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# **BOMB**

Art : Interview

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## **R. H. Quaytman by Antonio Sergio Bessa**

*On painting, architecture, and working in "chapters."*



Installation view of *O Tópico, Chapter 27* at Gladstone Gallery, New York.  
Photo by David Regen, courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

My first encounter with Quaytman's work happened by chance around 2004 when I was working on a Portuguese translation of Susan Howe's *Pierce-Arrow*. During a visit to Howe's home in Guilford, Connecticut, the conversation quickly shifted away from Charles Sanders Peirce and semeiotics to architecture. At some point she volunteered, "If you like architecture, I must show you the house my daughter and her husband Jeff Preiss recently bought nearby," the daughter being Quaytman. We drove for about five minutes and arrived at a magnificent structure designed by Tony Smith perched on the edge of a cliff overlooking the Long Island Sound. In hindsight, I feel like I have been stalking Quaytman, quietly following her development since the early days of the artist-run space Orchard.

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In 2001, Quaytman introduced the idea of chapters as a way to organize her working on different subjects in discrete series. In an era that tends to (over?) analyze everything, the concept provides viewers with a roadmap, while at the same time allowing the artist space to experiment. The works that compose *O Tópico* (the subject), on view at Gladstone Gallery, have been commissioned by Brazilian collector Bernardo Paz for his private garden in Inhotim, Minas Gerais. The exhibition provided the perfect opportunity for me to finally meet Quaytman and talk about our common interests related to painting and language.

## 1—At Quaytman's Studio on the Lower East Side

**Antonio Sergio Bessa** How did this idea of creating a work for Brazil happen?

**R. H. Quaytman** I had never been to Brazil, but my good friend, the artist Andrea Fraser went often. She used to live there and I felt like it was her spot ... I felt like I was too WASPy or uptight or something to go to Brazil.

**ASB** It's interesting that you mention Fraser. I was curious about what took her there, that maybe she had a hiatus in her career, but maybe not.

**RHQ** Well, she's always playing with the idea of stopping her career as an artist.

**ASB** But then she returned, and the work was even stronger. I would like to ask you about this idea of dropping out. I read in an interview that your work has to do with drifting.

**RHQ** Maybe like sailing, when you are floating and drifting but you do have canvas sails. On a current, definitely rowing with or against.

**ASB** I was also taken with the idea of anonymity in your work because you initial your name, which is a way to drift and have some privacy.

**RHQ** I think that I'm only half there with my paintings, anyway—only at the very beginning, and I want to shift that focus tending toward the artist as the thing of interest not the art work. Women artists especially are subject to that kind of personal scrutiny. So I felt the need to steer clear of the "personal."

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Installation view of *O Tópico, Chapter 27* at Gladstone Gallery, New York.  
Photo by David Regen, courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

**ASB** And that comes across with the chapters. You give something to the viewer, promising a sequel so the focus isn't on you, but shifted toward the work. It becomes about what's going to happen next.

**RHQ** I often wish I could figure out how to make a cliff-hanger chapter, but I haven't figured it out yet. Something like *Breaking Bad* or something where you're ...

**ASB** Sure. Like a page-turner.

**RHQ** (*laughter*) Yeah, a page-turner.

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**ASB** Is that why you got into the analogy between a series of paintings and the chapters in a book? Is a book more of a cliff-hanger than a painting? When you see a Goya, you don't necessarily say, "Oh, my god, I'm dying to see the next Goya!" But a book, it's like, "Wow, where is this guy going with this?"

**RHQ** Well, originally my idea was to shift the most intense focus off the individual painting and into the situation of the painting—to its neighbors and context.

**ASB** So it's not about the object, but it's about an environment.

**RHQ** It's about both. I mean to acknowledge that they are objects that are changed by their location, and by adjacencies. So I wanted to really work with that, to study it and think about how that happens. To create a lateral reading as opposed to one that was primarily about depth or surface. Ironically, the one about depth is traditionally about a temporal narrative. I realized the lateral also can be a narrative, and that that might be a way to tie abstraction back in.

**ASB** It is interesting that painting has often been conceived as the illusion of depth and focus, and here you are doing almost the opposite. So the focus is not just on one work, but a succession of works, and moving from one to the next.

**RHQ** Well, I felt that wasn't possible anymore with painting in our world.

**ASB** Why is that? You think there was a change in the viewer?

**RHQ** Yes, I felt the viewers were changing and they weren't looking at paintings that way any more. They weren't looking at paintings the way they were being painted.

**ASB** Their attention span?

**RHQ** Partially, but also the noise around them was louder, and the dialogue with other art, and with ideas, was kind of overwhelming.

