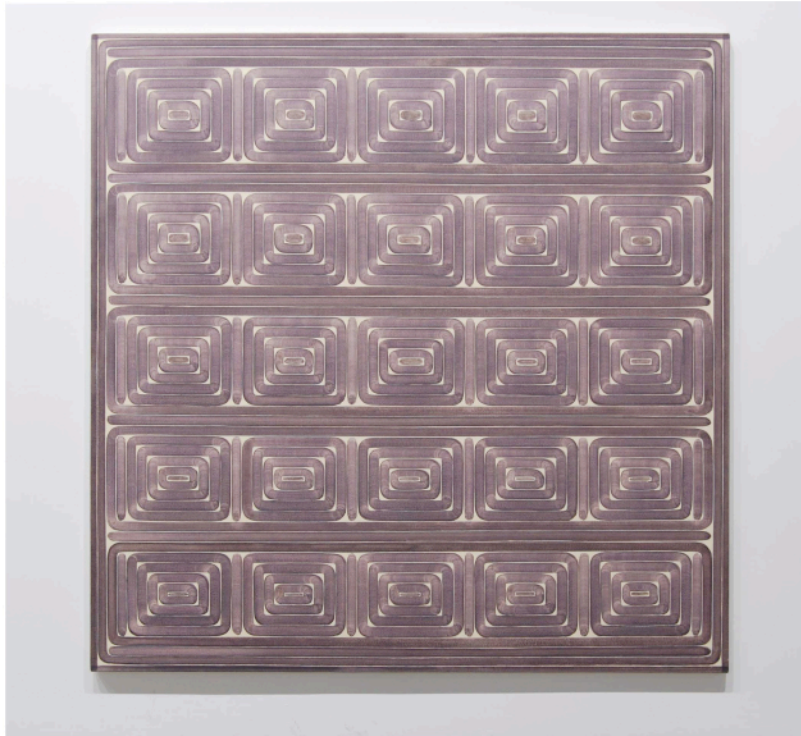


whitehot | March 2008, Interview with Dan Walsh



Dan Walsh, *Antique Black*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 70 x 70 in. (177.8 x 177.8 cm),
©D. Walsh. Courtesy of the artist and the Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

Thomas Butter Interviews Dan Walsh

Dan Walsh currently has a show of paintings at Paula Cooper Gallery, 534 W 21st St. NYC. This exhibition coincides with the release of a beautiful new monograph on the artist's work, which is for sale at the gallery. Dan's exhibition runs through March 29th.

I talked with Dan at his beautifully self-designed and built loft and studio on Bedford Ave. in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. This is a pretty close transcription of our conversation, with very little editing, in order to have the feel of an actual visit to Dan's studio.

Tom Butter: *I am holding a draft of the new monograph here – it is a quite thorough and interesting document of the last 15 years or so of your work – starting with paintings from the early 90's. How are you thinking and feeling about this catalog?*

Dan Walsh: I feel really proud; we have been waiting for this for long time. To have such a document and have it be so complete brings up the fear of becoming an historical object or something to be studied. One wants to be on the move or on the run (laughs). I always thought of myself as depositing a show along my way to some other place, but I have this strange feeling that I kind of arrived- there is certain finality, or completion to the show – although I think it's the best show and has some of the best paintings I have done – it is a bit scary for me.

TB: *Although you often qualify this as romantic, you speak of painting as a journey. This sounds like you do not want the journey to stop...*

DW: Right, absolutely, but I am very good at creating new problems for myself – I don't doubt that (laughs) but I'm just saying there's a certain finish to this...it's curious that this is a manifestation of a few ideas I had coming into this show. I wasn't particularly nervous – I don't usually get nervous. I trust my instincts, that is, I commit to something for a few months and accept it will be of interest. I went into this show wanting to address how I painted my paintings – my process – in this case brushstrokes or lines and how they are finished on the edges, and how they bump up against edges, and how I start and stop making concentric squares or lines. With that I decided not re-invent the wheel in compositional terms. I stuck with some forms I knew – some formats-let's call them line paintings and concentric squares and grids- the stock of the Minimalist trade. I'm certainly not claiming to have created new form – I like to sit right in the middle of history and be stout there – let's say – be intense right in the center. Not try to punch out of the bubble – not try to radically redefine a history. The rewards I think are very clear. It's a bit of a refined and confident show – people are using these words.

TB: *I think refined, confident are accurate. To me it feels like there is greater touch, in that the touch seems to be determining the image more...*

DW: That's well put, and what I'm talking about. I knew my image, and went out of my way to avoid my usual touch – I knew I could paint a fancy painting, but I have always liked an earnest and comical stance. This time around it was almost a challenge – those were

tough paintings to make.

