

MALI MORRIS INTERVIEWS GEOFFREY RIGDEN

By Letter, London-Paphos, July 2012

Little Rootie Tootie is a painting I have of yours, from 1979. It's one of many which pay tribute in their titles to Thelonius Monk. Please elaborate?

Geoffrey Rigden: That painting, which I considered was in the spirit of the music, was so-called after Monk's composition, written and first recorded in the 50's. It was his moniker for his infant son. The first LP I bought, during my first year at Somerset College of Art in 1960, was *Monk at Town Hall*, a live recording of a 1958 NYC concert of a big band playing Monk tunes that included a particularly rousing arrangement of that piece. I heard him playing in Bristol that same year, with a quartet, as part of a programme called Jazz at the Philharmonic. I bumped into him coming out of the Gents during the interval.

Mali Morris: O.K., now can you bring in a painter who inspired you, early on?

GR. If Monk was a musos' muso, Hans Hofmann was no less of a painters' painter. He emigrated to the US from Germany in the late 1930s, and his reputation as a significant component in the development of post-war American painting is well established. The list of artists that attended his NYC and Provincetown schools is legion, - it was a broad church - all sorts, ranging from Larry Rivers to Helen Frankenthaler. And Robert de Niro Sr, a very good artist. Greenberg used to hang out there and he acknowledged Hofmann's fundamental teaching as a significant contribution to his own critical development, - though if I recall correctly, found his verbal delivery rather opaque.

In a 1973 essay, *Influences of Matisse*, Greenberg (I'm quoting from memory here) stresses how Hofmann - who had himself attended Matisse's classes in Paris in the 1920s - insisted on Matisse's primacy, at a time when he was "widely considered to be beside the point." Greenberg also infers that Hofmann's own painting would have benefited from 'the cooling and clearing' quality of Matisse's post-Fauve palette.

MM: Do you agree with that?

GR: Yes. But nonetheless his late high-key paintings remain astonishing to me. I don't think I dreamt this - around 1963, passing Waddington's, I saw one probably for the first time, through the window, burning off the back wall. It stopped me in my tracks.

MM: One of our first conversations was in a pub in Canterbury, in the early 70's, after a day's teaching at the art college there. We discovered we were both fans of Milton Avery and Albert Marquet, not exactly popular painters at that time. Later on many more were added to that list, Adolf Gottlieb, William Nicholson, Stuart Davies, Alfred Jensen, Paul Feeley... I'm leaving out all the

well-known ones, the greats, the obvious ones we were inspired by, - these were an obscure lot, though more often mentioned these days. Is there something that they have in common with each other, do you think, something that drew us to them?

GR: Among those artists you listed - painters' painters, especially Avery and Marquet, probably what we recognized, and which they share, is a sense of touch, understatement and quietude - they are not Heavy Hitters. I have the impression that, foremost, they were highly observant, and wanted to interpret what they enjoyed looking at with the minimum amount of fuss and bravura, or visible struggle. That Marquet was so admired by Matisse, and Avery by Gottlieb and Rothko seems to say a lot. And Gottlieb for me is still more pertinent and engaging than Pollock.

MM: Can you say something about format/motif/composition in your paintings? The first paintings I saw of yours, just before we met, were in a four-person show at MOMA, Oxford. You had been painting stripes before that, hard-edged one-shot paintings, at the Royal College during the 60s. These days there is often a wonky symmetry, sometimes years of over-painting, references to European Modernism, or Middle-Eastern artefacts, and everything on a smaller scale.

GR: Those Oxford paintings of 1971 were in a show that John McLean organised, including himself, Basil Beattie, and Alan Gouk. Mine were a sort of mix of Avery and Hofmann via Darby Bannard, if that is imaginable. Since about 1964 I'd been influenced primarily by Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis and was - if you'll pardon the expression - a Greenbergian-type painter, before I had read him closely; I'd kind of intuited what it was all about, and things evolved. I was informed as much by the fortuitous and rather heady circumstances of being a part-time assistant - hanging pictures and so forth - at Kasmin, whose gallery was then on Bond Street, and showed all those artists who were inspiring me, - Tony Caro, Frankenthaler, Louis, Noland, etc. This was the outcome of acquaintance with Tony Caro. In 1967 I had repainted several of his early steel sculptures with the Australian sculptor Paul Selwood, with whom I shared a studio in West London. We'd inherited this job from Ron Robertson-Swann, another Aussie, who had studied with Caro at St. Martin's. I'd met Ron in 1965 on the train to Liverpool, where we were both prize-winners at the John Moores, selected by Greenberg, Patrick Heron and John Russell.

MM: Here's a prompt, for period detail : your reminiscence from that time, which I'll call *Stretching Noland*:

GR: In 1968 Noland had his third show at Kasmin's - the first of his horizontal stripe paintings to be shown in London. I bowled along to the private view with Robertson-Swann to find a situation resembling a Bateman cartoon signifying confusion. A 25 ft long canvas was lying loosely over its stretcher frame, across three or four trestles. It was surrounded by a perplexed looking group, including, as I recall, the artist and his wife, with Kasmin, David Annesley and

Tony Caro. As we entered, Tony announced that there was no longer reason to panic, and Robertson-Swann (who was unflappable) and I (less so) had staple-guns pressed into our hands. After a short consultation on procedure we embarked on the task, and had the painting on the wall in about half an hour. Later I found myself talking to the very *chic* Mrs Noland, who propelled me across the room to tell her husband that I was '*the guy you wrote back to about jazz*'. I gathered his letter had been an enormous compliment, as he rarely replied to any mail. '*Where*', he asked, '*could one go to hear some Acid-Rock?*' Being a jazzer this was a challenge rather outside my province, but extraordinarily, during the course of an episodic evening, a party ensued all over West-End clubland, guided by Jimi Hendrix, whom we had met at a Tandoori restaurant. At some point I recall conversing with John Hoyland and Noland (but not Hendrix) about Hofmann, with Joe Cocker blasting out a few feet away.

