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WEBEXCLUSIVE **IN CONVERSATION**

SEBASTIAN BLACK with John Ganz

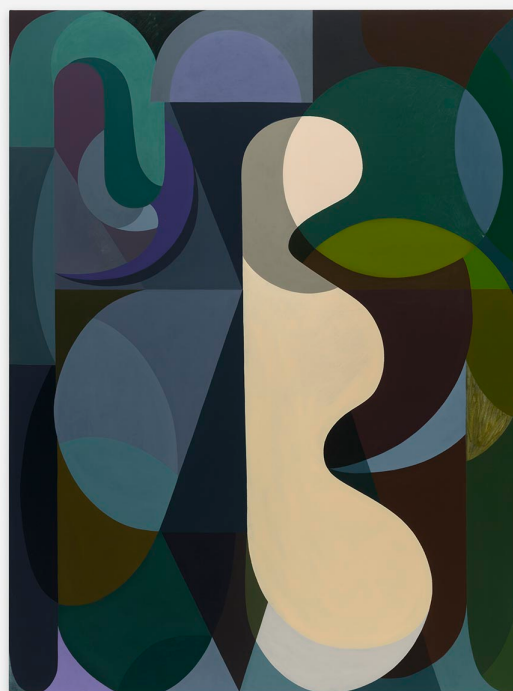
Recently, John Ganz sat down in Sebastian Black's Brooklyn studio to talk about his recent show at C L E A R I N G. The conversation quickly turned to thoughts on art history, the limits of language, irony, and the act of painting itself. Black mixes a wry sense humor with a philosophical cast of mind and dedication to the everyday practice of painting.

John Ganz (Rail): Let's start off with your recent paintings at C L E A R I N G. They are "Puppy" paintings, but these are much larger than the old ones. How did they come about?

Black: To be honest, I'm not even really sure. When I began making the "Puppy" paintings, they were about 9 × 12 inches, or about seven feet by a little more than five feet. When I started I just tried to scale up smaller paintings. The first ones were flat, because I projected them. All the brushwork was just about filling in the shapes. That didn't work out that well so I ended up gridding something out a little bit. Then I just ended up winging it. When I was mechanically scaling them up you didn't have that moment where you could get distracted in the midst of filling in a shape and just veer off to the left, and then you have some whole new problem that you have to grapple with.

Rail: You couldn't draw, basically.

Black: Yes, exactly. I wasn't drawing. When I did



My friend worked as a public defender in Nashville and he told me about the racist judges with their racist gavels (nose, mouth). He told me how they whacked deep grooves (whiskers) into their desks which they were mad at for being called benches (muzzles). I heard about how some innocent twin brothers were convicted in a joint trial. They got the death penalty and were executed and buried but someone mismatched their bodies to their graves (eyes) and so they buffed the names out right then and there (pupils) with a power sander. Their ancient and unfazed attorney had a king



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the first two, I let them sit for a while and then I worked on some new ones from scratch the way I had done the smaller ones. And then I went back into those other ones and fucked them up by just doing a big shape that I figured probably wasn't going to work that well and then I corrected

everything. There was a long period of time when I wasn't making "painting" paintings. And in the interim you just kind of forget how to do it, and then you come back to it in a different scale. It's not like riding a bike really where you go and jump right back into it.

Rail: It's a whole new learning process.

Black: Right, and you figure it out pretty quick again. But when I came back into them the puppy face was almost gone and the shapes were much flatter, and there was less shading. And I think—even though the shapes were pretty much the same—because they were flatter they just looked more abstract. What I was saying about forgetting how to do it was just to say that there's not really a program beyond just the format. I think what unites the earliest ones that look like they were painted by a five year old and the ones now that are "more sophisticated" is that the image of the puppy head or the torso meets with the edge of the canvas. Initially, I thought it was interesting, kind of an allegory, where the frame or the rectangle of the canvas constrained what pictorial, representation, or abstraction was

trying to achieve. It was like the limit of the painting's effect. And then it just became more interesting to me as a template or something with a scale shift and stuff almost like a bounding box in Photoshop or something, you know, that would just inform the layout of the surface. So that's the only real rule, except that the proportions are usually about the same: there's two kinds of tubular things on the side, two kind of circular things, a triangular thing, and a kind of muzzle.

