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CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

Mary Weatherford

Terry R. Myers

Mary Weatherford, 2018, *2018. Flashe and neon on linen, 117 × 234 inches. © Mary Weatherford. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen Studio. Courtesy Gagosian.*

On the occasion of her exhibition *I've Seen Gray Whales Go By*, critic and independent curator Terry R. Myers spoke with artist Mary Weatherford, who he has known since her first solo exhibition at Diane Brown Gallery in New York in 1990, in her studio in Los Angeles.

Mary Weatherford: This is the last painting. It has to go out tomorrow morning.

Terry R. Myers (Rail): I didn't think it was still going to be here.

Weatherford: The cords aren't done. That means I have to come back tonight.

Rail: Remind me of its title again.

Weatherford: The nickname is *The New and Exciting Painting*. It doesn't have its official name yet.

Rail: Actually, I think *The New and Exciting Painting* is a perfect place to start our conversation. [*Laughs*]

Weatherford: [*Looking at the painting*] I think this is the best iteration.

Portrait of Mary Weatherford, pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Rail: How many iterations were there?

Weatherford: About five. We had gray cords, white cords, black cords. We had gray boots, white boots, black boots. We had the cords going to the right, we had cords going to the left. We had boots that we call spit-out boots, we had boots that we call turnaround boots. The problem was that the light and the cords were forming a secondary shape so the two things were not integrating. This has a wave movement now. There's a move to the right and then the cords pull back to the left, so it looks like it could swing to the left at any minute like one of those rides at an amusement park.

Rail: The motion of this one.

Weatherford: The motion. It took a long time to get the cords to say that, because they were falling straight down and it looked like the—is it the Citigroup Tower that's cut off at the top?

Rail: The triangular top? Yeah.

Weatherford: That was the problem. I think we solved it.

Rail: How obsessive have you become with all the hardware stuff, like that list you just went through, all the different iterations, how much of that is going on with all of these?

Weatherford: Every single one from the very beginning.

Rail: Even the color of the caps.

Weatherford: From the very beginning. With the Bakersfield show [in 2012] I only had access to white GTO wire. After that I found gray. I had the black manufactured for myself in Italy, believe it or not. Once I got the black cords I then had three choices. It really is the last part of the painting that is the scribble on top. But it's key. These paintings wouldn't be what they are without the third element, which is the cords.

Rail: Well, a big question relates to these paintings being painted with this other thing that's going to happen after.

Weatherford: They're being made with the idea that they will be defaced.

Mary Weatherford, Sweet Potato, *2018, Flashe and neon on linen, 116 × 99 inches. © Mary Weatherford. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen Studio. Courtesy Gagosian.*

Rail: But it's not only the neon, it's the cords and the transformer and the space and the situation. The person that popped in my head this morning that I don't think you're on the record about is Robert Ryman.

Weatherford: Of course. Nobody has talked to me about Ryman, an obvious association. Maybe the neon trips you up to think more about [Bruce] Nauman.

Rail: To me, the neon is the thing that is more integrated into what I would consider painting with a capital "P." It is in the language of painting. The cords are in drawing.

Weatherford: The cords are the drawing.

Rail: And the neon is the drawing too.

Weatherford: The neon is color and form, which is painting, and the cords are line. I remember the first time I saw a David Salle painting, and then of course [Francis] Picabia. I'm interested in the idea of defacing a painting, of scribbling on it. If you go through a picture book and you find

a child's scribble on an illustration, that means that the kid liked that illustration. Otherwise why would they scribble on it? The child's scribble is an addition and it's an homage.

Rail: And an improvement in their mind.

Weatherford: It's an improvement. It's an homage. And it's an addition.

Rail: Back to Ryman, the obvious parts of it are obvious—the hardware and all that stuff—but it makes me think about the terms of what is more classically or traditionally painting in Ryman in relation to what you're doing, like the painted parts of these paintings are doing things that are also going on in the neon and the cords—that you have reactivated what the gesture is in terms of its component parts: shape, color, form, line, so on and so forth.

