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APRIL2011

IN CONVERSATION

Rochelle Feinstein WITH PHONG BUI

Just a few days after the opening reception of her new exhibit *The Estate of Rochelle F.* at On Stellar Rays (March 27 – May 1, 2011), the artist Rochelle Feinstein paid a visit to the Rail's headquarters to talk with publisher Phong Bui about her life and work.

PHONG BUI (RAIL): It must have been in late May of 1988, just a few days before Meyer and Lillian Schapiro left for South Londonderry, Vermont, where they had gone every summer ever since in the late 1930s, that they showed me a small abstract painting, with a loosely painted grid and rather somber palette of burnt sienna, raw umber, sap green, and deep blue, which, I was told, you had given them. My first question is: How did you get to know the Schapiros?

ROCHELLE FEINSTEIN: I was living with someone whose parents were close friends with the Schapiros. I don't know when their friendship began, but in the early 1950s, many left-wing New Yorkers, including writers and artists like Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer, Gandy Brodie, Wolf Kahn, and Emily Mason, just to name a few, had either moved to Vermont permanently or lived there only during the summer. I remember after a few visits to Meyer and Lillian's (often referred to as Dr. Milgram) house they asked me to bring my work to show them, which I eventually did. All of the paintings I made in Jamaica, Vermont, which was ten minutes away from their home, were very small, mostly because my studio was basically niched in the upstairs attic of the house I was staying in at the time. As you can imagine I was just really feeling my way as a young painter in the early '80s. And because I admired Meyer so much, the idea of showing him my work terrified me. But when I finally did manage to show him and Lillian a few of my paintings they really liked them. So I was relieved. And from that point on, we would occasionally visit their West 4th Street home in the city.

RAIL: Between Perry and West 11th Street on the East Side.

FEINSTEIN: That's right. And we were on Charles Street, which was only two blocks away.

RAIL: In the late '80s you began to show your work. You had your first two shows with Emily Sorkin Gallery in '87 and '89, which was right after the market crash in 1987. Looking back now, how would you re-assess your relationship with Neo-Expressionist paintings? Was there a shared distrust of centralized, hierarchic, ideologically closed systems from the previous language of Minimalism? Or were you interested in setting a path that opposed those predominately large-scale, narrative paintings, yet shared their freely borrowed and recyclable images from mass culture?

FEINSTEIN: I'd say it's both, plus romanticism: a love/hate relationship with it all. Actually, having seen the Martin Kippenberger retrospective in 2009 at MoMA I realized that what I identify with in his work is this love and loathing relationship with painting. And it's that combination that keeps me coming back to painting, even though it can be very disappointing every time you come back to it. In any case, during that time I had to expose myself to a lot of people of my own generation in order to learn from that kind of chicken coop, so to speak. Even though I lived and worked in the East Village in those days when all the galleries, including Civilian Warfare, Gracie Mansion, and International With Monument were springing up, for some reason I was a little fringe. I didn't know that I was supposed to have my nose pressed against the glass. Gradually I started meeting people through talking about art; David Reed was among them.

Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

RAIL: Who is an ideal person to talk about art with.

FEINSTEIN: Yes, absolutely. I remember going to the Ralph Blakelock show at the old Salander-O'Reilly Gallery on the Upper East Side. And as I walked in I saw David looking at the catalogue and I said, "Oh no, we're going to have to go through this again—'hi–oh yeah, we've met!'" You know, we both do this. And suddenly we started looking at the show together and took the train home, and it was the beginning of a wonderful friendship. But it all circulated around that art; that was the connection point.

RAIL: I remember seeing that show as well. I came back from Italy in early September, 1987. And it was a real revelation to discover a painter who had this same weight of mysticism and vision of nature that Ryder did, but with a completely different treatment of materials, surfaces, and so on. But before we go forward can we go back to your early formation? You went to Pratt Institute and graduated in 1975.

FEINSTEIN: Actually I went to Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) first. I worked during the day then I went to school at night for six years. I studied fashion illustration and fortunately I had a teacher who believed that you had to know anatomy. And from there I just started drawing and painting. So it was then I wanted to be a painter.

RAIL: That was when you transferred to Pratt?

FEINSTEIN: Yes, but at first they couldn't accept all my credit unless I had an Associate's Degree. So I lied and said that I had one. They finally accepted me. As a junior I became a painting major.

RAIL: Who, among artists we know, did you work with?

FEINSTEIN: Rudolf Baranik was one. Also, Ernst Benkert, who was amazing and highly conceptual for that moment when everyone was involved with just the painting culture. He was very cool, very analytical, and he was the person I chose to work with.