Rail: Beyond this formal evolution, what do you take to be most distinctive about these paintings?

Black: Yes, that's just the description of components. What I tried to make explicit was that I gave all the paintings these really long titles. I call them *Puppy Tales*. It's like a story that generates an image. I don't really know if there's a name for it but what I like about it is the

sized belly (head). As a young Marine he bided his time at the shore of Iwo Jima while the dogs used to ferret out the fox holes caught the sniffles. They had been standing for too long in the sloshing pontoon hulls. The future attorney suggested they use condoms (ears) to keep the dog's feet dry. It worked! The Americans spilled onto the shores and onward to victory, 2015. Oil on linen. 84 × 63 inches (213.4 × 160 cm). Courtesy C L E A R I N G, New York.



Stamford Connecticut. What an æmæ (eyes). What a shade of brown on that car park beyond the spotty Amtrak porthole (muzzle, whiskers). How are the local schools I wonder. How are the interrelations between the local socio-economic spheres? I want to pinch a grape (ears, head) until it dies or becomes other but they're telling me the cafe car just closed. Meanwhile In New York City the quality and price of a pizza slice (nose) reflects broader patterns of wealth distribution (mouth). The middle class slice is dying, 2015. Oil on linen. 63 × 84 inches (160 × 213.4 cm). Courtesy C L E A R I N G, New York.



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relationship between the image and the text, not illustration or interpretation, but the text and the image co-generate each other.

Rail: But what's the priority? Do you write the text before or after making the image?

Black: I do them separately and then I just tack them on. I wrote around sixty over the summer, while India Donaldson and I were traveling so that I could be doing something. So what you're supposed to do is you'd have a little text and then you'd show him and then you'd make a little drawing and you'd have a cute dog face at the end plus a little story. It's just a framework to do a little language game, to do a little bit of writing. And the only rule is that one thing has to correspond to the head, and one to the ears, and the piece is done when you've convincingly gotten around to something that could be drawn in the shape of a dog. And these texts we just stuck on the back, as tales. The thing that I like about it in a gallery context is that when the gallery prints the label, they have to print this whole big long title. And this is what the press release for the show is about: It was saying if the face of a painting could be construed as the face of a dog, then the back of the painting could be construed as the butt of a dog, and then you would put the tail pinned on the butt of the dog. So the whole thing was from nose to tail, which is why the title is *Tales I Knows*.

Rail: It seems like punning is something you often come back to. That's the way you make a relationship between the text and the images—through puns or homophones. It's interesting that that's where text and image get similar—things and images look like other things through analogy.

Black: That's what I meant when I said what I liked about the relationship between text and image is that it's not necessarily descriptive and doesn't rely on interpretation or a value system outside of the one they co-invent. The writing about the paintings becomes part of the painting through analogy. It's the same with the *Period Pieces*—the titles of those all have, in parentheses, the little punctuation marks used in the painting—not because of some analytical, conceptual taking-account of everything used—but because it's the same thing. I like the idea that if it were in a museum, where there would be a wall text next to a painting, it would be closer to the painting than a typical wall text. The black square would be on both and it would be kind of the same thing. It would be as if you looked at a Malevich painting and the wall text says that it's a Malevich painting and there's another black square under it. There's almost a one-to-one relationship.

Rail: That kind subverts what a wall text would do. There's no referent outside of it.

Black: The idea is that something is bounded, but could also exceed itself in a certain way. The text would be a way that it exceeds itself without being a thing that disciplines it or makes it have a certain amount of meaning. The rectangle is what bounds the painting and the title like the seepage. Maybe analogy is a good way to understand how paintings behave in the



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world. Modern art in general is predicated on being autonomous but at the same time is asked to do all this stuff—either sublime, metaphysical work or some political thing. There's this foundational paradox built into it. In order to be meaningful it has to be separated, that would be the nexus of the *Period Pieces*—the weird buzz where the social and the autonomous bump against each other in this one form.

Rail: So you've created the texts for the paintings. Maybe this is an attempt to limit what could be possibly said about them?

