézanne's greatest portraits *Young Man and Skull* (1896–98) at the Barnes, in the same breath as Goya's *Saturn Devouring His Son* (1819–23), partly because of the shared tenderness, melancholy, and pessimism, all of which are so present all at once.

Flam: I had a conversation recently with a writer friend. One of the things that came up was that writers read other writers and are inspired by other writers, but those other writers don't haunt them, don't sit on their shoulders when they're writing. Whereas, artists have artists sitting on their shoulders when they're painting. And so there is a whole different relationship to the past of the art that you practice. And I think in part this is because writing, and reading, happen over time in a very fragmented, slow way. Whereas paintings, even though they demand slow looking, you can remember images as snapshots in your mind. So that when you are in your studio, Cézanne, Goya, or Michelangelo, among others, they're all there. And it's impossible to purge them. In fact you don't want to purge them, you don't want to get rid of them forever. You just want to keep them at bay long enough while you are working that they give you the peace and quiet of mind to have your own originality to come forward. And after you finish working you can go back and be friends with them again. The past is there, but the past has to be absent while you are creating.

Nickson: And that absence can either be a quick glimpse or it's there forever.

Bui: Super true. In regards to your unique palette, was there a specific moment that shaped your color sensibility?

Nickson: Yes, one major shift happened when I was living in Italy, between 1973 and '74. I was in Sicily and I was just packing up the paints from having painted the sunset at one location. All of a sudden, there came a flock of sheep, just like those in Giotto's frescoes, where I was painting, and then this wonderful man on a mule said, "Buona sera." And I said buona sera back, and it was as natural as anything to him to see someone painting in the dark in that very remote place of Sicily. I have a palette that I use for watercolors and also for oil, which is ordered in such a way that I can use it at dawn or after the sun has gone down, when there is an enormous amount of light that continues to linger on, especially on the horizon. I don't even have to see which colors are on the palette. I just know where they are by weight. And that is an incredible benefit to making decisions in terms of that experience.

Flam: This makes me think of how, many years ago, I had a friend who married a Frenchman, and she was living in Nice. She became friendly with the famous chef Jacques Maximin, whom she wrote a book about eventually. As she spent endless times going to his restaurant to watch him cook, she noticed how much he smoked, around thirty cigarettes a day, and that

he himself usually ate very simple food, such as steak and fried potatoes. At a certain point she asked him how he could know how the elaborate food he cooked tasted, since he smoked so much and ate such simple food. And he said, “I don’t have to taste the food with my tongue, I taste it in my head.” And it seemed at first ridiculous, but if you think about it for a moment, when Beethoven wrote a symphony, he couldn’t hear all the instruments playing.

He would sit down and write it out in his head. When you are talking about painting in the near dark, I find that so moving because it’s like Beethoven composing music. It’s not entirely in your head, but in some combination of head, hand, whatever else, in that moment of deep immersion, some inner light more than anything else.

Could you share with us your earliest experiences with art in relation to your family, and then also later to people you studied with in London?



Graham Nickson, Walkway, 1982. Charcoal on paper, 26 1/8 x 31 1/4 in. Courtesy the artist and Betty Cuninghame Gallery.

Nickson: I was born a year after World War II. And my father, who was a painter and photographer, would buy piles of books that had been discarded by the former owners for very small amounts of money, and he would bring them home. He would tear out the spines and give us the end-papers to draw on. They were acid-free, well-made paper, the best to draw with. I made my first drawing when I was four. I put it into a local event, and so did my brother and my sister and all three of us won the prize in our categories. My parents were quite bohemian. On the walls of our home hung my father’s portrait paintings, in the manner of John Singer Sargent, his favorite painter. And then next it would be many of my brother’s paintings in the styles of de Kooning, Gorky, and Pollock. At that time my brother had gone to the Slade, and he was one of the first artists to get very involved in American-style painting, after the New American Painting show at the Tate in 1959.

Bui: I’m thinking of the Euston Road School, founded by William Coldstream, Victor Pasmore, and Claude Rogers, even though it only lasted two years, between 1937 and ’39, with its emphasis on the new trend of naturalism which had an impact thereafter on the figurative school in England. In other words, was there a continuity in your undergrad study at Camberwell College of Arts, and later at grad school at Royal College of Art?

Nickson: There would have been more of a continuity if I'd have gone to the Slade, but I wanted to go to the opposite. For Camberwell had been the basis of the Slade. Frank Auerbach, Leon Kossoff, David Bomberg, Euan Uglow, and many others came as visiting artists and taught at Camberwell. They all had this aura of being very dedicated, very serious, which was something special. One can say that in both Auerbach's and Kossoff's works, however painterly and expressionistic, to some extent, they were trying to expand Bomberg's idea of "the spirit of the mass," and how volumes would exert their presence in space. Whereas in William Coldstream's case, as in Uglow's, his student, there was an objective aesthetic that involved interminable measurement of forms in space that lies between volume and flat geometry— an empirical truth.

