

# **BROOKLYN RAIL**

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

**Art**

## IN CONVERSATION

# IN CONVERSATION: Dan Walsh WITH JOHN YAU

by John Yau

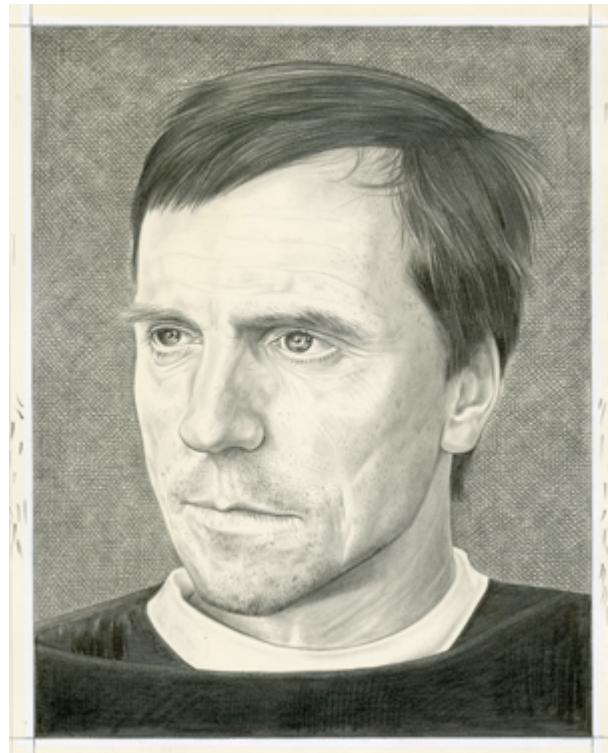
On the occasion of the painter's exhibit *Days And Nights*, which will remain on view at Paula Cooper Gallery (521 West 21st Street) through March 27, 2010, Dan Walsh welcomed Art Editor John Yau on site to talk about his life and the new group of paintings.

**John Yau (Rail):** Your work is incremental. You make a set of marks and then you make another set on top of that set. You always show the build up. You don't try to hide or cover it up. On one hand the approach is very deliberate, but on the other hand there is a let's see what happens if I do this on top of this.

**Dan Walsh:** I've always thought of myself as, not being a child, but playing in a sandbox, and very thoroughly. Since I come from the minimalist vein, I'd stick with my grids or my simple strokes, concentric squares or something like this. Yes, I'm letting them play. It's not reductive, it's additive. But I'm paying attention; I'm not like an early Sol LeWitt where I let something dictate and let it run. I was joking with my friend the other day, and said I feel like a cheating Sol LeWitt. I add things up or collect things, but you will notice, I don't mix and match too much. If I set something in motion, I'm looking to follow that possible intelligence in the painting.

**Rail:** To see where it will take you. It's also performative in a way.

**Walsh:** Yeah, that's interesting.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

**Rail:** The viewer apprehends the physical movement of the hand, the brush stroke, as well as the visual. The paintings are both, yet nothing's fetishized. It's very straightforward. Within that deliberateness, it's about concentration, about the act of concentrated looking and doing, a way of marking time.

**Walsh:** Yes, what we hit on before, which I think is interesting, is that it's actually a very concentrated process for me to make the paintings. On the other hand, over the years, what I decide is a good or bad effort is about a concentrated state of mind, which you are looking at.

When I have someone standing in front of my painting, I'd like to say that I've concentrated that individual's viewing experience, verging on the symbolic maybe. But I do get a lot out of my actions. There's also a whole spatial side to the painting. That's what I like about this painting, the way you look at it is very much about the process, just like you described, you think about how it's made, and then you realize there's a spatial component, there's a wall just there somewhere, maybe a sense of place. Although it's yellow paint, these greenish brushstrokes look like a woven wall or something, then you've got the black in between which is the more real, so that there may even be a contradiction going on. So it's a performance, but remember, in the end, if you get into the spatial side of this painting, you can forget about all that at the same time. And maybe that's not good.

