David Craven in conversation with Renée van der Avoird

Renée van der Avoird: In the early 1970s, when you were a student at the Ontario College of Art in Toronto (now OCADU), a certain pedagogical revolution was underway. The school was moving from a traditional curriculum to one that was more critical of the art world, one that encouraged radical and experimental art-making. How did this climate of dissent influence you as a young artist?

David Craven: I was a little older than most other students, as I had come from a university background before I entered OCA. So, I was a little more direct in terms of what I wanted for myself, which was to learn. I was there almost twenty-four hours a day, working away. That heated political environment was not conducive to me so, after three years, I quit. I got my own studio and dabbled my foot in that water. That's basically how, I think, everyone determines his or her path in life. It's not an epiphany at sixteen; rather, you dabble your foot in the water, then you're up to your ankles, your knees and, before you know it, you're up to your neck.

RVA: In those days, the very function of painting was shifting from formalism into a more confused state; however, you continued to work within a formalist category. Can you speak about the challenges of this moment? How did they influence your trajectory as a painter?

DC: The common refrain at the time was still "painting is dead". I didn't believe in that, obviously, but after the somewhat programmatic path my early paintings took, I began to explore different media, including collage. But it wasn't until I moved to New York in 1980 that I took a leap. I felt that I had to do something. I realized that art school wasn't working out anymore; it was too limiting. And so I took a jump of faith and tried something else. Being an inheritor of my time, I wanted to make work that was more existential, work that had to do with individual personalities and the "real". The paintings in *The Falling Men* series, such as *Falling Figure Earth* (1981), were the initial experimental works.

RVA: In a previous essay, Saul Ostrow likened your career to "a long train trip that is leisurely with no specific itinerary, no deadlines, not even a pre-determined destination". He suggests that it is the movement between these ever-shifting locations that intrigues you. What I find striking about your practice as a whole, is that it's incredibly multifaceted. In this way, your work disrupts our expectations of categorical stability. That said, do you consider your career more of an inventory than a progression, guided by notions of risk-taking and experimentation, rather than, say, development or refinement?

DC: I really don't care about progression anymore. Progression only leads to an end game that is self-defeating. My concern has always been to not only entertain myself, but to also make sure that I'm not bored with a certain practice and a certain history. If you look at my work, it's clear that I am constantly struggling with tensions between formalism and the real, personality and self-referentiality, et cetera. My work takes twists and turns. Let's face it, as artists we are supposed to be imaginative, inquiring. So that's what I always thought my role was, to publicly experiment. If you follow my career, you'll see all types of continuity between the past and the present. It's ongoing. It's organic. And that's what's important: to have things not be programmatic, but organic.

RVA: I'd like to know more about your interest in the sculptural potential of painting. Your works have a definite sense of objecthood, especially some of the recent constructions like *Ouch* and *Slide* (both 2012), which oscillate between two and three-dimensions.

DC: Since the early days, I've been experimenting with certain aspects of formalism, literalizations of the form. My paintings are objects in the real world, yet they still respond to the outside world in terms of engaging the audience to not only look at them, but to experience and react to them.

RVA: On that note, would you say that these kinds of constructions function as framing devices as well? For example, in the black-and-white *Cinematic* works, you've assembled numerous panels to create very dynamic compositions. The panels also intensify the imagery and heighten the tension and anxiety of the subjects.

DC: I've always been very interested in tension and fragmentation. The *Cinematic* works embody quite a bit of tension, with competing dichotomies: they are at once paintings and structures. They're smothered in fragmentation but there's a wholeness that comes from all the layers and textures that can slowly be absorbed. They also represent a fear of authority, which is always present in my work.

RVA: Can you elaborate on the "cinematic" quality of these works?

DC: My early figurative works such as *Circulating Rumours* (1985) and the other large-scale portraits are all constructed. They are collages of an inventory of images that I had previously made with paint. They were then formed together, almost like sculpture. Using the large frames was a natural way to portray existential angst. The pictures—like cinematic stills—have a poignancy that has to do with silence. Although the characters are screaming, it's a muffled type of communication. That's why most of them always look outside the frame. The frame is insubordinate in terms of identifying the works as a picture, but there is always an absence outside the frame that refers to another subject.

RVA: Moving ahead to the works in *Jump Cut*, I'd like to know a little bit more about your use of text here. You mentioned that these are fragments of conversations that you overhear, is that correct?

DC: Yes, I live not only in upstate New York but also in a ground-floor apartment in New York City. And one of the niceties of the city—somehow I sleep better in New York than I do up in the country—is listening to stiletto heels passing my window, fragments of conversations, the police pulling a guy out of a car: it's all about these little fragments. Fragments have been a real issue for me; even within my formalist work I carry that aspect forward. Now, it's based on experience whereas before, with the *Cinematic* work, it was based on a programmatic theme departing from the earlier formalist work. It's interesting how I can still use both experience and formalism to make paintings that are complete but still open-ended. And that's the issue, right now for me, to have the work be open-ended.

RVA: Can you elaborate on the use of colour in your recent work?

DC: After black and white, I wanted to experiment with something that was dangerous, for me. I'm not afraid of trying new things, so I put myself in a position of dealing with something I haven't dealt with, which is colour. The colours are purposefully zany and "comicbook-ish", much like colours used in sign-making to attract attention. I had absolutely never dealt with these aspects before. The purpose of these experiments was to see how afraid I was to get into something new again.

RVA: You're always challenging yourself.

DC: I am. I really am. And I'm proud of that and the fact that I still have the strength to do that.

RVA: In your more recent work, you've developed your own unique brand of abstraction that combines gestural marks, poured paint, collage and experimental shelf constructions. Can you take me through the making of one of these works, from idea to execution?

DC: First of all, it all started up here in the country. I began to make my own stretchers because I had to. I couldn't afford to order them from a professional and ship them up here. And so, my stretchers are unique in their ability to float off the wall and look very thin. I started making them that way expressly, with that ambition. I tell this to students: I didn't know anything about construction, about how to make things, woodworking, or anything like that. Students feel they need to be totally secure with their medium and materials but, I just tell them, no. You just get an idea and start making it. You find out how to make it. That's what I do up here. The more stretchers I built, the more familiar I became with the

woodworking aspect of the work and that led me into making the constructions in *Jump Cut*. When I start them, I have no idea where I'm going. I really don't. They're completely intuitive, with a background, obviously, that is in my stomach from years of making work and I just let it go.

RVA: There's a surprising materiality to them as well. In certain works, such as *Shots Fired Shots Fired* (2009), you incorporate paper towel into the background.

DC: A lot of my work comes out of plays on language, such as "slow absorption". A painting is a slow, absorbing piece of art that takes time to reveal itself. So, at a certain point, it rang a bell with me. I started thinking about paper towels mopping up paint. That's when I started laying them on the canvas as a ground that would almost exaggerate the texture of the warp and weft of the canvas itself.

RVA: Finally, I wanted to ask how you think these two bodies of work, *Jump Cut* and *The Cinematic*, are connected.

DC: They're not connected in a stylistic way at all. But they're certainly connected by the use of language: in travelling, stops and starts, authorities. Before, there was a muteness in the paintings, whereas now there's a declaration. Both sets of work are absolutely a reflection of urban life. That's all I know, really. Urban life is the generator of all this tension.

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