Bui: Did you ever make abstract paintings during those years?

Nickson: When I was showing at a gallery some decades ago, the partner would often say he thought I was the most abstract painter in his stable. So yes, when I was an undergraduate, I made some figural abstract paintings in response to the Bay Area School paintings, especially Richard Diebenkorn, David Park, and Elmer Bischoff, who I later met when showing at the same gallery. It seemed exciting to somehow make figurative paintings in a style of Matisse but with Abstract Expressionist gestures.

Flam: Moving forward, during our very first conversation, when we first met back in 1976 at a party, I remember you speaking very passionately and eloquently about Seurat. And I have to say at that time I was a little lukewarm about Seurat, and you really opened my eyes to Seurat. Which brings me to the next question: how have the historical artists you most admire affected your own art?

Nickson: They've all in some way become talismans. With Matisse, *The Piano Lesson* (1916) has been with me for a long time, and it still remains on my high thinking list. I should mention that despite the fact that there was a lot of enmity towards painting at the time I started out, when most of my friends were leaning towards performance and minimal works, my love for painting was reinforced by so many great experiences in having seen huge shows of Bonnard, Morandi, Matisse, Goya, and Bacon. But to get back to Seurat, I was struck by the ambition in the work. He was in his early twenties when he made the decision to undertake such challenges, and he would die trying. And in the process, he gave us not only a group of bathers sitting by the banks of the river, but also the most monumental Chelsea boot you'll ever see in a painting. I'm referring to his *Bathers at Asnières* (1884) at the National Gallery of London, of course. And, also, one of the great uses of black as a color is in that painting. Seurat had transcended his own ambitions by making deep connections to Roman friezes, bas-reliefs, and the carved sculptures that we see in sarcophagi, among other things in the past. Yet his paintings never appear like they're pastiches of the past.

Flam: Which brings us to the concept of representing the body in nature.

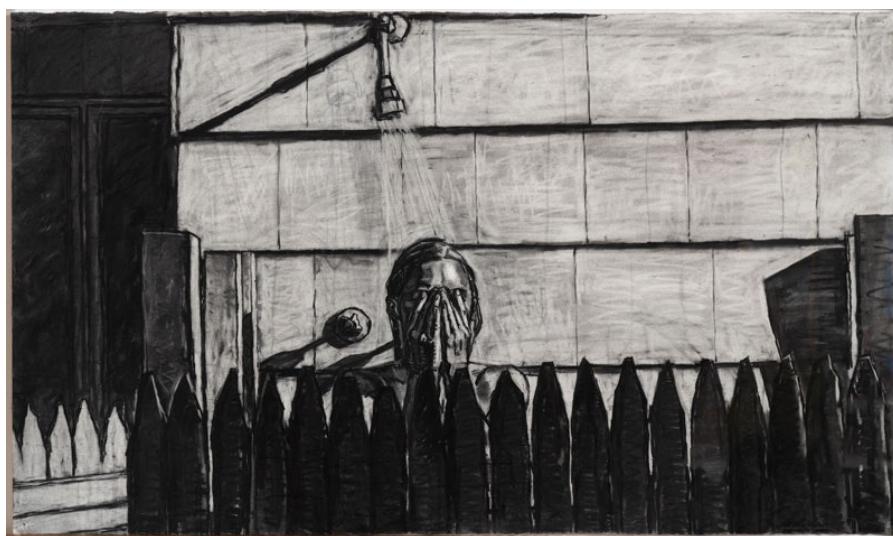
Bui: In present tense. Yes, how the figures get portrayed in nature in different contexts or environments, being under the sun, on the beaches, in the water, in various locations, as you have painted in Italy, in Florida, in Australia.

Which may appear at first hot, even erotic in terms of temperature, but then in a prolonged viewing, they're cool, and stationary. Oftentimes I read them as punctuation marks, like a comma, a period, or a semicolon in a sentence, as they anchor or even trap space in-between differently in different paintings. Is that a fair observation?

Nickson: Sure, they can be seen as semaphores.

Bui: As in graph theory, yes.

Nickson: They're like ciphers in a language. Still, I've come more and more to think that mystery is one of the great elements in painting. In art, mystery is something you can't buy, you can't rent it, you can't just use it at will. It happens, sometimes. And it happens as mystery should, mysteriously. And that I think is something that I'm looking for in paintings. So the idea of language and how a figure can become part of a greater sentence is part of the quest, yes. And that's why you might have two figures and then a catalyst for them might be an upturned lifeguard chair. And the lifeguard chair may look like a piece of modern sculpture, and the connection between the two figures is like the difficulty of two languages trying to understand each other. So there's a theater of action that is not narrative. It's got its own story.



