



DETROIT: THE GREAT STORIES



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The Great
Stories





DICK GOODY

ARCHIVE, STRUCTURE, AND ABSTRACTION

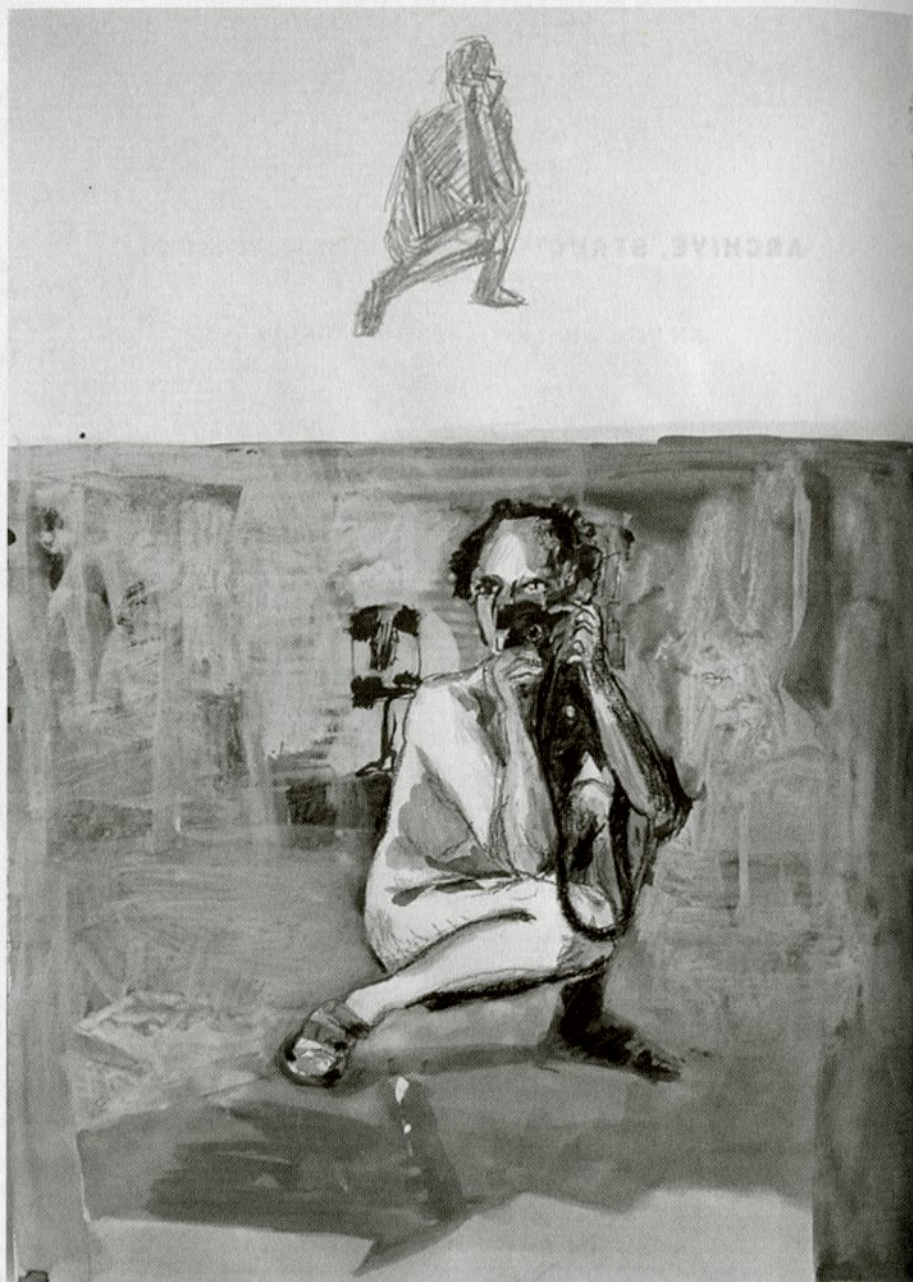
AN INTERVIEW WITH HARTMUT AUSTEN

Hartmut Austen's paintings originate from photographic and figurative sources filtered through his personal ideology. While his paintings may be ambiguous and abstract, they are rooted in the authentic, the political, and the real. His archival material of found images: photographs, Xeroxes and clippings—brings legitimacy to his paintings because of the aura/value inherent in an extant image. Therefore, his work occupies two realms: the real world which is archival and architectural and his interior world which is impenetrable and ideological involving the filtering of subjective narrative through abstraction and use of color.