Weatherford: But there is something weird going on. If I were Ryman the painting wouldn't be stretched, it would be tacked to the wall. I'm not a purist. Now I'm looking at this and thinking that's where I've gone wrong. I should take it off the stretcher. [*Laughs*]

Rail: Knowing your work for as long as I've known it, you have stayed committed to this category of painting in a way that's unapologetic and a given—not that you haven't done the odd thing outside of it—but this notion that even the components of the painted part of a Ryman are in dialogue with the hardware. What he's doing with paint in the context of his work makes me think of what you're doing in paint in the context of your work even though they don't really have that much in common. Many years ago, he came to the Art Institute of Chicago and he gave a twenty-minute talk. As he was putting the slides up, all he talked about was how they were lit when they were photographed in very specific terms, talking about the bulbs. At first it seemed silly but then it became an amazing experience as he was really getting into how he was seeing these works as objects and then as things that had been reproduced and then how they were being projected onto a wall with light. You think about all the ways that the presentation of a painting relies upon light. I think that there's a lot of layers going on that you've developed and I kind of want to say that has been since the very beginning of your work in the late 1980s and your 1990 solo exhibition at Diane Brown, before the neon or this kind of gesture was even in your work.

Mary Weatherford, Nagasaki*, 1989. Oil on canvas, 82 × 82 1/4 × 1 3/4 inches. Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.*

Weatherford: Let's talk about the target paintings and where that comes in. I don't know if you remember this: the way I made the target paintings was that I built a giant compass using

trammel points that slid up and down on a thin piece of wood. I could adjust to draw a circle bigger or smaller. One point went in the center, and then I replaced the other point with a small pencil. The compass would swing it around and it would draw. I built a drawing machine. Very interesting compared to this one because *The New and Exciting Painting* looks like the original machine for the target paintings, but lit up. The machine would carve—not really draw, but carve—a pencil line into the oil paint. I would hand paint the bands of color, and then after the paint was on there, I would use the compass to carve into the paint. So, unlike, say, Carl Ostendarp who would paint back and forth a shape so that where the colors met—they came right close together, I decided to carve that line into the wet paint. The process of making the target paintings, which were really circular timelines, was of putting paint down and then carving into it with a machine, a handheld machine, that was made out of wood and a pencil and a point. The last circular timeline I made, which was the hardest one to make, was double ovals. An oval is not made by calculus, it's not two parabolas put together, but you can build a machine to draw an oval, it's beautiful. Remember those drawing machines?

Rail: Spirographs?

Weatherford: Spirographs! I made the machine to draw ovals in my studio on Warren Street. I made side-by-side concentric ovals. The entire painting is six by eleven feet. It was never shown. And, it was just too hard to make. It was during the early days of people using computer graphics, and I had these guys print out an oval for me so I could project it, but there wasn't a program to draw a proper oval and so I did it by the old-fashioned way. That love of the parabola—which comes out of calculus—is all through these paintings. My love of math is in there. That's what the cords are: the love of math, the perfection of math, the pi. Pi doesn't discriminate, pi doesn't care who you are.

Rail: Not at all! Changing gears, it was a provocative time when you were making those paintings.

Weatherford: There was rigorous political and conceptual work going on, and then there was Moira Dryer. Moira was a big influence on me in terms of how to bring painting and sculpture together.

Rail: I don't know if you remember, but I know you went, because you signed the book. I organized an exhibition in January of 1992 at Amy Lipton Gallery called *There is a Light That Never Goes Out*. Moira was in it, [Philip] Taaffe was in it. It had the first Polly Apfelbaum floor piece; a Michael Jenkins shower. Larry Johnson was in it.

Weatherford: I signed the book? Good.

Rail: Yes, and Moira came, not to the opening but I met her at the gallery to see the piece. She died very soon after that.

Weatherford: She was so cool. Drilling holes in paintings.

Rail: Did you know her?

Weatherford: No, I knew her work. She started at John Good Gallery and then joined Mary Boone. Her show at Mary Boone was beautiful.

Rail: That show at Mary's was within a month of my group show. The painting in my show was this beautiful pink and black striped one with grommets called *The Wall of Fear*. I love that title.

Weatherford: She has influenced my work.

Rail: I wrote a text about her that was never published, called "Dryer Eyes." It talks about how, of her generation, she's the one who left so much unfinished business.

Weatherford: I was in a show recently that was a tribute to Moira Dryer at Eleven Rivington.

Rail: I remember you were also in shows like *Painting Culture* [1991] that Deborah Kass organized for fiction/nonfiction. And you were in *Plastic Fantastic Lover (object a)* at the Blum Helman Warehouse.