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**ASB** Right, but it's very directly about the eye. As if you're saying, "This is a picture that your eyes are constructing." Can you talk a little bit about that? What's your interest in op or the optic?

**RHQ** I thought that the optic really was an incredibly helpful way to figure out how to assemble a group of different kinds of pictorial events. The op tended to work well with other paintings which had a different kind of time and appearance. I find it's hard to put two photography-based images side by side and so the problem became one of how to juxtapose and activate different genres I suppose. That I'm interested in. Also the op patterns often relate to the monitor, because it feels like zzz, like electricity in your vision.

**ASB** There's often a very jarring juxtaposition of the fragility of the body in your work, but then there is some optic element that breaks your train of thought and takes you to something else.

**RHQ** Well, the ops often hurt. Literally, they are hard to look at. And when it's reproduced it's always different, because the pixilation never gets it right. I kind of like that aspect of its resistance to be documented.

**ASB** But do you think also that this optic element, which can strike one as very scientific, is something to counter the emotional content or impact of the image?

**RHQ** I try to use images that are not too magnetic emotionally so that you won't be wanting to stare at it too much. It has to allow you to slide off it. It's sort of like a profile. Often if it's people, for example, as with the portrait of Kasper, they look to the side. If she's looking to the side, you look to the side. It's like a directive or an arrow.

**ASB** But you can read quite a lot on figures. For example when I saw this image, I thought to myself, Is it a man, a woman? So, the picture lacks sexual definition.

**RHQ** Yeah, that's what I like about it. It lacks not sexual definition but gender definition.

**ASB** It can pull you in, but I think you don't go too much into it because either the formal or the optic element is telling you that this is processing through the eye or something like that.

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**RHQ** Also I'm interested in how close you are to the painting and how distance changes a painting. But one other thing about the optic in this chapter, the pattern is from these baskets I found in a book on basketry and the Amazonian indigenous cultures.

**ASB** So it's from weaving?

**RHQ** Yes I read about how the baskets and the architecture of the Indians are all intertwined and everything is an expression of everything else.

**ASB** That's very interesting because the weaving brings us back to the idea of the book, and the chapter, because the text is a texture. Roland Barthes has written about writing as texture. When did you come up with the ideas of chapters?

**RHQ** I think it just came about because I felt disempowered by the art world and the gallery system. I thought I had to take on the authority of showing my own work, to displace the emphasis a little bit away from the status of the gallery or institution back onto the work. I was very conscious of the rapid coming and going of exhibitions. There was no kind of longevity. We are just so at the mercy of gallery time, and it just seemed wrong or distorting. I did feel that one's practice or body of work told a particular story, in a sense. And it is my life, But I want to emphasize that it's not necessarily a personal or private life but rather a response to a situation in history.

**ASB** In a way, it is an entire life. I mean, I don't want to get too psychoanalytical but it's interesting that you started this series of chapters with a work about your father. It's this idea that we spoke of in the beginning, about looking at pictures and trying to make sense of them, putting them together and then apart. It's almost like you're trying to write a sentence with—

**RHQ** Yes. And also because Harvey was a geometric abstract painter of a particular postmodern generation. Psychoanalytically speaking, it felt like an act of redemption just to paint and claim myself a painter as opposed to an artist. As if I was going to save this problem that was literally and figuratively dying in front of me. But *Chapter 1* was also about many other issues more important than my father or my relationship to him.

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**ASB** You have said that after both your father and your stepfather died, things went into storage. And a storage that was not like this constellation in your studio that is more like books on shelves.

**ASB** I'm thinking about the process of writing and the fact that whatever you write, even when you assume it's very objective, language in the end bites you in the back.

**RHQ** Well, paintings bite also. Escaping self is obviously impossible. I always say paintings show the truth whether you mean them to or not. To me, the personal is just a given. My system is not so systematic actually. Because the process of making them is almost geological, by which I mean the lower layer (gesso) often doesn't know how the upper layers (silkscreen, flocking, brush, shelf) will evolve.

**ASB** And that is the editing process, which is also part of writing. You write and write and write, then say, "Oh, wait a minute," and you begin to edit out.

I admire the fact that your chapters are not the illustration of a theme. You depart from something but then it gets complicated along the way, because I think that's the process of writing. Every time you write about something, you want to push the writing toward some conclusion, or closure, but writing itself is actually pushing you onto something else.

**RHQ** Yes, you are exactly right. It's a battle. The first given for *Chapter 27* was that I had four sets of panels, in eight sizes, fabricated by James Cooper. Then I decided to paint all of them with that Fibonacci spiral shape so that all the sizes nested ... But what I didn't at first see was what that shape makes the paintings do. They begin to suggest a spinning motion on top of the nesting and lateral. This was unsettling to say the least!