**Rail:** Or maybe that's what you want. You said you wanted it both ways before. I mean, that you wanted this and you wanted that.

**Walsh:** But just to be clear, yes, I'm looking to go as far as I can, or expand, in my world, but if you get too spatial, then I lose your concentration, then you're going somewhere else. So that's where I draw the line. And I drew this line here, and maybe I would have painted more strokes over it like this other painting. I would have just kept going over and over it until I liked it. But this really worked out well. There's a space, but don't want to go into that, to fly away and be in another place. I want you to be standing here looking at the painting in the classic Minimalist sense. With that said, I like the word fictional. You know, is there anything real now? Can we really pin it down? If I say that this is a minimalist painting, can I force everyone to think that and believe that and look at it that way? I'd rather show the variety of experiences within a painting, and say things are possible, as opposed to saying it has to be this.

**Rail:** The Minimalist credo is what you see is what you see. Its insists on the factual, but we know that the reality you and I live in now, we don't even know what's factual anymore. I mean the world is factual and fictional; it's one reason why *The Matrix* was so popular. So in a way, your painting is saying: we live in this world and it's both factual and fictional and we can't go too much in the direction of fact, and we can't go too much in the direction of fiction. We have to find our way through that.



"Model" (2009). Acrylic on canvas, 55 x 90 inches.  
Courtesy of the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery.  
Photographed by Seth Erickson.

**Walsh:** Okay. I agree with that, but remember, I wouldn't draw this plan on paper and say this is where I'm trying to reflect culture. This painting is a result of me being exposed to a lot of painting, painting a lot of paintings. Rather than want the painting to mean something specifically here or socially there, I am trying to reveal painting's possibilities today with my conscience, you could say. It's not a social critique, I read this book and you know.

**Rail:** No, I don't think of your work as socially directed.

**Walsh:** In other words, that wasn't my goal. It's a relative goal, but this is what happened by me exposing myself again and again. Although I did bite into the idea of fictional quite a few years ago, we can't just say that something means something and it sticks. If it is, you're hanging on for your life. And that is not a good way to be thinking today and being in denial or escapism or whatever. So I'm just saying the ideas are there, whether, I can't say, okay, two parts fictional, you know, it doesn't work that way.

**Rail:** You're not formulaic.

**Walsh:** Well, I was conscious of the effect when I started putting the water in the paint, and that I would get these kinds of other spatial experiences in the paint.

**Rail:** Right. Transparencies and opacities.

**Walsh:** Yeah, transparencies. Sorry I feel like I jumped over some of your things. I missed some thoughts there. You said one other thing.

**Rail:** All right, we'll go back to incremental. Then I mentioned that you've always had a space in your work that you've played with, and explored what to put in that space, what that space is made of? And then there's the fact that the paintings are hung low because you want the viewer to be on this planet looking at this thing—it's not about transcendence, escape, any of those other things; fiction, illusion, transport. So it's a down-to-earth painting done in a down-to-earth way. There's nothing fancy in the way you make your moves, you don't show

off what you can do with your hand, right? And yet, all this stuff happens. Your paintings are neither dry nor mechanical.

**Walsh:** I appreciate what you were saying about the space. Before, I was really into the idea of historical space, and I would lay this object or diagram in the middle of this white field that looked like a piece of paper. One thing that I would say is very consistent about me is that I was always making a kind of stage set for looking at something. How symbolic or historical that was depends on where I was in my development, early on it was more of an idea on a painting, but I noticed that I got more interested in displaying things or showing them in an arena, I like that word, a place to look at something. But if you take the idea of symbolic exchange, which I still believe is a core Minimalist idea, even though what you see is what you see, I think it reflects back on the viewer very strongly, what they see, what they bring to it. The idea of use value, like how are you going to use this painting. As I said before, I'm not going to tell you how to use it, but it'll be a vehicle for thought or interaction. If you take that idea and with my conscience, I guess, or whatever I bring to the table. You know, anyone can think these ideas, these ideas are a dime a dozen, it's what I'm bringing to those words, I think it's pretty rich stuff. You know, my sensibility is Minimalist; it's concentrated.

