



RON GORCHOV with Nathalie Provosty

In his typically charming and laissez-faire manner, the artist Ron Gorchov, when asked to conduct a public presentation of his watercolor work within the container of his concurrent show at Lesley Heller Workspace, instead invited his friend Nathalie Provosty to spare him the preparation and engage in a conversation, which she did with great pleasure. The conversation took place on October 2, 2013, and what follows is an edited version that incorporates some of the robust audience participation.

Nathalie Provosty (Rail): On the occasion of a watercolor show I thought I would ask you about water, wetness, liquidity, and fluidity. When you moved to New York in 1953, your first job was as a lifeguard and swimming instructor, and it seems that you've had an affinity for wetness, in a way. Was there a certain point in your life when you wanted to make your life or your paint more fluid?

Gorchov: I never thought about that. [*Laughter.*] But it's a very good theory. I do like very thin, wet paint. When I was young I worked through all the different ways to paint. I used pasty paint and built it up. I fell in love with Matisse's way of using very little paint. I liked the elegance of using thin paint. When I was really young and painting, I really didn't have a way that I knew I could put paint down. I hadn't figured out what I liked. I didn't want to lean towards subjective motivation, where the brush stroke is totally subjectively motivated. I wanted to be more like a sign painter, where it was objectively motivated. In other words, I wanted to know where the paint was going. I made a decision, I thought, that's the kind of artist I wanted to be.



Ron Gorchov, "Brother," 2013. Watercolor on handmade paper, 14 1/2 × 12 inches.

Rail: Did you make that decision off the bat?

Gorchov: Through a long amount of thought. I feel like the subjective element—where you have an impulse to put the paint down and you know where it's going—that impulse, and the feeling

you have when you're putting it down, gives the work life. But I didn't want to make that the main issue.

Rail: You say impulse creates life in the work, and you chose to be a lifeguard, which is an interesting position in that it's a job that has pleasure and leisure, *and* a constant threat of life or death situations.

Gorchov: Oh there's no leisure. We were always at the beach; we were always afraid of having a case we would lose. I have to say, I really feel like a big success as a lifeguard because I did it for a long time. I did it when I was 15 because the service men were still away for World War II so they were hiring younger: if you were over six feet tall and you were 15, you could get a job. So, we never said anything, but we were always happy at the end of the season and we didn't lose a case. On the beach you have many cases where you have to pull people out.

Rail: Do you think there's any parallel between that and making a painting?

Gorchov: I never thought of it. No, I don't. I wasn't a great swimmer, but I was an okay swimmer. I swam in competitions in high school. It was a job that I liked because I could stay in shape, and it was outdoors. I think people think that guys become lifeguards for the girls, but I didn't do that.

Rail: Going into the idea of leisure, in the 2006 interview in the *Rail* that Rob Storr and Phong Bui conducted, you described a number of your friends who were hard workers and producers, and you said: "with all of their impressive ability to produce constantly, I don't know how they tolerate my way of working, which is painting that comes out of leisure." I just read Roland Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text*, and he talks about the difference between leisure and pleasure. He said leisure is a social activity and pleasure is a solitary activity. What do you mean when you say your painting comes out of leisure?

Gorchov: Well, I think you spend a lot of time, if you're doing art, doing nothing but just kind of dreaming. I've never had an idea that I consciously tried to figure out; they would come to me for no reason when I was relaxed and at leisure—a thought, an impulse to work. And the idea of hanging around in your studio, having friends drop in, making coffee, reading a bit, and then you're on your feet with a brush in your hand and you don't remember how you got there, that's great—where it just happens. I really think that we live 99 percent of our lives completely unconsciously.

Rail: Last night I saw the new Keanu Reeves movie called *Man of Tai Chi*. There was a certain point when the main character, played by the actor Tiger Hu Chen, is about to lose to his arch nemesis, which means his death. Tiger's master had been telling him all along that he needed to slow down, but being so passionate he couldn't. At a certain point his enemy, trying to provoke him, says, "You are nothing," and Tiger closes his eyes and realizes that he was nothing, and he becomes very powerful and defeats his opponent. Your comment about not even realizing you stood up and had a paintbrush seems like this kind of non-being space.

Gorchov: Yeah. Also, one of the great things about painting is you can have a thing you're working on and you sort of try to figure out what to do with it, yet you don't have to show up on time. You can do it when you feel like it. Musicians, who have to make performance dates, can't do that. And I'm sure that's why they use drugs. [*Laughter*]

Rail: You also mentioned in that *Rail* interview, that your paintings are made of reverie and luck. What does that mean in your case?

