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Transcript: Art and Desire with Walter Robinson

Guest Walter Robinson with host Charlotte Burns

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Charlotte Burns: Hello and welcome to In Other Words. I'm your host Charlotte Burns and today we have Walter Robinson in the studio.

Walter Robinson: Hi, Charlotte.

Charlotte Burns: Walter, you've had many lives. You were the founding editor of Artnet. You had a great deal of recognition as an artist in the 1980s. You were associated with the Pictures Generation. You made nurse paintings before Richard Prince. You made spin paintings before Damien Hirst and then you stopped painting in the 1980s. You had resurgence in the last few years, and now you're a full-time painter once again.

What is it like to be known as an artist again after decades of being known as a journalist?

Walter Robinson: Well, it's terrific. It's a lot of fun to get up and go to work. Before, when I worked as an art writer, I was an editor at Artnet Magazine from 1996 to 2012. I would get up early in the morning, rush into the office and get a lot of things done. That's what made me happy. Now, I'm a painter. I go into the studio late, and I sit around all day goofing off.

Charlotte Burns: But that's not true, Walter. You are very productive. Your social media feed is just art, art, art. You get out and you do a lot.

You told me last time I interviewed you that you had trained yourself to like things that are bad. You said: "My whole position is that it's what I think about it, not what it is. You can have really interesting thoughts about bad art." You said you wanted your own art to look good, and to look strange. "What I do isn't strange looking, and I regret that. But what I do appeals to children. I like that. You can't have both."

Walter Robinson: I almost became a painter of children and family life, sort of like Alex Katz, painting Ada. When my daughter, who's now 35, was two or three years old, I made many portraits of her, and I made portraits of her mother, and I had a show of those at Metro Pictures back in, I suppose, '85 or something. It was very much of a family event. I also painted pictures of her favorite toys. I was looking for some pure sense of authenticity.

Back in the '80s, it was all about how everything was a construction, that nothing was natural. So, I was looking for an attachment that was biological or pure or unmediated, which is of course impossible, but I thought my feelings about my daughter and the feelings she had about her toys was as close to evolutionary transcendence as you could get.

I was so nervous at the opening. I was petrified of the idea of greeting everybody with the same words, so I had them set up a little bar, and I made martinis so everybody who came in and said: "It was a great show," I could say,: "Could I make you a martini?" It became very popular in my circle because everybody went home drunk, and of course, at the end of the day, I got all the pictures back because, who wants a painting of somebody else's little kid?

Charlotte Burns: Were you more nervous about showing those works than other works that were more cynical?

Walter Robinson: No. Back in the '80s, instead of focusing on building a career as a painter, I looked at every exhibition as a project where I would try to come up with some idea of a subject to paint. That particular exhibition was the portraits of my daughter. I did another one at a different gallery, which were paintings from my honeymoon, pictures of my wife and the landscape of Yucatán, which is where we went. That show included the first ever nude flossing her teeth in Western art history. I'm very proud of that. There are lots of nudes, but that's the first one flossing her teeth. There is also a nude of her wearing her wedding band. I like the idea of a nude with a wedding band.

The different shows I would think of as different projects. It's only now, 30 years later, that I'm more focused in terms of building an ongoing career.

Charlotte Burns: How are you doing it differently this time around?

Walter Robinson: I don't know, actually. One of the things I did back in the '80s was say yes to everybody. So, I was showing with three different galleries at the same time, and there was maybe the suggestion that I should have been more loyal to Metro Pictures.

The important thing is I suppose if you're talking in terms of career, is that in 1986, I somehow lost my mojo. I became a single father, and I started working harder as a writer and a critic. I got a little bit disillusioned with what is required to hustle in the art world, and so I stopped working towards an exhibition. And if you want to be a player in the art business, I think you need to be working towards an exhibition at all times.

Charlotte Burns: You were also making the TV dinners at that stage, works I look at and I think they speak to an unbearable loneliness. Do you think that was part of your decision to stop making these works? It seems to me that they must have been somewhat difficult to make.

Walter Robinson: It's interesting you say that because my Carla McCormick characterized them at the time as really depressing. For some reason, I didn't show them. I kind of regret it. I wasn't thinking of myself as lonely and depressed, but my wife had just been sick and died. Maybe if you believe in the subterranean currents, maybe it emerged that way. I thought of them as a funny way to make a still life. People paint flowers in vases and apples on a tablecloth. I thought: "Why not paint TV dinners?" I was trying to paint them in the way that Cézanne painted. I thought that was amusing.