TB: *They look extremely, extremely focused.*

DW: Yeah, it didn't take that long, but after each day, I was exhausted. My eyes were popping out of my head. It was kind of interesting. I was talking with someone about the athletic – and it is almost like since I didn't have the image to come up with, I needed something to challenge myself more. I felt like there was this athletic side to this show – I had to prove that I could pull this off.

TB: *When you say athletic, you are talking about your body?*

DW: Yeah, how I had to be absolutely there: I couldn't screw up. (I mean one could and then start over a new painting.) But physically I really had to be in touch with what was going on – the pressure, my eyes – to make a good, straight 1/2" thick ten foot long line; for example, many of the lines on the lower part of the paintings were done lying down.

TB: *It seems like an athlete has control over scale, in the sense that the large movements and the minute movements are all integrated – when performing athletes use large and small movements, but everything is scaled correctly in terms of the body.*

DW: That's interesting, yeah, OK. There is a pretty grand gesture to the show, but the details are quite, you know, important. I was very concerned with the details and the edges of course.

TB: *Yes. Your comments in previous interviews about opticality and how it interrupts access to the work seem relevant – it felt like you were also playing with that a bit – there were very optical moments in the work, I didn't feel it interrupting, but I did feel like you were pushing it.*

DW: Yeah and again I catch myself sounding so romantic, but I feel like the show couldn't have been any other way. Opticality for opticality's sake is of no interest whatsoever. There was a logic to these paintings and I just let it run – opticality would be [an] unavoidable consequence of the structure of these paintings. And although there is a lot of color in these paintings, the show isn't colourful the way other shows have been colourful. I knew I had to behave myself, or it would have gotten really out of hand.

TB: *It may not be colorful, but it uses an intense amount of color.*

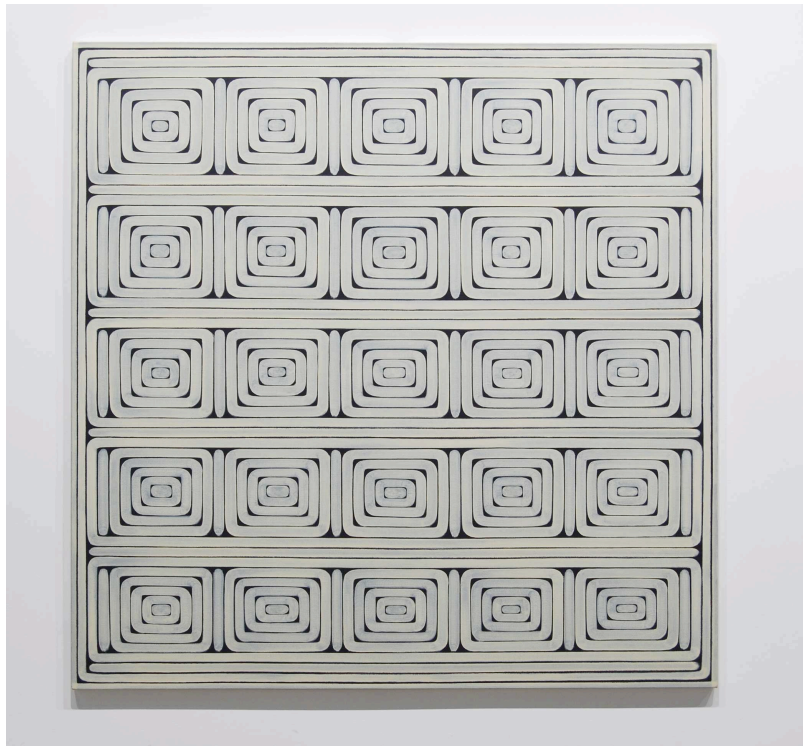
DW: Right. I did that on purpose, knowing that I could get into an optical wasteland. It was all fun. Actually, I indulged myself, and made one painting (which is not in the show) that is incredibly optical but, you know it's the same old thing – you have to manage the picture, and control these things. It is easy to make a charged picture.

TB: *Right. In the past you have used the front room at the gallery as a kind of self-aware moment, to make a comment about the show. Is that true in this case?*

DW: No, but for every show I have plans for that front room. In times before, I guess I had more of a sense of humor then – (laughs) Before, I used to try and comment on my show – and I had a blast making some of these paintings. This time around the two paintings I had planned for that room are the two big ones that are hung [on] the back wall – *From Here* and *To There*. I wanted to keep those two titles together because they were based on two paintings from a recent Paris show titled *Automatic* and *Manual*. I thought of the relationship between two different kinds of cars (vehicles) or gearshifts – that it would be funny. But they didn't make it in the small room. Paula Cooper – the best installation artist I know – pulled them out, and it was clearly better. No it did not happen this time.