**Rail:** Also, you were talking earlier about Tibetan mandalas and the belief in looking as a way to understand being and consciousness.

**Walsh:** Mandalas are guides for the students. Now, am I going to claim to tap that or anything, but I figure if you're concentrating, and again back to the Minimal format, if you're concentrating on something and cannot identify that something, you're getting there. Of course, that's the problem with this whole history thing, everyone has the word for it, or a definition, and they want to pigeonhole the damn thing every time, it's just how people are.

**Rail:** Well, it's interesting, because you used the word symbolic before but in another way.

**Walsh:** Symbolic without objects. There's something symbolic going on here.

**Rail:** Right, but without objects. Mondrian had a symbology—for him the vertical meant male and horizontal meant female.

**Walsh:** Mondrian—I can't think of a better painter, just a few. That was the time and that was the place. I don't think we think this way now but if you put a cross and cut the...yeah, that would mean something to me being born a Christian. But yeah, whatever terms you want, but don't tell the public what it's supposed to mean. We'll have readings of it but when I look at a Mondrian I don't think about that exactly.

**Rail:** I was getting back to the notion of the Tibetan mandalas. The great thing about Mondrian is whatever his relationship to theosophy was, and Carel Blotkamp says, it was strong right up to his death, he doesn't use inherited symbols. You are not using something

inherited, but you want to be in that place where you can use the word symbolic without saying this means that.

**Walsh:** The symbolic would be more in the form of the stage set—the setting of the painting, what goes on in it. I could just paint the setting of the experience of a painting every time and you would look right through it. I've done many of those paintings, one titled "Pediment." Where I just have two steps where you step into the space, fictionally speaking, or to emphasize the missing object of thought. But what I do with this, the painting in the end becomes the setting. The painting has to be part of it. Before, I felt like I was framing paintings and that would be the environment, but now I think it's more unified. I also have to be honest with myself, I have to entertain myself through this process, too. I guess I could make a painting that everyone would understand. Would that be didactic?

**Rail:** I don't think of you as a didactic artist.

**Walsh:** I'm saying I could be. This whole idea of relevance is becoming a bit of a joke. Relevance to me is back in the studio. Call me a throwback or a romantic, whatever.

**Rail:** What's the title of this?

**Walsh:** "Model." I like my generic titles.

**Rail:** Which is basically black and white on a gray base. It started with 15 circles as the grid.

**Walsh:** Right, 15 points in space.

**Rail:** And around each point you put the opposite color. So then it went black, white, black on a gray ground.

**Walsh:** With a one inch brush.

**Rail:** With a one inch brush. So black, white, black and you went around in free hand and then slowly it became something else. What would have been a simple set of steps as you kept adding to them it morphed into something else that you couldn't have predicted.

**Walsh:** If you think about my geometry, it can only get so complicated to the mind, and to the eye. I just kept following these squares, concentric squares outward and they started to overlap. It gave it this kind of aboriginal look that really surprised me.

**Rail:** And you didn't hide anything. The paint is transparent enough so you can see through it, and see that it's slowly built up.

**Walsh:** Yes, the transparencies allowed me to run past the logic of my last show of paintings.

There was a certain logic and stability to those paintings that started to, not haunt me, but, I felt a little like I was trapping myself into a finality. I had the structures set beforehand and so then I could just concentrate on the light and the color and the application of the paint. So I tried to let this show run a little, overcook them a bit. Let them run too long and see where that logic would take me. It has become the mantra of the show. Let some of these systems run on their own.

**Rail:** Right and see where they take you. At the same time, you have an eye for rules. [Both laugh.]

**Walsh:** These are simple things. These are not complicated rules. There are only so many squares here. There is a structure to hold on and concentrate. What would happen if I had a hundred squares here? If I had a five by 20 it wouldn't be the same. It would just be a field. You would not have that concentration.