Charlotte Burns: It seemed to me that your work is somewhat autobiographical. You were talking earlier about your family and toys period. Those works, when I look at them, look very different in what they radiate than the TV dinners. Those works are about love and family and something bigger than the self, and TV dinners seem like a slightly more reduced universe.

Walter Robinson: Yes, arguably. To me, the paintings are always about the meaning of the sign. They're all signs that are read in some particular way. And they're also about desire. A lot of the pictures are about desire and feeling and emotion. Maybe TV dinners are kind of an atrophy because of that. But right around the same period, I made the spin paintings also because I wanted to have an abstract line. I always loved the abstract painting of the Washington Color School. One of the first shows I really remember was a show called "Color and Structure" at the Whitney Museum. It's kind of lost to time, but it had artists like [Frank] Stella in it and Robert Swain, if anybody remembers him. He was a great color painter.

The problem was figuring out a way to make an abstract painting that hadn't been done before. Instead of coming up with an idea that seemed new, I came up with an idea that was hackneyed, and that's the spin machine. I could joke like Joseph Beuys would say he made his first artwork with blood and wadding when he was six months old. I could joke I made my first spin painting in Ocean City, New Jersey on the boardwalk in 1958 because the origins of the little spin machine must be buried somewhere in a popular reaction to abstract expressionism. I don't know if it's every written down. I've never seen anything about a man claiming to have invented this machine. So, I made maybe 50 spin paintings, showed them in the basement gallery at Metro Pictures in 1986. Sold one, got all the rest back. That's the good thing about being a failed artist. You get all your works back.

Charlotte Burns: I don't think we can call you a failed artist. Do you think you had a problem taking yourself seriously? So many things were jokes or puns.

Walter Robinson: Yes, well, you know, Freud wrote that essay "[The Joke] and [Its] Relation to the Unconscious". There's real psychological truth behind humor. The art world is such a ridiculous place, and it requires that it all be taken so seriously.

Charlotte Burns: Well, it is serious to the extent that you spend your days making art. That's how you spend your time. That's how you live your life. The industry may be silly, people may be silly, but art can be important.

Walter Robinson: It's definitely some kind of elemental part of human consciousness. It is funny to try to imagine where it all comes from. Why do we like paint as a substance? It has certain appeal, like to most people who like painting. The texture and the body and the—

Charlotte Burns: The viscose.

Walter Robinson: —the sense relation to it. Why do we like that? What's the point of that? Where does that come from? Is that somehow buried in our primal brains, or what? If you think about art in general, I guess it begins with body decoration, and then it moves on to signs of status, and from the very earliest age, earliest times, it has uncanny skill. I think that's also very important. You can put that in the algorithm.

Right now I am working on an essay on artificial intelligence.

Charlotte Burns: What are you writing about?

Walter Robinson: You know how the question is that everybody is wondering when a computer will become like a human being? My thesis is that people are already computers.

Charlotte Burns: Do you think that humans are rational enough to be like computers?

Walter Robinson: Well, if you think about artificial intelligence and deep learning and the notion of an algorithm, you can look back to an artist like Sol LeWitt and all the other minimalists who are very clearly using rules to generate their art. That's the basis of artificial intelligence.

If you consider going to all the auctions and all the galleries, pour all that data into the artificial intelligence that is the human brain, and then it can produce avant garde art.

Charlotte Burns: I don't know if that algorithm works because we've been doing that for a while and I don't know that we're in a period of terrifically avant garde art. Shouldn't this be the apotheosis? There have been so many art fairs and auctions and events and biennials. Shouldn't we, therefore, following your logic, be at a period of incredibly radical avant garde productivity?

Walter Robinson: Well, the dataset constantly increases. The body of the article would be talking about all the different variables that you'd want to enter to produce, like your generic contemporary art. I had the idea at the Art Unlimited Exhibition at Art Basel in June.

Charlotte Burns: Oh, I see what you mean. So, you mean I want some large art. I want some abstract art. I want some figurative, melancholy portraits of females.