Graham Nickson, Shower, 1984-1985. Charcoal on paper, 31 x 53 in. Courtesy the artist and Betty Cunningham Gallery.

Bui: Theater of action, perhaps quiet action, which is one of the reasons we admire Piero the way we do. You have spoken in the past of Piero's occasional use of repetition in his work, for example in one of his great frescoes, the two angels that are mirrored images of each other, as they're on both sides holding the curtain, where the Madonna in the middle appears. I'm mentioning this partly because certain groupings of your figures often become a serial compilation of images as they reappear in different places, or spaces in the painting, either in frontal or in profile positions. Can your use of repetition be seen as an additional device that amplifies the spatial punctuation that we'd just spoken about?

Nickson: It's a mechanism that has been used in a lot of paintings, as a way to not only cannibalize images that tell different stories, but also give a unity to the work. And it doesn't mean that different applications become cliches in their functions, it means that they depend on how different artists use them according to their own obsessions. Mondrian swings to mind in this, but that makes the next piece happen, by cannibalizing the previous piece. And that's something I found myself doing. Because I've been so obsessed by an element or an instance that this becomes perhaps a subject. The leitmotif may be in several other paintings. So you might find the same character in a different role in three different paintings.

In terms of monumentality, that's a hard thing to establish. Because it sounds so highfalutin, but it's very real. And I think it has to do with the quest for something that is a representation of mass and volume in the flat two-dimensional reality of the picture plane. I'm looking to try and bring back and rethink the nature of volume and mass in color or as implied color

of drawing, while being mindful of not becoming a mannerist. I've been looking at a lot of cave paintings lately. And I'm fascinated especially by the Chauvet caves, for example, which were painted from memory with such bizarre metaphors and raw desire to make powerful images, that have power over the viewers and give a sense of mystery and ritual, as though they're seen as altars to the animal kingdom. I like Etruscan art for the same reason, for they capture us because of their spiritual belief of the afterlife. Cézanne too, with his notebooks, showed all those fragmented drawings that he was thinking about, as we got to see them in his last show, *Cézanne Drawing*, last year at the Museum of Modern Art, with recurring themes every tenth page. It's an obsession about certain images that I can identify with. To me, whether they get painted frontally or in profile, each gesture will carry a mystery of its own.

Bui: No doubt. As Christ stands frontally and monumentally, for example, in Piero's *The Resurrection* (ca. 1463–65), right in the middle of the fresco, while the four sleeping soldiers are painted in profile and three-quarter profiles in both their faces and bodies. I get so absorbed in thinking of what they're dreaming about every time I look at them. Which also brings up the subject of whether we dream in color or black and white.

Flam: Which seems to be the subject of your current show, your current predominantly black and white show. As I was looking at the images of the works, something that struck me is that when you first look at them a lot of the figures seem to be nude, but when you look a little more carefully you realize that they're actually wearing bathing suits. And one of the things that strikes me is that the figures in your paintings seem to inhabit a kind of space between nude and clothed. Could you say something about how it's more obvious when they're in color, because then the bathing suit is a different color from the skin? But in the black and white paintings I was really struck by looking at those images again and again, how many times I thought on first impression that it was a nude figure.

Nickson: Well, the idea of not, for the most part, having the subjects be nudes, was to avoid that loaded imagery in the first place. So the sensuality or the content that makes us think about the figure itself takes a different route, and one of the routes that it takes is to make it about our own time, and if you go to any vacation, any place, you'll see the gregariousness of modern wear, what people wear constantly and surprisingly. And that leads a little bit to the first time that I saw a person doing yoga, it was magic—because it was a very strange incident of seeing, walking near the ocean in a gray mist, and out in the distance was a bright sunlight and a single figure standing on her head, like a beacon of hope and aspiration. It was a very moving, transformative experience. And painting this person practicing her yoga was one way of not falling into the trap of being arcadian. Therefore they are bathers-not- bathers. They are theater-not-theater at the same time.

Flam: That's very nicely put.

Bui: You're exploring what lies between the pair of opposites.

Nickson: Yeah, I'm a great believer in opposites, which is why I often completely repaint my paintings in reverse, just to see what happens.

Flam: And one of the things that struck me is that you are able to work very effectively both on a very small scale and on very large-scale images. What are the different kinds of challenges and satisfactions in working on both scales?

Nickson: The small scale work has the feeling of being on the top of a mountain looking down into a valley and seeing it as a festival of horse racing or some activities happening there. And the kind of excitement that one gets from not being at all

able to touch it or see it clearly, but it's happening whilst you're on the top of that mountain looking down. And the difference in the large scale is that you're in it. You're surrounded by it.

