

PINK TOMB

John Finneran in conversation with Laura Copelin

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LAURA COPELIN: I want to say, first of all, it has been a pleasure to take the time to consider these paintings and to be able to elbow out a space to look deeply and really notice what is going on in this body of work. The book seems to encompass a discrete moment in your practice, from 2012 to 2015 approximately. Do any particular works mark the beginning and end of the series for you?

JOHN FINNERAN: There is a painting that I think of as the beginning, *Restful Spirits (Sunset)*, 2013. This painting was the first full-color version of a composition with three women. Previously they had been mostly black with red figures. They were very graphic, without much atmosphere. *Restful Spirits (Sunset)*, which has the purple background with glowing yellow behind it, was the first painting to push itself somewhere I wasn't expecting while I worked through it. It's the one I think of most often. So much so, that I keep the proportion of that painting in mind and reuse it over and over to attempt to recapture the feeling of making it. It wasn't an idea that I executed, I was totally involved in it.

LC: This is an interesting point of initiation. Is there a work you can point to that marks the end of this investigation?

JF: I think we specifically put *Pink Tomb*, 2015 toward the end of the book. It may be an ending. It was part of the show in Los Angeles, *Dreamers at the Gates of Where Dreamers Are*. When you start you don't have any reference point for what you're about to do, nothing to look back at, so a beginning is clearer to define.



Restful Spirits (Sunset), 2013

LC: You built your own formal vocabulary to fully articulate the paintings. Forms like the female figure and basic geometric shapes – circle, triangle – are such a powerful force in the work. Can you describe the most essential forms that emerged while you were working?

JF: In *Restful Spirits (Sunset)* the primary forms were the smallest, most basic things I could think of: the circle is the sun or the moon, the triangle is female anatomy or a pyramid or a mountain. I let the eyes become a bellybutton. All of these forms and meanings are available when you start to work. You see what they become as you make the painting.

LC: There is a lot of repetition, reversal, and re-ordering in the work. How does that function for you? Looking back at the work in total, can you trace how the evolution of these forms took place?

JF: I would still like to know how it all works. It's a very reactive process and all the paintings are reactive in terms of how I am putting the forms together within them. You think the sun is sitting in its place but then later you realize it

belongs somewhere else. In *Restful Spirits (Sunset)*, 2013, the central figure is standing on the sun, she just has a toe on it. It's a simple thing but that meant a lot to me. It showed me how I can move shapes to force the figure out of a static place. That was the start of something. If you had a mountain, and you had a figure standing next to it, then you would need to figure out how that figure would interact with it.

LC: There is this radical presentness in your treatment of color and in the form of your line. The more time I spend with the paintings, the more I think about your remark in an interview about de Kooning, "there is a way in which the de Kooning's can never be resolved – its meaning is within its many meanings."

JF: The idea that you can not resolve something is more interesting. There is a loop you can be in where you have an idea for a painting and you just paint the idea and not that much actually happens. Because you know the whole thing already and there's no surprise to it.

LC: The repetition in the paintings is so primary, but the interrelations of all of these seemingly simple elements creates complex constellations of meaning and composition. Can you speak to this alchemy in the paintings? Where do you feel the source for those compositions is located?

JF: I try to locate it as simply as I can. In a feeling for how the elements touch each other and what kind of space the figures' posture is asking for. I think mood and an emotional aspect can enter the painting in those decisions. Elsewhere I've called it a concentration, or as you've said noticing or presentness. When you're answering a simple question like: "Do I rest my shoulder on this? Or do I not?" You're conveying something very elemental about how you're feeling.

LC: Sometimes you present impossible reversals or impossible positions like with the figures in *Figures in the Dream of the Moon* or *Dream of the Panther*.

The figure is at odd angles, broken up, or is upside-down. It seems important to defy gravity compositionally, to transform the order of the painting, or just to delay our ability to complete the logic of the painting.