TB: *OK, I was looking for it.*

DW: I wish. I love the idea. I just wanted to make some good paintings this time around. I knew I had some great paintings in the studio, but less and less I feel like I can look at myself fully or believe that the look at myself is correct. To critique oneself is very healthy, but I wouldn't know where to go with it – when I was younger I always thought I was on the margins, commenting. I knew I was outside of the thick of things and I knew I could take some safe and clear shots and make clear statements. Now I like the idea of being right in the middle of history and like I said, be stout, and intense. I always have a catchphrase to explain what I'm doing. You know people come to the studio, you've got to make some kind of statement. Nowadays it's getting more and more blurred. I feel like I'm painting but I don't have an angle on things the way I used to. I used to have a very particular historical take, and if you didn't agree I would probably have a problem with you...Now I feel [like] what's the use of trying to control this. One thing I have always believed is that the meaning of all painting is historically determined and (the problem has been) how to deal with that... I always used to say: "I'm making a perceptual painting that is historically determined" which is a great, funny, and contradictory statement. Now with this show, I would say these are antique perceptual paintings. I titled the two on the right *Antique White* and *Antique Black*.



Dan Walsh, *Antique White*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 70 x 70 in. (177.8 x 177.8 cm), ©D. Walsh. Courtesy of the artist and the Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

TB: *What does this mean: "antique perceptual"?*

DW: It would be like a philosopher or artist in Greece investigating the perceptual (a test pattern for a mosaic, i.e. Ravenna). So it would be kind of old looking: "we found a mosaic of a perceptual exercise (let's say) and we brought it here today and we looked at it. It was still retinal but we knew it came from a long time ago. Actually I did a series of small paintings titled *Antique OGV- orange, green, violet or YRB- yellow, red, blue-* and I mixed dots...It is kind of making fun – I would never claim to make a true perceptual painting today – this is impossible. But it is historically indebted or infused.

TB: *When you say "antique" are you talking about looking at it through the eyes of another era?*

DW: Not for content, but for action. Saying: "I don't mind making it old-looking."

TB: *Historically old-looking?*

DW: Yeah. I have always said there are no new experiences in painting and in art. It is more the awareness of the artist, and where that experience sits, in relation to the context. I would be quite aware of where that is. And I would say "OK, if I am going to make a perceptual painting I would take it way back in to history – not to make fun of myself, but to put it in the right context. So "antique"- how antique do you go? The whole absurdity of this allows for a certain freedom.

TB: *You are going pretty far back, if you are going to Greece.*

DW: That's just an example to talk about the first philosopher or scientist to deal with the perceptual as an isolated incident that didn't have an object. Of course, everyone would wonder how we see a tree. In abstract painting the perceptual would be a pure state.

TB: *Right, isolated. So would you go back before western abstraction?*

DW: Yeah, for me, with the goals being different...I like the idea of a mandala. We talked about vehicles. I think a Tibetan mandala is a great example of a perceptual painting. What does this do for you? It is supposed to help you understand what Buddha was talking about, or who Buddha is. It is a guide – it is a vehicle for learning. By positioning you into a symbolic and perceptual state, like with the mandala, you'd be aware of yourself looking but – I would not have an object for you to realize – I am claiming not to deliver the goods, meaning what you are going to use it for? I'm interested in the state where the perceptual has not yet committed to content. You are looking, but I am trying to stop you short before you know what it could mean. I want to slow things down. I know it is impossible. History is right there, waiting to jump in. It depends on how quickly you want to get on the historical track. In earlier shows sometimes they looked like interactive screens, now I am making it easier to engage with these paintings. But, they are pretty complicated once you get into them – they aren't as simple as you think. I'm trying to get you into a symbolically interesting situation where you could use these paintings to (in a mandala sense) learn something – but I'm not going to tell you what you have learned. Hopefully, you are involved in an act of intense looking. Many artists have done it before – Mondrian is such a wonderful artist.

TB: *You don't have a goal to realize?*

DW: Well, I don't have a goal to offer to the public, but I have a vehicle. My goal in the end is to catch you looking and thinking about what it is you are supposed to be looking for. Isolating the viewer's possibilities of, and state of looking at, the painting, without offering up what one is supposed to realize.