Black: In my mind it's a bad strategy for getting reviews or for discursive things to happen around it. But maybe that's what I'm asking for.

Rail: But you're also making a joke out of it. If someone comes to you and says this painting is about this—you see what the joke is? It's simultaneously a humble and prickish thing to do, like all jokes are, like a humblebrag. It's self-effacing in the interest of being a little aggressive, like “you don't get it.”

Black: Yes, that's the consequence of making work in that way. I didn't set out to situate myself in a specific way. I just thought, “Oh that was interesting,” and when I took a step outside, I realized that's what I had been doing. That's part of the thing with templates. My intention wasn't ever anything outside of generating a system. It was never a Machiavellian thing where I decide this is how I'm going to make a body of work for the next three years. The flipside of the works having a discreet meaning is that they have a vacancy, too. Whatever I'm reading at the time, I think, “that's what my painting is about.” All my notebooks from the past three years are filled with a lot of this and that. When a show comes along and I have to write the text for it, I take whatever I'm into at the time as what it's about. That's sort of true and not true. There are certain things you always come back to.

Rail: It seems that you've always had one foot in Marxian thinking about how art functions in society. You don't go totally aesthetic, which you could. And you don't indulge in metaphysical conceits about your work.

Black: That type of painting and gesture was fine at a certain time. But at this point, to sustain that kind of work, the paradox is that there has to be so much subjectivity and ego to make something that's supposed to transcend that, which always ends up looking boring to me—it's like a lot of paintings today. The idea that something is expressive, is just about pure painting, always ends up being about the artist, or at least getting read and functioning that way.

Rail: I suppose the irony is that it's supposed to provide a transcendent experience for everyone, but all it does is provide an outlet for one person.

Black: Or not even an outlet, but it has a really specific function for a whole network of



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people. It becomes a way of producing volume and a lot of people cash in—it becomes something about the subject in a really problematic way. Whereas this thing is supposed to be a more unsubjective way of painting. In the same way that the poetry of Oulipo is not about channeling beauty in the world, but first about having something to do, an activity, passing the time. It's a way to make stuff, and it's the least fucked up thing to do.

Rail: To not to force your subjectivity on people? I remember reading an interview with you when you were in grad school, and you explicitly placed your paintings as a reaction to Neo-Expressionism. It sounds like you're saying the same thing.

Black: I don't really care about Neo-Expressionism. I find it hard to place myself for or against any movement—there's no real movement in painting now. That was probably the last time that there were art world stakes—like this is the right way or that's the wrong way. Even with the Pictures Generation, things only get clear when you look back. I probably said shit like that in grad school or the act of doing an interview brought it up in me. But when I started making the “Puppy” paintings, I was angry at modernism.

Rail: That's weird because they are very modernist looking.

Black: Yes, of course. That's why they used to look bad. Around 2008, I was really into Josh Smith, and I wanted to make stupid paintings of puppy faces that look like Cubist paintings but they're actually thumbing their noses at that stuff. That was a thing for a while. Pretty quickly I realized that there's a laundry list of things that are stupid about that attitude. For one, the things that you think you're sending up are a million times more sophisticated than you. The things themselves are theoretical, like Picasso paintings. It's not like people imbue them with stuff. They have latent in them a smartness that people pull out. And no matter how hard you try to send them up, the joke will ultimately be on you. You realize that what you're actually doing is hedging, so you don't have to face that.

Rail: It's not a funny joke.

Black: Exactly. It would be like if you told a joke and everyone was laughing, you thought you were the shit and then realized they were all laughing at you. The people I was also getting into were like Morandi. At one point he was almost like a Surrealist, experimenting with Cézanne, trying to find his place in modernism, and then it was the bottles. By doing that, he did a long con. I don't think like this anymore, but I had to frame it that way to be dedicated. I thought maybe I could get into the long con.

Rail: “Long con” kind of goes against what you said about not being Machiavellian before...