When thinking about the structure for this interview, it became imperative to focus on Austen's primary spheres of interest in his work: archive, narrative, color, and formalism (structure and architecture); additionally, to provide greater context, biographical questions exploring the personal and the political in his work were posed.

BIOGRAPHY I

You were born in Germany in the mid-sixties. When you were a boy, what sort of things did you draw?



From what I remember, there were several kinds of things I was interested in drawing: side views of yachts, interior floor plans of imagined apartments and houses that I might want to live in one day, and surrealist line and value drawings of faces, figures as well as copies of illustrations I saw in books and exhibition catalogs.

Do you think there is something distinguishable between what a German boy might draw and what an American one might do?

Generally, I don't know what an American boy might draw, although I have the suspicion that he would draw more things inspired by those omnipresent animated television shows. This is something which didn't interest me or something I wasn't much allowed to watch. I looked a lot at books and contemporary magazines like *Schöner Wohnen* and *Häuser*—German architecture and interior design magazines my dad had. I was mostly interested in the illustration of floor plans, the life-stories of the people that lived in these places, and the artwork hanging on the walls in the magazine photographs.

As a student, were there particular maxims or ideas that were drummed into you?

Well, that being an artist is a privilege, not a right; that one has to decide between a career as an artist and starting a family; that art follows its own inherent, sometime unexplainable rules—in other words, that art is free; that to persist, one has to resist; that an artist, although a social being, has to act like an a-social catalyst. That an artwork needs to be oriented and judged in the context of the best in a field; that effective art is uncomfortable, opinionated, and inventive, and—specifically in our class at the academy—that painting is still relevant and that we will have to prove it, and so on.

Which of these still hold true?

As with many things, there is a bit of truth and relevance in almost all of them, but I like the excitement of not knowing exactly.

Which artists were important to you back then?

I am influenced mostly by modern Western art. Any definite list here would run the danger of omission. I kept (and still keep) lists of artists I look at, have looked at, or want to look at. They change constantly. However, there are a few I keep thinking about, and to give a sense of the trajectory of influences before and during my studies, I'll just name a few influences: Tomi Ungerer's book *America*; Horst Janssen's flower drawings, self portraits, and erotica; Paul Klee's lyrical ink line drawings; the three "P"s: Picasso, Picabia and Polke—for their stylistic and formal diversity; Edvard Munch's use of landscape, portraiture, and color to portray neurosis, desire, and tension, as well as his handling of his own paintings as living organisms—sometimes he'd paint in the snow and he didn't care if the snow mixed with his paint—it became part of his process. Also, Vilja Celmins' paintings, which operate in similar terrain as Gerhard Richter's, while using smaller square footage. The Argentinean artist Guillermo Kuitca's paintings of maps. And, inevitably, Piero della Francesca. And three Belgian painters who paint very differently from each other—Raoul de Keyser, Rene Daniels, and Luc Tuymans. I liked Susan Rothenberg's paintings during the eighties, which somehow initiated my use of grid structures. Finally, Helmut Federle's *Basics on Composition* series and, last but not least, Blinky Palermo, Mary Heilman, Martin Kippenberger, Clifford Still, Philip Guston, Martin Assig, Jasper Johns, George Seurat, Francis Bacon, and Baselitz.



HARTMUT AUSTEN **AUSTERLITZ** 2003 DRYPOINT PRINT 11 × 16 INCHES

ARCHIVE

What kinds of images make it into your archive?

Mostly cutouts from newspapers, but also snapshots or images culled from the Internet. I would say that I collect images, which I feel relate in some way to the five or so groups of imagery I am interested in painting: floods, war, buildings, portraits, and places, among others.

Let's consider your audience. What kind of value would you say your archive holds for them?

Well, most people don't know I keep a dossier of images. I like to think that it is of mostly explanatory, anecdotal, and hence trivial value for them. But just as I am curious about the conditions of something happening, I'd also not be surprised if people used these sources to interpret my pictures. I haven't made the images available in exhibitions, and I doubt that I will show them in the near future. However, I show them here and there to studio visitors—perhaps too often, too willingly; maybe I shouldn't. These images are working material and I don't see my paintings relating to their initial sources all that much.

Would you say that the whole process, from archiving (choosing) an image to using (transforming) it in a painting is subjective? Or is there something objective in the choice, but subjective in the transformation?