TB: *So you are giving us a means, but not an end?*

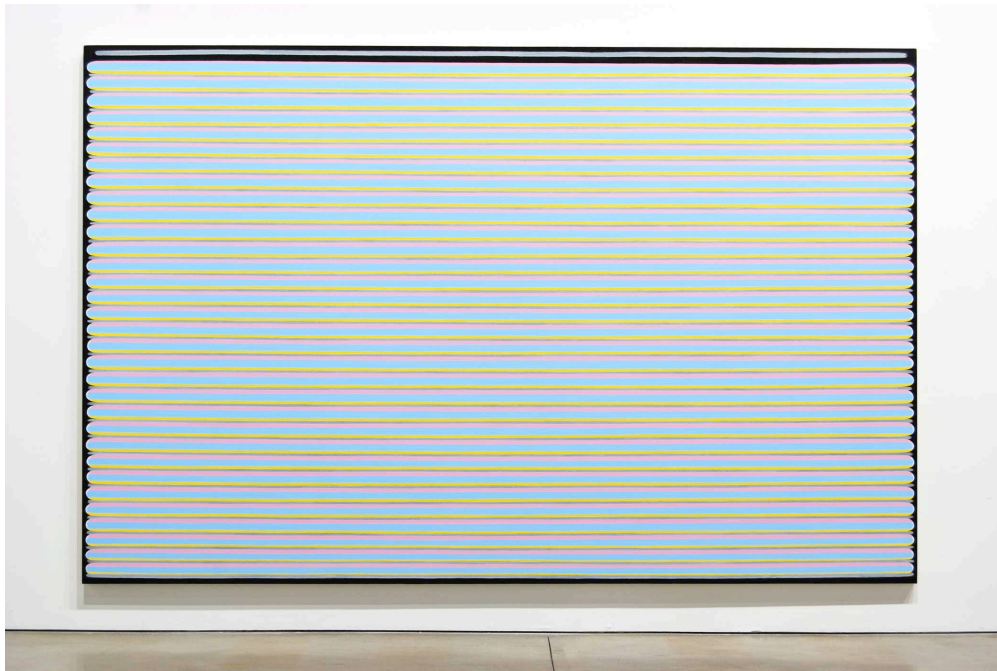
DW: Right. And then if there is some residual content it would hopefully be a historical awareness of painting and how it informs my painting. For instance, minimalism is a great example of bringing the psychology of the viewer up, or the awareness of how you are looking.

TB: Stephen Ellis, painter and critic, in a very thoughtful and penetrating essay for the monograph, builds a description of your thought and work involving qualities which oppose, complement, or illuminate each other as follows: calculation and action handled in such a way as to produce grace, geometric austerity paired with chromatic luxury, your work having a poignancy – sometimes comic, sometimes not, you as a melancholy celebrant, your paintings offering serenity without being timeless. Steve calls these and other pairing “tightly braided dichotomies”. Thoughts on this or other aspects of his essay?

DW: Stephen really caught me well. We’ve had many, many discussions about painting. (It is funny but we usually talk about French Modernism). But, I just don’t think that way. I do think about the difference between what goes on in the studio and what is offered to the public. I am rigorous in the studio; I put a lot of pressure on myself and have great expectations. But when you put it out in the world...what is it going to mean? I used to expect a lot from the reception of the paintings, but you cannot control how they are going to be read, and what they are going to “mean” out there. But I don’t see them making any great statement in the world. They don’t seem to stand for one position or another – they are just “right” – I think I’m no longer trying to prove anything to anybody. When Stephen talks about the dichotomies, I just think about a rigor in the studio versus flexibility out in the world. The idea of attending to one’s context – being sure that the statement you are making is clear – is tough: let’s say you have some motivation to say something specific with painting – to articulate a very specific position, you will have compromised what would have been a natural logic or a certain logic in the studio that happens and grows over time. It becomes meaningful by working a lot and going over and over again, painting a lot. I think of someone we both admire, like Guston. I guess I am apologizing for not being clear enough. In retrospect, I think I have changed. I don’t think the work has changed as much as how I think about it. I used to say that the responsibility of an artist is to articulate the position when it goes out into the public. I think that is still the case, I’m just saying now the last thing I would do is compromise a picture for the sake of clarity of the content. I certainly got something back in this show as retinal goes. I would say it is the clearest show I have ever made, but it is no longer politically clear, it is more clear and honest with itself as a perceptual vehicle. Now I’m just trying to do things that are interesting and exciting to me, rather than needing to prove something to somebody. I used to say: “It is very important for me to make this statement about what was going on (in painting).” Looking back, it was absurd. No one interpreted my statement as clear, they just thought: “oh this is a touchy-feely Minimalism” – one always fails at one’s attempt to make a statement and pin it down for the public.