Walter Robinson: Right. For instance, another variable is a rediscovery of overlooked artists who were better known in the ’50s or ’70s, and it’s since been forgotten so, it’s a mini renaissance for these older artists.

Charlotte Burns: But wouldn’t the flaw of this be that the more old stuff you feed in, the more old stuff you’re going to get? Where does the new come in?

Walter Robinson: Well, that’s part of the problem. You have to somehow figure a variable that would break all the rules because that’s what we do in the avant garde business. We break all the rules.

Charlotte Burns: You would have to a function a rational intelligence that was capable of disrupting its own self.

Walter Robinson: The whole premise is kind of a joke since basically AI wants your job, and that’s the punch line. Now I don’t have to write the article since I’ve mapped it out here.

Charlotte Burns: Well, it seems like you didn’t want to write anyway. You said you’re enjoying goofing off.

Walter Robinson: Yes. It’s such a proble, you know. I have a choice between sitting in front of a computer wrestling with ideas or going to my studio and—

Charlotte Burns: Wrestling with ideas.

Walter Robinson: —playing with the paint and making pictures.

Charlotte Burns: Well, you’re still wrestling ideas in your art. When I first interviewed you for The Guardian newspaper. I remember you talking to me about the ideology of the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser. You said to me: “In a sense, art’s function is to confirm to us that we are in fact individual subjects which we are, but ideology underlines us and motivates us. So, in the same way that TV dinners look like real food but come out of a factory, ideology produces subjectivity. We’re all really the same people.” This is linked to what you’re saying essentially, which is artificial intelligence. We’re already kind of there. We’re already uniformed.

Walter Robinson: It’s so amusing that Althusserian Marxism has this parallel with AI and deep learning. I love that. That’s very funny.

Charlotte Burns: Well, I think it’s how you interpret it. You were talking to me, about this idea that we’re all the same, that there’s a homogeneity to people, and that’s something you explore in your art because you paint the same things over and over again whether that’s burgers, or beer, or babes, or salads, or whatever it is that you’re focusing on. It could be a shirt. You paint things in serial, and that’s the link I made was that these things were connected in your art. Your thinking about homogeneity was connected to your painting similar subjects over and again.

Walter Robinson: Well, one of the funny things about art is that it’s supposedly embodies imagination and freedom and individuality and yet every artist has a brand, and they just do the same thing over and over again. These days there’s a lot more resistance against it, and you have a lot of artists who are working in a wider variety of modes. If you think of Gerhard Richter, he’s made all kinds of paintings. Abstract, and figurative, and realist, and expressionist, so he’s a good example. These days, all kinds of artists will work in all kinds of modes.

Charlotte Burns: It also seems to me to that this is a time in which you can have the opposite. You can have massive studios in which the artists have very little to do with overseeing the production. And you can also have artists working in really small-scale on their own, pursuing monomaniacal obsessions.

Walter Robinson: Well, we do work in this zone that seems to give us infinite amount of freedom. I feel a lot of pressure to scale up. The institutions kind of demand it. I much prefer working small.

Charlotte Burns: They’re roughly around the size of—

Walter Robinson: 9×12 is my favorite size on paper because I can work fast, and they don’t take up much storage space.

Charlotte Burns: Why is there such a pressure to go big?

Walter Robinson: You can blame on the institutions because their spaces are all so large.

Charlotte Burns: Right.

Walter Robinson: And they just sort of demand display scale. Our entire architectural culture is gargantuan. Brobdingnagian. It’s huge. Everything is scaled up. Of course you can work small, and the museums and galleries allow that as well. You can go either way. But there’s something really appealing about pushing the limits, right? Be big or go home.

Charlotte Brurns: So, maybe the pressure that you're feeling to scale up is coming from the increasing demand for your work.

Walter Robinson: Well, you know, as an artist you can always be a real refusenik. You can insist on what you want, that's what artists are supposed to do. They're supposed to resist all pressures.

Charlotte Burns: Was it difficult for you in those intervening years to write about your peers and their success? Or were you proud of them? Did you feel mixed emotions?

Walter Robinson: No, well my position and my psychology did affect the way I approached things. I think I trended away from the hagiography that characterizes a lot of art writing. For instance, I wasn't really interested in writing long profiles. Of course, I did write things that were celebratory of artists that I liked and whose work that I liked, or people who were friends. I'm not known for writing negative articles.