JF: That's a nice way to describe the un-logic that developed as I got into the middle of this body of work. It was nice to look at something and say "that doesn't even make sense, how can that possibly be?" Looking at the thing that can't possibly be and thinking where you are in relationship to it, that state was important to me. To look at a thing that you know and think... "I know this figure, I know where the foot should be, where the leg should be, and I see where the foot ends but the in-between is missing..." You know that figure, so the impossibility of the image doesn't stop you, it gives you extra space to think.

LC: It allows you to enter a symbolic realm, a space that is beyond your literal experience of the world. Your titles point to this, so many incorporate words like death, dead spirits, and the dreams of human and nonhuman entities, prompting the viewer to enter the symbolic realm with you.

JF: Those are big mysteries. Dreams are very mysterious and endless to think about, and I feel the same way about death. It is endlessly unknowable within the present, but you know it is a true thing because you know that you dream and you know that there is death. To stand with that distance between something that you know and be with your the lack of understanding about the mechanics of it, I find that calming because I feel like, well, I want to know, so let me think about it for a while. I'm happy to be thinking it through. In the other realm I'm not proposing anything that isn't true in some way and to make it present for you as an image or as a physical presence, allows you to think about those things.

LC: You emphasize 'not-knowing' and forgetting when you talk about making work, which also exists in these spaces of dream, death, and creation.



Dream of the Panther,
2012

if to say "last time I encountered this square next to a leg I felt that a certain decision ought to be made about the space around it, but now I forget what it was." That means I get to make that decision over again. If I had an idea about how I'd react when I started, I wouldn't be bringing the right openness.

LC: There is a freshness in all of these paintings that is so potent. Within the book and in the compositions themselves, you are not necessarily faithful to the "correct" orientation of the paintings or their subjects. Sometimes the figure gets flipped, or in the book format, a painting gets used as a background and/or turned on its side. There are rules of orientation that you are breaking all the time.

JF: Ultimately you are getting one correct picture of every painting in the book, which is even a compromise on my part because the book was not meant to be like that. It was supposed to be a little confusing. I liked this idea that you have expectations when you look at something. Like the desire I have of wanting the painting to be a certain way. I think, "what if I don't give myself this certain way that I want the painting to be?" This disorientation is good if it feels playful as opposed to withholding.

LC: It's like a meditative state, a forgetting or 'not-knowing' that allows you to

You have said before that you don't really remember making the paintings. Although you don't remember making the painting, you are reenacting or remembering certain elements while you're in the process. How does that work?

JF: The aspiration to forget is part of a hope that I haven't predetermined how I'll react to those landmarks as I arrange them. As

enter into a free space. It feels relevant, politically, right now, that art can help us look closer and more critically. Do you think that meditative state allows you to notice with more sensitivity, to see the world in a different way?

JF: You already bring so much to the moment of looking. The goal is to empty your mind a little bit. So I think “how can I get out of the way of all this and not have an idea about what I’m feeling while I’m feeling it?”

LC: Can you talk about the female figure in the paintings and how you are handling a form that has been so frequented and problematized throughout art history?

JF: This is a big subject for me and I have been thinking a lot about it because this book is coming together and the repetition becomes so strong. I had been painting the parts of a face for a while and I think it became inevitable that I paint a full figure. I just would not have been honest with myself if I didn’t try. I painted men at first too but stopped because they just ended up looking like me. I gravitated to the image of a female figure but I never knew who the faces were. I would guess that they are also me, because it is always you in some way. I wondered what is the way that I can make it the least like me? The female figure seemed an obvious answer. I wanted to understand something outside of myself.

LC: The paintings are so archetypal. They allude to representations of women in many different cultures and throughout history. What are you interested in provoking when you’re representing the female figure?