Weatherford: *Plastic Fantastic* was hatched in a Williamsburg loft with Gail Fitzgerald. I said, "This is who I'm interested in" and wrote a list of artists. They were all women and they were all working in sculpture and I was making painting. Max Lang had asked me to join Blum Helman Warehouse, and I said "I notice that the gallery shows nearly all men. I have an idea. I'll join the gallery, and here's your first show." I handed Max Lang—and I wish I still had that piece of paper—a napkin, or a yellow pad, with a list of about fourteen names. I said, "I want to be in this, but I don't want to curate it." So he took it and he got Catherine Liu to work on it and she added a lot of interesting people that I didn't know. She added Cathy de Monchaux. A lot of Europeans I didn't know. That show was a real who's who, a crystal ball. The opening was incredible.

Rail: It's all coming back to me now.

Weatherford: Ava Gerber, Jessica Stockholder, Polly Apfelbaum—people should know about this show—Angela Bulloch, Rona Pondick, Andrea Zittel, Karen Kilimnik, Gail Fitzgerald, Rosemarie Trockel . . .

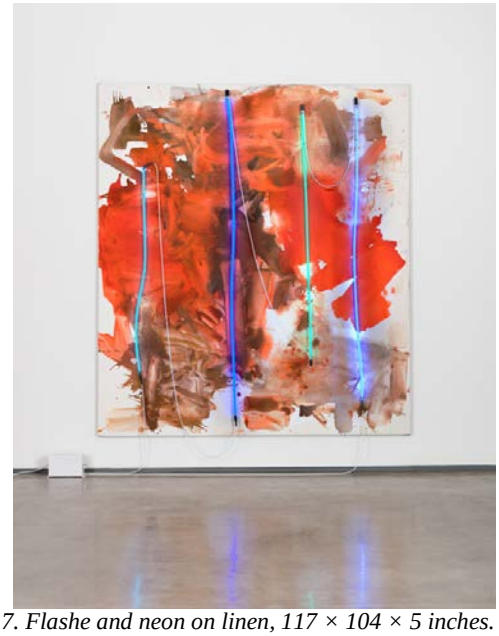
Rail: It's interesting what was going on with the idea of painting in that context. I talk about Mary Heilmann as someone who is performing the moves of everything but painting in painting, and you come to painting from a sculptural point of view too. I always go back to your references: your use of opera, for example, in that early work, a lot of people talked about it as an opening up of painting, not that there were never paintings done related to opera.

Weatherford: I want to go there but I also want to stop and acknowledge—thinking about the show you curated—whether it was your intention or not, what I saw was your interest in color.

Rail: Well, it was called <u>There is a Light That Never Goes Out</u>, which is a song by The Smiths, and in 1992 I would hope it was cool to name a show after The Smiths.

Weatherford: What's impossible—impossible!—to understand, for people who are even ten years younger than we are, is what the AIDS crisis looked like in New York at the time, and why color might be important. That color can hit an emotional tone. For anybody who had eyes in their head, in downtown New York City, we lived and moved among the dying.

I worked in a postcard shop at the time. I was graduating from Princeton, and one of my professors, Andrea Blum, asked, “Do you want to be an artist?” And I said “Yes” so she said, “I’ll get you a job, I’m friends with some people who are opening a postcard shop.” And I said “Fine. That sounds good.” It was called Untitled II. It was on Broadway at Great Jones. It’s now a sneaker store. There was another one in SoHo simply called Untitled. The original was in Paris. Untitled II, where I worked, was also an important photography bookstore. Michele Davies did the postcards, and her husband, Bevan Davies, the well known photographer who showed at Sonnabend, had the photography book business. It was a double-whammy.