Even the Zombie Formalism article just was trying to be witty. I wasn't trying to kill off an art movement. I actually liked it. If you think of the spin paintings, they're typical of Zombie Formalism. You have a machine, a method, and that makes the paintings.

Charlotte Burns: Right.

Walter Robinson: So, I wasn't really against it. It's funny. You can have a lot of conflicted emotions when you look at art works, no matter who you are. Right? It's really mixed. The notion of a pure disinterested aesthetic appreciation that—who was it?—Kant was looking for, is really hard to come by.

I would rather much more be completely compromised. Otherwise, you're only writing about art that you hate. Like many critics aren't allowed, you're not allowed—publications don't want you to write about your friends. You can only write about people you don't know, only write about people you hate. Art you don't like. You can only write about art you don't like. Because if you like it, you're compromised. But anyway, that doesn't really matter.

Charlotte Burns: So, you didn't really answer the question of whether it was hard for you to write about your peers having success.

Walter Robinson: Well, my peers.

Charlotte Burns: When you were feeling like you were a failed artist, was it difficult to watch other people gain recognition?

Walter Robinson: I didn't really feel like I was a failed artist as far as how you measure yourself in terms of your success.

Charlotte Burns: I'm only saying failed artist, because you said that earlier.

Walter Robinson: Yes, but it was kind of as a joke. What was the context I used it in?

Charlotte Burns: You said: "The great thing about being a failed artist, is—"

Walter Robinson: Is you get the works back.

Charlotte Burns: Right.

Walter Robinson: That is an advantage. Because an artist always wants to keep everything, it's hard to let things go.

But I don't know. To be honest, I'd say that I like figurative art, and I also like conceptual art. I like things that are gestures. So, I'm a fan of Eric Fischl, Elizabeth Peyton and John Kern. Whether I wrote anything one way or another about them, I don't really even think I did. I wrote very much about what was going on. I was much more into short takes than I was into long profiles and stuff. So, it didn't really come up. Who did I resist?

As an editor, I had all these other writers to do all that for me. Very opinionated writers, like Jerry Saltz. I would reprint his stuff, or Donald Kuspit, who was a great influence on me as a thinker. They all had opinions, very strong opinions. Charlie Finch.

Charlotte Burns: It seems that in there has been a resurgence of interest in art of the 1980s. We're also seeing more shows in galleries and museums. The Whitney just had that show. You were on that great picture of The New York Times. They took a picture of lots of the artists from the 1980s.

Walter Robinson: Yes.

Charlotte Burns: Why is it that people are revisiting that? Is that just a generational thing? That we like to go backwards

every now and then?

Walter Robinson: It could be, yes. I think as the art world expands, you have more people looking more material. So, in a sense, the overlooked artists of the '80's are kind of the same kind of fresh material that say new art is.

I think that's the most obvious mechanism. People looking for fresh material. So, the show at the Whitney was specifically described as that. What's it called? "Art of the '80s" or something? So, they put in artists that hadn't been show at the Whitney and weren't in the collection. People like me and Kathe Burkhart. We were side by side.

Charlotte Burns: Yes

Walter Robinson: So, that was new and fresh, and in a sense, it's like plugging gaps because we were both present back in the '80s, we just didn't get that kind of success. But I think the fall off of the market success of Neo-Expressionism is a really interesting phenomenon. They were so important in the '80s and such a strong force. Even now, I think their prices are not as strong as other artists—Cindy Sherman, Jeff Koons, Richard Prince, who are all '80s artists, they're just not Neo-Expressionist.

Charlotte Burns: Exactly.

Walter Robinson: I don't really know how to explain it. There were a lot of critical attacks on Neo-Expressionism from the intellectual left as being phony, but that was part of the attack on any kind of notion of an authentic self that was being expressed.

Charlotte Burns: Someone said to me that—

Walter Robinson: People have forgotten that I suppose.

Charlotte Burns: —when people talk to you about your art now, do they want work from the '80s or they're happy to look at more new things?

Walter Robinson: Well, this is something that any artist will be tortured by. People want early works. The collectors always want early works, and your job as an artist to convince them to get the new work.