JF: I had this interest in any image that comes to you that is a pre-learning image. For me they were these the circle, square, mountain, triangle. Facial features also fit into that for me. They were simple enough things that you could recognize before you knew their name. When I first started drawing

these figures they were so specific. I couldn’t have actually painted an image of a person that was naturalistic but I felt drawn to paint the figure in this specific way. I think the image has to do with what my pre-understanding of art was before I was old enough to understand what art was conceptually. I’m sure my father and mother would have shown me objects and paintings at museums. I think my first real memory of an artwork is in the courtyard of an apartment complex near where I grew up, in the center of it was a large Picasso sculpture, it was many feet high made of concrete. I remember my father telling me that was art and I accepted that as an image of “art.” And eventually I found it again when I began these paintings.

LC: Trying to get yourself back to these original impressions and what came before the intellect intervened...

JF: Yes. And the female body has loops and moments where one symbol or part of anatomy can be exchanged for another, the triangle can turn into a mountain somewhere in the painting, or it can be genitals in another location. That is a pre-differentiation thing too.

LC: You are accessing the shape when a circle can still be a sun and a spotlight and a head and a number of other things. I want to go back to this question of gender and you being and not being in the paintings. Almost all the paintings are of female forms, except *Dream of the Spirits with Night* and *Sunset with the Sea*, where, maybe I’m just projecting, but I get this sense of a gender transformation occurring. There is a half figure without defined genitalia and a female figure in shadow, then this interstitial space between them... These female bodies feel powerful, repeated again and again like an invocation. They are grounded, their feet are flat and their posture is strong.

JF: I think I am painting an image that I’m impressed by and drawn towards. I said disarmed before but I am also in awe. My internal sense of landscape

is related more to the inside of a museum, to the paintings I grew up seeing in New York, than nature. But that feeling of being in an overwhelming landscape that pauses your humanity for a minute, of seeing something that is overwhelming and beautiful but connects you to yourself and your sense of home. I think that is what I am looking at when I look at these figures. I am looking at the ocean or a mountain range in really beautiful light.

LC: A lot of these colors are sunrise and sunset colors. The body becomes the landscape or the body and the landscapes are interchangeable. I feel so much generosity in the paintings, can you speak a bit about that?

JF: A long time ago I made a painting that I saw completed at a gallery. I recognized that the energy in it was competitive and angry. I had made something, that wasn't a generous thing. I think only I saw this but I felt sad about it. I felt like I didn't want that to be what I put into the world. That was the start of a long process of questioning every decision I put into the painting. I know that's vague but I was searching for that angry feeling, trying to root it out. I felt like if anger was getting in there, then I have to examine all of it, everything that was in there, I have to go back to zero. As I made decisions in the painting, I had to make sure they are decisions I feel good about. I want to make sure the feeling I want to give is in the painting I'm making.

LC: It's so interesting to hear how you recognized that you were transmitting information or a state of mind that you didn't want to put into the world.

JF: I'm really glad that I had that experience. Right now we are talking about the image of women in my work because I want to know everything that I am saying about that. I don't want to find that I have been ignoring something or letting myself not think about something. There are parts of this body of work that confuse me still. Sometimes you don't want to look. But I feel like that is what I'm doing now. I'm trying to look.



Angel,
2013

LC: Looking at the book, do you get a sense, overall, of the information that you are transmitting about the female figure? Is there anything that you notice now?

JF: I think I notice recognizing myself in the faces. I used to have this process of painting the faces and trying to make them as blank as possible or so I thought. In a lot of ways I was reaching a default image of myself, they looked enough like shapes that were familiar from my face that I thought that they were blank. Secondly, the binary that I was describing before of that not being me, I think it's something I can try to understand better. There are so many feelings you can have towards a person. I'm trying to understand if there's part of me that is comfortable with expressing warmth towards this female image that wouldn't be as natural to me if it were male. It is not how I feel in my actual life, but it is true of my concept of these images. I wonder where I can go. I feel warmth and love toward my male and female friends equally, it's not a gendered feeling. Why would it be gendered as an image?

LC: In talking it over, the idea of you being the female figure even as it defines itself as not you, now seems so obvious since this book is titled *Eye, Eye, Eye*. There is this repeated assertion of subjectivity under a different shape.

