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Michael Krebber, "R.H. Quaytman," *Interview*, October 13, 2016

Interview

R.H. QUAYTMAN



I read somewhere that, as a child, R.H. Quaytman could identify the origin country of a painting by its depiction of the sky. (Quaytman's father was an artist; her mother is a poet). This biographical detail is a perfect initiation into the New York painter's work, because Quaytman, too, packs an immense amount of telling historical, geographical, political, and aesthetic information in what might, at first, be seen as a straightforward visual effect. After all, contemporary painting is very similar to the sky in its abstract universalism—harmless, beautiful, dreamy, apolitical, a point on which all viewers can agree. Quaytman takes that idea of abstraction and

GLADSTONE GALLERY

materiality and turns it on its head. Ever since the artist began working on her series of "chapters" in 2001, she has complicated—and enhanced—the state of postmodern painting by investing her projects with endless layers of meanings. Her style often involves screen printing and oil or gesso on wood board, a frisson of photography and paint that can harken back to op art as well as pop and all of its subsequent countermovements; the accumulating imagery for each chapter usually springs from deep-diving research into the specific sites where Quaytman is scheduled to show the work, and the cultural, political, optic, and even personal associations that coalesce along the way. In short, Quaytman has managed to re-invest the painted surface with a dizzying encyclopedic dimensionality, releasing chapter after chapter of what might one day make up a completed book the way 19th century humanist novelists serialized their epics one chapter at a time. And in each of Quaytman's idiosyncratic chapters, there is, to misquote a modernist, so much there there. References to Walter Benjamin or Clarice Lispector, to fellow artists she's shown with, to artworks she's happened across during her travels, to architecture, theory, memory, literature—it's all right there in the frame.

This month, Quaytman will exhibit work from her 30th chapter, as part of "Morning: Chapter 30," a retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Alongside chosen pieces from previous chapters, the new work is influenced by Quaytman's late 2015 road trip into the Nevada desert to visit Michael Heizer's iconic 1969-70 land-art masterpiece, *Double Negative*. As the artist was preparing for the show, she took an evening off this past July to meet up with her friend, the German painter Michael Krebber, at her apartment on East Third Street in the East Village. Over wine, they discussed everything from Chinatown turtles to Trump. This is a redacted version of a much longer wine-infused conversation. —

Christopher Bollen

MICHAEL KREBBER: I like this apartment very much.

R.H. QUAYTMAN: Oh, thank you. I like the building very much. Although the first month I was here, a man upstairs jumped out the window. And my first night, it sounded like someone was being murdered in the apartment above me. You know, I found out recently that Madonna lived right around here before she became a superstar—just being Madonna-ish here, when it must have been really dicey. There's also a huge Catholic church directly

GLADSTONE GALLERY

across the street that I'm too frightened to go into.

KREBBER: The first time I visited New York, I lived on Ninth Street by Tompkins Square.

QUAYTMAN: In the Christodora?

KREBBER: No. It was a simple building that still exists. But the area was completely different. This was back in 1977. Every fifth house was burned down.

QUAYTMAN: Did you ever go to Pat Hearn's first gallery on the Lower East Side when it opened? It was in the '80s.

KREBBER: I went to Hearn's gallery on Wooster Street. Was that her first one?

QUAYTMAN: No, the first one was over here. I worked briefly at her Wooster Street gallery answering phones and stuff. I remember she was always very short on cash. That's where I first met Jutta Koether and a lot of people I later became much closer with, people who you also knew. But Pat's first gallery over in this neighborhood was shocking. The Lower East Side was a hellhole then, not like now with the highfalutin galleries and spaces. When Pat did it, it was incredible because it was just a bombed-out, really scary neighborhood, and she opened this space that was beautiful and glamorous. It took real chutzpah.

KREBBER: And now the whole neighborhood has become glamorous, no? It's an overdose now of avant-garde. It's *arrived!*

QUAYTMAN: I don't give anybody credit for moving over here or anywhere now. I get the feeling that the art scene can't go to Brooklyn, but maybe that's my old-fashionedness. What if all the galleries just started en masse moving to Brooklyn?