RAIL: How about Sidney Tillim?

FEINSTEIN: I met Sidney at an interview for my first teaching job at Bennington College.

RAIL: When was that?

FEINSTEIN: 1981. He came to Bennington earlier to be with the Clement Greenberg crowd.

RAIL: That seems right, because Tillim went to school with Greenberg, and was with Hilton Kramer, at Syracuse University.

FEINSTEIN: Yes, on the postwar, G.I. Bill.

RAIL: Tillim's criticism is now mostly remembered for its advocacy of Pop Art, as well as Realism, though he always wanted to be as engaged with his time as possible, and in a variety of ways, because he loved Baudelaire. His rave writing on Claes Oldenburg's "The Store" (1961) equals his writings on the paintings of Alex Katz and Philip Pearlstein.

FEINSTEIN: Not to mention Donald Judd in his review for *ARTnews*, criticized Sidney for having switched from abstraction to figuration.

RAIL: And Tillim later returned the favor for Judd's show.

FEINSTEIN: Yes, mostly because he was such a contrarian. You know how I got the job? Hard to believe but the school put an ad in the *Village Voice*, which I answered. At that time I was waitressing and I thought, well, maybe I can teach. I had done a poster for MoMA's Printed Art exhibition, which included a public art project on the busses circulated in NYC. It was the days when Joe DiMaggio used to say "Save with the Dime." Bus ads had little cards that you could tear off and take with you. Anyway, I thought I could bring a few of those posters, that it would be okay for a interview. I remember Sydney was a little bit truculent with me in the interview, which was fine, and I later learned that they decided to hire me because one of the faculty members, Sophie Healy, who was quite remarkable, said, "Well, let's hire Rochelle because she looks like she likes to dance." It was because I had this big belt that I had tied on the side like Fred Astaire [*laughs*]. On the first day I showed up for my job, Sydney was there and he walked up to me and said, "Hello, my name is Sidney Tillim, welcome, I didn't want to hire you, but welcome anyway." And I thought, "This is really good! Somebody actually tells you the truth." We became instant friends.

RAIL: Do you think that that friendship had an effect on your early work in some ways?

FEINSTEIN: It did mostly because we talked to each other about our work a lot, especially on the long train or bus ride back and forth from New York to Vermont. We also lived in the same neighborhood. He was on Bleecker, and my studio was on 2nd Street. What was so interesting about Sydney was that while he was so erudite and perceptive a person he wasn't a contemplator about his work. Whatever he did he did it very quickly, whether it was drawing from the TV or painting with a paper towel as if it was like action painting. He was very interested in relationships of color and the idea of painting and immediate labor, not the kind of labor that required too much time. And I was at the point in my work where I was really laboring over paintings, and I never forgot what he said to me: "You know Rochelle, what's a painting? It's a piece of paint on a surface. If you can make a painting in 25 minutes, that's great."

Rochelle Feinstein, "Nude Model," 2009. Styrofoam, enamel, cloth, paper mounted on stretcher. 36 x 36".

Rochelle Feinstein, "The Estate of Rochelle F.," 2009. Fabric, paper, drop cloth, stretcher. 60 x 60".

Rochelle Feinstein, "I" 2010. Oil, leaf, acrylic, fabric on canvas. 49 x 38".

And I said, "Oh, that's ridiculous." But now I think, "If I can do it in 15 minutes, that's great." So Sydney really helped me to think about painting differently than the way I used to think about painting.

RAIL: And I can see in your work the similar contrarian nature, or let's say the flat-footed interplay between representational images, from ordinary and domestic objects like a couch, a bookcase, a corner view of a bathroom, and so on, to snapshots from your personal traveling and different abstract trajectories. I'm speaking of the series of egg tempera paintings on 10-inch-square panels from the defunct Ten in One Gallery in 2002.

FEINSTEIN: A wonderful gallery. We miss it.

RAIL: Which brings up another question: knowing your work, which for the most part, is inseparable from your expressive temperament, it was a surprise for me to see the paintings made with egg tempera, a medium that requires infinite patience and delicate, minute application of cross-hatch brush strokes in order to build up believable form. I mean how did you decide to work with egg tempera, which you haven't worked with since?