Mary Weatherford, Blue Cut Fire, *2017. Flashe and neon on linen, 117 × 104 × 5 inches. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen. Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.*

I arrived at Untitled II before it opened for business. We had empty postcard bins and empty bookshelves. It would be impossible to read all the books in a bookstore, unless they arrived box by box. A box would arrive, I would open it, read the books, shelve them. The store filled up little by little. I learned the history of photography, mostly black and white photography, from the very beginning, Gustave Le Gray all the way up to present-day. And then there were the postcards. Every artist in downtown Manhattan came into that photography bookstore and bought postcards from the bins. There were thousands of postcards that were arranged in two ways—which was very weird—by subject matter and by artist. This was the brain-child of a very curious and brilliant woman and every artist—*every artist*—would come in for hours. Jean-Michel Basquiat came in. I could tell what artists were working on based on the stack of cards they handed me at the register. One of the most popular cards at the time was [Arnold] Böcklin’s *Island of the Dead* [1880]. I don’t know if it would still be the most popular card, but I don’t think so. The other thing that was popular—I looked down on customers who chose this because it was so popular and so fun—was the boxed set of Matisse cut-outs. Jean-Michel came in one day—I knew who he was—and I thought, “I wonder what he’s going to bring to cash register.” Here he comes with this box of Matisse cut-outs. I rang it up and it’s five dollars and something, and he turns his pockets inside out like “No money.” So I said “Well, I guess you’ll have to come back.” Alexis Rockman would come in, Francesco Clemente, Robert Mapplethorpe, Louise Lawler. Everyone.

Rail: I remember it was *the* place. People now probably can't wrap their head around it. This was the Google Images of the time.

Weatherford: If you wanted to go get some images, you either had to rip up some art magazines or go to an Untitled bookstore and buy a bunch of postcards.

Rail: I was working at the MoMA library that has 500,000 or so artist files and you could sit in the reading room and look at things there if you wanted to, but that was something you'd have to intentionalize. What I remember about Untitled II is just going in with nothing planned. How long did you work there?

Weatherford: I worked there for at least a year—maybe longer, maybe two years. People would come to the cash register with their stack of postcards and I would ring them up and they'd say, "That's too much money, I only want these two." Then I would restock the rejects.

Rail: I suppose on an unconscious level every single one of those postcards you looked at imprinted itself on your brain. Wow.

Weatherford: Do you want to look at the checklist for the show? See if it spurs anything? What's new and exciting, Terry?

Rail: Yeah, what's new and exciting? [Laughs.] Maybe it's not necessarily new and exciting, but how long did you work on these new paintings?

Weatherford: A year.

Rail: A massive group of paintings that are going back to New York, which has to be meaningful.

Weatherford: I feel good about it, but anytime you make a brush stroke—and you're the person to talk to about this Terry—you're talking to De Kooning if you're in New York.

Rail: This is where I want to go. You did the *Red Hook* show at Brennan & Griffin [2015], and you were in the Forever Now show at MoMA [*Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World*, 2014 – 15] so the relatively recent work has been integrated into a conversation that I still want to claim as a kind of conversation about New York painting—I don't mean only New York School painting.

Weatherford: Okay.

Rail: You've upped the scale which makes me think of the situation of what these paintings can mean in New York but now maybe—and I'm being deliberately stupid—you are being the California painter you always were, and the conversation about painting here and the conversation about painting there.

Mary Weatherford, City, *2017. Flashe and neon on linen. 117 × 234 × 4 3/4 inches. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen. Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.*

Weatherford: I think the work that influenced me was, on the one hand, art that I saw at what was the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art. In high school I saw—and I know he's from New Jersey—a Robert Smithson show there. The La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, now the San Diego MCA has the greatest view of any museum in the world bar-none. The only artist that's been able to deal with that is Robert Irwin. There's a room that faces onto that beautiful stretch of the Pacific Ocean and anything that was put in that room would be killed by the view. So Irwin cut a hole in the window. It's one of the greatest art pieces made in the last…

What also struck me intensely was a Richard Artschwager show. This would have been in the '70s. The permanent collection was a lot of light and space and post-minimal art. So I had that background of growing up in Los Angeles and San Diego and then going to Princeton and having Sam Hunter as my Art History professor. Sam, of course, organized the first museum show of Jackson Pollock [1956 at MoMA]. I came from Light and Space to New York and heard about the New York School by the way of Sam. The artists who were teaching at Princeton were abstract painters and sculptors. So, my paintings are . . . you just sort of slap those two things together . . .

Rail: And then you're done!

Weatherford: And make them talk to each other.