Gorchov: It's extremely abstract. It's what they tell kids not to do: spacing out. Just not thinking of anything. And then when you get an impulse, and you feel like you know what color or what form, or you see how a line should be different—when you can see that, it almost feels like luck. Whenever you can grasp something and really be sure about it, it feels to me like luck.

Rail: Does chance have a role? Perhaps luck is an offshoot of chance. I spent a period of time reading what different artists had said about chance, and Pollock said there's absolutely no chance in his work, period. [*Laughter.*] And Jasper Johns had said: yes, there's always chance. Yes, there's sometimes chance. And then he said: yes, there's seldom chance. And then he said: yes, there's never chance.

Gorchov: Jasper said all those things?

Rail: Well, that's a paraphrase. But he covered all of his bases. Is the element of chance part of the process of putting the paint down?

Gorchov: When you're mixing paint—which I think all painters love to do—mixing paint in a pot to get the right color, and you're looking at it, you have to test it every now and then. I also mix paint very simply, so that I can remember what I put in it. In other words, I don't want to have to figure out a complicated picture. I use at least some white lead, and a pigment, and I may use another color to tint it more warm or more cool, something like that. I feel really lucky if I get it right the first time. And I don't all the time, so I have to take that off.

Rail: And when you put it on, it's often very translucent, or the edges have glimpses of what's beneath, and it never folds across the sides. There's certainly pleasure. I've noticed looking at your paintings and these watercolors, I always feel as if I'm getting a massage. Or even as if I'm watching someone else receive a massage.

Gorchov: That's great! What a compliment.

Rail: Barthes also describes that the moments of pleasure happen at the seam, or the fault line, and pleasure is very close to Eros, the erotic moment. Do you think the erotic is an important element in painting and why, or what, that might be?

Gorchov: Yeah. I think that painting is definitely related to that kind of pleasure. The edges of anyone's work are really an important issue. How the edges are done.

Rail: You once said how difficult it is for a painter to have a hard edge and a soft edge in the same painting. Is that something that you've tried to create?

Gorchov: I like making very close edges. But sometimes when drips run into the other colors, it is better.

Rail: At the opening of this show, one of these sheets of paper had a little fault in it, and you said you did that on purpose, as though you absorbed the so-called accident or the mistake.

Gorchov: I didn't do it on purpose. I don't want to be the kind of artist that feels he has to make perfect work. Work doesn't need to be perfect. I like the illusion of perfection. Brancusi's work looks so pristine but has all kinds of bronze bits where he's fixed it not so well.

Rail: "Noli Me Tangere," (2011) one of my all time favorite paintings of yours, is an exquisite, medium size, pale painting with two shapes, a little low—they're beneath the middle, which is surprising. That story "Don't Touch Me," is biblical.

Gorchov: Christ appears and Mary sees him for the first time after he's risen. My interpretation is that she is about to embrace him but he says, "Don't touch me." No one has given a good answer for what that means in the scriptures. I don't know what it means. He says, "I have to go to my father." The mystery of Him saying that makes the situation very electric.

Rail: In one interview you said that you think it means that the skin is the place between coming and going.

Gorchov: I said that? [*Laughter.*]

Rail: You did! So I wonder, what is it about the skin? Where is a person's edge?

Gorchov: Well, paint-film or painting is about surface, not about mass, like sculpture; that's like skin.

Rail: And your naming your pieces seems so important. How did you come up with the name "Brother"?

Gorchov: When I was making the paintings with the stretcher I used in the early '70s, "Brother" was the third one I did. I called the first one "The Art," and the second one "Promise." This one was a red and blue painting, a hundred inches high. And, you know I'm an only child who never had a brother but I thought, gee, I'm going to call it "Brother." An impulse. And the painting was bought right away by James Duffy who was a big collector, a very nice man—who has died since then—in Detroit. He owned a plumbing supply company. He was wealthy, supported the arts in Detroit, came to New York to buy paintings, and put his paintings in the factory, which made me happy—I liked the way his art looked. This was 1975 and he gave it to the Detroit Institute of Fine Arts, but they never put it up. Museums have work of mine but they've never put it up, and I'm upset about that. Now I'm worried about Detroit's collection, with their bankruptcy, and I thought well, maybe I'll see that painting again. So I've been doing a lot of

studies, sort of renditions of it in different sizes. Old photographs make it easy to get the form. I found it was a painting I could make in any scale. Most of my paintings only work in a certain scale.