It tends to be a rather—but not entirely—subjective process. For example, certain images are chosen for their subject: flooded landscapes, buildings in the process of being built or destroyed, portraits, people lost after destructive events. These images are already objectified per se

through the lens of the photographer, the editing process, and so on. Many levels of editing have been achieved until something like a newspaper photograph becomes available to my eyes. I might cut the picture out because I like its composition, its expression, or its subject. I don't search for newspaper images with the goal of painting them. They get my attention. This is different with my own snapshots. I use my camera like an amateur, for example, so that I have something to look at when I get home. But now and then I use the camera as a tool to record a specific impression. These could be close-ups of water drops on a plastic tablecloth in a Biergarten in Berlin, or my son mirrored in a train window while passing through a tunnel, bathed in artificial light. I guess there is a certain romantic or sentimental impulse behind the selection process in both kinds of categories. They remind me of something in my past—an impression, a quality of light, specific shapes. I may also find something in them that I feel expresses something about my current state of mind. I started using photography because I wasn't always entirely confident of the merit of the paintings I'd based on memory and imagination.

Sometimes you use erotic images, but by the time you've finished painting you can't distinguish that there was anything sexual there as a source. Do you think erotic imagery has a different value than something non-sexual?

My work is based on observation, curiosity, even voyeuristic interest in the world, my life, and the lives of others. I tend to tighten—or should I say, condense—sexual imagery in my pictures to a point of abstraction, in that I treat this kind of source like any other. I generally like it when things do not immediately have a clear motif, but rather evoke the sense of touch and curiosity. There must be something in a painting that keeps you looking for a while, trying to figure it out.

One of your sources is the *New York Times*; would you agree, then, that your archive is a political instrument?

If the personal is political, yes.

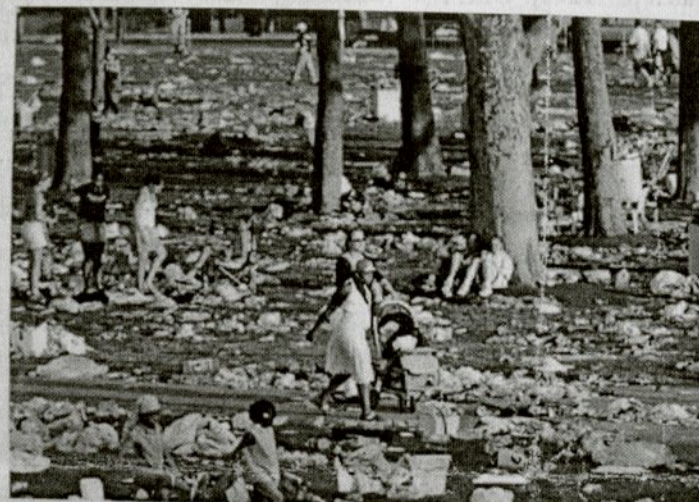
NARRATIVE

Your paintings, despite the fact that they are figurative, have a curious absence of narrative. What mechanism is at work when you take an image (signifier) and make it into a painting? Are you consciously suppressing narrative?

I am not very interested in telling stories in paintings. It would require more knowledge about subjects and, perhaps, the use of different media. My paintings function more like snapshots, which are amalgams of things seen, destroyed, combined; things that are impulsive, achieved, thought, and so on. I am an observer and in that sense, perhaps, they are stylistic impressions as much as they are formal inventions.

It seems to me that you really value your archive, yet when you start painting you deconstruct the image. Is there something contrary or iconoclastic going on?

I start a painting with an impulse, not an image; I rely on imagery more than I rely on words. However, I don't qualify or quantify where source imagery comes from. I also make paintings without using photographic sources; at times I use drawings from life as much as my imagination. I can make paintings from anything. But I need an inspiration, a conviction.



AP

HARTMUT AUSTEN ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTO

FROM THE INTERNET CA. 2004 8.5 × 11 INCHES

What is happening, in your interior/ideological mind, once you have the image on the canvas?

I sit down and look at those initial marks. I may put down a background color or I may use thinned paint to go over the entire image. Sometimes I scratch parts away. What I do, technically, is fairly regular stuff: paint and over-paint. I like to change the consistencies of paint while working on a picture. I may think about something I read about an artist—say, Mondrian; how he created an ordinary yellow out of carefully layering three different yellows. When I get frustrated with colors or forms, I may give chance a try and use a color or technique I've never used before. This is when I discover things.

What is really interesting, for me, about the transformation from image to painting is the way in which the whole reason for making the painting—the image—is either shrouded or obliterated. The result is a lack of omniscient narrative. Could we call this process a sort of constructed ambiguity?