FEINSTEIN: I only did it for about a three or four year period, mostly because I was traveling in Italy for four months, and I wanted to work while traveling. I had 20 beautiful panels made, all of which could fit into a suitcase. And I was at that time very interested in Siennese paintings, which were painted with egg tempera. What struck me about egg tempera was how it was used systematically to describe narrative. I was interested, for example, in the way color signs pointed out the important hierarchy of the relationships of the narrative—whether in the predella or the altar. I learned and observed what dominant colors are used for Christ and Mary, for the saints and the apostles. All are painted with different versions of a four-color palette, which were two reds, two different reds, a green, and a blue, plus white. And so I decided to use photographs that I had collected that were really lowbrow, as you just described. In any case, you're right, I haven't worked with egg tempera ever since.

RAIL: In all of the reviews of your shows that I have read, I thought Barry Schwabsky's was the most perceptive. He said, "Your effort to tease formalism and personalized abstraction can easily lead to results that are too hermetic, or some form of quirkiness for its own sake." But he praised the work for showing how an agile or even fierce sensibility need not create a stylistic consistency to make the work strongly felt.

FEINSTEIN: I think that he did, and does, understand my work, which is particularly about the matter of style. And to go back to your initial point about the '80s, even though things were sort of bouncing all over the visual map—the material map—there was still such a thing as style. And for whatever reasons, I wanted every painting to represent a particular moment, like a calendar, whether it was about the world, or me personally. And I wanted each painting to have its own presence, so having a consistent style would prevent me from achieving that goal. Once I showed a painting with a dishtowel glued on the canvas, and people would send me dishtowels and pajamas and all sorts of things in the mail. And I said "No. I'm not someone who's just introducing material to say that this is an opposition to formalism. I'm actually just saying this is a dishtowel and I'm making a painting with a dishtowel." So the formal aspect in painting has always been important to me.

RAIL: What about the social-political aspects, depicted in a variety of ways, with, as many critics would say, a subversive feminist effect? Let's begin with the use of text, which is used with a sense of humor. For instance, in the series of photographs called "Joyride," made in 2000, there were words such as NOW, HERE, THERE, LISTEN, WAIT, LOVE, MORE, WRONG, which were all inserted in these thought bubbles and cryptically placed in different landscapes.

FEINSTEIN: It's such a good thing to talk about. Because I don't think they're texts.

RAIL: You mean like the way Louise Fishman calls her text-based paintings of her friends, "Angry Lucy," "Angry Paula," portraits.

FEINSTEIN: Exactly. I was interested in abstraction's relationships being self-referential. In other words one abstract painting shares something with another abstract painting whether it's more intentional or less so.

RAIL: In a relational sense.

FEINSTEIN: Yes. And how do we look at anything? Perceptually and cognitively. The first time I had really used words, I had been working on a series of eight paintings in the studio called "Love Your Work." They were all green, and the words "Love Your Work" were painted very large and backwards. Then one day I visited my brother, who had just come back from China. He had this whole folio of photographs on the coffee table, and he said, "Sit down and look at my photographs." And I did. So I turned to one page, and it was the official postcard of a temple. He said, "Isn't that amazing? It's the same image I took." And I said, "No, that's not amazing." Because our perceptions are really formed largely by what we've seen and what's familiar. But it got me thinking about my collection of color photographs of nature from the '70s, 8 by 10 foot prints done by amateurs in their Kodak-outfitted basement labs. They were spotted, torn, but they were always in sequences. So that's how the text entered into it, because I was thinking, what could any of us possibly be looking at? Gradually I started taking the font from those "Love Your Work" paintings, and inserting different words, as you had mentioned, into each photograph as a directive. The idea was how do you take a completely neutral image, which after you say, oh that's pretty, or I've been there, or whatever, then direct it to stop?

RAIL: Did you paint each word directly on each photograph?

FEINSTEIN: No. I digitized the anonymous photograph, scanned each word and remade all 58 on the computer, because I thought it was important for the saturations of each color to suggest different seasons and hours of the day, from the East Coast or West Coast.

RAIL: What about video works? How did it fit in, when did it begin?

FEINSTEIN: It began around 2002 when I did the Barry White project in my house, which was a lot of fun.

RAIL: Which was later included in the show *I Made A Terrible Mistake* at Art Production Fund's Lab Space on Wooster Street in 2009.

FEINSTEIN: Yes, although the work was all done between 2003 – 2005. People looked at it and said, what do you mean you made a terrible mistake? In other words, I didn't know what younger installation artists knew: to do a big project first get the backing and commitments before you do the work, not after. So, I ended up with this huge white elephant, and it was very hard for it to travel, and expensive. It all went into storage, and stayed there until the wonderful Art Production Fund said, why don't you do it here?