Bui: It's like people skating in Bruegel's painting *The Hunters in the Snow* (1565) from his seasons series. There's an infinite extension of space, depth, and timelessness when we think and feel both the sense of intimacy and monumentality. To Jack's point on the subject of black and white, do you think in black and white or do you think in color or both? For example, I remember having a conversation with Carmen Giménez about her great show of Picasso *Black and White*. Even when Picasso uses colors, he thinks of them in black and white.

Flam: For someone who is such a colorist, which you are, it's also quite surprising to see very large monumental works, both in scale and in imagery, that are in black and white.

Nickson: Do you know that one in twelve men are colorblind? It's so interesting the reaction you get from someone looking at paintings who is colorblind. Because sometimes the whole painting is based on a relationship that they can't see, for they may or may not recognize the leitmotifs that run through the main narrative. To answer your question: I think the making of a work of art is about breathing. Drawing is inhaling while painting is exhaling. And drawing gives the permission to find the color, and color is part of exhaling. I feel like I can do both as long as I maintain my breathing properly. About Picasso, I think he uses color like an electrician. He wires his paintings, and the coloring of the wires tells you whether it's live or whether it's neutral or whether it's X number of voltage. It's as if he's codifying color. Whereas Matisse is more of a great sensate, especially the paintings in Nice, where so much is staked on color as relaxation of spirit and pictorial harmony all at once. I think it has to do with thinking in color, using color as believing in color. Color, like the figure, has its own sensuality. In this current show, I wanted to include one painting in color in relation to everything else in black and white as a way to show, again, the inhale and exhale of my breathing.

Flam: I appreciate that association. In the show, there are some very large works that are in charcoal, and then there's some very large works that are in acrylic that are painted in monochrome. And my question is, how does the medium affect the nature of the imagery, or when you're about to start something, what determines the medium you're going to use for a large black and white work, whether it'll be charcoal or acrylic?



Graham Nickson, *Exhale: Submersion*, 1986. Acrylic on canvas. 60 x 68 in. Courtesy the artist and Betty Cuninghame Gallery.

Nickson: Charcoal is usually the most generous of mediums, partly because you can get the first thousand revisions very generously. Then acrylic is the most generous in the gradients of black and white, for it can die with color, and does frequently. To make colorful paintings with the richness and surprise that we see in Cézanne or Fra Angelico or, say, the Etruscan Tomb of Hunting and Fishing of Tarquinia in the Necropolis of Monterozzi, oil would be a preferred medium, even though it's a less generous medium, because it's got the ability to do things that the other mediums can't do. As for my use of watercolor, as much as I admire treatises on color, I still think that by the experience of painting in the natural world, you can gain more information with color than any other way. Instead of exploring its natural transparency and also ranges of subtlety, I prefer to apply all the colors in their extreme intensities.

Bui: That was what Andrew Forge, our late friend, thought of your use of colors being pushed to the limit, as if they are being boiled or burnt. Another way to put it is simply that your watercolors are unlike others. They're distinctly made by Graham Nickson's hand.

Flam: I should add that the way you put color down is at the same time structural. You use very distinct strokes to model form with the color, and it's also intensely emotional, as what Phong was citing, that quality that Andrew Forge noted, that the color appears to be being pushed to the extreme or limit. How do you balance color as structure and as a source of emotion or feeling, at the same time?

Nickson: The way one does it is the hard way, which is through trial and error, and finding the right color for the right image. In the same way that one tries to find the right scale for the right image.

Flam: How do you think your teaching has affected your art?

Nickson: It gives me a great belief in the human imagination. And the importance of an artist keeping in contact with his or her own peers and also their younger peers. I think it's nourishing in that way. But I don't think one should confuse one's teaching methodology with expectations of what the new students are doing, and you can't use your own strategies on their work. Because then it gets confused. I think you've got to be always trying your own unique obsessions. And everybody's got unique obsessions. The importance of a teacher is to bring out the implications of what's happening, because of those obsessions. And it's those little differences and those huge differences that make painting so exciting. Painting every sunset and dawn for two years changed my life. And I like the images to change others lives with the same surprise and mystery. I think it's a great time for an artist, artists of all sorts. And it happens now that painting is very in vogue and images and figures are very in vogue and color is very in vogue and maybe that's why I'm doing a black and white show just to be... [Laughter].

Bui: On the contrary! You are going against the current.

Contributors

Jack Flam

JACK FLAM is Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Art and Art History at Brooklyn College and The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, and the CEO and President of the Dedalus Foundation.

Phong Bui

Phong H. Bui is the Publisher and Artistic Director of the *Brooklyn Rail*.