It's the result of the handling of materials. I think the joy of working and experimenting with a medium is important, as is the personal as well as contemporary context in which a painting is made.

FORMALISM

There are three formalistic elements that clearly distinguish the look of your work: use of color, use of the grid, and use of architectonic structures. We could say that your interest in architecture lies in the real (archival) realm. What draws you to architecture? Is it something emotive or formalistic?

Architecture is structural and personal, even organic. I see architecture, if done well, as a representation of human thought, history, orientation,

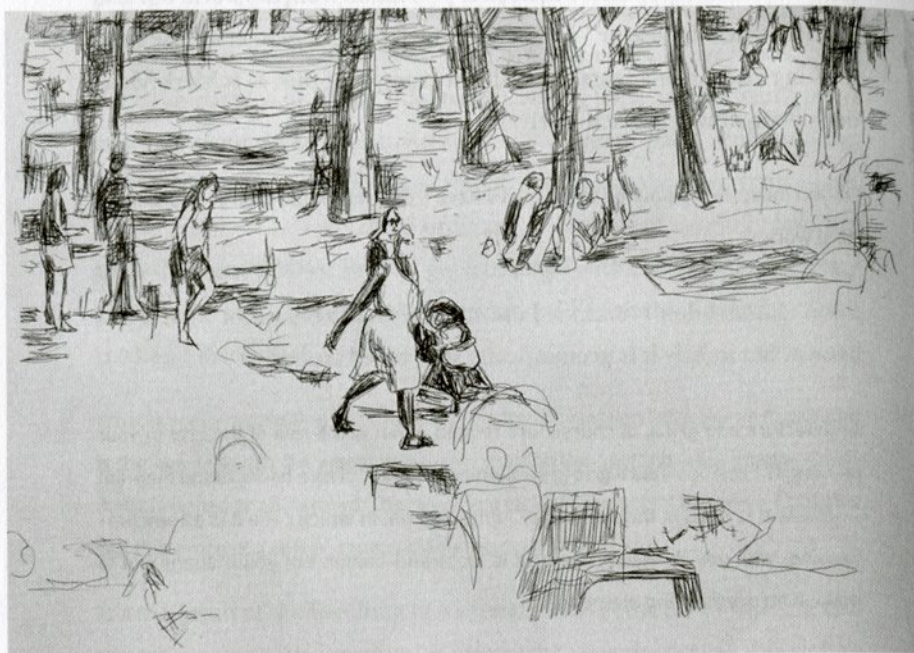
and disorientation. After all, it separates interior from exterior. It exposes or protects or threatens. I have a childhood memory of rooms with secret and ever-changing spaces, which offer protection from the world but also confine—the “House ur” in Rheydt, which Gregor Schneider has been working on for many years, is a brilliant example of this, as is Mark Mander's floor-drawing as self-portrait.

Do you think your paintings with figures have a different value than your architectural works?

I don't know. I don't think so. I use architecture to represent what is unknown, but mostly it is geometrically structured space.

Architecture and grids, of course, are related. What is the role of the grid in your paintings? I ask because a grid is something we think of as a background element—unless it is used in the manner of Agnes Martin, in which case it is all-encompassing: with you, however, the grid is front-and-center, but you manage not to make it an overbearing element.

As I mentioned before, I started using a diagonal cross structure in my paintings under the influence of Susan Rothenberg's paintings from the eighties. It was like a symbol of choice—a cross—as if I were making a mark in a voting booth; an affirmation that this painting is the painting of my choice, just as it is, at the same time, a denial, something I cross out. Another reference for me was Jörg Immendorff's painting from 1966 in which the words “Hört auf zu malen” (“Stop painting”) are crossed out. Later on I used other geometric structures, such as lines based on my initials, which also functioned as window frames, stretching or contracting pictorial space. The Swiss artist Helmut Federle, whose show at the Kunsthalle Bielefeld (the city I grew up in) made an impression on me. Sometime later the grid was introduced, but not as a rendering device;



HARTMUT AUSTEN **UNTITLED** 2005 BALLPOINT PEN 9 X 12 INCHES

instead as an all-over structure—democratic, un-hierarchic, and flat. In this way it nicely contrasted with whatever else I would put in a painting.

Something that may not be known about you is that you make dozens of postcard-sized watercolors—you will often make a watercolor of one of your archived images before you start a painting on canvas. I see it as a filtering mechanism—getting rid of superfluous elements which could make an image too cluttered. What is it that you like about the postcard medium, and how does it operate differently from oil painting?

