



IN THE STUDIO

R. H. QUAYTMAN

WITH STEEL STILLMAN

Modest in scale, moody in atmosphere and sumptuous in surface, the paintings of R. H. Quaytman are confections for the eye and puzzles for the mind. Quaytman makes smart, philosophical work, layered with modulated autobiographical content. Edges are a preoccupying theme and a recurring motif. Neither boundaries nor divisions, Quaytman's edges instead conjoin, hinging one perspective, one kind of experience, to another.

Born in 1961, Quaytman grew up in the New York art world of the '60s and '70s. Her mother is the poet Susan Howe, and her father is the late painter Harvey Quaytman. Fittingly, her work blurs boundaries between text and image. Though viewers need not follow every reference, those willing to do a little sleuthing will uncover a lode of fascinating information that only adds to the paintings' manifest pleasures.

Quaytman paints on easel-size plywood panels, all of which receive some amount of hand work. Most panels are then silkscreened with photographs or other images gathered from archives of all kinds—art historical, institutional, personal and scientific ones in particular. Each painting can stand alone, but all are made in series, called “chapters.” Individual chapters include a variety of painting styles and motifs, held together by formal and narrative relationships that become slowly evident. Quaytman's production is guided by an elaborate program—a “system,” she calls it—that determines the paintings' content. One unvarying rule is that each chapter relates to the site where it was first exhibited.

Taken as a whole, Quaytman's work suggests a many-layered novel or film—a text in space and time. In her work, past and present, depth and surface, meet, but the distinctions between them do not collapse. Each reference maintains its identity. Afforded no ultimate resolution, the viewer is set in motion, going from one complex, intriguing visuality to the next.

Quaytman has been making and exhibiting paintings since the mid-'80s, and has a lengthy résumé of solo and group shows in the U.S. and Europe. Her ideas gathered force in the late '90s and since then, in part through her participation in the collaborative gallery Orchard on New York's Lower East Side, and as a result of a series of well-received one-person exhibitions—notably a show at Miguel Abreu in New York in 2008—her work has begun to reach a larger audience. Last winter Quaytman had a solo project at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art, followed this spring by a room-size installation at the Whitney Biennial. In the fall, she will exhibit

“Chapter 17” at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and then have a comprehensive survey—not a retrospective, she insists—at the Neuberger Museum of Art, in Purchase, N.Y. Since

R. H. Quaytman in her New York studio.

2006, she has taught in the MFA program at Bard.

Quaytman is married to the filmmaker Jeff Preiss, with whom she has a 14-year-old son. She lives in New York, and her Lower Manhattan studio is an orderly, well-lit space. We talked there for several hours one mid-March afternoon.

STEEL STILLMAN Do you know how your parents met?

R. H. QUAYTMAN They met in the late '50s when they were both studying painting at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. My mother is from an established Boston family: her mother was an Irish actress and playwright, and her father was a law professor at Harvard. My father, on the other hand, was from Far Rockaway, in Queens, and was the son of Jewish immigrants. I was born in Boston, but we moved to New York, to SoHo, when I was about three. A year later, my parents broke up—their relationship was strained by a lack of money and the difficulties of loft living at that time. Soon afterward, my mother and I moved to the West Village with the sculptor David von Schlegel, who later became my stepfather.

SS Did you spend much time with your father when you were growing up?

RHQ I spent weekends with him and my stepmother, Frances Barth, first on Grand Street—Brice Marden lived in the same building—and then in a loft on the Bowery, right next to where the New Museum is now. I have vivid memories of SoHo in the mid-'60s. For instance, I remember seeing Janis Joplin walking down the street, wearing a pink boa, as I played with Barbie dolls on the fire escape. She would practice with her band in a building across the street, and I'd hear them at night as I was falling asleep.

SS Have you always wanted to be an artist?

RHQ I've never wanted to be anything else, though there was a brief period when I thought about teaching the blind. When I was young, I loved to draw—I'd get lost in it. I think that's how most painters get their start. On weekends, I'd hang out with my father in his studio, doing projects. We started a print collection, and did bookbinding. We'd also take long walks on the Lower East Side during which I became more aware of my Jewish side. Later, when I was going to high school in Connecticut and trying to fit in—my stepfather David was teaching at Yale—my father was afraid that I might turn into a WASP.

SS Was it difficult to reconcile these different parts of your background?

RHQ Back then, my parents were two of the most opposite people you could imagine. As a result, I developed a kind of lenticular perspective—I was able to shift back and forth between their points of view. Probably my urge to make

different kinds of paintings and put them together is related to that early experience.