TB: You’re saying you are less interested in a program now, than you were?

DW: I guess I am saying I am less politically – but more programmatic in the method. But I did go out of my way to keep you looking at a painting in a psychological state: something is going down – what is it? With that said, for all Stephen’s great writing sounded great, all the way through on many levels – but I don’t think that way in the studio. It’s beautiful that someone special like Stephen could see that – I think it rings true – I don’t deny it.



Dan Walsh, *From Here*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 74 x 115 in. (188 x 292.1 cm), ©D. Walsh. Courtesy of the artist and the Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

TB: What do you hope for your work, what is assured?

DW: I am sure I can make a dynamic painting. What I hope is that I still have curiosity as I go on. I hope I stay interested. I feel like I am losing curiosity, and that reflects on my original statement about the show: I ask, “Are those paintings searching?” And for the first time I think, maybe not. That concerns me.

TB: So they are declarative.

DW: Yeah, OK. That is why I see confident painting as maybe a problem for me – the declarative might get in the way of the perceptual act. The classic modern/perceptual statement was “I am making a metaphor or analogy for the way one sees” but, Richard Serra, who claims the same thing – his declaration totally obscures this idea. I would want something in the present, strong, but be able to walk away with a sense of a dialogue about looking.

TB: You have continued to hang the paintings close to the floor. I know you have spoken about giving the work gravity and referred to the minimalist box on the horizon. I find it a pleasure to have my expectations confounded. How is it working for you in this show?

DW: There are a lot fewer notations referring to gravity in the paintings. This didn’t change how I installed the show – I like them low, and I think it is a good way to handle that space. I think everyone agrees that’s how one handles that space as a painter. I’ll take credit for that. The gravity was kind of a play on the “gravity” of the situation. On the other hand I always sagged the lines – everything always sat on some feet, or on a line, or serving tray...that made it more humorous and a bit more narrative. I think that all of a sudden there’s a lot more gravity and seriousness if I remove those bottom lines. Everything still sits on

the bottom of the frame, but like I said there is a lot more gravity in a figurative sense. One's history is important in an artist's development – everything you have made in the past follows and informs the new paintings. The original idea of gravity was to get the idealism, (and all art as far as I am concerned is laced with idealism), down to earth, and to get people to stop dreaming and transcending themselves somewhere. I am still there, just with different methods and a bit less literal.

TB: *In an interview with Bob Nickas included in your new monograph you mention Peter Halley speaking of the possibility of painting functioning as a "model" of painting and, at the time, this was freeing for you...how did this develop for you?*

DW: I had been in NYC since '83 and was coming of age here, in Brooklyn, properly, and Peter Halley was so influential at the time; there was this whole new crop of artists. I was making Abstract Expressionist paintings, kind of slow ones. I knew I was interested in the minimal and the perceptual state. But what was being proposed by this new post-structural scene in NY was (varied)...artists were doing appropriation, the Death of the Author was popular, the notion of history being determined was everywhere. I was trying to read it all and make sense of it. Everyone was being so historically specific, no one was reaching for, or even trying to reach, a perceptual state – in fact, they seemed to be rejecting that idea. I tried to be honest with myself, and asked myself: "What do I want from painting?" I thought I had an angle on it, and the question I asked was "How could you make a historically determined perceptual painting? I thought it was a wonderful absurd contradiction. Peter Halley's model of painting sidestepped the idea of being historically determined – it was just an idea – it was a proposal for a painting. So all of a sudden you're out of the idealism (relatively speaking), you're out of direct perception (like some of the early Stellas), and I just loved the idea. I thought it was a great idea for how I could continue as an abstract painter. At the time I was trying to find my voice, and it was great, it helped me. With the idea there was no more "world view" – meaning that one could get outside of history and say: "This is how it really is". I just felt like I wanted to work, and I didn't have a really good critical angle, so I could just propose things and not take the usual responsibility for it. There were such limits for painting at that time. No one was allowed to do anything. It still runs rampant today. No one would dare make an ideal statement, no one would dare be clear. You know: "I felt like I had four hands tied behind my back so I couldn't be really serious about painting...I tried to approach it in an absurd way, and have fun with it. I was taking myself too seriously at the time, but that's how I spoke about it. It's funny – I used to think I was carrying the weight of the world on my shoulders responsibility-wise. But now I just don't feel like I am really there.