Black: True. I guess what I mean is that there's something funny in the dedication of doing something over and over again. It was a way for me to decide that the paintings would be funnier anyways if they were just good paintings. Or like Jawlensky, who was one of



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Kandinsky's boys, who just used all the tools, styles, and color shapes to make smiley faces over and over again. They are very beautiful but you don't get to see them that often, because everyone's like, "What are you doing?" And my professor would always say, "Just don't call it a puppy!" Just like what people say about Jawlensky: "Why did you make it back to a smiley face?"

Rail: So people wanted you to take it a little more seriously in grad school.

Black: Yeah, some people. I was in a really weird spot, and maybe I still am a little bit. The thing you were talking about before—the way that it's a joke that's kind of on yourself. People who were painters thought it was snarky. At first it was, so I had to convince people that it's not. The only way to convince them is to make a good painting. People who weren't into painting didn't care because they thought it was just more painting, or they were engaged in something confusing and maybe still didn't know what its position was in a thing that they didn't care about. It just looks like a whole set of little, subtle position games.

Rail: That happens so often now with painting, where the stakes must appear so low from an exterior point of view. That's something I get from reading Clement Greenberg and his whole flatness thing. Like who gives a shit? What does it really mean?

Black: That's the last bit of modernist criticism that says "this is the thing" and then everything breaks up. Now it seems so ridiculous, like being a cube looking at lines. It's a lower dimension.

Rail: Just like in the Spinoza quote—if you're a triangle, you think god is a triangle.
[Laughter]

Black: But the good thing about art is that it is itself, and it doesn't need to be anything more. By just being itself and nothing more, it is a little more. There's some kind of weird trick that happens. That's the way you should relate to the world. You can't ask paintings to do stuff. You can't trace the curves of the thing and build a clear language with it the way you can with language.

Rail: But that's what you're often trying to do?

Black: The thing that I like is how meaning emerges from looking. Where does shape flip over into meaning something? You can repeat something over and over again until it becomes meaningless. You can also do this shamanic thing where you stare at a written word for long enough that it goes back to being shapes. It's a slightly psychedelic, or really anti-psychedelic experience, where it becomes just stuff again. For the press release of the show: every time I write, I have a Google doc of several pages of notes and I'm like, "This is going to be the thing, I wanna scrap it." But instead of scrapping it, I just push it down to the next page. People love to say that language fails. But it's not a failure. It's not language failing



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to do something, but you failing to position language in the world where it should be. You fail language. Language doesn't fail you.

Rail: Right, if you work within the constraints you can do a lot with it.

Black: I think that's why I thought puns were funny, because it's just like language bouncing off itself. It's not trying to use language to order the world. If you treat language that way then then knowledge would be like breaking stuff into all nameable component parts, like with science, breaking things down to the smallest parts and naming all the small parts. It would be this really analytical thing. But I guess what I was saying was that painting, rather than being like an analytical form of knowing something, it would be a productive form of knowledge.

Rail: Something synthetic?

Black: Yeah, it would be synthetic. Rather than naming things you would be—rather than using signs to categorize things, you would be producing things that like weren't quite signs or things.

Rail: A third category?

Black: Not a third category, but something that would, say, make clear that there wasn't a first and a second category in the first place. There's no language opposed to the world: It's all the same stuff.

Rail: So does this all add up to something like a critique of painting's function in the world?

Black: I don't know. Day-to-day that's not what I'm thinking. It's more a useful way for me to think about what I'm doing. It's an interesting way to proceed. I think you can tell from my garbled explanation that this is not a thought-out philosophical program that I am trying to advance through my paintings.

Rail: Right. You come to it the other way.

Black: Yeah, I come to it the other way, where this is a way to make myself feel like I'm doing something, to find a meaning for the activity rather than a meaning for each specific painting, you know?

Rail: For the "being a painter" of it all.

Black: Especially working on the big paintings for this show there's a lot more moments of despair, where you're like, "What the fuck am I doing?" just literally because it takes so much more to do that painting. Like if you make a 9 × 12 inch painting you can have a moment



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where you're like, "Oh, this could be bad" and then by 3 pm you're like, "Oh, that's good." But if you're making a big painting it can look bad for a very long time. But these are the weird things that arise from scale-shifts. So it's a valuable thing to try to make it bigger, even if it's just mastering the practical thing of filling up space. Painting is the activity of just figuring out how to fill up a big rectangle in a way that makes you not want to kill yourself.