SS Were you a painting major at Bard?

RHQ I was, and many of my teachers were my father's friends. So after Bard, needing to gain my own perspective, I spent a year studying painting in Dublin before coming back to New York. Eventually I got a job at P.S.1 answering phones. From there, I was promoted to program coordinator and worked with the curator Chris Dercon on a number of shows in the late '80s, including one featuring Hilma af Klint, which I organized. P.S.1 gave me access to an art world that I hadn't encountered through my family or at school.

SS Were you also pursuing your own work?

RHQ I lived in Williamsburg and always had a studio, but painting just at night and on weekends became problematic.

"I BEGAN TO THINK OF PAINTINGS AS OBJECTS THAT YOU PASSED BY—AS THINGS YOU SAW FROM THE SIDE, WITH YOUR PERIPHERAL VISION, AND IN THE CONTEXT OF OTHER PAINTINGS."

I spent several months of 1989 in a program in Paris started by Daniel Buren and Pontus Hulten called the Institut des Hautes Études en Arts Plastiques, but it really wasn't until I won the Prix de Rome in 1991, and had a year of uninterrupted time, that I began developing the system I still use to make my paintings. In Rome I began to make sentences of paintings—groups of panels that belonged together. And then, one day, I had an epiphany: "The stance of the painting is the profile." It was like a riddle; I wasn't sure what it meant, but I knew it was important.

SS Could you trace it to anything?

RHQ It seemed to refer to the viewer's movement past a painting. I began to think of paintings as objects that you passed by—as things that you saw not just head-on and isolated, but from the side, with your peripheral vision, and in the context of other paintings.

SS Since the early '90s you've been making architectural models of rooms, placing small paintings in them and photographing the arrangements.

RHQ When I returned to New York from Rome, I began thinking about how perspective might be brought back into



abstract painting after its relative banishment by the modernists. In the process, I built a shallow box, put a mirror in it and photographed it with a Polaroid camera.

SS You still make paintings based on Polaroid images. When they're installed in shows, these paintings have an interesting mirroring effect. Because the architectural model is of the gallery itself, and because the painting in the model is also hanging in the actual

gallery, viewers can feel somehow anticipated, or reflected, in the work.

RHQ I was an assistant to Dan Graham in the mid-'90s, and although I wasn't specifically thinking about Dan when I began using that image structure, there is certainly a parallel between these paintings and his time-delay video installations.

SS After starting with the Polaroids, you've regularly used silkscreening to turn photographic source material into painting.

RHQ Silkscreening has given me access



to content without my having to paint it with a brush. I've found it liberating. And since any medium or form in painting brings its own cast of ghosts, it has allowed me to tap into a genealogy of painters who have dealt with photography—Rauschenberg, Warhol, Polke and Richter among them. Silkscreening abstracts the photograph, materializes it and snaps attention back to the picture plane.

SS By the end of the '90s, your idea

of organizing paintings into sentences expanded, and sentences became chapters—longer, more complex series of paintings. How did that come about?

RHQ I'd decided that whenever I had shows I would make paintings that related not just to one another but to the exhibition site as well. Then in 2001—I'd just turned 40—I was invited to do a show at the Queens Museum, and another in conjunction with it at Spencer Brownstone gallery in SoHo. I decided to

View of the exhibition
"iamb, Chapter 12,"
2008-09, at Miguel Abreu
Gallery, New York.

make 40 paintings for each show, all of them linked. Conceived together, the two shows became "The Sun, Chapter 1."

The Queens Museum occupies the only surviving building from the 1939-40 World's Fair. Tragically, my grandfather Marcus Quaytman and



“MY PARENTS WERE TWO OF THE MOST OPPOSITE PEOPLE YOU COULD IMAGINE. AS A RESULT, I DEVELOPED A KIND OF LENTICULAR PERSPECTIVE—I WAS ABLE TO SHIFT BETWEEN THEIR POINTS OF VIEW.”

his father-in-law were killed in 1940 by a Long Island Rail Road train as they drove home from the World’s Fair. By coincidence, just before the Queens Museum show, I’d been in Poland to participate in an exhibition, and had taken a one-day trip by train to Lodz, where my grandfather Marcus had come from. I’d taken lots of photographs of the train ride, and decided to use them for “Chapter 1,” as a way of tying these histories together. The painted panels, which were all the same size, were installed at the Queens Museum in a long line as though they were film stills, or the cars of a train.

SS Almost every chapter includes a small, mostly black painting. You call

these “captions,” and paint them by hand. Frequently they depict arrows.