**ASB** They can spin because of the ratios?

**RHQ** The spin is suggested via the weight of the curve and their geometrical interconnectedness. Or, yes, ratio, I guess.

**ASB** Do you think in terms of language or grammar when you shape the concept of the chapter?

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**RHQ** Sometimes I worry that people focus too much on this chapter and book thing, because it's mainly just a way for me to say, "There is a subject, and there is development, and all these things are connected, and they're not scattered to the four winds, and they're growing. Maybe a tree would be a better word.

**ASB** But they're sequential.

**RHQ** And they're sequential or spiraling. You can go back to the beginning and read it again. I don't know. Or it can also be reshuffled. Books aren't quite like that. There are elements of my system that don't fit the book paradigm and I hope they are not overwhelmed by language's authority.

**ASB** And what about viewer participation. Do you consider that?

**RHQ** Yes, definitely—a lot. I want them to be readable images. By which I mean they are one thing at a glance and quite another after they have been looked at with thought.

**ASB** But readable according to what you want them to read, or are you open to different readings?

**RHQ** I take different readings very seriously. I often ask my Peter Mundwiler, my assistant, what he thinks. Or anyone who comes to my studio. I take what people see very very seriously, even if it's funny, joke, light things. I think about that a lot, what is the first thing people see when they come in here, I notice that. I like there to be the obvious reading and then another one and another one and then a lateral one.

**ASB** Well, the reading never stops, right? The way people read in the nineteenth century was entirely differently from how we read it now.

**RHQ** Yeah. But also if you want to know that that image is Elizabeth Bishop, then you can, but you don't have to know. It's there. It's like a thread, like a kind of footnoting, and you will be sure the footnote is connected to something. It's not a random thing. I'm as frightened of randomness as anyone.



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**ASB** Do you see some of your paintings as footnotes?

**RHQ** Yes, I definitely do. I've also used the term "caption" for the two smallest sizes.



*O Tópico, Chapter 27, 2014.* Diamond dust, enamel, silkscreen ink, and gesso on panel 32 3/8 x 32 3/8 inches. Copyright R. H. Quaytman. Photo by David Regen, courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

**ASB** In Brazil we say “plastic artists” to denote that you were dealing with something that is malleable, sticky, whether it’s oil paint, plaster, and so on. It’s always changing. But with language the process seems more concrete since you write sentences that have a number of words and they have to come to a dot and then be followed by another sentence. So you tend to organize things into categories?

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**RHQ** Genre?

**ASB** No, more like a suggestion that there is a norm to read it. That it's normative, that there are rules, there is a grammar.

**RHQ** There is a grammar I believe. I'm thinking lately about the Hebraic injunction against the image. And I'm very interested in the way some artists and thinkers look at the world hieroglyphically. They don't look at the meaning the thing is commonly meant to convey. They try to see it obliquely, literally to read it. I'm interested in that idea. I think Abby Warburg, for example, tried to invent a new form of art history around this approach.

**ASB** When you are at a moment like this, for example, in which you are about to finish a chapter, do you feel already like ...

**RHQ** Actually it isn't very satisfying because I'm already thinking about the next one and how this one should relate or inform that one. and then next one after that. But the crazy thing is the more I do the harder it gets.

**ASB** And why's that? You feel that you're getting closer to your subject?

**RHQ** Subject or *tópico* is the wrong word for what is difficult. The subject is always the picture or painting. To continue to use the analogy of language I would ask where in the sentence is the subject situated (declension) and what kind of sentence or statement can it possibly be making. The demand is more acute to see something or to ironically understand my own work. Its's also a map being drawn, or an itinerary, which recently goes from Chicago, to Vienna, to Brazil, to Israel, to Rome, and then back to LA and as it turns out back to Vienna. A loop. Is that important? I'm not sure. I just have to look at it.

**ASB** Because people keep proposing things and in a sense you respond to that.

**RHQ** I respond if it's a place that seems potentially rich in this regard.

**ASB** I've been trying to write a new book for a long time.

**RHQ** A novel?

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**ASB** About a poetry movement in Brazil in the 1950s. I already have a few chapters, but I just don't have the time to pull everything together. So when someone invites me to write for a journal I often use the opportunity.

**RHQ** Yes! I do that too, a lot. It's good to accept things, and everything you accept has the potential to help you make what you want to make or think about. Otherwise, don't do it! This interview is a perfect example. I knew you knew about Brazilian and concrete poetry so I thought I could get information from you.