**Rail:** Well in this painting—

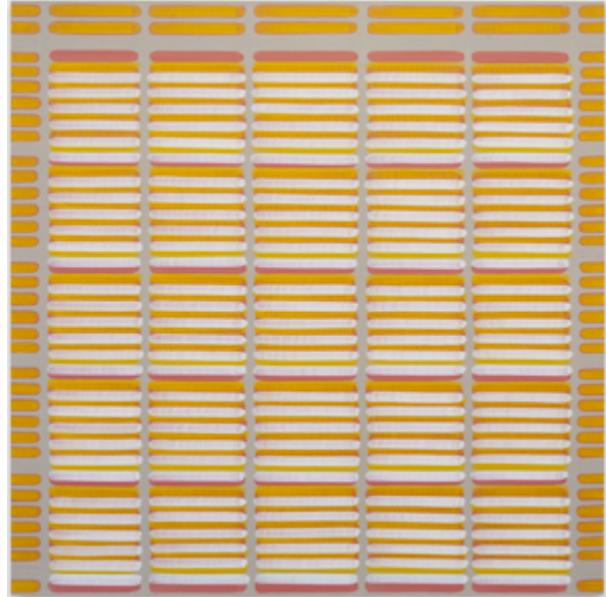
**Walsh:** You have fifteen and we have eight circles and twelve extensions through those circles. All these things—people can comprehend this. If it's too much, then it crosses into decoration, but I still feel like something serious happened. And also that's why I call it a good painting.

**Rail:** And there's also a tension between, say, the original circles and the concentric circles. Your eye goes back and forth. You can't say this and exclude that, there's always this play with peripheral vision, even though it's all concentrated and not on the periphery. It's seemingly straightforward but within that straightforwardness so much else happens.

**Walsh:** I'm certainly not trying to get too clever here. I'm trying to stand pretty straight up and basically be honest. I could say this is kind of clever, but, yes, what we talked about before, the system or the single logic, let it run, and I'm certainly not going to hide it. This just happens to be an extreme painting in the show. It's the kind of extreme result of this thinking here.

**Rail:** Doesn't it dare you to go further?

**Walsh:** Yeah. I tried to make another painting like this, and here's the problem. This was a wonderful result. I thought, wow, that's different for you, but the problem is once you have a system like this, once you know the result, what are you going to do? Set it up exactly the



"Crossed" (2009). Acrylic on canvas, 70 x 70 inches.  
Courtesy of the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery.  
Photographed by Seth Erickson.

same? So I have to trick myself onto a different logic. So I have a lot of trouble responding to this painting actually. It's obvious I should have made more of these paintings, but I wasn't just going to knock out another version of this.

**Rail:** At the same time, you can add one system or logic on top of another so that an interaction takes place among them that makes sense, but is not logical. Or it's logical, but it doesn't make sense. You can't decide on either conclusion; it's both.

**Walsh:** By occupying, occupying is too heavy of a word, by doing something thoroughly the illogical doesn't surprise anymore because you've been there. And all of a sudden it's another alternative within a framework that I am occupying. It's wiggling around. It's by knowing something, by working with some systems. I'm not saying I'm a complicated systems guy, but, by working with some objects, you flush out all the variations and it's not so unusual anymore. Just like—now I know this, I know what's going to happen. It's no longer a surprise.

**Rail:** So you can't go there again.

**Walsh:** Right. So what the people, the strangers looking at these paintings think and what I think could be two different things. Although artists historically try to convince people of something I need to convince myself of something. I don't need to have fun. But I do need to stay interested in what I'm doing here. I'm not just going to make something for consumption. Maybe a way to put this is that I am sharing my thoughts and actions with the public.

**Rail:** Well your process—

**Walsh:** I need these paintings, even if I know now what the answer is and therefore I can't go there anymore. I had to get through that or make that painting.

**Rail:** But your process has always been about attention. It's never mechanical. It's always the hand and the eye and yet it's never about fetishizing the hand and eye. It's very plain and declarative.

**Walsh:** I agree.

**Rail:** While you have talked about your relationship to Minimalism, I was thinking of Philip Glass, who builds structures out of repetitions and shifts. They are not simple. But I don't think of him as a minimalist. To me there's a very tangled set of impulses that you bring to this world.