TB: *Joan Waltemath, in a very full and descriptive review for the Brooklyn Rail March 2006 wrote about entering your painting from the inside out based on the way the color was working. How do you see color as structuring your paintings?*

DW: The "inside out" idea is very interesting. I think it still applies to my work and I think it is something I do that I haven't seen much of. The light comes from behind. It is not on top or the surface – and that's not something I planned, it has just been happening over the years. Something is at stake when you are looking at my paintings, something symbolic is going on. I will play that card hard in relation to the idea I have expressed here before – that I am not going to deliver any message for you. I am going to make a charged vehicle for you, a situation where something heavy (not too heavy), something symbolic is supposed to happen, but I am not going to tell you a story or what to feel. The light coming from the inside helps this presence. What Joan has observed is really something particular about my work, that only on reflection am I aware of. It rings true in the paintings. Not that they are possessed, or have powers – but I think some of the paintings seem to be casting spells – a strange magic. With that said, I would hate to be an artist who ends up making sensations and tricky puzzles. I was joking with some friends at the show that - "A few of these paintings are offering some magical spells." This is a by-product of being on the verge of opticality.

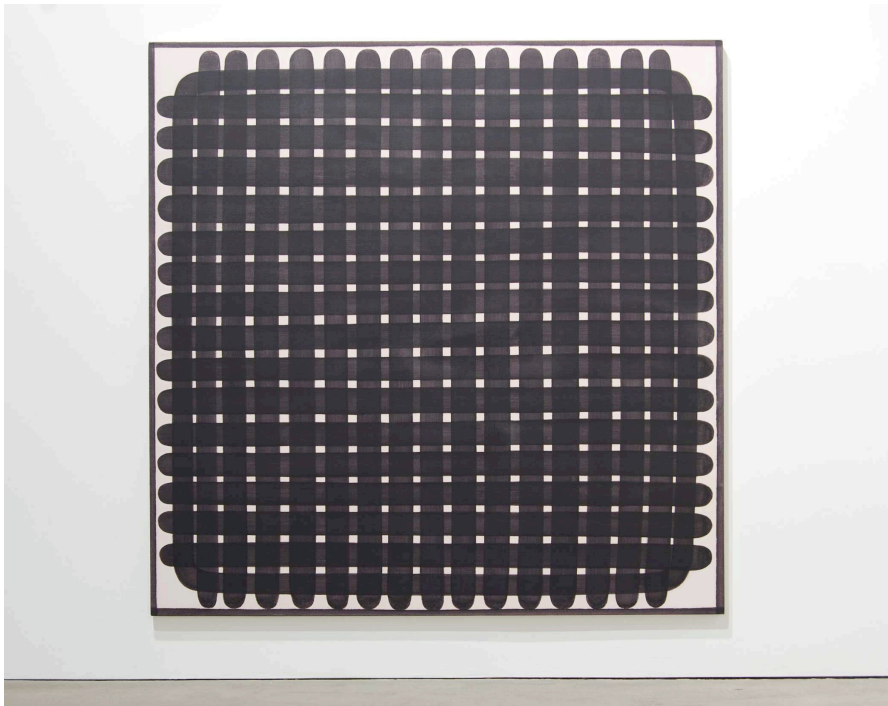
This light from behind is very apparent in the two paintings *From Here* and *To There*. In these I am using a simple triad of yellow, red, blue, very pale, more like a photographic triad and the one on the right is an antique triad of deep red, deep blue and ochre yellow. On the one hand I am very rigorous and a little scientific, on the other I'm kind of making fun of the idea that I would use antique colours for a painting. So maybe it is a little like what we were talking about with Ellis and the dichotomies – on the one hand I'm taking myself very seriously with these kind of half-hearted colors – like an antique triad – it's a little bit associative but any colour will do, it's just the right amount and how much water is in it (laughs). I'm going to stay away from colors that would be too associative, and too symbolic. The colors are calm here, because I knew the show was going to be a bit optical and the last thing I wanted was to get too bright, and have it be a "colourful" show. Very simple decisions. I am sympathetic to the gray and yellow combination. I have used that a lot over the years.

TB: *The books you showed me tonight really have a very saturated, close value colour. That feels like a different project.*

DW: The book I showed you before which goes from violet to yellow, goes in very consistent steps. The colour is not symbolic, it's a stock colour, and you are looking at, in a way, a soft color theory – you are seeing every color with the background or not, with the lines or not. This book is more about color interaction than a specific meaningful color. I used Stock colors (from a colour wheel) – saturated, only not to be vague. I was trying to find the "straight up" red, not too iron oxide, not too vermillion.