KREBBER: When I was here four months ago, I lived for a moment in Lefferts Gardens in Brooklyn, and there was no art at all. It was near a subway station, and I enjoyed living there. It was a completely friendly street where everyone wanted to be happy and lucky, sitting on the stoop outside.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

QUAYTMAN: Really? When I lived in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, it was distinctly not like that. Hasidic men would pick up hookers outside my window. Anyway, I guess we could talk about my trip out to see Heizer's *Double Negative* ...

KREBBER: I was thinking this afternoon about what I should ask you. I don't know a lot about your chapters. I just see your work from the outside.

QUAYTMAN: Actually, I prefer that viewpoint. I actively try to make paintings for passive, distracted, foreign, and even disinterested audiences. The chapter thing is more a method for myself, or maybe it's a symptom. It began around the same time Google was established. I would research on the internet a place I had been invited to show—like Lodz, Poland, for example. I began to find subjects and connections to the few notions I had about painting. But this accumulating subject matter started adding up and leading to other things. But I'll only use an image if it can also provide something perhaps not totally uninteresting to look at and not requiring much prior knowledge.

KREBBER: You and I met through a common friend. And I remember first going down to the Lower East Side and visiting Orchard [a Lower East Side gallery that Quaytman co-ran with a number of artists from 2005 to 2008]. I must have visited Orchard three or four times, and you were always there. And one time you were the gallerist.

QUAYTMAN: In the original concept of Orchard, [artist] Andrea Fraser was going to be the dealer, like, really a dealer, as in the Andrea Fraser Gallery. But she was ambivalent, and so these other agendas started to coalesce.

KREBBER: When I visited that time, you were as the gallerist for your own exhibition ["From One O to the Other," a group exhibition in 2008].

QUAYTMAN: That was awkward.

KREBBER: And in this exhibition, you had this hook or cleat where you could hang paintings. So I went and hung one of your paintings up on the wall. And then I took that painting off and hung up another one.

QUAYTMAN: Thank you! At the time, I thought I could do that everywhere,

GLADSTONE GALLERY

but then when I got to the museums, they said, "No, we can't do that." The cost of insuring the paintings is prohibitive. What I was able to do at Orchard was have the audience handle the paintings directly. But this kind of installation freedom is not possible for me anymore because of the insurance. You can't believe the tricks that must be done to secure a painting to the wall or a shelf in a museum.

KREBBER: It all becomes part of the work. And there is also a point where some part of the work breaks down. And that's an interesting moment for the artist. It can sometimes be only a small moment.

QUAYTMAN: Well, I'm hoping that the following moment will not eject me. I *do* want to make money just like the next guy.

KREBBER: Yes, but that becomes part of the artwork, too.

QUAYTMAN: Definitely. The irony is that the overarching chapter structure that began to appeal to collectors arose out of the simple fact that I had no money and work was accumulating. The book metaphor enabled me unconsciously to "save face." Because now instead of having unsold paintings accumulate to gather dust, I would have them organized like books on shelves. It was inadvertently a kind of inoculation against the explosive authority of the collector that has occurred since 2001. So in this way, the money is a part of the paintings.

KREBBER: I wanted to mention that when I visited Orchard there was also, on Ludlow Street, another artist space. Gareth [James] was involved and Cheyney Thompson and Sam Lewitt.

QUAYTMAN: I know. That pissed us off at Orchard. We were like, "Come on, Gareth! Don't start this other boy group over there when your responsibility is over *here* at Orchard." Because they were all boys over there. Speaking of which, did you see Andrea Fraser got a big, very positive review today in the *Times*?

KREBBER: No. *Andrea* has a big review in the *Times*? She now lives in Los Angeles?

QUAYTMAN: Yes. She became much happier the second she moved to L.A. I've never seen such a transformation. She needed to be there the way I

GLADSTONE GALLERY

need New York, actually. We hosted a very fun New Year's Eve dance party at Andrea's house in L.A. this year after my road trip to *Double Negative* and Death Valley.

KREBBER: There was too much quality or talent involved in Orchard for my style—a complete mixture. For me, I thought, it is a failure.

QUAYTMAN: It was a failure. And I stand by that failure, because we wanted it to be. But it was a failure for so many interesting reasons. I mean, it definitely failed at being cool. We were uncool. I think because we had to reach a neutral place between such opposing views. It was democratic in that way. I mean, Andrea and Nick [Nicolás Guagnini] and Karin Schneider and Moyra Davey ... the list goes on. It was not a group of friends.