Rail: That's a nice definition.

Black: With a bigger one you're going to have to think a lot harder about it. Maybe that's why the "Puppy" thing or the *Period Pieces* were a way of mitigating that kind of existential catastrophe, you know because it was like, "Alright at least I knew like going into it that there's some kind of rules about how to deal with all the space."

Rail: Is this the nub of the whole issue?

Black: Yeah, but in a purely practical sense, not in a like kind of metaphysical sense. You're not trying to solve some great problem you know, like trying to advance Painting. It's just like, "what are you supposed to do with that corner over there." There's that Polke painting, *Higher Powers Command: Paint the Upper Right Corner Black* (1969).

Rail: It's a joke, but it's a really good one. It's one of the great painting jokes.

Black: Yeah, it's one of the best painting jokes ever. I don't want to go far here, but when you're painting there's no higher power telling you paint the corner a certain way. Just like you've got to do something.

Rail: Yeah, everybody's got to do something.

Black: Being an artist always felt like the least bad thing I could do. That's what I mean by it being an activity. It turned out to be a really good attitude to adopt towards doing it, because it gets you out of a whole slew of problems that could really mess you up.

Rail: Well, attaching grand pretensions to your actions is a hard route. You're defending yourself in a way by not doing that, because if you make big claims for what you're doing, you're going to attract criticism.

Black: Right, or you're going to drive yourself crazy or something—but a lot of the artists who go metaphysical that have been like megalomaniacal, crazy grand-narrative painting dudes.

Rail: There's a temptation when you're a painter to say, "I'm going to create something so subjective, that only an ideal viewer will be able understand it."

Black: Or that it's so transcendent that anyone in the face of it will become its ideal viewer,



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but there is no ideal viewer.

Rail: Right, there's the conceit that you're going to transform people.

Black: Yeah and either people are going to like really get it or they're going to be philistines who don't get it. Everyone does a bit of both. Even in this interview, I'm always one step away from saying "People don't get what I'm doing." Artists are always like, "You don't get it." When people ask what it is, you are like, "I don't know." [Laughter] "I don't know, but I don't know better than you don't know." That's maybe the definition of art.

Rail: Well let's use that grand statement as an occasion to kick the obnoxiousness up a level. Kierkegaard wrote a book called *On the Concept of Irony* (1841), in which he invented the troll, in the sense that the ironist is the person that every time they interact with somebody it's like, "I know better than you, and I'm not actually communicating with you, I'm fucking with you." It's just to show that they know better than the norms and the society they live in are shallow and they can play with them well. But ultimately the joke's on the person that's doing that, because they can't see that they are also implicated. But then with Socratic irony it jumps to another level, where you're like, "I don't know either."

Black: Yeah, that's good. I think that's part of the thing that I was talking about before that the paintings had to get better; you have to be committed in a weird way to try and make them good even in the face of your own ironic intention. So why the *Period Pieces* paintings went from being just stickers on paper to being engraved and it took awhile, it's like, "I might as well put some skin in the game and make the whole thing ridiculous."

Rail: I think what haunts painting, and what haunts art still is the "master problem," which is like it's people think that the artist knows something that the audience doesn't.

Black: I give painters more credit. I think they do find out something new. In the activity of making a painting, you come face to face with the fact that every time that you do it, there's always a moment where you could make a bad one. But when something new happens the artist is just thinking materially. Then when people interpret the work inevitably they go to two poles simultaneously, which are the flip sides of the same coin. They go to the genius-subject and then they go to the extra-subjective zeitgeist thing or the extra-subjective religious thing. They usually get all folded up together. Like the artist is the guy who is somehow in touch with the ineffable and I'm like, "There's no ineffable, everything's effable because we're f-ing doin' it." I think all that stuff cheapens art in a way—it cheapens it and it reproduces a worldview that's not good to me.

Rail: But I like that about art: that it makes bad things seem good.

Black: Yeah that's what I'm saying!



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Rail: Because we're like, "I know that seems bad, but art makes it look so good." [*Laughter.*]

Black: I think we solved it.

CONTRIBUTOR

John Ganz