Ron Gorchov, "Noli me tangere" installation view, 2011. Oil on linen, 44.5 × 36 × 10 inches. Image courtesy Cheim & Read.

Rail: In your watercolors, does signing on the front have something to do with establishing the scale of the image?

Gorchov: I always thought that to sign your work on the front of a painting was a modest thing to do because people won't know who did it unless you sign it. And I didn't want to be that modest. So I don't sign my works, usually. I think in the works on paper, some writing—title, owner, date—looks okay for me.

Rail: In the stories that the titles refer to, many of them seem to be about a kind of pairing—like the Greek story of the lion Androcles. What is the function of the title to the painting itself?

Gorchov: The sound of the word, the story, and the image have to, in some way, resonate for me. But I do believe the title shouldn't be descriptive. I think it can give the painting another dimension that isn't material. I feel it. And also, I want to be able to remember these paintings when I do them. So the titles help me remember. And it forces me to read a lot, to keep up with stories, to have stories in mind that I can use—

Rail: Do you think reading affects your painting—I mean the painted part of the painting? And your growth?

Gorchov: A lot. I really think it's good for artists to read everything that they can. I think it helps artwork to have a lot of stories. In all directions, I think it's great.

Rail: There was a certain point in your work when—and I'm thinking of the one in Ray Smith and Maricruz's bedroom—it had strong line quality and was scraped, and structured into more of a field. More recently you've used either two singular shapes floating in the field of color, or maybe a post and lintel structure. Did something in your life happen to crystallize the change?

Gorchov: When I started out doing the concave and convex paintings, I found that two forms, two symmetrical marks, was a good way to start. And I did that through the '70s. Then I started to turn the forms so that they were both facing in one direction, and things like that, just to make it a little different. And then I did get bored with it, and I thought I would go back to my roots, which was looking at de Kooning and Gorky and those people. I thought I would go back and try to put what I had done 30 years earlier into the work. But I found them really hard to do. And also they took a long time.

Rail: You have mentioned that before you made a painting, you put above it a big sign with a marked number of how many hours you thought it would take, [*laughs*] like 32. And then, when you'd get to what you thought was the halfway point, you'd cross that number out and write the half of it.

Gorchov: Yeah, I would do that when I had a deadline for a show at Fischback—it was crazy. The paintings were all around the studio, and I was trying to complete them. My idea was that I

would work on a painting until I had done half, until I had half the work. And you know, when you get up and go to the painting and work on it, it doesn't take as long as you think. Often, if you have any impulse, it can go very fast. So sometimes, in a half hour, I can knock off three or four hours. Then when I saw all the numbers around the room were getting to be like "four more hours," and I counted them all up, I thought I was safe. But I haven't done that for a long time.

Rail: Is there a point when your feelings about effort in paintings changed? Was there something that caused you to recognize and respect the quickness of your speed?

Gorchov: Well, I think that if you're really following impulse, it won't take too long. But, that's the way I work. There are artists that work differently than me, where they work with a lot of craft. For instance, because it takes so long, I can't stand taping to make edges, but artists that do it, they like it and it looks great.

Rail: You're generous with artists; it's wonderful. I wanted to go back to Gorky—that period and those influences, and specifically John Graham. You've said that there was a period of two years when you and Joy—your first wife—had seen John Graham nearly everyday. You knew him longer than that, but that two-year stretch was intimate. As for the crossed-eyes in the Graham painting—you had said that he described them as crossing space.

Gorchov: He said he crossed the lady's eyes in order to trap space. He was a very complex man, but he really knew a lot.

Rail: Right. And there was a man too, whose eyes he crossed. Did he ever talk about what else that could mean? Or was meaning only structured in terms of space and the picture plane?

Gorchov: To him, painting is all about space, which he talks about in his book *System and Dialectics of Art* (1937).

Rail: When you begin a painting and you're choosing the colors, is there a quality of space that you're after, or mood?

Gorchov: It's completely spatial. I follow Graham on that a lot. I really think that painting is about space and proportions and where things go; it's what painting is. Form, if it isn't the right color, it is not in the right place. And you know you can actually change the relationships a lot by changing the color a little. Yesterday, something happened in my studio. I realized that new things come to you all the time when you work in art. I had forgotten that if Graham wanted to make something slightly off-white, he used violet instead of greying it, and it's really good. So, last night I remembered that, and the painting worked out.

Rail: What's the difference between impulse and intuition?