**Walsh:** I wouldn't call myself a minimalist. I'm just saying that's definitely where I come from. It's a still object that is relatively passive and draws the psychology of the viewer to the matter at hand, to the object or the painting. I would say from that point on, yeah, maybe I

am a maximalist, or whatever that means but yes, my core ideas for years has been to slow it down, gather concentration for viewers looking at this.

**Rail:** Okay, let's talk about this painting which is technically red, yellow, and blue.

**Walsh:** In the jar, in the jar.

**Rail:** In the jar, it's red, yellow, and blue. On one hand the surface glows like a screen or monitor. The way you use the surface, it's not always a hard-flat thing. It changes; it's optical, it's about light. Then there's the architectural repetition. Mayan facades. Some odd association flips into my head. So there are two things going on which are seemingly contradictory—a hard, repetitive façade, and a screen full of light. That tells me that you don't have a set notion of what the plane is that you are painting on. You are finding out what it is. You don't always know what's going to happen when you put the paint on.

**Walsh:** Right. But let's just say that I'm always a painter of space, of what I consider shallow space, more mental space versus the illusionistic or, dare I say, pictorial space. I like the term retinal space. How one would *read* a space where they feel the pictorial space of de Kooning which were supposed to average around six inches deep and it's very intense. In my painting, it's on the surface, but you can read it deep. It could be an illusion of a surface maybe. But you would never think of it as a deep space. The space is malleable in your eyes. I don't think it's far from some kind of conception of the space as the surface of the painting. So what I'm saying is that it's not some grand plan. I'm just trying to stretch out the vocabulary and see what's possible. At the same time, it's never far from what is an image of a space of the surface of the painting, let's say. In other words, I would be horrified if someone told me that I wasn't in control of my picture plane. It's my main accomplishment, if I could say that.

**Rail:** Mental space, let's talk about that.

**Walsh:** We were talking about the Tibetan mandalas and I think of that as mental space.

**Rail:** Mental space. Space for contemplation, for reflection, thinking, what is it to think, what is subjectivity, what is objectivity?

**Walsh:** Don't scare me now [*laughs*.]

**Rail:** I think in these paintings there is a play with subjectivity and objectivity that is neither X nor Y, by which I mean they aren't ideological. There's a play with those positions.

**Walsh:** Well, that feeds into what we were saying before about setting up the symbolic encounter. Let's bisect that once and say, you have my objectivity and my subjectivity and you have the viewers' objectivity and their subjectivity. I am an absolute believer in the idea of sensibility in that one has to engage, quote unquote "objective critical world," and that's

already a vote for relative subjectivity. Although perfect objectivity of course does not exist, I would say I am trying to find forms to get people involved with my paintings. I have to chart a relatively objective course, in this case a grid, some lines, something known, so you could work with me, and you trick them into working with the painting. I'd like to think I'm occupying some ground in-between these states—how that is objective for me, how it is subjective for me, what is objective for the viewer, and what is subjective. I agree, they are flexible. I never thought about the paintings that way.

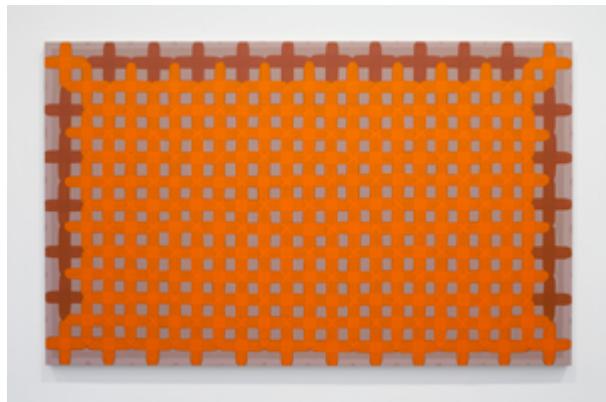
**Rail:** Two things occur to me. One is that from here, some thirty feet from the painting, you see one thing, but as you move closer you see where the strokes end and another kind of thing happens because of the overlapping of four strokes, which is a flower-like shape. So then we have to think about how do we see. You make us conscious of that, but not in some didactic or hectoring way. We become aware that seeing exists along a continuum. You might say there is something ethical going on in these works. If you meet someone, do you know or not know them? However well you begin to know them, do you acknowledge that there will always be something about them that is not known? Let's say that that's something that happens with these paintings because as much as we know them, see how they are made, what they are made of, what the materiality of the paint is, there is no overt reference that grounds the viewer. So we are left in that space of knowing and not knowing, and can we live with that? Is what you meant when you said earlier "my paintings are not about culture in this way or that way?" They are not about being representative of some cultural question I'm trying to answer. You want to leave the conversation between the painting and the viewer open.