RHQ I tend to work on one or two small caption paintings as I begin a new chapter. Painting them helps me think less analytically, and including them in exhibitions punctuates the other paintings the way a comma or period might punctuate a sentence. The arrows set up a contradiction, moving viewers along and drawing them in at the same time.

SS The next series, “Lodz Poem, Chapter 2,” was made for the 2004 Lodz Biennial. It focused on the work of two Polish early modernist artists, Katarzyna Kobro and Wladyslaw Strzeminski.

RHQ I’d discovered Kobro’s work when I was preparing for that earlier show in Poland. In the ’20s she was making constructivist sculpture that could have been made in the ’60s or ’70s. I’ve often copied artwork as a way to understand it, so I rebuilt one of her painted steel sculptures and took many photographs of it. Some of the images became paintings.

For “Chapter 2,” I interwove paintings related to Kobro’s sculpture with caption paintings referring to Strzeminski’s draw-

ings of Jews in the Lodz ghetto. Although he himself was not Jewish, many of his best students were, and in his shaky, figurative drawings the world appears to be melting and falling apart. My paintings transposed Strzeminski’s wobbliness to the outline of a white rectangle on a black ground. I suppose they were a way to acknowledge, in an exhibition in Poland, the events of World War II.

SS Was Strzeminski the inspiration for your early Op paintings, which were also part of “Chapter 2”?

RHQ I’d already been making pattern-based paintings, but Strzeminski’s interest, in the ’30s, in opticality and the afterimage inspired me. Unlike ’60s Op, my pattern paintings do not convey a future of freedom and fun, but call attention—as Strzeminski’s work did—to vision itself.

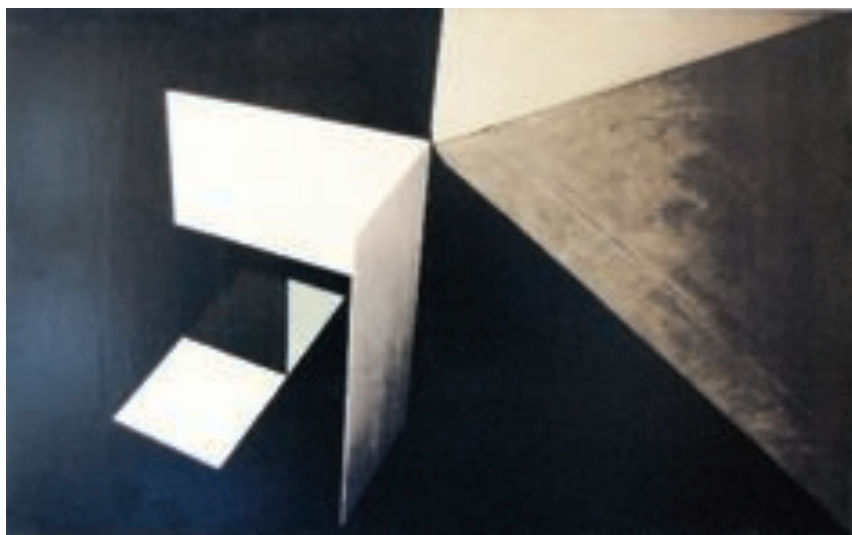
SS From 2005 through 2008 you were the director of Orchard. How did Orchard get started?

RHQ Orchard was a direct response to the reelection of George W. Bush and to the strong feeling, among the people I knew, that there was a real disconnect between the booming art market and the political disaster



Above, *The Sun, Chapter 1*, 2001, silkscreen, oil on wood, 20 by 32 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches.

Opposite, *The Sun, Chapter 1*, 2001, silkscreen, gesso on wood, 20 by 32 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches.



Left, *Kobro Spatial Composition #2 (1928)*, 2000, silkscreen, gesso on wood, 19 $\frac{5}{8}$ by 31 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches.

we were in. Another impetus was the death in 2003 of Colin de Land, who'd run the gallery American Fine Arts. Though I hadn't shown there, many of my friends had, and we all felt its loss. So we decided to open our own gallery, and to run it as a collective. I'd been without gallery representation since 2001, so I was

happy to be engaging with people and ideas, and showing my work in a context that I'd chosen.

SS In keeping with the requirements of your system, you used Orchard itself as subject matter for your paintings.

RHQ Right. I made quite a few Orchard-related paintings. I made two paintings for a show there called "Paintings without

Painters and Painters without Paintings."

One was based on a photograph of a slide-projector piece that Dan Graham had made for the gallery, and the other was a painting of the artist Andrea Fraser looking at a Louise Lawler photograph of an Andy Warhol painting of a woman.