Rail: So let's put De Kooning on the table. Let's say, 1957, '58, '59, you know paintings like *Ruth's Zowie* [1957], *Merritt Parkway* [1959],*Suburb in Havana* [1958]—when he is a passenger in the car back and forth to the Hamptons as he's starting to disengage from the city and, as I said in my review of the MoMA show, he's leaving the haters behind, he's about to go full-on back "into" the water, the ocean, maybe back to his Rotterdam roots. What he's looking at and experiencing. You also go back in the studio having had experiences and then you make the painting with your gestures. It's the same thing, but that doesn't mean its derivative, and it's not the same thing. This is why I am been happy to be writing again about Cecily Brown's work right now. I think there's plenty of room now to do the things you and her and some others are doing.

Weatherford: I believe that. One of the reasons I paint so thinly is so that—what you would call it?—the iconography? is vastly different from De Kooning. I stopped using oil paint in 1991. I wanted to leave that history behind.

Rail: Right. I also think that the methodology of these paintings that they are being made with a mindfulness of these other components—that has to change the production.

Weatherford: Terry, that's straight out of Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*.

Rail: Right.

Mary Weatherford, Ruby I (Thriftimart), *2012. Flashe and neon on linen, 93 × 79 inches. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer. Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.*

Weatherford: In that book he writes about the punctum. I became fascinated by it. Like the pearl necklace in a photograph... what's the *thing*? That goes back to my stain paintings with the flowers silkscreened on them—this idea came from looking at Helen Frankenthaler's stone lithographs at Princeton. I went through a stack of them that looked like *nothing* to me. There's no place to focus. They're empty. That's the beauty of them. There's something in my personality that wanted them to have a stamp. Like a [*thud*]and so, sometimes my paintings are just me finishing a Frankenthaler. [*Laughs*.]

Rail: Well, you have the advantage or disadvantage of all the history of painting that's been important since that time—and I do mean all of it. And maybe it's not just painting. You brought up the Metro Pictures group. Your paintings wouldn't exist as they do now if not for the Sherrie Levines and . . .

Weatherford: Oh, absolutely not. Even Cindy Sherman. I don't think she's given many interviews, but her project about—maybe I don't know what I'm talking about —the feminine self? I don't want to call it a "search for," but a presentation of—what would you call it?

Rail: A perpetual presentation?

Weatherford: . . . a perpetual presentation of the changing self, the feminine self. There was a moment in about 1992 when I decided to become the author. I thought that the most frightening thing to claim, as a woman painter, would be authorship.

Rail: Right.

Weatherford: Even the title of this show. *I've Seen Gray Whales Go By. . . ..*

Rail: I had a thought about the title of the show. Is it . . . is the humor I'm reading in it in it?

Weatherford: Hmm, I don't know.

Rail: Because I'm reading it as referencing painting itself. You, and I, have watched gray whales go by.

Weatherford: . . .if you've ever gone out whale watching.

Rail: I know that's the real thing. To me it connects to a point you made so beautifully before about coming of age when you and I did in New York. Just having that be present. Again, back to my title from The Smiths, a key line from that song is "take me out tonight / because I want to see people / and I want to see lights." And I wrote in the press release that it was an exhibition about color. People and lights were the two things that Morrissey wanted to to see, both, I would suggest, in relation to color and death.

Weatherford: I don't know how to talk about this, but there was an equating of sex with death then. Any sexual encounter was a risk.

Rail: There's something to me about what you're describing, about what you're letting us in on what the paintings do in the gesture, the material, again all of the stuff I'm going to call the hardware. All of these decisions—I guess we could call them formal decisions or material decisions—are permeated by this worldview.

Weatherford: I think about Emily Dickinson a lot. Who wrote *Sexual Personae*?

Rail: Camille Paglia.

Weatherford: Right. There's a chapter on Emily Dickinson in there. I thought it was great. I'm a big Dickinson reader and I think that the paintings, in some ways, have a something to do with her themes: death, mortality, longing.

So what else do you want to talk about?

Rail: Well we could start with me having witnessed what I just witnessed, which is the devil in the details, the fixing things in the work? [*Laughs*]

Weatherford: The trauma is screwing a hole in the painting.

Rail: Exactly.

Weatherford: I mean what happens . . .

Rail: . . .you are planning on doing it all along.

Weatherford: What happens if you make a mistake? Because you can't make mistakes. What happens if you put a light on it and you live with it and you think, "that doesn't really work."

Rail: Right.

Weatherford: That means the light is a part of the painting because if one were to approach it as a Sol LeWitt with a directive like ‘one painting with one light two thirds of the way down’ then it would be . . .