**Walsh:** Right, definitely. With all these potential complications in these paintings a goal of mine for many years had been familiarity. Let's have a conversation; let's have a dialogue. Now where do I take you with that dialogue. That's where it has gotten a little tricky. I have always tried to take a neutral stance under complex situations. I think this painting occupies a neutral zone as you proposed, but I'm letting the method dictate some of the imagery. But again, I'm a good editor of this. These are carefully chosen or vetoed or changed or—I still think it occupies that neutral zone.

**Rail:** That's an interesting way of saying it. What do you mean by neutral?

**Walsh:** I'm not going to tell you about something relatively dramatic. Actions were taken in this painting but it's neutral in the sense that it is still minding its own business in a way. It's looking for interaction but it doesn't have an expression.

**Rail:** It's self-contained, but it's open.



"Landing" (2010). Acrylic on canvas, 55 x 90 inches.  
Courtesy of the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery.  
Photographed by Seth Erickson.

**Walsh:** Yeah. It's very aware of itself, of its responsibilities. I have taken my responsibilities.

**Rail:** And now can you take yours?

**Walsh:** Getting back to the ethical—that's asking a lot. But yes, I would say these are pushing up harder and harder against that line. The paintings' responsibility to the public as to what is brought to it. It's very aware, it's like a personality. It's very aware of how far it's projected into the space. As an expression, as a concept and of course for these to work the way I proposed earlier I can't take it so far and start using God references. Rigor can get so tiresome, I don't blame some abstract painters' for expanding, like Guston. But I find that's what makes abstract painting so interesting is exactly this collapsing point, this vacuum. Flexibility is key.

**Rail:** Well, the thing that interests me about this work is that every mark, you have a respect for that and you let it stand there. Even if you put something over it, or you go around it, you don't really deny its existence. There's something almost religious about it, a respect for everything there.

**Walsh:** Anyone who knows me on a more personal level knows I'm heavily into efficiency. Every painter I know thinks about Stella and how he just occupied the surface of the canvas.

**Rail:** Of the black paintings up through '65 or so.

**Walsh:** One thing I shared with you before, maybe off the recording, is that I had an ongoing embarrassment about how I painted my paintings. But I refused to go into either the quotational or historical method. I want to be honest about the approach. Once I started overlapping and finding the order, the kind of structure, for these marks to sit in, I felt very comfortable and unencumbered. I think maybe that's a word for the show: unencumbered. I felt like I found the beginning and the end of the strings. It would either be the concentric or simple horizontal strokes, for example, but they would end in very particular places. So the discipline to make these paintings is heightened. Also, I feel like I have found a way to work openly, like my vocabulary has expanded because of that. I look at this grid painting. See how everything ends? I think that is the most interesting part of the painting, exactly where those endings are. You know how they join. Needless to say I learn what's going to happen at these crosses. But that was a wonderful surprise in this painting. Just to be clear, there is a kind of, I would use the word discipline, there is a concentration—we always talked about people needing to concentrate to look at these paintings. I have a lot of concentration I have to bring when I'm in these paintings.