To use Olympic ice skating as an analogy: you have mandatory exercises, and then you can do a routine in which you are free to improvise. My paintings are mandatory exercises, but the drawings are a free-skate. I usually enjoy doing them more because they relate directly to my thinking. They are improvisational and experimental. They are a separate strain of my practice. I rarely do preliminary drawings or outlines for my paintings now. In fact, drawings—mostly watercolors, gouaches, and ink brush works—sometimes pick up on ideas I've already painted. Because of time constraints, I am trying to become more efficient in my studio. Here and there I use existing works on paper as a source (or one of the sources) for paintings, but the results are often poor. Alex Katz does wonderful small studies which he seems to have no problem enlarging. I've always admired these artists who work efficiently and who can do anything in any scale at any time. I probably would have to switch to tempera or acrylic to accomplish this, to translate the specific color atmosphere of my drawings onto canvas in a reasonable amount of time.

Sometimes you work on the same image (theme) in two or more paintings. This is surprising to me, inasmuch as I have conceived of a model in which your process is chiefly concerned with the revelation of transforming an image through (into)

painting. What is it that interests you in taking an image and transforming it more than once?

I just feel that an image is not yet exhausted; but I also don't like to repeat myself so obviously. I also don't wear the same shirt every day—I change a bit. But how and why I do so is hard for me to say. The final gestalt of a painting emerges through the often prolonged process of working and reworking. Some days I like to paint figures; other days I'd rather paint flat shapes. Some days I paint cross-hatch strokes in monochromatic color, and other days I prefer to lay down broad areas of bold color contrast.

COLOR

How did you learn to use color? Was it through theory or empiricism?

Whatever I might have learned theoretically at the academy wasn't a consideration in my painting process; in fact, the first time I applied to the academy in Berlin I was rejected on the grounds that I lacked any sense of color.

In some ways your work is reminiscent of Post-Impressionist painting, in the sense that it has a dynamic decorative structure and refined use of color. At the same time, it partially retains its inceptive documentary data—I'm thinking of painters like Gauguin, Sérusier, Seurat, and Vuillard. These French artists are strikingly different in their outlooks and use of color than the early-twentieth century, angst-ridden German Expressionists. Do you feel a connection with the Postimpressionists?

The German expressionists merged the romantic with the gothic in German art of the nineteenth century, but also immediately reacted to what



HARTMUT AUSTEN **PARK** 2005 OIL ON CANVAS 18 X 24 INCHES

was happening personally and politically around them. Look at Otto Dix, one of the most versatile of all of them, or Beckman. Fantastisch. But my work is, by comparison, less concerned with content then with appearance—and in that sense I relate to the French.

In many ways your use of color facilitates the abstraction in your work. Abstraction is the means with which you create ambiguity, which in turn rescues your painting from the banality of realism. Do you agree with this analysis?

Well, it's a little clinical and at the same time somehow too causal. The world around me is complicated and contradictory. In contrast I strive to use my paintings as exercises in simplicity, structure, and touch. They create their own reality.

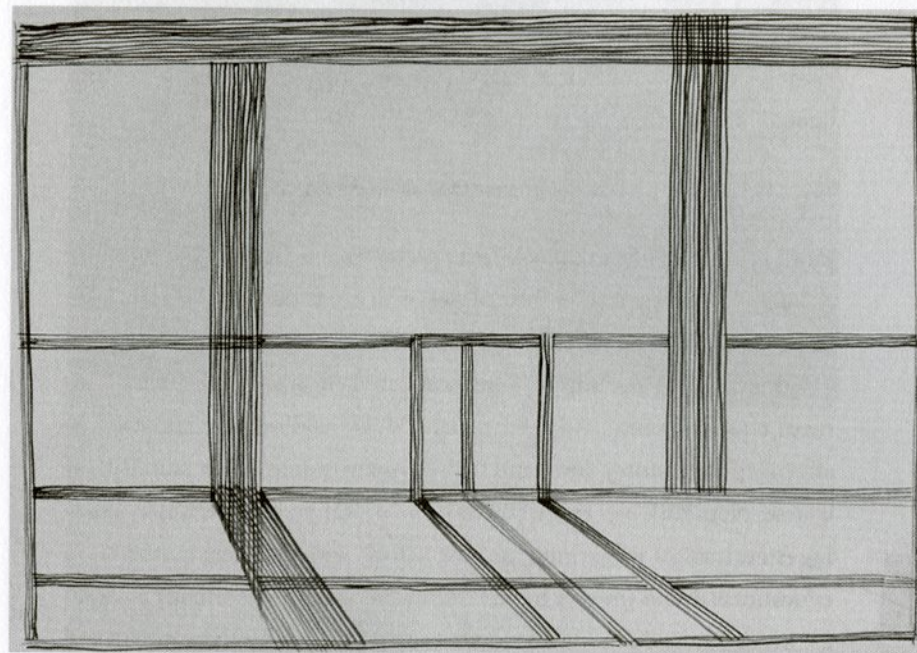
Your use of color is sophisticated and controlled. On the other hand, you often use curious, dare I say dissonant, color choices. You achieve chromatic harmony with expansive use of white and other neutral tones. Do you see yourself as calculating in your use of color or is it an intuitive process?