The interesting thing for me is that I have these groups of paintings, these series that I'm really interested in, but they don't sell. One group of paintings is these figure paintings from newspaper advertisements and from emails. It's my normcore line from ads for Macy's or Lands' End. It's fashion. I just like the notion of a consumer utopia. Because for all the problems we have in the real society, consumerism—the image of our society presented by these large companies who are selling us stuff—that's very positive, and I like that.

You'll have an advertisement for jeans, and it shows five people and they're all wearing jeans, and it's a white guy and then a black guy, and three women, I think one of them is Asian, one of them blond. So, it's five people all wearing jeans, and to me it's like a secret advertisement for polyamory. Lands' End has this advertising program called "Family and Friends". They'll be a bunch of Wasps, my people, and they'll be three or four women and one or two men, whole bunch of kids, and it's so primal. It's like a clan of the cave bear with patriarch and his extended family. I love that. So, is it like this secret meaning? I don't know, is it just a joke? Maybe it's just a joke.

Charlotte Burns: With your art, it's always seemed to me—you were talking about desire and you always paint objects or objectification, whether that's a burger or objects that epitomize consumer desire, jar of Vaseline, beer, people who sell their bodies as though they were objects and are consumed by others. When does the person become an object?

Walter Robinson: Well it's always a little bit about the market. The normcore paintings, those models are always selling. They're always looking right at you. Barbara Kruger talks about direct address. Jenny Holzer with her statements, they're direct addressed to the viewers. So, I'm an '80s artist and these paintings have this kind of direct address also. That polyamory painting is people selling blue jeans, and I kind of like that because the painting is selling and the image has already been pre-tested by the marketing department of the corporation that is inflicting that image on us. Typically, we throw it away. I wanted to save it, I wanted to steal it from the corporation and use it for myself, or use it for us, if I speak for the consumer. So, I'm going to steal it back.

So, that amuses me, to take these advertising images and turn them into fine art. You can say: "Well, they want to be art, right?" They're anonymous advertising images, and I want to show respect to the creative people who devised them. But the pictures of cheeseburgers are all designed to sell cheeseburgers. They're not real cheeseburgers; they're fake cheeseburgers. They look quite different than the actual cheeseburger you would buy. They're selling themselves, too. I like that. I want to piggyback on that kind of popular culture. I could be the artist who paints cheeseburgers. I could see an advertisement in Artforum. "Walter Robinson—" instead of saying: "New paintings", they could say: "Walter Robinson: New Cheeseburgers." That would be funny.

Charlotte Burns: But you're ons alads now, aren't you?

Walter Robinson: Yes. Well, I got the idea for the salad paintings from my niece who's into this health business, and she goes on the Internet and she sells these shakes and she has people work out and she gives them pep talks. I'm reading these pep talks that she's writing, and I'm thinking: "That kind of language has never appeared in the art world." I want to use that language. I want to make healthy paintings. I have all these unhealthy paintings, paintings that are, gosh, about emotional drama and about bad food that's bad for you. Cake. I like to paint desserts. I'll make some healthy paintings of salads.

That's why I've been studying these women Abstract Expressionists because their brushstrokes look like pieces of lettuce. Lettuce is the natural nature's brushstroke, don't you think? And then you think of salads. Where does the salad even come from? They aren't any Old Master salads. We're in a new age of salad making.

Charlotte Burns: It's always struck me that your work is sly and sincere at once. Do you think that's fair?

Walter Robinson: Well, that's very, very nice. It's funny because my stuff is both very ordinary, very normal, very obvious, and I like to think that it has some kind of philosophical meaning. You're thrown as a young artist—you're thrown into this world where everybody's being individual and original and fabulous and great and different from each other. So, what I struck on was being different by not being different, by being ordinary, by being normcore. So, I kind of like that.

Charlotte Burns: Normcore didn't exist in the 1980s, but maybe you pioneered it.

Walter Robinson: Well, you just make stuff. Artists follow their whims I think. A lot of artists today, if you go to talk to kids in art school, they have it all figured out and they write long, theoretical statements about their work. For me it was completely different.

Charlotte Burns: So, why do you paint things in serials?