**Rail:** I think the thing that's interesting for you, but also for the viewer is that there are surprises within this system. Your eye goes back and forth as it shifts around. How does the mind find, what does it do in thinking? It expands, it contracts, it follows your eye. And

there's a wonderful sense that it's all-important and everything in it is important. And you can't say it is this or that. You have to take in both.

**Walsh:** That's a very nice read. I like it a lot. What I was thinking about more is when you see those dots and you see those joints that I was telling you about, those would jump forward and give you a different view than the inner grid squares. But, again, to claim that one of these paintings is how you describe it, which sounds good to me, there can't be too much of a dynamic of push pull. There can't be any of the space where you see one or see the other. There has to be both and there has to be less dramatic shifts, it has to be subtler. And there are four or five different things you concentrate on. It can't just be two.

**Rail:** No, no it's not just two.

**Walsh:** It has to be subtle in that way. You could misinterpret that position by saying, it is a historical position, yes, it's deep in history. There are no complexities. It's just there in space.

**Rail:** Being that this painting is one brush stroke. It's not just two things happening. That was what we were talking about in the beginning. It's a bunch of things happening.

**Walsh:** You have to watch out for the really clear one statement. Be it spatial or mark making—certainly you're not hedging your bets but you have to. Again it's an ongoing thing. It is my sensibility over many years. I didn't write it out on a piece of paper. But it is, lets just say if you want to make something very clear, if you want to make one statement very clear in a painting, lets say the idea of push-pull, you left out a lot of other stuff. So, how do you get to find that place where many things are included but nothing is excluded. And so, that's why I go back to this idea of the sandbox. Just play well. And count on your experience as a painter. I don't come in and say this painting will be about this today. Or maybe I'll work on some short strokes today.

**Rail:** So you don't have a plan when you make the painting.

**Walsh:** I say this because whenever I am about to start a painting, I change my mind every five minutes. Strangely, in this show, the color was the first thought. But, if I'm going to start a painting, I'm either working on a sister painting or I'm starting with a variation in mind. For example, there is another painting like this, that's a little more organic then the second version, I tend to work in pairs just to get the opposite feeling off of things.

**Rail:** Gravity plays a part in this painting. That has been true of your work since the beginning. That's like an acknowledgment of the human.

**Walsh:** And hanging the paintings low. Well I really played that back in the mid to late 90s.

**Rail:** They were like six inches off the ground.

**Walsh:** Like the paintings were hanging down, had weight. I feel like that is less the case today. Because it is occupying the surface of the painting so thoroughly, almost to the point of pattern. That gravity I employed is much harder to get at. So, that is maybe one of the things I am addressing with the special project, *Days and Nights*. This was a bit of a novelty idea when I first thought of it. To say, okay here's my laboratory. I even painted a funny decorative frame around it to make it look like a panorama at the national history museum. But it's saying that this is my vocabulary, this is how I spend my days and nights. And this produces the work in the other room. It's not as complicated as it seems. But look how complicated it gets with different backgrounds. They are the same colors, a little more pigment, but the same color on tonally opposite backgrounds. It's my index, or my key. I had these especially made to fit the two walls end to end. It's the same exact image; this is the one time I used guides to lay it out. It's the same; it's almost exactly the same on a different background, that's all it is. The only difference is the plinths and the light bulbs—adjustments were made for them to sit in their respective backgrounds. But I wanted to show my vocabulary, that this is where it's coming from. It's kind of revealing—I wanted to reveal my method, my tools of the trade so to speak.

**Rail:** I understand that. I had the thought that you were daring yourself to do this to see what would happen. And also, it dares you for the future. Well, what do you do after this—and it doesn't point to anything obvious.

**Walsh:** I could joke and be tongue in cheek and say, oh, it's just an idea. But this is where I am. These are my vaguely familiar names. I feel like this could be my future and I'm not going to hide it. Historically, for me, as these project rooms go; I always intended to make a critique of myself, to try to objectify myself. I think of my bookmaking. Now, did I ever really succeed? It doesn't seem to matter, because only by wearing out a form and their variations do I move on. I'm here, I'm standing here, I'm not trying to trick anybody.