A couple of days later Caro brought Noland to the dank cellar where Selwood and I had our studio. The Master unravelled my paint rags and enthused about the Hendrix Experience. After surveying my rookie efforts, which were clearly out of his painting (though actually at that time more indebted to Jack Bush), he suggested that I had to anticipate his next move and be ahead of him - the idea of which astonished me. Robertson-Swann later said to me, "When you see a Noland you wonder how he's going to get himself out of this one - (painting oneself into a corner, so to speak) and then whatever he comes up with next, you say - oh, yes, of course, - inevitable!"

MM: Teaching at Canterbury, back in the 70s, you were known as the tutor who had all the latest news about the then current American painting. You seem less interested in what is 'of the moment' these days, more preoccupied with your investigations into the art of the further past, somehow embedding your discoveries inside your own paintings - which look to me completely contemporary, even when you are quoting or re-cycling. What does the whole idea of 'being contemporary' mean to you?

GR: You've reminded me of how I'd use texts like those intense analytical essays by Michael Fried and Darby Bannard from *Art Forum* as materials for tutorials. I felt that they put across the point far more articulately than I was able to, and I suppose one was dogmatic and evangelical about it at the time. Certain phrases have stayed with me, like '*... Noland's tense, almost hurting presence...*', invoked by Fried. I tend not to read so much art criticism these days, which leads me to your point that I appear to be less engaged with contemporary art. Well if that is typified by Hirst, Koons, et al, - official art - I concur, but there are many of our generation, and older and younger, who without much critical or official attention are quietly cutting their own groove - too numerous to mention. But I take the point - in an article of about 35 years ago, Kenworth Moffett, writing about the painter Friedel Dzubas, referred to 'the grandfather principle' which roughly speaking suggested that one generation further back than our immediate predecessors may be a more fertile source of guidance and inspiration. Following this train of thought - which seems more relevant as I get older - it would suggest that Picasso,

Matisse, Braque and Derain, for example, fit into that category, and inevitably that leads back to whatever turned *them* on, - African sculpture, icons, Persian miniatures, archaic Mediterranean artefacts, etc. And I have always enjoyed making things which I *literally* inherited from my own grandfather, who was a rather Heath Robinson kind of model-maker, sign writer, and Sunday painter.

MM: How do your constructions and sculptures relate to the paintings? You paint flat, but you also work in three dimensions, using bits and pieces of abandoned stuff, which gets glued together, re-painted, and sort of cheered-up. You improvise spatially, and apply paint, make and remake and keep them going for a long time before they are finished. I wonder if you refer back to the cubist structures of Picasso and Braque. Are these works connected to a love of those artists, that period, in any deliberate way? It's never parody, it's not irony, it may be homage, but it's not pious. What is it?

GR: I have long been fascinated by the constructed sculpture of Picasso, Julio Gonzalez, and Miro (why are the Spanish artists so good at this?), David Smith, and of course Caro, who restore discarded or redundant elements into high and evocative art. The boxes I've been preoccupied with for a few years owe considerably to early C20 collage and constructed sculpture. It may be that this process has allowed a measure of playfulness that is more restricted in my flat stuff.

MM: I wouldn't know how describe the way you use colour, except that it's always surprising to me, and you always seem to get it right. Could you comment on how you approach this aspect of your work?

GR: I've always been eclectic as far as colour is concerned. It sort of gets arrived at by trial and error. Of course most of it has been stolen from other palettes, local colour and nature. In a way I think drawing is the fundamental essence of my painting, which tends to be a laboured process of synthesis and revision. Some time ago I recognised that in several of my pictures there was this compositional set-up wherein I was loosely transcribing from masterpieces such as Matisse's *The Conversation* of 1917, at the Hermitage, and Duccio's *Annunciation* of 1311, at the National Gallery. Matisse's observation, that '*every move in a painting seems to suggest three more...*' sums up for me the complexity and mystery of picture-making.

MM: When your ship comes in, what might change in the way that you work, the materials you use, the scale you employ?

GR: A larger studio with a decorative secretary and a very practical assistant, and casting and fabricating facilities for iron and aluminium.

MM: Here's the Desert Island Question: I'm offering artworks, books, CDs, and luxury items. You're allowed two of each.

GR: i) Matisse's *The Conversation* and a Miro sculpture.

ii) Anthony Powell's *Dance to the Music of Time* (12 volumes) and a Raymond Chandler Omnibus - *The Complete Philip Marlowe Stories*

iii) *Eldridge, Hawkins and Hodges, Live at the Village Gate* and Miles Davies' *On the Corner*

iv) My harmonica, and something washed up ashore from Lebanon - for the arthritis.

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Photo of Geff Rigden by Chris Morphet, APT Gallery London, 2009