SS In that painting [*Ark, Chapter 10 (Christian Philipp Müller's picture of Andrea Fraser Performing May I Help You at Orchard in front of Louise Lawler's Picture of an Andy Warhol Painting behind a Tony Smith Sculpture)*, 2005] we look at the back of Andrea's head as she looks at Louise's picture, and so on, and the woman in the Warhol looks back at us. It's a painted *mise-en-abyme*, and it functions as an emblem of your practice. For the viewer, the deep



Left, *Ark, Chapter 10* (Christian Philipp Müller's picture of Andrea Fraser Performing May I Help You at Orchard in front of Louise Lawler's *Picture of an Andy Warhol Painting behind a Tony Smith Sculpture*), 2005, silkscreen on wood, 20 inches square.

Right, *iamb, Chapter 12*, 2008, oil, silkscreen, gesso on wood, 20 by 32 3/8 inches.

Below, *iamb, Chapter 12 (blind smile)*, 2008, silkscreen, gesso on wood, 20 inches square.



“THE PATTERN I USED FOR THE OP-LIKE PAINTINGS IS CALLED A SCINTILLATING GRID, WHICH WAS INVENTED TO SHOW THE BLIND SPOT AT THE CENTER OF VISUAL PERCEPTION.”

satisfaction of your work, aside from its visual interest, is to be found in parsing its references. What may at first seem obscure, inside-the-art-world allusions unfold into more expansive narratives.

RHQ I want to make paintings that can be read on their own terms, without footnotes. But if, as a viewer, you persist in asking questions, you'll find answers.

SS For “Ark, Chapter 10,” which was the three-person show you organized at the end of your time at Orchard, you made paintings that related to Orchard’s history, and displayed several of them on storage racks similar to ones you have here in your studio. The display of paintings became a sculpture [*From One O to Another*].

RHQ I felt I needed to acknowledge—within the structure of the pieces

themselves—the fact that I would be showing my own works, becoming, in effect, my own dealer. The storage racks, like the racks in a typical gallery’s back room, enabled visitors to pull out the paintings the way a dealer might, when showing them to prospective clients.

SS The racks addressed the nightmare, which perhaps all artists have had, that their work will never be seen.

RHQ Making the storage-rack pieces reminded me of the trauma of putting my stepfather’s and father’s works in storage after they died. Those experiences and the questions they raised—about artists’ estates, and about the life of the work itself once the artist has gone—left a big impression on me.

SS In 2008, you made a book, *Allegorical Decoys*, whose centerpiece is an essay you wrote about the development of your work. Having been your own dealer, you became, in effect, your own historian and publisher.

RHQ I realized instinctively that, in some sense, the paintings wouldn’t exist unless they were written about and collected. Otherwise, they would

be like trees falling in the forest with nobody there to hear them. Writing that essay was an opportunity not just to reflect on my practice, but to locate my work within a larger critical conversation on my own terms.

SS Also in 2008, you used two exhibitions—a solo at Miguel Abreu in New York, and a two-person show, with Josef Strau, at Vilma Gold in London—as the basis for “iamb, Chapter 12.”

RHQ When I discovered the shows would happen concurrently, two ideas came to mind. The first was about light, because Josef often uses lamps in his work. Light, looking and being blinded all seemed good metaphors for painting. The second was about illustration. Josef and I had earlier talked about the idea of painting as illustration, and about how freeing it can be to operate in a supposedly degraded space. I decided to use the image of a print I’d



bought years ago with my father, of a scene from Milton's *Paradise Lost* by the 19th-century English artist John Martin. Then I began reading *Paradise Lost*—which is in iambic pentameter—and realized that the sound of the word iamb made it seem right for the title. I love words that have more than one meaning or association.

SS Vision is at the heart of “Chapter 12.”

RHQ The pattern I used for the Op-like paintings is called a scintillating grid, which was invented to show the blind spot at the center of visual perception. When you focus on it, your peripheral vision goes haywire.

SS The fact that “scintillating” means sparkling also seems to refer to the several paintings you coated in diamond dust.

RHQ Diamond dust introduces a different kind of optical experience. Unlike an Op pattern, which both blinds and repels vision, diamond dust blinds and attracts vision. And the combination of the two can create an interesting tension.

SS Dan Graham appears as a model in “Chapter 12.” In an image based on a photograph, we see him from the waist up and naked, in front of a scintillating grid painting in your studio, his eyes

turned into the bright light of a lamp [*Iamb, Chapter 12 (blind smile)*, 2008].