Walter Robinson: Why do I? I guess a long time ago as a sort of Post-Modernist kind of quip, I wanted to paint all different modes. I wanted to paint still lifes and portraits and abstracts. And I didn't want to be inhibited. I actually saw a show in the '70s in Germany of Richter, and sort of took inspirations from that. There was also a show, Polke, where he had blocked off the exhibition area and made viewers go up to the mezzanine to look at the pictures, which weren't hung on the wall but rather scattered all over the floor of the space in the vague shape of a giant swastika. I haven't gone there, though.

But it's just been sort of organic. Maybe the same thing that made want to write art criticism, because as an art critic, you're in the business of looking for new things and championing the new. As an art critic, you get to talk about a lot of different things. And as an artist, an individual artist, you usually talk about one thing, yourself and your work. And you can only do the same thing so long before it gets a little tedious.

Charlotte Burns: Right.

Walter Robinson: So, maybe I'm too ADD to work in the same vein, but the downside of that is, you can seem like a dilettante if you change style a lot. But another artist that who we just saw in an exhibition here who changed regularly, and did one fabulous thing after another, was Picabia. He'd do a huge body of work, maybe in one locale, then he'd move and do a completely different body of work in a different locale. That's awesome.

Charlotte Burns: Well, it is. And you mentioned Polke, who did a similar thing. We've done market analysis of both artists for In Other Words, and the common thread seems to be that artists who work in such diverse styles are not easily understood by the market.

You talk about Richter and talk about how diverse his output is. The market seems to focus on small bodies of work that it recognizes, and moving beyond that takes a little bit of time. Really radical, diffuse production is less easy to wrap your head around.

Walter Robinson: It's true what you say. I had an art dealer, Hans Neuendorf, who founded Artnet, come to my studio and tell me that collectors would be confused. You have to give them something simple that they can recognize. In my case, the kind of romantic, dramatic images I was painting, copying, pulp paperback covers from the '40s and '50s. That kind of romance imagery, that would be my trademark, and then once that's established, he said: "Then you can branch out into other forms of imagery."

As it's happened, the romance paintings that I make are the most in-demand.

Charlotte Burns: Those paintings are the works that in 2008 Metro Pictures showed, and the sales allowed you to rent a studio. So, this revitalized career, it's sort of owed to them in a way, isn't it? That demand.

Walter Robinson: Well, my revived career is definitely because of Helene Winer, the dealer at Metro Pictures who called me up and invited me to do the show in 2008. Said it would be fun. “Do you have any of your old paintings from the ’80s?” And they did quite well. They sold a lot of works to their collector, and that launched the whole thing. That’s when I got a studio in Long Island City, because I had a little extra money. I had been painting like a Sunday painter, in my front room in my apartment.

My personal renaissance really began then, 2008. It’s been, what, nine years? In 2014, Barry Blinderman, who used to run a gallery here in New York in the ’80s, who I showed with, he now is the director of a museum in Normal, Illinois. He gave me a retrospective survey and produced a catalogue. That started things off, once you have a book.

But, I wanted to back up a little bit and talk more about Picabia. The different bodies of work, I imagine, sell at different levels, no?

Charlotte Burns: Yes.

Walter Robinson: I know that’s true of Frank Stella, who has also worked in clearly different categories. I think Stella’s black paintings are the highest priced, and then the racetrack paintings are next. I think you can rank them by category.

Charlotte Burns: I think the market does rank artists all the time within bodies of work, and sometimes that value spreads.

You can look at the fact that over the past decade, more female artists have been making their way up, but usually those artists are parallel, rather, to movements that are already accepted where the material’s run out. ”Let’s all talk about Joan Mitchell now because we can’t get any Pollock.” “Let’s talk about Picasso ceramics because we need to move the market on.” Very good dealers do that very well. They expand existing markets by making clear the links between what you know is great and things you didn’t know were great but maybe you could afford.

Walter Robinson: It’s interesting that the women artists of the ’50s that you’re talking about—it’s a really curious phenomenon. Because we look now at Joan Mitchell or Lee Krasner, you look at these pictures and everybody thinks they’re terrific. So, what happened? Were we just blind to female creativity in the earlier decades, or is it the market actually affecting our opinions? Is the invisible hand of money making us move our attention to these things? It’s a curious question.