TB: *The time involved looking at the books seems critical to their meaning.*

DW: Yeah. The book is an intimate thing – people say: "Why do you do books, you can't sell them, what are you doing?" The idea of the book and its intimacy its more important than the expression of time. But the time issue comes up pretty darn quick when you want to make an interesting book that could be 32 pages long. How are you going to deal with 32 pages? You start structuring – there are developments, there are rhythms. Needless to say, I have learned a lot about time, having made 15 books. The book started out as a very presentational idea for paintings of mine and it has branched out, as my work has in general. I'm trying to avoid falling into categories, and getting pigeonholed as an artist who does this, or that. I'm going to make a general statement now: You have to work so damn hard to stay away from categories and not be pigeonholed as this kind of artist, or that kind of artist, ending up being associated with modernism, or naturalism. I find it very interesting to make an abstract painting that has some naturalistic qualities. Two shows ago I made some paintings and dabbled in naturalism – a kind of faux naturalism that landed on the paintings in certain ways. It keeps me out of trouble (laughs). Painters and artist have to work to stay out of associative traps that could keep you from being clear about what you want to do. I think it is a major achievement to not be associated with anything. It is hard work.



Dan Walsh, *Statement*, 2007, acrylic on canvas, 70 x 70 in. (177.8 x 177.8 cm),
©D. Walsh. Courtesy of the artist and the Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

TB: You have said, "experience is better embodied" in a discussion about an early project you put together at Paula Cooper. Could you comment on this in relation to the many installations you have done, which use, and modify, and take into account existing architecture?

DW: That was a response to art in the late '80's that was so cerebral and notational. It sounds so idealistic, but as a joke I say now – "Whatever gets you through the night." That is a more appropriate state of mind these days for me. Looking back, I really was on a mission: I had an angle and thought I was right – now I would retract that so strongly. Not the idea that experience is better embodied, but I would delete the word "better". I'm not going to tell anyone else what to think. You could have a better experience in your head all your life, and it could be rich. At the time I was into the complete body experience, the complete physiological side of things. It just seemed richer to me. I was so sick of say, some of the surrealists – there would be puzzles, like Magritte. Of course everyone likes Magritte, but it is so in your mind, it's like mind games, parlor games. Definitely not what I was after. I was doing these taped wall things. I am still proud of that work. In my case, the big statement was making life-size models. Remember that show I did in the late '90's with the Lichtenstein in it? Wayne Gonzalez had a lot to do with that show. The whole interactivity thing was coming into play by the mid-nineties. Rita McBride did these bleachers, I loved them. I saw perception as bound to be a body experience. I mean you could be Robert Irwin doing those experiments in the '60's where they would be isolated in a room, lying down, and all you can see is black. Is that bodily? Yes. I'm just saying that kind of experience is bigger, and it is more real. That's my own thing, like I said, I can't tell other people mine is better.

TB: When you say full-size model, and you are talking about architecture, what that means to me is that you can enter that room, but when you are inside you are modifying it and become aware of what is going on with the architecture- you are aware of some things, you lose awareness of others. A model captures certain aspects of what is real but not all of them. A clay model of a car captures the form of a car, but you can't get inside.

DW: Like Charles Ray.

TB: Right. What I thought you were doing was isolating certain qualities in the room, these qualities came to the forefront, because of what you did to the room, say with the tape. The disruption makes us aware of everything.

DW: Right. One thing that was noticeable about that show I put together with Grosvenor, Gonzalez, Walsh, Lichtenstein and McBride was that it was very intimate. It was a real challenge for me. I knew the space by then, I knew it well, and I thought I made a giant cathedral space intimate with those lines. So it was kind of like: "It's real in the sense that you are looking at it, but it is kind of making fun of the reality of the direct perceptual situation by making it a model." I am no Gerhard Merz – who would do two years of study about the history of the building and make some kind of discrete and concise statement. I wouldn't have the patience for that kind of research, but by altering the space, there isn't any great realization going on, there is just an awareness of being there. Let's hope that if we were all developed people we would have that awareness anyway. It is kind of making things a little bit fun, making things a little bit intimate, a little bit comical. An awareness of looking at things. With that show I was able to make you aware of looking at things, but hey, it's only a model – but it is on such a great scale. I mean, here is an idea of architecture. Usually these installations are responses to other things going on around me. I was sick of these quotations, notations of things – (I said) "I'll give you a quotation". You have to look at it, you just can't pigeonhole this stuff. It's just a re-engaging of how you are looking at something. 7 Grays was a much more ambitious project as these things go. It was very controlled. It was something I was very proud of.

TB: Yeah it was very adventuresome. Whom are you thinking about these days in relation to your work?