Gorchov: Well, you intuit a certain way, and I think intuition could be wrong a lot. Of course, we all need impulse control. So impulses can be wrong too. But nevertheless, intuition and impulse are important. The other day I told Veronica [Shear] about this idea I had—that I notice

consciousness when I feel that a painting is going somewhere, when I feel like one thing is leading to the other, and I have a momentum in the feeling about the work.

Rail: And then does it arrive? Is that its completion?

Gorchov: Well, we hope. Sometimes it doesn't work out. I've had paintings that failed and I had to repaint them because I thought they were going somewhere, and—

Rail: They go unconscious. [*Laughs.*] I wonder about rationality and the role of concision in thinking, left over from the enlightenment. How important is rationality to the process of making a painting?

Gorchov: To me, art is really very much about the irrational. I don't think you can rationalize why something is good, for instance. There are many definitions of art, but what strikes me as art is when something's much better than it should be, when you just can't figure out why it's so good. In other words, you can't use craft—that it's meticulously made or that the colors are absolutely right. Something can be really good, and nothing's right about it; it's irrationally good.

Rail: Is that also relevant to living, as in just being a person in the world?

Gorchov: Well, I'm not known for being that rational, so I'm not a good person to ask about that. [*Laughter.*]

Rail: Movement and travel were characteristic of your early childhood. How did that affect the formation of your thinking? I think it's related to the fluidity in your work.

Gorchov: Maybe, I don't know. Well, what Nathlie is talking about is that my father was a Depression entrepreneur, and he had many things he could do. One of them was opening bars and restaurants, and he liked to do it all over the United States, and we'd have to go out there to do it. And he would do real estate things—one skill he had was as a closer for large buildings. People knew about him and would tell him to come out, and so he was actually flying very early, in the '30s, before World War II, to close large real estate deals. Sometimes he'd go to a place and meet people and see possibilities in the city where he could start something, or he'd meet a partner. My father liked to start a business every week if he could, and so we were off. Every three months, we moved. I went to 16 grammar schools. Sometimes I was ahead of the class, sometimes I was behind. Sometimes they would put me in private school. I guess I got used to a lot of people, always meeting people.

Rail: A plankton is an organism in the water that cannot swim against the current, so by definition a plankton goes with the flow. Certain animals are planktons for a while and then grow up and they're not anymore. I've asked a few people about the idea of being a plankton in the world. Jonas Mekas is one, who's this poetic temperament. Shoja Azari, an Iranian artist who is very involved in politics thinks that's the most horrible idea ever, to be a plankton. Do you consider yourself a plankton?

Gorchov: [*Laughs.*] Great idea. Sometimes ... I'm pretty sure I don't go with the flow. As an impulse, I just can't, you know? I'll see the way things are going and I'll say "No I can't do this." But I think that's common.

Rail: There's always mind changing. What's your stance on changing your mind?

Gorchov: Well I'd like to be a person who's flexible and will change my mind. I want to be. There are some things it's very hard to change my mind about.

Audience 1: I was thinking about the painter George McNeil when you were speaking about the rational. I know that part of the mystique of making art and painting is that it's not rational. But in fact that's only half true, like everything else about everything. A lot of decisions about the way we proceed and the physical object that we come up with are entirely governed by rational decisions, or ought to be because otherwise you're stuck with a lot of problems. McNeil said, make things easy for yourself, choose a format, and stick to that. And he also meant a size, keep a uniform size—not too big, not too small. He said mix all of your colors in advance so that you'll have them in your pots all ready to go. I was thinking that's the best part of rationality.

Gorchov: Could you do it?

Audience 1: No of course not.

Gorchov: [*Laughs.*] Thank you. Thanks. Actually when I think I'm being really rational, all my friends think I'm crazy. They say "What the hell are you doing Ron?" [*Laughs.*]

Rail: How did you view Minimalism when it took over the art scene?

Gorchov: I thought that it was an interesting change from Pop Art. Graham credited Ozenfant with another definition of Minimalism: that you begin with a pure white virgin canvas and you do everything you can think of on it, for months and months and months until it becomes black.

Rail: It's like Balzac's Frenhofer story, "The Unknown Masterpiece."

Gorchov: Yeah. There was a term coined for that kind of thing, maybe before World War I. I would call what happened later neo-Minimalism, where a few elements are very clear.

Audience 2 [Phong Bui]: Ozenfant was one of the only collaborators with Le Corbusier. That short-lived movement is called Purism. And it was very important to Ad Reinhardt's early development of his theory of the total variation of black. I think it might have extrapolated from his friendship with Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk friend of his from Columbia.