It’s especially odd to think of today when diversity is such an imperative. I think the market is reacting to that very strongly. A lot of the fresh material in the market is by contemporary women artists, who are so fresh I couldn’t even begin to list a bunch of the names

Charlotte Burns: I think there’s a difference, too, in the way our stories get told to us. It’s a much bigger system than just the market. Walking around the Frieze Art Fair in October, I didn’t walk around noticing that there were loads of women artists, I just saw the art. I didn’t know if it was men or women who’d painted or created these objects. But, I do remember being a journalist on deadline for daily newspapers. You have blinders on. You walk around a fair saying: “Okay, I need a female artist under 25. Are you showing any? No, sorry, I’ll come tomorrow when I’m talking about overlooked dead artists.” You have your narrative and you have 800 words.

There are a lot of stories coming out where journalists are focusing on women or artists of color having been overlooked. I think part of that is because a lot of the people writing those articles are not the same faces that always were. A lot of women are writing about women artists now. That’s changing the stories as we see them.

I think the revelations of sexual assault and harassment that are unfolding in every industry, a lot of the stories that are coming out are so sad because many of the women felt that they couldn’t continue in that world, that they couldn’t carry on. They felt belittled, they felt like they would have to make compromises in order to move forward, and so a lot of those women just didn’t carry on to become an actress or a journalist or whatever industry, they faced more hurdles, and that’s true of people from all different kinds of backgrounds, that they face different hurdles, that perhaps filter out people who may have risen to the top. So, that’s another part of how the stories we hear get told to us, and the art that we see, that we find.

Frankenthaler is a great example. She wasn’t at her own studio visit. It was men looking at her art and she wasn’t in the room. So, I think if we want to-

Walter Robinson: Sounds like a—

Charlotte Burns: —think about why people-

Walter Robinson: —Clement Greenberg move to me.

Charlotte Burns: It was Greenberg. It was a Clement Greenberg move. You’re totally right. So, that’s how people get

silenced. They're literally not there.

Walter Robinson: Well, it's interesting. Helen is definitely an individual as much as she is a representative, any kind of trend. But it's true what you're saying, and you don't want to underestimate the power of political activism to shift the balance.

Charlotte Burns: Right.

Walter Robinson: Certainly we've had the Guerrilla Girls raising awareness on this issue for decades.

Charlotte Burns: Decades, yes.

Walter Robinson: And more recent political activities, demonstrations and protests have really pushed a wider sense of diversity as a curatorial and cultural imperative, onto the front burner, definitely. It's totally changed since Zombie Formalism. That was in 2014, three years ago. It was being rewarded by the market and by flippers, this kind of process-based abstraction.

And when it started being called Zombie Formalism, not so much by me but just by the writers for The New York Times, and by Roberta Smith and by Jerry Saltz, picked up the term right away as a pejorative.

You could even argue that that snuffed out that movement, and in it's place has come all this socially-aware art which I think we saw, say, in the last Whitney Biennial, we saw it in Documenta. Almost all the artworks had not some kind of formalist abstract basis but rather some social meaning.

One little bit of throwback, I think, is the Laura Owens show, which is currently at the Whitney. She's a really brilliant painter, but I think most of her gambits are formalist. It's about painting and about art and ways to make painting. It's not so much about society. It's a terrific comparison to have Jimmie Durham right next door on the same floor, since he is also very witty and formally inventive, but almost all of his works have this wider social meaning. So, it's a fascinating comparison.

Charlotte Burns: What are you working on now, Walter? What is your next body of work, or your current body of work?

Walter Robinson: I have a lot of different things that are going on. The big project I spent a month fiddling with, probably more than I should have done, is part of a benefit collaboration with RxArt—which is a charity which puts art in pediatric wards—and a couture house, a relatively young couture house called Sies Marjan. The designer's a guy named Sander Lak. Sies Marjan is sponsoring the RxArt coloring book this year, because RxArt does a coloring book every year where artists design the pages.

Charlotte Burns: That's so great.san

Walter Robinson: They give them to the kids, and kids can color them. They're having a launch of the coloring book at a boutique in Miami Beach called The Webster, and I made a sheet painting for them. Come in December 6th.

Charlotte Burns: I'll be there.

Walter Robinson: To The Webster, somewhere in the afternoon on Collins Avenue, I imagine.

Charlotte Burns: Thank you so much for being my guest Walter, it's been a pleasure.

Walter Robinson: Well you're welcome, I'm glad to be here.