KREBBER: That's a nice detail.

QUAYTMAN: It *was* a nice detail because I had to battle so much over everybody and everything. But it was sort of good to have to battle about those things.

KREBBER: Orchard was right by Miguel Abreu Gallery, who is one of the galleries that represents you now. There was a whole generation happening during that time of Orchard, which seems not to exist so much anymore. I was reading an interview with the artist Sam Pulitzer and he implied that Miguel Abreu artists were "goody-two-shoes" artists.

QUAYTMAN: I'm totally a goody-two-shoes artist. Sign me up for that! I try not to offend.

KREBBER: I thought I was always on the side of those who were not the goody-two-shoes artists.

QUAYTMAN: [*laughs*] I think we've established a lot tonight.

KREBBER: Maybe that's why I got in trouble and why I'm now living here in New York.

QUAYTMAN: I told you not to move to New York. I did warn you.

KREBBER: But I like that I moved here. I couldn't stay in Frankfurt; I

GLADSTONE GALLERY

didn't want to live in Cologne at this time; Berlin, no way. So then I thought there was only New York.

QUAYTMAN: But you moved into an extreme living situation. A synagogue converted into small apartments for poor Chinese families is, I would say, extreme.

KREBBER: You once said that you can't be a teacher because you're not optimistic. I was a bit jealous of that idea so I borrowed it.

QUAYTMAN: Please take it!

KREBBER: Because my teaching, for a long time, was optimistic. And I felt for a while that something was really happening and changing in art.

QUAYTMAN: I think I know what you mean. A lot of young men were having great fun for a while. It was less fun for me, perhaps. This reminds me to ask, are you a feminist, Krebber?

KREBBER: I cannot say that I am not a feminist but I cannot say—

QUAYTMAN: Leave it there! "I cannot say that I am not a feminist." Just leave it there. You're in America now. Be optimistic! [*Krebber sighs*] Shit, the U.S. is going down, and it's going down this year. One thing I am worried about is the fact that I'm opening this chapter just a few weeks before the election.

KREBBER: What do you mean? Because there is something in this new chapter that is about the election?

QUAYTMAN: It definitely is my American chapter. It's red, white, and blue.

KREBBER: Where is your Turkish chapter? So much is happening in Istanbul at the moment; it's just terrible.

QUAYTMAN: Well, let's not forget, I did just finish a chapter in Israel right before this, and then Brazil before that one.

KREBBER: It's not only an American problem.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

QUAYTMAN: No, and neither are the things I think about. The map leads from New York to Germany to Italy to Belgium to Chicago to Brazil to our Wolfgang Hahn Prize exhibition in Cologne [a joint Krebber and Quaytman exhibition at the Museum Ludwig in 2015], to Israel, and it now spirals back into the Southwest. I like to escape from the local, from New York. I never wanted to be understood as an American artist, and I always try to take off the blinders of the local and the personal. I often say that I am from the Atlantic Ocean.

KREBBER: Like England?

QUAYTMAN: I'm not a *British* artist. Ugh! I could be called an Irish artist way before a British artist.

KREBBER: But Turkey. I read the news, and it's now all about lynching in Istanbul and cutting off heads.

QUAYTMAN: Well, I could paint that. I'd paint a decapitation. It's a famously popular subject for female artists, come to think of it. In fact, I had a decapitation painting in my Cologne chapter, *Cherchez Holopherne* [*Cherchez Holopherne, Chapter 21, 2011*].

KREBBER: My mother tried to explain how human nature is when a war happens, and that there will have been so many rapes and killings after a war ...

QUAYTMAN: Naturally, after the war, most of the men are killed and there are only women left over.

KREBBER: My mother also said that farmers always have the cows and the bulls in separate stables, because she came from the countryside. When the bulls were getting excited in their stables, the farmer would go in with a water hose, with cold water, and spray the testicles and then it was calm in the room.

QUAYTMAN: Maybe they should try that technique at the Republican Convention. Just spray all those white testicles.

KREBBER: My father explained communism to me in a similar way. He said the idea or ideology of communism would not work because it was

GLADSTONE GALLERY

based on the notion that man was good. But man is not good, therefore, it would not work.