Gorchov: So you think Reinhardt's black paintings came from that?

Bui: Well, he admitted at some point that he liked that book a lot.

Gorchov: Yeah I'm sure. I never thought of that.

Rail: The definition also reminds me of Manet's stationary letterhead, which says that everything happens. Ron, did you have much of a relationship with Ad Reinhardt from being colleagues at Hunter?

Gorchov: I got very mad at him one time. He is dead so I really shouldn't... it's not fair, but I can't help myself. I'll tell you why. We shared an office and I came in and he was rifling through my drawer. I said, "Ad, can I help you with anything?" He said, "All of my slides are gone." And I said, "Ad, why are you looking in my drawer?" I was a little annoyed at him for that. That kind of paranoia, artists shouldn't be that way. But, he actually apologized.



Ron Gorchov, "Gift of the Naxians VI," 2013. Watercolor on handmade paper, 15 × 12 inches.

Audience 3: I noticed you dedicated a few of your pieces to the Naxians. Who are they?

Gorchov: The gift of the Naxians. Athens was a democracy and they were constantly wanting to control other islands because they had a good navy and were powerful, and they especially wanted to control the Naxians. But the Naxians wanted self-rule. There is a long story about how

it didn't work out and they were massacred by the Athenians. What interested me is that a democracy can be wrong. The majority can be wrong. When the Athenians took over Naxos, they said, "Why are you doing this?" and the Athenians said, "Well, because we can. We're strong enough to do it." It's interesting in our times, in terms of the problems with democracy.

Audience 4: You have said of your time in Mississippi that you couldn't get any work done. And now I hear from you that your relationship to the creative process is maybe organically somewhat of a letting go. Could you speak to that?

Gorchov: The problem in Mississippi for me was the terrible issues before Civil Rights; the behavior was amazing down there. I can hardly go over it. Coming from Chicago and having really close black friends, it just didn't appeal to me at all. So I stayed there for a year. But, Oxford, Mississippi had really serious intellectuals in place because of the spirit of that particular part of the south; I met Faulkner there, and a man named Stone who was his mentor. At Oxford there was Cookie's Coffee Shop that served dinner and kept hardcover books on a shelf that you could read. All of Faulkner's work was there. In those days there was no money so people bartered. I made drawings of the shop with some of the people in them and they were put on the wall. Sometimes I got free meals; the dinners would be called steak, but the meat was venison that the hunters would bring in, and fish was brought by the fishermen. So there was wonderful food. Stone was a very close friend of Faulkner, and arranged for me to meet him and go fishing at Sardis Lake, which is a beautiful, very clean lake that has crappies and catfish, very easy to catch. We caught a lot of fish.

Rail: Did your love of good food and fine wine and coffee begin there, or earlier?

Gorchov: It started early. Good coffee did. [*Laughs.*] I like good wine but I know more about coffee. I have to say that coffee everywhere before the '50s was wonderful. People always made good coffee. People knew how to make it in the old days. In the '30s it was great. And now, specialty coffee is not as good as average coffee in the '30s and '40s.

Rail: Were you drinking coffee in the '30s?

Gorchov: I was.

Rail: Wow, you started early.

Gorchov: When I was 8 years old. [*Laughter.*] I was not able to stay awake in class because I was awake all night. I was hyperactive. So I was sleeping in class and they were complaining. My father was working a pre-World War II defense job at Consolidated Steel—in Los Angeles, just before World War II. This is '38. And they used to leave coffee on the table when my mother would drive him to work, early. I would be getting up for my own breakfast, and there was this hot coffee on the table with cream and sugar, it was delicious!

Rail: You have a memory. I've read of when you were 10 years old, thinking, "In the year 2000 I will be 70 and will be alive to see spaceships." And now hearing that when you were 8 you were drinking a pot of coffee; you have a notably flexible sense of time.

Gorchov: We moved so much that I think it helped me with my memory because I don't have one place that just blurs into itself. I remember episodes from all different places.

Rail: And now, here, we're about at the one-year anniversary of Sandy. And you had, in the first floor of your home in Red Hook, water fill up to the ceiling, including your kitchen. Reflecting back on that, how has that affected your sense of place, time, and where you are now?

Gorchov: No looking back, it was just another normal event. Things like that happen. And the great thing about it is, when something like that happens, you can say, "It wasn't my fault."
[*Laughter.*]