It is a rather intuitive process. You won't find any elaborate color studies, color aids, or collages for paintings in my studio. I decide about principal colors by looking at the work in progress, the daylight situation, and try-outs on the canvas. You can see areas in many of my works where I've started with a tone and changed my mind along the way.

BIOGRAPHY II

When you moved to America was it cataclysmic or relatively uneventful?

I was lucky to be feathered by welcoming people familiar with the Detroit area, especially my wife and her family, as well as by some members of the community I still feel connected to. But it must be said that (a)



HARTMUT AUSTEN **UNTITLED (ARCHITECTURE)**

2006 PEN AND INK APPROX. 11 × 15 INCHES

American culture is not exactly un-influential in German culture, and (b) I had previously lived six months in Chicago and came to the U.S. for a couple of visits before I decided to get rid of most of my belongings in Berlin and try it out here. So, initially no culture shocks; instead, a surprising cacophony of voices, faces, cultures, and landscapes, which delighted me.

Back then, did you have an entrenched idea about the American psyche?

Until I graduated from school, I was pretty much horrified by American politics. I was socialized in the eighties, which was the decade, politically, of Reagan, the Cold War, and two Germanys. The media communicated a picture of a dying empire—and we feared (or hoped) that acid rain, racial tensions, AIDS, and a permanent McDonald's diet would eventually bring the country down and that Germany would follow suit. But, of course, New York was and would ever be cool. Later, in Berlin, by reading American art magazines, meeting artists, and attending cultural and educational events (mostly by meeting the person who eventually brought me here), I gained a much more nuanced picture, especially of its cultural diversity. Also, my professor in Berlin spent half his time in the U.S. At the beginning of each semester he would deliver sermons about new technical, artistic, and other innovations he became aware of by traveling, watching the Discovery Channel, and visiting SoHo galleries.

Do you see yourself as a particularly German or European painter?

Well, you said earlier that you see French influences; so let's say German, with a bit of French and a bit of American mixed in.

Let's talk about ideology. I mentioned that your work has an ideological dimension which operates in the private interior realm of your mind as you are making a paint-



HARTMUT AUSTEN **UNTITLED (WINNER)** 2000 BRUSH AND INK 8.5 × 11 INCHES



HARTMUT AUSTEN **UNTITLED (LOSER)** 2000 BRUSH AND INK 8.5 × 11 INCHES

ing. We cannot know how it works or what it is comprised of, but let me ask you: what ideologies or philosophies are attractive to you?

Existentialist philosophy interested me (Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre); but my entrance into philosophical inquiry happened through poetry and fiction as well as the film of post-war Germany. My parent's bookshelves always provided discoveries. There one could also find a lot of religious stuff like Calvin, Luther, Bonhoeffer, and the Bible.

Recently you have become more interested in curatorial projects. I'm thinking of your involvement with the Telegraph collective and your forays into art writing. What is the basis for your interest in this field?

While I need and love the solitude of the studio, I can't operate in a total vacuum. From early on, I was looking to make connections with divergent types of people with diverse interests. With Telegraph I have the privilege of working with a very strong, unique group of artists. We do one, perhaps two projects a year and have been gaining more and more attention; you can check us out at telegraphart.com. My interest in the other activities—like working on *Detroit: Telegraph* with Lynn Crawford—is really an opportunity for me to learn more about structure and organization, and to meet people here and elsewhere.

What's next for you?

I want fewer distractions. I want to move ahead with what I am doing. At the same time, I love being with my family and friends—and, oh yes, I'd like to buy a sailboat in lieu of a yacht. There is work to be done.