RHQ I sometimes use other artists—or people in my life—as models, posing them in front of my own paintings to acknowledge their presence in my thinking and in my work. But a viewer doesn't need to know who Dan Graham is to appreciate the symbol of an older man staring into the light like a blind visionary.

SS At the Whitney, you've installed “Distracting Distance, Chapter 16” in a north-facing room centered on one of Marcel Breuer's trapezoidal windows.

RHQ “Chapter 16” is about the relationship of a window motif to the idea of distance. I wanted to work with one of Breuer's windows because, for years, I've used that same shape in my paintings to refer to perspective. As I looked into the history of the Whitney, I discovered that Breuer hadn't wanted windows in the first place—he thought air conditioning and electric light had rendered them obsolete. I'm sure he had the Guggenheim's top-heavy, windowless form in mind.

As I was considering the window, my mind kept returning to one of the more iconic paintings in the Whitney's col-

lection, *A Woman in the Sun*, painted by Edward Hopper in 1961, the year I was born. I love how empowered that nude is; she's like a film noir character. Realizing that my friend the artist K8 Hardy looks like the woman in the painting, I asked her if she would agree to model nude in the Whitney. She agreed immediately, saying she had lots of “nuditude.”

SS She shows up in two of the paintings. In them, you reimagine the Hopper, locating K8 not in a bedroom but in the very room at the Whitney where the viewer stands, with the window in the painting echoing the window on the wall.

RHQ And as in Hopper's painting, K8 stands in profile, while the viewer passes by. My idea was to set up a series of reflections between the viewer, the space and history of the Whitney, and American painting.

SS How does the motif of the window relate to the Op paintings?

RHQ I wanted to create a sense of light that seemed colorless. I discovered that the RGB color model used for TV and computer screens—today's windows onto other spaces—could be used to make

paintings that would read from afar as light, or as a glowing grayness. When you approach these paintings, or look at them obliquely, their colorlessness shifts to red, green or blue, depending on your angle and the light in the room.

SS The title for “Distracting Distance, Chapter 16” is a variant of a phrase by the poet Osip Mandelstam. Many of your titles intimate a poetic approach to painting.

RHQ I find it helpful to think about painting as if it were poetry, and to focus on a given painting’s grammar and syntax, even on its vocabulary. In reading a poem, you notice particular words, and how each is not just that one word, but contains other words as well. The same is true for a painting.

“‘CHAPTER 16’ IS ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP OF A WINDOW MOTIF TO THE IDEA OF DISTANCE. FOR YEARS, I’VE USED THE SHAPE OF BREUER’S WINDOWS IN MY PAINTINGS TO REFER TO PERSPECTIVE.”

I’ve always found it helpful to take other media and transpose their forms and ideas to painting. Early on, when I was feeling kind of lost as a painter, I’d read about other kinds of art-making—sculpture, video or conceptual art—and almost unconsciously twist the thinking around to make it be about painting.

SS It seems like you do a lot of reading. What is your work process like?

RHQ Much of my studio time is spent as if I were a writer: reading, thinking, looking at pictures, making notes. I also spend a long time on the little caption paintings, but once I’ve decided what to do, everything else happens quite rapidly.

SS Your painting system is really a set of rules. Why are rules so important?

RHQ They’ve been a way to confront what seemed problematic to me about painting—the overbearing authority of its long history, its exhaustion, its capitulation to capital and power. Taking color, dimension, medium, subject matter, even the choice to be a painter—things that might otherwise seem arbitrary—and

applying rules to them has given me at least the illusion that I’m free to make something of my own. My rules are inventions—and they continue to generate new possibilities.

SS Do you know what you’ll do for SFMOMA?

RHQ Not yet, but I’ve been reading about the San Francisco poet Jack

Spicer. I may not use anything related to him, but his approach to writing poems appeals to me. Spicer wrote them in sequences, believing that the single poem was like a one-night stand. His focus was on the book, not the poem, which exactly parallels my relationship to painting.

SS And after SFMOMA, you’ll be





having a survey exhibition at the Neuberger.

RHQ I am interested in how that kind of overview will fit into the architecture of my ongoing project. I'm also working on a companion volume to *Allegorical Decoys*, featuring images of every painting from the first 17 chapters.

SS Is it too obvious to suppose that these chapters will one day add up to a book? What exactly would such a book be?

RHQ The book may be like a story or a long poem, but I don't have a conclusion in mind. My plan is to go on painting with this system for the rest of my life—and my hope is that I won't ever find out how it ends. ○

Distracting Distance, Chapter 16, 2010, silkscreen, gesso on wood, 24¾ by 40 inches.

STEEL STILLMAN
is an artist and writer
living in New York.