**ASB** When it doesn't help my book, I don't agree to write. Because what's in it for me? I never make any money. No one is going to read about concrete poetry. Five people, perhaps?

**RHQ** I know a lot of them though.



*O Tópico, Chapter 27, 2014. Encaustic, gouache, oil, silkscreen ink, and gesso on panel, 24 3/4 x 40 inches. Copyright R. H. Quaytman. Photo by David Regen, courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.*

**ASB** Your work deals so much with architecture, too.

**RHQ** I learned about architecture from Dan Graham. He always was telling me to read various books on architecture and it turned out to be a great tool to think about painting.

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**ASB** But when you thought of the project in Brazil did you think about architecture?

**RHQ** I did, yes, a lot.

**ASB** Because you mention architects at some point, right?

**RHQ** Well, João Vilanova Artigas, and of course Lina Bo Bardi, but it's like everybody's on Bo Bardi right now, so to reference her directly is almost too much. Even though, yes, Bo Bardi, definitely. *(laughter)*

**ASB** I was not thinking in terms of the big names.

**RHQ** It's just unbelievable in Brazil—the architecture. What a dump we US citizens live in compared to Brazil! It's unbelievable. I couldn't get over how great it is down there. One really feels how architecture changes social space for the good.

**ASB** But you didn't think of bringing that to this chapter? A commentary on architecture? Or do you think it comments at some point?

**RHQ** I didn't know how to do it, really. But it's funny, a lot of people expect me to do architecture. For this chapter I decided to work with Solveig Fernlund because she and I have worked quite a few times on installation design and also my home and I need to work closely with someone. And really I was just improvising.

**ASB** Well in general the work is so much about space.

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## 2—At Barbara Gladstone Gallery in Chelsea



Installation view of *O Tópico, Chapter 27* at Gladstone Gallery, New York.  
Photo by David Regen, courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

**ASB** Is this the first time that you create a full-scale model in a gallery?

**RHQ** Yes. Ordinarily I'm not invited to make permanent pavilions for my work. But I've made chapters that are motivated by the specific installation architecture. For example, *Spine, Chapter 20*, which was a kind of retrospective looking back at the first twenty chapters in a huge room at the Basel Kunsthalle. Solveig Fernlund and I also worked on this together. It was shaped like an open book that formed two spaces—one ninety-degree angle and one thirty-degree angle. This was the first time I used an architectural plan to counter the problem of the relatively small scale of my work.

**ASB** And how was the experience of thinking of a space when it's still not configured for the works?

**RHQ** It was great. I wish I could always do that! Unfortunately I can't. I mean it was interesting because we could plan the dimensions of the walls to be the same as the panels.

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**ASB** It's interesting to see the work in this setting, after having seen it in your studio. There everything offered a linear reading and here it kind of splits up.

**RHQ** Yes, I couldn't quite understand how much the paintings would suggest a spin until we got into this space. You'd think that if you stood in the center you could see every painting, but in fact it's the opposite, you can't see anything. I think it turned out to be extremely important to have been able to make this model to really understand what about it would be activated and how the paintings would be experienced.

**ASB** It reminds me of Philip Johnson's private gallery in New Canaan, with those movable walls. The walls are like pages of a book that you can leaf through, and you don't see everything. I think this space here has a little bit of that. I feel like you are playing with this idea of gallery space—

**RHQ** Definitely. And storage.

**ASB** Did Solveig Fernlund, the exhibition architect, conceive it as a book? It feels like the pages of a book.

**RHQ** I think we discussed it more in terms of the “golden section,” the height, and the dimensions. She knows my work very well and in one day—in one night actually, after we had discussed my ideas she went to bed and woke up with this solution.

**ASB** And the shape is exactly what?

**RHQ** I believe it's most commonly known as the Fibonacci spiral, or the nautilus shell. It's often used as a kind of high-modernist utopic visions of the harmony between architecture, science, and human progress. I was concerned about this history actually because I myself don't share that optimism.

**ASB** When I saw the model in your studio, I thought of a snail.

**RHQ** Snails are everywhere in nature, everywhere. It's like a growth.

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**ASB** So the space has a very organic quality. And then it's interesting that some of the shapes in the paintings reminds of shape of the space. Then when you get to the center of the space, all of a sudden you become indecisive.

**RHQ** Indecisive about everything. You're at the mercy of the spiral which can expand or contract and there is no correct direction to look for answers, and no correct direction to read what you are apprehending.

*Quaytman's exhibition at Gladstone Gallery, New York, is on view through December 20, 2014.*

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Tags: painting, architecture, landscape, concrete poetry