RAIL: I was glad to have seen it on the last day. In any case, when did your interest in feminism begin?

FEINSTEIN: It began with my first political action at the Women's House of Detention where I joined a group of radical feminists. I was maybe 18 or 19. All of those jailed women, before being put on trial, sat there in limbo, didn't have money to raise bail. That's why they were there. Needless to say, all of us got together and decided to organize this one-day-sale. I remember people from the neighborhood brought all sorts of stuff and gave it to us. And we did raise enough bail money to get many of the women out that same day.

RAIL: That's great.

FEINSTEIN: It was. So I was very dedicated to action, and from there I began to read Simone de Beauvoir, and also those women who were in academia, like Susan Bordo, not necessarily writing about feminism, but they

Rochelle Feinstein, "Carousel," 2010. Oil collage, digital film, wood on canvas. 49 by 40 by 4 inches.

recognized that there was a way to look at anthropology, art history, through other lenses, and not only feminism, but feminists representing an opening in the discussion. As for how my interest in feminism manifests itself in my work, I certainly hope it's not that overtly manifested. I would prefer my freedom to make the painting independently.

RAIL: I spoke with Pat Steir about her feminist involvement, and she said because of the fact that she was so active politically that there was no need to do the same in her paintings. She's very happy that the two activities are separate from one another.

FEINSTEIN: I agree with Pat. The work does have a lot of feminist tendencies in it, but I don't want it to repeat what we already know through language. I need it to have a visual life.

RAIL: Let's focus on the works in the recent show. Take "Carousel" for example, a painting which, underneath, seems to be very worked, with well-rehearsed brush strokes, though one can read it as a puzzle because it was covered by a printed black image of luggage on a sheet of velum. It seems either deliberate or random. The same can be said of the other painting, "No Joke," with the inflated color balloon placed on the top, which intensifies its precariousness because the whole painting is hanging on a thin string.

Rochelle Feinstein, "Image of an Image," 2010. Gold and aluminum leaf, scrim, steel rod on canvas. 81 x 77 x 4".

FEINSTEIN: "Carousel" is one of those paintings that I think really has both my anger and my melancholy in it. First of all, anybody can make an abstract painting, if they're taught how to make one. That was basically the painting underneath. Meanwhile, I had been thinking about the nature of collage—which is now called mixed media—and what it meant in the 20th century, which was about rupture. I wanted to carry the idea of rupture further with the digitally printed image on film.

RAIL: The hand versus the machine.

FEINSTEIN: Exactly. And that's why the film is hung on two grommets—so that it doesn't stay flat to the painting surface underneath. That way the exchange can be read more effectively.

RAIL: Though with "Image of an Image" it was done with the opposite purpose: the shower curtain needed a little patch of silver and gold leaf in some parts to integrate the two surfaces.

FEINSTEIN: True. One thing I did not want for my work was for anything to repeat; yet I want everything to be related to its moment. With the three paintings you just spoke about, while they're not alike, they share an additive world, mostly. Painting isn't enough for me, it really isn't.

RAIL: Believe me [*laughs*], I've had the same feeling. Also, in your recent interview with Justin Lieberman in *BOMB* you spoke about how boxing, which you practice routinely, provides clarity to the different rankings of weight, height, and so on.

Rochelle Feinstein, "No Joke," 2009. Oil, acrylic, vinyl, bungee on canvas. 60 x 60 inches.

FEINSTEIN: That's why I like boxing.

RAIL: We know Alex Katz, for instance, goes to the gym to work out every day, which helps him keep up with those huge paintings and the quick pace of execution that they require. Or Haruki Murakami prefers running long distance while listening to Creedence Clearwater Revival or the Beach Boys so he can get to his writing fresh. When did you begin to box?

FEINSTEIN: Well, my brother reminded me that it began when we were growing up. My father, Martin Moskowitz, was a Golden Gloves boxer. He used to take me to the Friday night fights, out in Sunnyside Gardens in Astoria. My Uncle Louie was also a pro boxer. So how could boxing not be part of my life? What happened was, about for years ago, between traveling to New Haven, coming home and going to the gym, and then my studio, it was too exhausting. One day I was walking two blocks away from my studio and there was Gleason's Gym, and the minute I walked in I felt immediately at home. Once I began to box I realized that I'm not going to be a pro boxer by any means, but it really helps me to understand my flaws, my mistakes. I actually learn from them. For me the affinity is also to the rules, when you hold your ground and don't square up, really how you move around that ring, and control from the center of the ring.