QUAYTMAN: That's also the Republican viewpoint from what I can gather, that humans are fundamentally brutes and baddies. This also seems the Israeli—and let's face it—German viewpoint.

KREBBER: But my father is a leftist, like being a Bernie Sanders supporter in Germany.

QUAYTMAN: I do think it's just very hard to know what's going on right now in any way. It's scary and I feel frightened, actually. I think everybody is. All my friends seem to be in crisis.

KREBBER: Well, there is a new situation now that quite disappoints me. I should try to see it in a positive way but I can't—I cannot really do that. But on the other side, I am also getting *old*.

QUAYTMAN: I think it's courageous that you just up and left Frankfurt and came here.

KREBBER: No, it is not courageous. But teaching at the Städelschule was fun, like surfing.

QUAYTMAN: School is communal. It's company, social. I find, however, being solitary feels right lately. I've never been that way before, but it feels right to be alone now. But I know what you mean; it's hard to envision what's going to happen right now.

KREBBER: There has been a kind of generational change. And something has now also changed in my head. But in either case, a certain moment is gone and now I see the results of it. Now is maybe a situation again where everybody is against everybody. It is ... *murderous*. And you will have to find ways through it. And you will have to not completely dislike that. It's like, when you have ten chairs and eleven people, and they run around the table and have to sit down. It's a German game and it is very cruel.

QUAYTMAN: I know that game, musical chairs. It's the worst! Maybe you have to be at the right party for that game.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

KREBBER: I don't know what the right party is anymore. Maybe that's also happened in my head. You know, you have a very good supermarket on the corner.

QUAYTMAN: I love that supermarket, Key Food. That's the slum grocery store with a lot of heart.

KREBBER: I just came up Essex Street, and the other one was called the Essex Street Market.

QUAYTMAN: Oh, that's a famous market. It's nice, right?

KREBBER: It was quite good. I now shop at Di Palo's [on Grand Street] where all the tourists go.

QUAYTMAN: Di Palo's is the best and was there way before the tourists.

KREBBER: Yes, I like everything in there. That's my shop at the moment. And I buy milk opposite my apartment in the Chinese supermarket. I don't go into the fish department anymore. They have all these animals in the fish department, and once I looked into a bucket and I saw three turtles. They cost \$8.99 and they were still a bit alive. I thought you could buy them and take a knife and make it more comfortable for them. I could help them. Then the next day I went back and they had two different sizes of turtles. Then I went to the zoo in Brooklyn and the turtles were swimming, and I thought, "Here they are—the same ones they sell in my supermarket."

QUAYTMAN: My assistant Peter Mundwiler's partner just got a job landscaping zoos. Like, designing the polar bear cage! That would be a better job than being a painter, right now, frankly.

KREBBER: Ah, come on.

QUAYTMAN: How to design spaces for animals in our life, in our world.

KREBBER: I still like gambling.

QUAYTMAN: Then you'd like Vegas. Did you ever go to Vegas?

KREBBER: No.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

QUAYTMAN: You should go!

KREBBER: I don't need to go to Vegas. I saw it from the plane when the captain says, "Look to the right."

QUAYTMAN: Have you ever done a road trip across America?

KREBBER: I will do that one day.

QUAYTMAN: You want to do that together? I want to get back to the Southwest, to Death Valley, Grand Canyon, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah ... First you land in Vegas and get a hotel room there. Quite good hotels are so cheap because they want you to gamble. And then you rent a car and you can just go off into the desert.

KREBBER: I know that secondhand. Kippenberger did that trip with a friend. And I know there is a trick to those Vegas hotels. It's easy to get into them, but you can't find your way out. Every way leads to a gambling machine, yeah?

QUAYTMAN: Yes, and there's no daylight. They don't let you know the time of day. All clocks are gone. And you can chainsmoke! It's incredible. You really need to experience it once in your life.

KREBBER: I will think about renting a car and doing this trip.

QUAYTMAN: My trip out to Nevada and *Double Negative* changed all my plans for my MOCA "survey" exhibition. It made me decide to paint a giant American landscape or horizon on 22 paintings spanning a 110-foot wall. I was inspired by Warhol's "shadow paintings" [*Shadows*, 1978-79], which I saw hanging on the very wall that my *Morning, Chapter 30* will hang this October.