JF: I wanted to call it *I, I, I* but no one would read it that way! Everyone would think that it just says one, one, one. It is true that there is this thing where it is ultimately all me.

LC: Can you talk about your palette a little, where does your sense of color come from?

JF: There are couple practical decisions that are involved. Mostly it is just red,

yellow, and blue. I am happy with that concept. I like the simplicity of just those three colors black and white. I found that I gravitated to these specific kinds of red, yellow and blue because there was a warm feeling in them for me.

LC: For me the colors communicate the emotional weather of a painting. The feeling tone is another way to say it, in the language of dream interpretation. This palette is so full of those feeling tones. They indicate if it is morning or evening, night or day – you get a spectrum of very specific times of day through these colors.

JF: I think that I try to have all the colors be present at once in the paintings. If you looked really closely you could see there were very light glazes under everything. That is the way that I kind of mimic light. By trying to present a full spectrum across the whole painting but then emphasizing different colors to make an image.

LC: You see that in the painting *Tomb*, 2013. Looking now at *Tomb* and the painting *Goin' Home*, 2015, the compositional similarities create a circular association. We've found ourselves at the heart of it! *Tomb* and *Home* are directly connected. And there is this childlike rendering of the roofline and what appears to be an open door or a threshold...

JF: It is just so existential. What is in there? That is the question. The root of that question though? I don't even know what that is or what I was thinking about.

LC: I think the paintings teach us that what is in there is what is on the surface. The feeling tone of the painting is there – that particular salmon color and the



Tomb,
2013



Goin' Home,
2015

JF: I think you are right and I'm almost satisfied that it is just there. I don't actually want to go through. I'm interested in its presence.

LC: This existential contemplation of the ultimate end, death, seems balanced out by the repetition of the female figure and the moon that both emphasize cycles and continuity. Both cycles and ends are very relevant to what we're talking about. The painting *Heaven* has all sorts of doorways or portals, one is even directly connected to the vagina, then there is an infinity symbol that is reflected in the breast and symmetry of the body.

I'm going out on a limb, but talking about these openings gets me thinking about a secret hope I have; that the ascendance of image-based culture via the internet could return human perception to a wholistic, all-at-once apprehension that is more yin, as opposed to linear, codified, vector-like logic at the heart of a culture based on the written word, which helped establish patriarchal dominance. Everything in politics right now is screaming in the opposite direction, but my hope is that we are moving towards a more feminine or yin consciousness, powered by the prevalence of images and video as the dominant means of communication.

JF: I think I was worried in looking at these things as a whole and even

mountainous purple-blue and the overlay of the yellow on pink. As existential as the investigation is, the surfaces of the paintings are saturated with meaning, color, and information.

describing this process to you that this was going to be something passive. The paintings were going to be something passive. I think there is this passive collection of information happening that is trying not to be ordered by an internal priority system. It's just a collection of things I am seeing visually and thinking "that may be true" so I pass it on. That is an alternative to the type of painting that I grew up with in grad school. Where paintings need to have a hypothesis which creates a very directed experience for whoever is looking at it. That never struck me as a very generous idea. I'm into your concept and I hope that this idea of the process as passive turns out to be a misinterpretation on my part. That there is real value in approaching information that way.

LC: Passivity is often used pejoratively but it is about accepting or allowing things to happen. I believe that art and artists are so important because culturally, they dream, re-imagine the world, and in doing so, manifest change. I think the way we are all going to evolve is by dreaming, but this could be seen as passive too. Really, it is a political act, to conceive of another reality and bring it into existence, to make your dream real. Cultural and political leaders help the public dream. That is the art of being an orator or a poet or a revolutionary, any kind of visionary, having the capacity to bring people along in your dream. It's so nice that many of these paintings have the word 'dream' in the title or illustrate different beings' dreams.

JF: I think all of this could be true. The idea is wonderful and simple – that you can think of something you want to do or the way you want to act towards the world or the people you care about, and you can just do it. It can be difficult to make that change but it is always available to us. You have to have a moment where you are able to see it and feel it but it is right there.