Rail: . . . whatever happens happens.

Weatherford: Right.

Rail: The idea is the machine that makes the art—but painting with light ...

Weatherford: There's something odd about putting on a light and have it be not quite right. What is good composition? Why is a painting good? The composition of a painting has everything to do with how close—shall I call it the object? Image? The stuff inside of the painting (that's what De Kooning 's working on)—how close to the edge? Where is the painting and where does the painting stop? Where am I and where do I stop?

When I'm working with the light in the studio, I hang the lights with fishing lines and move them around like puppets to find the right spot. One of the things I started saying when it didn't look right is, “That looks stupid” because you can't really argue with that. It's like saying “that doesn't work” or “that's wrong.” It's ludicrous. Why does it look wrong? How does it look wrong? Is it too uncomfortable? Does it not rub you the wrong way? Does it not rub you the right way?

Rail: Because it could be that it's wrong because it's too right.

Weatherford: We’re not looking for symmetry, like in a face. But there's some moment that is—for lack of a better word—compelling.

Rail: Right. I mean I think it is sort of good old-fashioned things like composition. Like, playing with rules and tweaking them.

Weatherford: But what are the rules of composition? Are they made up by physics? I look at fractal patterns and they resemble nothing—crystal formations, snowflakes...

Rail: Isn't also as much about cultural conditioning?

Weatherford: Two eyes, one nose, one mouth, two ears.

Rail: Right, but isn't it also like cultural conditioning?

Weatherford: Yeah.

Rail: Like the condition of the screen today. But I'm curious what your reaction would be to the notion that the neon light, the cords, and all the accoutrements are asserting that the painting is perpetually being made. It’s a way of activating the painting without it moving, without it being kinetic. Of course all light is hitting our eyes so you could say all painting is actively being made in front of us. If the light is not hitting someone's eyes, is it being seen? Here’s another stroke of

paint, but there it's light—it's not the same as the paint on the painting and it is plugged in, drawing electricity. The idea of the painting always doing something, or working. I think that the neon does that in the most straight-forward way but also then it becomes—it could be metaphysical, it could be quasi-spiritual, it could be moody, it might be funny, it could be . . . you know. And then, yeah, you have to plug the damn thing in. Those boxes are even called transformers!

So, “The New and Exciting Painting” will get a new title?

Weatherford: It might keep the title because of all paintings in the show, the way that light splits at the edge I think is funny. There is a place for humor, and there’s not another painting that does that. This is the first one.

Rail: Having not seen all the shows you’ve been doing since the neon but seeing this body of work in the studio, it strikes me that it opens up even more the territory for what comes next. Not that I could put too fine of a point on that, but it also relates to something that I know other people have talked about in relation to your work—the progression in how you’ve worked relative to what I would call the experiential source material. I think you said somewhere else that that shifted over time.

Mary Weatherford, Arroyo walk, *2017. Flashe and neon on linen, 117 × 104 × 4 1/4 inches. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen. Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.*

Weatherford: There was a painting in my show at David Kordansky’s called *Arroyo Walk* [2017]. One evening I went for a walk in the Arroyo. The sun went down. I walked under a bridge. There were oak trees and some construction going on and under the bridge there was an orange cone. It was a beautiful walk. I came home. The next day I made a painting with a heavy silver-gray at the top, like the bridge, deep oak-colored green, and an orange stroke. A direct translation. Alternatively, there might be a painting like the one in this show called *2018*, made when I was very agitated. It was the week of the alleged gas attacks by [Bashar al] Assad. I’d recently visited the Prado for the first time—the Goya *Black Paintings* [ca.1820 – 23] were on

my mind, especially the one with the floating figures. I was working on this painting and suddenly I needed to put in these evil floating figures. So this painting is more of a history painting. There might be a painting in this show called *Sweet Potato*. I'm learning to ride a horse, and this big, lazy horse's name is Sweet Potato. The massiveness of this horse is striking with its beautiful color. So I came to the studio and made a painting about him. I used to attend Neil de Grasse Tyson's lecture series he put together at the American Museum of Natural History when I lived in New York City. I like going to astrophysics lectures. I've downloaded many photos from the Smithsonian and NASA of phenomena like the Horsehead Nebula. This painting is a Horsehead Nebula, Terry. There are a lot of horses in this show.