DW: Actually I have been looking at late Seurat and I have thought a lot about Chris Martin's recent show. At first I was kind of disappointed that he didn't hang some bigger paintings which he is so famous for. He had so much under his belt with the formal development of his paintings, I was a bit caught off-guard that he went for a more "I'm bringing in all states of mind/pedestrian" approach, like he was saying "I'm not painting one train of thought here". That grew on me later, after I saw the show again. I always thought Chris and I were quite aligned and similar, but clearly now I'm realizing I have committed to a particular way of painting – I hate to use the word discipline, but I am afraid these are disciplined paintings.

TB: Absolutely.

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<http://www.whitehotmagazine.com/index.php?action=article...>

DW: I am able to reflect on myself through Chris's show. In general I also like Chris Wool's position – the paintings involve a kind of struggling, a frustrated "I can't get anywhere" elusive, erased, statement. I have always liked his position.

TB: *Comments on the climate in NYC for painting right now?*

DW: There is this non committal attitude – we are in a place where people say: "Oh we certainly can't make an ideal painting", and artists have laid-off the strong critical statement. Artists are happy to reflect culture now. At least Chris Martin has the experience to make a good pedestrian painting. There is a pervasive general historical amnesia. I am at the end of a generation that still feels obligated to pay my dues to history. I am envious of these younger painters. They can do anything, and everyone uses narratives, but it just reeks of conservatism to me, as if abstract painting isn't conservative enough already! We can all criticize each other for being conservative. I don't think anyone can claim they are not stuck with this problem of not getting outside of history. We are all feeling like we are giving into the activity, without...I was going to say: "I want to go out kicking and screaming" and I used to say that about myself. I would rather see someone fail and fall hard, fail with intense tries...and that must look pretty absurd nowadays. To see these kids act like everything is open and say: "Oh symbolism, what a great thing, never heard of it before", or German Expressionism for example. It is tricky...I mean, can anybody, myself included, get outside of this mediocrity in painting? I don't think it's possible to make a substantial painting anymore (in the spirit of Richter). But with that said, I'll say I'm certainly going to be hyper-aware of where I stand in relation to that mediocre state. I'm going to articulate, or come up against that idea- the idea that the mediocre is all we can make now. I don't think there are any great statements to be made with painting anymore either – no context is stable enough. We were talking before about rigor in the studio. I just put up a show. I worked very hard on it, I spent a lot of time in my studio, and it was a very meaningful experience. We were also talking about things going out in the world and gosh, how one's state of mind changes! You say: "This I supposed to mean something, I am supposed to be responsible for this. Or I am supposed to have made a development, or I am supposed to have progressed." Did I, or does it matter? Of course I expect all kinds of things in the studio but to talk of oneself historically now I say: "It has been an interesting journey, but am I affecting anything out there? Not really." I am just proving to myself I can stay alive, stay interested. This whole thing of being out in the public is becoming more and more of an issue...people just pretend the art world is intellectually robust. Economically, yeah. It would almost be better if something could affect us which we could all react against, and feel strongly about. I was saying to some friends recently: "Wouldn't it be great to actually believe in something?"



Dan Walsh, *To There*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 74 x 115 in. (188 x 292.1 cm), courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery
©D. Walsh. Courtesy of the artist and the Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

TB: *I think you are talking about the idealism you don't feel is available. You are mourning the loss of idealism. But I would say that for people who care about painting, you exemplify an attitude towards it, which we can all learn from. You offer us a sample of what it means to pay attention.*

DW: Yeah. So the best compliment I ever got was when a guy recognized me when I was traveling and said: "Yeah you're Dan Walsh, you make very sober paintings." If I am going to give myself any credit I'd say: "With intensity, I am trying to stand right in the middle of it in an honest, and in as vulnerable a way I can get, and paint. No smoke and mirrors, I am not trying to introduce distracting themes, or get into notating Goth references, or something (laughs). I'm trying to be honest and intense, standing in the middle of old turf.

TB: *That's where antique comes from, right?*

DW: It's a joke about my colours.

TB: *It's also a joke about "old turf", right?*

DW: Yeah. Ten years ago I actually thought my paintings were talking about the big painting culture, the state of things.

TB: *I think they are, though. Standing in the middle of history is the "state of things" for us. You choose to be there. It is a big commitment.*

DW: That is what I have decided to do. Am I going to claim it is the most meaningful position?

TB: *You claim it by your actions; you don't have to say it. When we go to see your paintings, we see your actions.*

DW: It is a weird contradictory time for me. Here I am, I'm sure these are the best paintings I have ever made. But I was so determined to be a good painter and make a concise statement but now whatever is concise is in the paintings, and it has nothing to do with my historical position anymore. I had to give up the specifics to get to that other place, so I always feel I am apologizing for what I gave up. But I think I have gained something.

TB: I do too.